

The First Two Pages: “Quiche Alain” by M.K. Graff

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Uncomfortable and scared, with tension in my gut and sweat in every crevice.

Those are the explicit words I’d use to describe my feelings when I considered writing a short story.

I’m a crime novelist who writes two mystery series, each a mix of amateur sleuth and police procedural. I wallow in the length and room this format affords me to develop characters and twist a plot. I revel in planting red herrings, and exploring a setting until it becomes a secondary character. The idea of fleshing out a complete, reasonable story in twenty pages terrified me.

Yet after talking with Barb Goffman and Art Taylor, two masters of the short story, I decided to stretch myself and try my hand at writing for *Malice Domestic’s* anthology *Mystery Most Edible*. I’d keep both mavens’ words of advice plastered across my brain: “A short story is about *just one thing*.”

Plunging in, I made a conscious choice to surround myself with elements designed for my comfort, the antithesis of what I felt. I chose existing characters from my Trudy Genova Manhattan Mysteries to inhabit the story. Trudy’s job as a medical consultant for a New York movie studio is one I held during my nursing career, one I thought would pique readers’ interest.

I added more ease by modeling the lead actress character after my high school drama teacher, Ruby Parks, someone I'd admired, down to her armful of bangle bracelets and Texas twang. Yes, I kill her off, but what greater compliment from a mystery writer? Ruby's no longer with us, but I like to think she's directing plays on a heavenly stage in a cloud of "Youth Dew," smiling in approval.

Small touches brought more familiarity. The opening scene in a French bistro has "La Vie En Rose" playing in the background, appropriate to the tone for this story. It also happens to be my wedding song. By using these touchstones, I gave myself the confidence I needed to dive into creating a mystery story that readers would enjoy.

A surprising thing happened along the way: I enjoyed myself.

With the framework down and my comfort level set, I wrote of a murder on a movie set that revolves around food. The story opens near the end of filming a pivotal scene in a television movie, bringing readers immediately into the world of actors, directors, and the multiple people needed during a film shoot.

Here are the first two pages of *Quiche Alain*:

The raspy drawl of Louis Armstrong singing "La Vie En Rose" filled the French bistro decorated with rattan and wood chairs. Three couples sat at round marble-topped tables having coffee, as a waiter carried a steaming cup of hot chocolate to an elegantly made-up woman in her late seventies, seated alone. Her red hair and floral dress were accented by an armful of gold bangle bracelets. She angled her head in thanks as the large cup was set in front of her.

The waiter bowed and glided away. The woman took a delicate sip, then looked up in confusion that quickly turned to joy as a white-haired man appeared before her. He placed a croissant next to her cup, and took the opposite chair.

“Alain! It’s really you,” she whispered.

“*Oui*, my dear,” he said with a trace of French accent. “Now eat to keep your strength up. We have a lot to talk about.” His hand covered hers in an intimate gesture.

She smiled and bit into the croissant, her bracelets tinkling, then chewed and frowned. She spit out the morsel and yelled: “What kind of crap is this?”

“Cut!” The director’s voice boomed from the control room.

I gave my best friend, production assistant Meg Pittman, a look of sympathy as she hurried to Wanda Jackson, the actress starring in this television movie. My charge was up to her usual hijinks.

“Wanda, what’s wrong?” Meg’s brow furrowed over brown doe eyes.

The control booth door slammed as the director, Ron Dowling rushed in. “Yes, Wanda darling, whatever is the matter?”

Ron Dowling wasn’t my favorite director. The short, intense man had a cocky attitude and liked to keep women in their place, beneath his tiny, Birkenstock-clad feet—unless they were the money draw for a project, like Wanda Jackson.

My name is Trudy Genova, RN, and I work as a medical consultant for the Passion Broadcasting Junction studio in Manhattan. I check medical scenes in scripts, work on set with actors and directors, but can also be the medic for a particular star.

That was my job for Wanda Jackson, the Oscar-and-Tony-award winner who had been teaching acting at NYU’s Tisch Film School until her health declined and she decided to publish a memoir. PBJ convinced her to film her story and play herself in the final scenes.

It was difficult. Severe arthritis and osteoporosis made her daily life painful, and Wanda had a major heart condition few people knew about. She planned to retire from public life once this movie was in the can.

That brought us to today, filming the last scene of the movie to be released the same day her book will be published. *Wanda Jackson: The Untold Story* would be sold all over the world, in Kindle and hardcover, from Audible to the DVD of this movie. That the untold

story only matched the reality of Wanda's life at times didn't seem to bother anyone working on the project.

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M.K. (Marni) Graff writes The Nora Tierney English Mysteries, featuring an American writer living in England with a nose for murder, and The Trudy Genova Manhattan Mysteries, based on Graff's work as a medical consultant for a movie studio. She is the managing editor of Bridle Path Press, and a member of Sisters in Crime, the NC Writers Network, and The International Association of Crime Writers. Graff writes crime book reviews at Auntie M Writes, www.auntiemwrites.com. Her first Trudy Genova mystery, *Death Unscripted*, will be followed this spring by *Death at the Dakota*.