

The First Two Pages of “Infinite Loop” by Naomi Hirahara
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An Essay by Naomi Hirahara

When my friend, Sherlockian Les Klinger, asked me to contribute to his latest anthology of short stories inspired by the great detective on 221B Baker Street, I was a bit intimidated. What could I offer to this wonderful body of pastiche? I was also digging deep into my first historical mystery novel and didn't want my divided attention to derail either creative project. I decided that for my Sherlockian story I would go to the well of my young adulthood—college in the 1980s, the advent of high-technology at Stanford University, located in the heart of Silicon Valley.

Once I decided that the story would be told by my Dr. Watson stand-in, a pre-med R.A., or resident assistant, named Joann Wat (I know, not that creative), the beginning came to me very easily. I did have to wrestle with the title. I did do some research on the development of the personal computer led by such pioneers as Apple's Steve Wozniak. I learned that “Daisy Bell” (A Bicycle Built for Two) was the first song that a computer was programmed to sing in the 1960s. That was an interesting bit of trivia, but I finally came to the conclusion that this level of research only led me to a dead end that wouldn't properly serve my short story. I returned to what I personally knew—infinite loops in basic computer

programming. The terminology was intriguing on its own and also represented a greater theme of being stuck in life by repeating certain patterns.

Examining the breadth of Conan Doyle's stories, I saw that false identity was a recurring trope. I also noted that many of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries involved a missing person case and not necessarily murder. I wanted "Infinite Loop" to engender a more farcical than menacing tone, but I didn't want to reveal all my cards at first.

The construction of the first two pages of "Infinite Loop" seems deceptively simple. It opens with a phone call. The brief exchange between two women reveals much about each one. Probably every person can relate to the dread of receiving an annoying phone call that interrupts our daily routine and requires unexpected and undesired action.

My first line:

I heard of Michael Tanner's disappearance first from his mother.

This simple sentence could mean anything. A reader's mind may first go to a young child's disappearance.

It was about 10:30 P.M. Saturday evening and I was sitting at my desk in my single room, attempting to figure out what medical schools to apply to.

Now we are learning that our protagonist is a premed student in probably a dorm room.

My phone rang underneath some brochures.

“Hello,” I said into the receiver after maybe the fifth ring. As I pulled the phone cord, I almost toppled over my open can of Tab.

Here the time period is being established. There’s a phone cord and then, the drink, Tab, which was popular among young women in the 1980s.

“Is this Joann Wat?” The woman on the other end sounded out of breath, as if she had climbed too many stairs, and her voice had a weird gurgle like phlegm was stuck in the back of her throat. She identified herself as Mitzi Tanner. “I’m Michael’s mother. I think he’s missing.”

A-ha. Now the reader knows the protagonist’s name. (As an aside, it’s always tricky to figure out an organic way to introduce the protagonist’s name in a first-person story. A phone call is about the most natural way to reveal this information.) Also, she’s female. And finally, we get a sensory description. Instead of sight, though, it’s sound, appropriate since the story begins with a phone call.

“How did you get my number?” I asked her. After all, I was a university dorm resident, not some summer camp counselor in charge of the kiddies.

We not only know for sure her role as an R.A. but are getting a sense of her personality. Through a simple piece of dialogue, Joann reveals her priorities. In light of her role, shouldn’t she be more empathetic?

“Oh, your number is listed. I just called information.”

I cursed myself for being too cheap to pay extra for my number to be unlisted. But I was a scholarship student on a budget.

Joann's financial status is now revealed. Based on her sarcastic inner voice, it's obvious that she has a chip on shoulder.

“Michael always calls me at nine. I haven't heard from him since last night.”

Oh my God, I thought to myself. Your son is a freshman at Stanford, majoring in computer science. And you are going to call me, the R.A., because he hasn't verbally checked in with you? I was stunned and to be honest, a little envious. My parents operated a Chinese restaurant in Orange County and during high school, my brothers and I were free laborers every weekend night when we weren't doing school work. No one was keeping tabs on our well-being, then or now.

