

The First Two Pages of “When the Wind is Southerly” by Leone Ciporin
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An Essay by Leone Ciporin

I worked on this story for years, but I only wrote these two pages in 2019. I'd had the sense before that something was missing, and I tried several approaches, from changing points of view to cutting scenes. None of it worked. The kernel of a good story was there, but I struggled with the structure.

Then, in 2019, Malice Domestic announced the theme of their 2020 anthology, *Murder Most Theatrical*. That theatrical theme helped me finally realize what was missing. I'd had *Hamlet* in mind all along—in fact, this story's title is a line from Act II, Scene II—but I'd never made that connection explicit. I was like the person who says, “Did you see that movie?” and no one knows which movie they mean.

I had assumed subtle hints would alert the reader to the Shakespeare connection, and of course, they would figure it out when they Googled the title, right? But I never Google titles, so why would anyone else? I was expecting the reader to do my job. Big mistake.

I wrote a new opening that formed a prologue to the main story, with the main character, Marian, watching *Hamlet* with her neighbor Sally:

I'd so looked forward to seeing *Hamlet*, and now I didn't want to be here. Fred should be sitting next to me, instead of my sweaty neighbor Sally. Fred and I had loved coming to Sunset Manor's performances, watching the resident thespians prove that age was no barrier to creating art. We'd even imagined ourselves joining the theater group when we moved to Sunset in a few years.

During *Macbeth*, I'd leaned into Fred's chamois shirt, sniffed the bits of grass on his neck, and enjoyed the mischievous glint in his eye. Now, I was rubbing shoulders with Sally's damp housedress, inhaling her odd vinegary odor, and watching her fan herself with the playbook.

"I haven't read *Hamlet* since high school," Sally said. "I didn't even read it in high school, actually."

"You didn't have to come. I'd have been fine by myself."

Sweat pooled in her neck creases as she turned to gawk at me. "Marian, I'm glad to be here! Something different to do. And I'm curious about this Sunset Manor retirement community you talk about."

Curious meant nosy. Even when her husband was alive, Sally poked in everybody's business, but in the two years since his death, she spent all day staring out from her window or porch swing, watching neighborhood comings and goings.

I also used the first two pages to establish key facts, such as the loss of Marian's husband Fred and her grief at his passing:

After losing Fred three months ago, I knew how it felt to be alone, so I'd invited her. Not that I needed the company. There were plenty of pleasant people here, robust, smiling people who shared my hair color.

"I didn't realize how nice this place was." Sally glanced around the auditorium, her gaze settling on one of the men, who wasn't nearly as handsome as Fred. "Are you really moving here?"

"I'm thinking about it." I'd already started the paperwork to escape the house where Fred once was, and now was no more.

The bad news about adding this new opening scene was that I had to delete my original opening, which read:

From behind, they were a perfect family. A balding man in creased khakis nestled a hand in the curve of his wife's waist, while an older woman bent a helmet of flyaway hair to a small boy's auburn curls.

The helmet lifted, and the old woman glared at the man. "Rollie, stop calling it assisted living."

"Aunt Marian, please. It's where old people live. Who cares what I call it?" Rollie's golf shirt bore the crest of a country club he'd once visited.

I managed to slip some of it into my new opening scene, by having Marian show Sally a family photo:

Sally swiveled to inspect a pigtailed girl leaning on her grandmother's shoulder. "Cute little girl."

"Did I show you my latest photos of Benjy?" The first picture I pulled up showed us from the back. I imagined it from Sally's perspective. A balding man in crisp khakis nestled a hand at his wife's waist, while an intelligent older woman bent a helmet of flyaway hair to a beautiful boy's auburn curls. From behind, we were a perfect family.

Right after that snapshot, I'd told Rollie to stop calling Sunset Manor assisted living.

Rollie had snorted. "Aunt Marian, please. It's where old people live. Who cares what I call it?" Rollie's shirt bore the crest of a fancy country club. I suspected he visited golf courses just to get the shirts.

These first two pages set the stage, so to speak, for what happens next, particularly with Rollie's view of "old people" foreshadowing what's to come.

For the rest of the story, I interspersed snippets of the prologue, Marian and Sally watching *Hamlet*, with my main story. They meshed well, since I'd had these lines from *Hamlet* in mind when I wrote the story.

Without the Malice Domestic anthology call for submissions, I'm not sure I'd ever have realized that I needed to make the *Hamlet* connection clearer, so I'm especially thrilled to see this story included in the 2020 Malice Domestic anthology.

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Leone Ciporin's short stories have appeared in *Flash Bang Mysteries*, *Woman's World*, and several anthologies, including this story in *Malice Domestic: Murder Most Theatrical*. She's a member of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime. When she's not writing mysteries, Leone works as a manager in an insurance company law department, which is more interesting than it sounds. Leone lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.