

The First Two Pages: “The Case of the Vanishing Professor”

By Tara Laskowski

(Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine, May/June 2018)

The idea for this story began about 12 years ago when this question popped into my head: How would a woman who was named after Nancy Drew react to people always joking about her solving mysteries? In “The Case of the Vanishing Professor,” my Nancy Drew gets forced into attending a hokey murder mystery dinner, where, of course, she stumbles upon a real-life crime.

In the opening scene of the story, which is also the first two pages, I wanted to be sure to lay the groundwork. I wanted to hopefully generate enough interest—with some funny, interesting characters and a strange, uncomfortable setting—that readers would continue to turn the pages.

Here was my first challenge: How do I deal with introducing my character and her famous name? I knew I wanted to keep her name from the reader for a bit to create a little suspense, but I also knew I couldn’t withhold it for too long or it would seem gimmicky. Since Nancy is so secretive about her name, I knew she would not be the one to reveal it to readers. So I decided to have one of the other characters disclose it—and who better but the couple who becomes the center of the mystery? The opening scene of the story concludes with Nancy and her date Tim approaching their assigned table at the murder mystery dinner:

Our table was on the other side of the room, near the doors. A man and a woman, our parents’ ages and smartly dressed, were already standing by it, holding a name tag between them, admiring it and laughing, and I knew, before we even approached, what they were talking about.

“Must be part of the act,” the wife said, glancing up at us with a thin smile.

“So they’ve got the actors sitting with us? That’ll be interesting,” the man answered, then tucked the name tag back in its spot between the wine and water glass and shoved his reading glasses back in his jacket pocket.

“Table 7?” Tim asked, and shook hands with the two. “This must be us.”

“I’m Maggie Thomas, and this is my husband Winston,” the woman said. “We’ve got Nancy Drew sitting with us apparently.” She tapped the place card.

I glared at Tim, and then smiled brightly at both of them. “Yes, yes, you do. But really, I go by my middle name. Elaine.”

Her name is important to the story, of course, but more essential for me was to reveal and introduce details about the characters and their relationships that highlight and determine some of their actions later on in the story.

For example, we know right away that Nancy is at a stage in her life where she’s dating. She’s met Tim recently, and as the story opens we get clues they aren’t usually each other’s types.

It was our fourth date. You know, the one where we both decide if we are going to sleep with one another or just part merry ways. The one where the stakes are still high, but the nerves calm down a bit.

I had thought things were going well. Tim seemed nice, gentle, which was not normally the type of guy that was interested in me.

This sets up an initial conflict as the story unfolds. Tim has set up this dinner date as a surprise, but will it work in their favor, or will it be the thing that ruins their budding romance? Nancy is clearly less-than-thrilled about the dinner surprise, and her dread grows as the opening scene unfolds, until she thinks dramatically, “The murder had already happened. We were never going to last.”

Nancy’s pessimism, in addition to hopefully providing some comic elements to the story, also helps to establish one of the central themes: attraction. The story plays around with the idea of attraction, and how our judgment can be blinded by our fascination with other people. In the opening scene, Tim’s eagerness to please Nancy has blinded him from realizing that he should not have chosen a murder mystery dinner as his surprise to her—that it’s probably last on her list

of things to do. Later in the story, we'll see how another character's interest in Nancy causes his troubles, and how Nancy's attraction to a third character blinds her to his true intentions.

“The Case of the Vanishing Professor” is the first detective story I've ever written, and the first time I've ever had to lay clues for the reader as the mystery unravels. The great mystery short story writers make this seem easy, but it is not—or at least was not for me. B.K. Stevens, in her essay “Camouflaging Clues” (SleuthSayers, 2016), discusses some extremely clever ways to introduce clues early on, before a reader is even ready to look for them. I wish I could say I embedded these kinds of clues in the opening pages, but, alas, I did not. My main intention with the first scene was to create a likeable, funny main character that readers would want to stay with for a while. The conflicts set up here are light ones—will this date be a total disaster? will she be a punch line during this murder mystery dinner?—but they pave the way for the more serious conflicts and crimes that pile up as the story moves along.

My hope, ultimately, when readers finish the first scene, is to persuade them similarly to Tim's endless optimism as he pulls Nancy into the mystery dinner. I, like Tim, am trying to say, “Oh no, you're gonna love it. Just wait.”

#

Tara Laskowski is the author of the short story collections *Modern Manners For Your Inner Demons* and *Bystanders*, which won the Balcones Fiction Award and was named by Jennifer Egan as one of the top books of 2017 in *The Guardian*. She has been the editor of the flash fiction journal *SmokeLong Quarterly* since 2010.