

The First Two Pages: “Hell Week” by Greg Dahlager

From *Minnesota Not-So-Nice: Eighteen Tales of Bad Behavior*,
edited by Barbara Merritt Deese, Pat Dennis, Michael Allan Mallory,
and Timya Owen (Twin Cities Chapter, Sisters in Crime)

An Essay by Greg Dahlager

The call for entries for this anthology specified stories set in Minnesota, and that they incorporate some form of crime, mischief or mystery. Additionally, they were to embrace the location and culture of this place. Having lived in Minnesota all my life, I felt by now I had a sense of what it means to be Minnesotan—you betcha—though my stomach still turns at the sight and smell of lutefisk.

“Hell Week” was the idea I came up with, inspired by those sporadic, horrific news accounts of deaths from hazing on college campuses nationwide, and the attempted cover-ups that usually follow. I decided to set my story around a fictitious sorority at the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. While most hazing deaths result from some misguided combination of reckless games, cruel punishments, and excessive (and often forced) alcohol consumption, the deaths themselves seem to come as a surprise to all those involved—nobody actually having been premeditating murder. For “Hell Week,” I contemplated a situation in which a character *does* have murder in mind when the hazing rituals get underway. (The term *hell week*, as it applies to the Greek system, refers to a pre-initiation

period where pledges hoping to join a house are put through a series of potentially unpleasant tests to prove their dedication and worthiness of membership.)

As a hopeless pantser (a writer who generally writes without thinking much about things like plot or endings), I got right to work, letting the words flow out of my messy subconscious and tapping them out on my keyboard, quickly forming my opening scene: Two blindfolded pledges in nightgowns, their wrists bound behind them with duct tape, left for dead in a cold place in the middle of nowhere. As openings go, I felt this was fairly likely to grab a reader's attention.

Ostensibly, our pledges' predicament is meant to test the resolve, resourcefulness, and cooperativeness that would deem them worthy of active membership in the sorority. But in this case, one pledge suspects someone is actually *trying* to kill them, and she has someone in mind with a motive.

Here then are the first two pages of "Hell Week":

First, they had to remove the duct tape that bound their wrists behind their backs before they could do anything about the blindfolds. It would require teamwork, and overcoming a problematic amount of alcohol still coursing through their veins.

"Stop shaking," Nora Bauer said, now that she and Tiffany Martin blindly managed to arrange themselves back to back, Nora running her fingers along her pledge sister's tape, trying to find the seam.

"It's freaking cold!" Tiffany wailed.

"We're a bit underdressed tonight," Nora conceded, but Tiffany didn't laugh. Both wore nightgowns and slippers. Wherever they were, they could feel the November wind whipping.

Nora thought she might have found the seam, but lost it because Tiffany couldn't stop twitching and shivering. When she located it

again, she picked at it with a fingernail, finally gaining enough purchase to start peeling.

“Are they trying to kill us?” Tiffany cried.

Nora almost had it—it was peeling faster now and her left hand gathered the unraveling tape with each revolution around Tiffany’s wrists. “There! You’re free.”

“Thank, God.” Nora heard Tiffany rip her blindfold off and gasp. “Oh! We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“Can you take off my blindfold, pretty please?”

Tiffany complied, and Nora found herself standing in a shallow ditch between a gravel road and a frozen cornfield, with rows of dead, broken stalks jutting up through the snow at all angles like vandalized gravestones.

“We’re gonna die out here,” Tiffany said, sounding resigned to it already.

“We’re in a farm field. That means there’s a farm nearby. Probably just down this road. See where the streetlight is?”

“It’s so far away! I’m freezing.”

“Can you undo my tape?”

“My hands are too cold.”

“Can you do it, anyway?”

“I’ll try.” Tiffany stumbled behind her, burping and slowly working the tape off with the marginal benefit of eyesight, and a three-quarters moon that was a shining piece of luck tonight.

Nora rubbed her wrists once freed, and then her bare arms, cursing Ashley Palmentere. Beyond the remote streetlight, some distance away, she saw a faint but sprawling glow. A town. “Let’s go.”

Running in slippers proved tricky, so Nora settled for a fast walk but Tiffany couldn’t keep up. Nora glanced back to find Tiffany down on her knees, vomiting on the gravel. In fairness, they’d made her drink more shots during lineup because she’d gotten the most answers wrong of all the pledges. Nora went back and helped her up and, together, they advanced more slowly down the road, having wrapped their arms around each other for warmth. Finally reaching the pool of mercury light cast from a pole opposite the darkened farm, they separated and hurried up a gravel driveway to a clapboard farmhouse. Nora rang the doorbell repeatedly but the house remained still and silent. She then banged on the door with her raw, frozen fist, yelling “Help!” Tiffany banged her own fist on a window that looked

like it belonged to a bedroom, and then on another. No lights came on. No sounds were heard. If anyone were home, they were either afraid to answer the pleas of midnight callers, or they slept the sleep of the dead.

“Are they trying to kill us?” The answer, poor young Tiffany, is *yes*. But who? And why? And will they succeed? Nora mentally curses someone—could this be the person responsible for their perilous situation? What motive might she have?

Prolonged exposure to the cold can result in frostbite, hypothermia, and death. As you might suspect, it gets quite cold in Minnesota at night in November, especially if you’re wearing only a nightgown and slippers. Excessive alcohol consumption (forced shots during lineup) makes matters worse—expanding blood vessels and causing more rapid heat loss from the skin. Nora and Tiffany need to find a way out of the cold before long, or they’ll find themselves joining that great big sorority in the sky.

Life or death openings always keep me turning pages, and hopefully the readers of “Hell Week” will be inspired to do the same. As the story progresses, more characters are introduced and new dangers arise. The beauty of the short story in crime fiction is that you can cram an awful lot of hell into a small package.

#

Greg Dahlager is a *Writer’s Digest* award winner, and his short fiction has appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* and a pair of anthologies. He resides in Minnesota and is a member of the Twin Cities chapter of Sisters in Crime.