“Could you just check his room and the rest of the dorm and call me back? We are in Hollister.”

Now in this section, certain truths are clarified. Joann is Michael Tanner's R.A. at Stanford. We also learn that Joann is most likely of Chinese descent and had to work in her family's business, making her resentful of other students who may have had a more coddled upbringing. It's ironic that Joann is the closest thing to a parental surrogate at college yet she doesn't seem to embody any nurturing characteristics.

Michael's mother, on the other hand, does seem overbearing and too attached to her young adult son. Based on her helicopter parenting, she deserves Joann's snark.

I wasn't sure how to answer her. On the one hand, checking up on the residents was part of my job description, but to do it on behalf of parents encouraged too much codependent least that's what we learned in the mandatory Peer Counseling class we took during spring

quarter. I told her that I would do what I could, which was the best that I could offer.

I looked out my window to see one of the other R.A.s. He was walking down the pathway with two freshman women, probably his main incentive to work in a four-class dorm. I was responsible for the first floor, which was much smaller than the second and the third. Curiously, all the women on my floor were juniors and seniors while the men were all freshmen. Except the one single on the end. That was inhabited by a male junior, Shel Rock.

We get a larger sense of who our protagonist is and how she feels disconnected to her fellow R.A.s., perhaps because of her gender. And before we leave page two, Joann's foil, Shel Rock (name again not subtle), finally appears.

Shel was a strange one, who always wore black. His hair was a platinum white and he usually wore sunglasses even on the rare occasion the peninsula was overcast. He owned a Roland Jupiter-8 synthesizer, a huge keyboard that dominated his single room. Lately, during mid-terms week, he started to play some obsessive, fever-pitched Philip Glass-type music that reminded me of the film, "Koyaanisqatsi," forcing me to pound on the door to quiet down. I didn't care for "Koyaanisqatsi" in the movie theatre and I didn't need a reprise of it in the dorms at two o'clock in the morning. Not surprisingly, he was a computer science major; I thought that he was even a T.A. in one of Michael Tanner's classes.

There's finally physical description of a character and Shel Rock deserves it. The contrast of his platinum white hair against his black clothing and sunglasses is great; he almost seems otherworldly in an elite campus setting. As Sherlock Holmes's costume is iconic, my Shel Rock needs to stand out. One of my editors, Les Klinger, suggested that I work in a more modern alternative to Sherlock Holmes instrument of choice, a violin, and a synthesizer fits the bill. To represent

Shel's frenetic personality, Philip Glass music, popular among some of my Stanford classmates, becomes Shel's signature sound. And Shel's possible direct connection to the missing student is made. At least we discover that both study computer science, leading us to the infinite loop reference that follows later in the story.

Although "Infinite Loop" is almost pedestrian in how it follows a missing person's case on a college campus, I had great fun in touching base with my past haunts. There's no reason why I'd ever write about such details, so Sherlock or Shel Rock allowed me the opportunity to put such memories in a story before they are entirely forgotten. It may be a bit self-serving to chase joy when writing, but in a time when delight often seems out of reach, I am thankful for this gift that can lift our spirits and maintain our sanity.

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Naomi Hirahara is an Edgar Award-winning author of multiple series. Her Mas Arai mysteries, which features a Los Angeles gardener and Hiroshima survivor, has been translated into Japanese, French, and Korean. Her first historical mystery, *Clark and Division*, set in 1944 Chicago, will be released by Soho Crime in August 2021. She has written several noir short stories, which have been included in such collections at *Los Angeles Noir*, *Los Angeles Noir 2: The Classics*, *Santa Cruz Noir* and *A Beast Without a Name*. Her essay on writing amateur sleuths is included in the upcoming *How to Write a Mystery: A Handbook by Mystery Writers of America* (April 2021), edited by Lee Child with Laurie R. King. A graduate of Stanford University with a degree in international relations, she lives in Pasadena with her educator husband. Her website is www.naomihirahara.com.