

The First Two Pages of “Some Other Dracula” by Christine Poulson

From *Music of the Night: A Crime Writers’ Association Anthology*,

edited by Martin Edwards (Flame Tree Press)

An Essay by Christine Poulson

“Some Other Dracula” begins with an epigraph:

“There seemed a strange stillness over everything; but as I listened I heard, as if from down below in the valley, the howling of many wolves. The Count’s eyes gleamed, and he said: “Listen to them - the children of the night. What music they make!”

— *Dracula*, Bram Stoker (1897)

I wanted to strike a sinister note, to establish that Dracula—or the idea of Dracula—is going to play a role in the story. The reference to music resonates with the theme of the anthology.

The story itself then begins:

The man lay sprawled at the heart of the maze. The faint strains of music playing and laughter and voices were borne on the still night air, but he knew nothing of that. There was a dagger in his chest and his white waistcoat was drenched in blood, His black cloak, lined with red silk, was spread out beneath him. The red and the black made a stark picture against the snow that covered the ground and the hornbeam hedges of the maze.

From somewhere in the distance came the muffled sound of a church clock striking midnight.

When I’m planning a short story, I begin with a document in which I play with ideas. In the case of “Some Other Dracula” this also involved looking through my notebooks, which go back over 20 years. These were my first thoughts:

Am quite fancying a story about a fancy dress party. Notebook 12, p. 20: saw a couple in Tewksbury dressed as Spiderman and a French maid. Charity event held at a grand house like Hanbury Hall? New Year’s Eve? Someone missing at midnight? Treasure Hunt? Found dead

at the centre of a maze. Falling snow—softly descending on a figure slumped on a bench—flakes melting on the upturned face.

So the image of a dead man in the centre of a maze was a key element from the start. I gave a lot of thought as to where I wanted to place this scene. It wasn't obvious that it should be at the beginning. Normally I would write a short story in chronological order, and as far as I can remember, this is the first time that I have broken with that. It is a risky strategy, to begin *in res media*, and then back track. You're breaking the narrative flow. And in this case, it also meant a change of viewpoint as I had already decided that I wanted to tell the story in the first person of Cassandra James, who was the protagonist of my first three crime novels.

On balance I felt that the power of the image compensated for these drawbacks. However, for plot purposes, snow could not be falling at midnight, so I had to get rid of an image that I liked: snowflakes falling on an upturned face. I added a reference to faint strains of music to tie in with the theme of the anthology and establish that there is a party going on in the background. I also decided that the party would be at Halloween to add a creepy, potentially supernatural, element.

Having gone with this image in my opening scene, I felt it was best to be upfront about the break in chronology. I had established that it was midnight. After a break indicated by three asterisks, the next section begins "It was earlier that evening" and we are in Cassandra James's bedroom where she is getting ready for the Halloween fancy dress ball. From now on we see everything from her point of view.

Stephen's voice floated out of the bathroom. "I suppose it's too late to cry off."

“Of course it’s too late!” I was standing in front of the bedroom mirror trying to adjust my wig. “And anyway we’ve paid a fortune for the tickets. Oh hell, I just can’t get this right.”

Grace, our teenage daughter, appeared at the bedroom door.

“Give me a hand with this, could you?” I said.

“Oh, wow, cool. Are you going as Marge Simpson? But shouldn’t the wig be blue?”

“No, no, it’s a Halloween party, remember. I’m going as the Bride of Frankenstein.”

Grace seized the wig, tugged it one way and then the other, and stood back to consider the effect. “Yeah, that’s fine now. Hey, Mum, you’re looking good.”

As Halloween costumes go, it was pretty flattering, I had to agree. The long white flowing dress and the filmy sleeves concealed a multitude of middle-aged sins.

“I’ll do your make-up for you, shall I?” Grace said. “Hey, if you’re going as the Bride of Frankenstein, does that mean that Dad’s going as—”

“No, no— he’s—”

The domesticity of this scene contrasts with the stark opening image. Having begun with a dramatic opening, I now felt I could pull back and relax the pace a little. I could introduce Cassandra and her family and I could feed in some of the background to the story through their dialogue. I wanted the reader to have time to get to know and like this family.

I delayed the appearance of Stephen to make a greater impact. This is what comes next:

From the bathroom came an eerie long drawn out howl like the cry of a wolf.

Grace looked at me, open-mouthed. A few seconds of silence and then Stephen appeared at the bathroom door, his hand to his ear. “Listen to them,” he said, “the children of the night. What music they make!”

He had taken Bela Lugosi as his model. He wore a red-lined cloak over evening dress. His hair was slicked back and a white mask covered the upper part of his face. Blood stains were painted round his mouth. He

snarled, revealing fangs, and advanced on Grace, his hands crooked like claws.

Grace squealed in horrified delight. “Dad! Stop it!”
“Not Dad, my dear, but Dracula! *Count* Dracula!”

The reference to the children of the night refers back to the quotation at the beginning and I hope that the alert reader will also spot that Stephen is wearing the same red-lined cloak as the man in the maze. Will it be Stephen who is lying there dead at midnight? Does something terrible await this happy family?

That’s the end of the scene. There is another break here. Then, having established a sense of jeopardy and suspense (I hope!), the story continues and we head for the ball with Cassandra and Stephen.

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Before Christine Poulson turned to crime, she was an academic with a PhD in History of Art. Her Cassandra James mysteries are set in Cambridge in the UK. Her short stories have been published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, Crime Writers’ Association anthologies, the *Mammoth Book of Best British Mysteries*, and elsewhere. In 2018 she was short-listed for both the Margery Allingham Prize and the CWA Short Story Dagger.

Deep Water (2016) was the first in a series of medical thrillers featuring scientist Katie Flanagan and patent lawyer Daniel Marchmont. The second, *Cold Cold Heart* (2017), is set in Antarctica. In the latest, *An Air That Kills* (2019), Katie goes undercover at a high security lab where they are carrying out research into transgenic diseases. A colleague is struck down by a mysterious illness. Has the security of the lab has been compromised, allowing a deadly virus to escape?