

**The First Two Pages of “There Comes a Time” by Cynthia Kuhn**  
From *Malice Domestic 16: Mystery Most Diabolical*,  
edited by Verena Rose, Rita Owen, and Shawn Reilly Simmons (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Cynthia Kuhn

“There Comes a Time” is focused on the dynamics among three characters, so they take center stage immediately. The narrator Kate works as housekeeper for the imposing Augusta Hildebrant, who has a very spoiled adult son named Harker. (Thanks to Bram Stoker for that name—I was teaching *Dracula* while writing this story.) My primary goal in the first two pages was to establish a strong sense of the character positions and introduce conflict that would provide momentum for the rest of the story.

We meet the trio *in medias res*, with Harker charging, as he so often does, right into the middle of things without a thought for others.

Harker Hildebrant was even more insufferable than usual. A wiry, fastidious man who never left home without an opinion to share, he barged into the Philanthropy Society gathering, demanding to speak with his mother privately. Augusta, an elegant woman in a red wool suit that stood out in a sea of muted tweeds and fussy hats, calmly asked him to wait until the meeting was concluded. Harker took that to mean he should pace back and forth in the hallway, clomping loudly from one end to the other until the women filed out, darting uncomfortable glances at him.

When the room was empty, Augusta waved her pouting middle-aged son into the cavernous library. I focused on picking up the plates and glasses left behind by Augusta’s guests, making every effort to ignore him. Over time, I’d learned that was the best approach.

Harker crossed the room and muttered something to his mother. When the tray was loaded, I looked at Augusta. She shook her head slightly to let me know that she didn’t need me to stay.

“It’s *mine*,” he said petulantly. “You can’t just take it—”

“Perhaps we could talk about this later, my sweet,” she replied.

“I have an important call to make.”

I turned around quickly to hide my smile. Every once in a while, she delayed his gratification in a way that I found satisfying.

It took numerous revisions to get the opening energy right. For me, it felt as though it clicked with the idea of Augusta sending her son out into the hallway, like a disobedient child might be expelled from a classroom, paired with his immature response: “clomping loudly” around to ensure that he remains in the spotlight of everyone’s attention. Then their conversation, when his mother quiets his whining without addressing his request, allows Kate to hide a smile and summarizes the triangle’s general responses to each other. The women see through Harker and behave accordingly.

Immediately establishing The Usual Thing—how their interactions typically went—is important exposition; however, very soon, something new happens. The New Thing marks the place where the action starts to intensify or, in English classroom parlance, “rise.”

I was walking rapidly toward the kitchen when, to my horror, Harker called out after me in his high, nasal whine. His habit of staring intensely at you was disconcerting enough. Add to that the way he pontificated at length on subjects he knew nothing about. But the worst was how he sidled up when you least expected it and trapped you in an unwanted conversation, as he was attempting to do right now.

I increased my speed.

“Kate!” He repeated my name with exasperation as he chased me. “Might I have a word?”

I paused, riding out the wave of revulsion that his proximity always triggered, and turned around warily.

His murky brown eyes bore into mine. “Have you noticed anything odd about Mother?”

Harker’s question here will lead to major conflict in the story—and how the characters are depicted in this moment is intended to increase the tension as well:

“What do you mean?” I adjusted my grip. He didn’t care that I was holding a heavy tray. It never occurred to him to take into consideration someone else’s situation.

“You’ve been working for us—how long?” He regarded the end of the cigar in his long, thin fingers, then sniffed it. Augusta didn’t let him indulge in the house, so he had taken to haunting the patio wreathed in gray smoke, surveying the vast property he would one day inherit.

“Ten years.” I’d moved in as a housekeeper for his mother right after high school and considered myself lucky to be here. There weren’t many job opportunities in our small Vermont town, and I didn’t have any family to rely upon.

“A decade already?” He stuck the cigar into his breast pocket and patted it. “You’ve certainly gotten to know her. Does she seem different lately? Is she making less sense than usual?” He followed that with a wheezy chuckle. “Forgetting things? Misplacing items? Talking to herself? Losing track of days?”

They’re facing one another in a confrontational stance, and Harker’s utter lack of regard for Kate holding the heavy tray while he sniffs his cigar increases the degree to which he is insufferable. (That is, of course, his signature state. The story itself begins with a declaration—“Harker Hildebrant was even more insufferable than usual”—and I hope that impression of him grows steadily during the story.) Harker holds an item made for pleasure that’s contextually connected to what he’ll inherit in the future while Kate literally holds the burden of the current

work on the estate in her hands and will inherit nothing. We know he is highly aware of his privilege and even revels in it. It's probably not a surprise to readers when Harker exits the conversation like this: "He did a little flick with his hand to indicate that I should step backward so he'd have more room to pass. Then he strolled down the hallway, hands in pockets, whistling a discordant tune." Even his whistle, especially combined with his claiming of the hallway and casual saunter, grates on the nerves.

In closing, I'll admit that it feels a bit odd to focus so much on Harker here since Augusta and Kate have the stronger—and I hope more interesting—presence on the pages to follow, but he does take up the most space in the first two pages. Ultimately, the story belongs to all three of them, and I'm crossing my fingers that the ending will bring readers back to the beginning in a satisfying way.

#

Cynthia Kuhn is an English professor and author of the Lila Maclean Academic Mysteries and Starlit Bookshop Mysteries. Work has also appeared in *Mystery Most Diabolical*, *Mystery Most Edible*, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Copper Nickel*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Mama PhD*, and other publications. Her books have been Agatha Award and William F. Deeck-Malice Domestic Grant winners and were shortlisted for the Daphne du Maurier Award and Lefty Awards. She currently serves on the national board of Sisters in Crime and is a member of Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers and the multi-author blog, Chicks on the Case. Originally from upstate New York, she lives with her family in Colorado. For more information, please visit [cynthiakuhn.net](http://cynthiakuhn.net).