

The First Two Pages of “Perfect Partner” by Vinnie Hansen
From *Hook, Line, and Sinker: The Seventh Guppy Anthology*
Edited by Emily P.W. Murphy (Wolf’s Echo Press)

An Essay by Vinnie Hansen

Some stories rise as though catching wild yeast from the air. Others need more direct leavening. For me, the leavening agent is often a prompt or theme. The theme “grifters, con artists, and their marks” of the Sisters in Crime Guppies’ anthology *Hook, Line, and Sinker* beckoned me.

The challenge was I’d never been scammed, didn’t know how any scam worked, and am tech-phobic, still clinging to free wall calendars and a landline purchased from Radio Shack. This is where the adage “write what you know” meets the addendum “or know what you write”—i.e. research. Ugh.

Fortunately, I did know a bright, professional woman who thought she’d met her soul mate on a dating site only to receive *the text* “from the airport” asking for money. At that moment, her light bulb went on. She was being scammed.

I started my story “Perfect Partner” there, *in medias res* (another writerly maxim):

Money. He needs money. In another minute, he’s going to follow up his text to me with an ask.

The first two pages of the story weren’t too difficult as the contours of the romance scam my acquaintance suffered are typical. She’d never met the man in person. Other than their exchanges through the website, they’d communicated only

via text messages where he was always attentive and locked into her desires. A seemingly perfect partner. Ta-da . . . title and a name for my fictional dating app.

“Perfect Partner” quickly enters the text exchange between scammer and mark, which raised a formatting issue. My initial search suggested texts should be indicated via a font change like so:

A new text pops up. **I’m in a bind here, Blanche. This chip deal will make or break my start-up.**

Ah, yes, the chip deal. With the global-supply-chain issues, Adam’s trip to Geneva is an opportunity to scoop up a secret cache of cut silicon wafer to save his company, a Fitbit competitor making monitors in hip shades of mauve and neon orange. A “business” he no doubt tailored to my profile interest in “well-being.”

I write back: **At hospital with mom.** A preemptive delaying tactic. My mom is seated at her home computer fretting away with worry about her future given the crushing cost of residential-care facilities.

I thought this worked but the editor preferred another format:

Adam: I’m in a bind here, Blanche. This chip deal will make or break my start-up.

Ah, yes, the chip deal. With the global-supply-chain issues, Adam’s trip to Geneva is an opportunity to scoop up a secret cache of cut silicon wafers to save his company, a Fitbit competitor making monitors in hips shades of mauve and neon orange. A “business” he no doubt tailored to my profile interest in “well-being.”

I write back.

Me: At the hospital with Mom.

A preemptive delaying tactic.

I’m curious what readers of this column think about the two formats. What is lost? What is gained?

The “me” in “Perfect Partner” is the thirty-eight-year-old protagonist, whose real name is not Blanche. While she fell for “Adam” hook, line, and sinker, she’s not an idiot. She’d shielded herself on-line with a pseudonym and with the vague employment title “customer service rep.” As she stalls “Adam,” I quickly fill in the reader on how she came to be sitting in a café texting with a con artist who’s working her for money.

Here's where things get twisty. I didn't want the mark to end up a victim. I wanted her to turn the tables, to scam the scammer, which meant a research plunge into the perdition of technology. I set out into the nether world of the web to find a con that would be feasible for my character and my brain. I landed on the SIM-card swap.

Even with this relatively simple grift, I needed assistance. Fortunately, I have a computer-genius friend, one of the creators of JavaScript. While he has little patience for mundane tech questions, it’s amazing how the idea of contributing to a story can entice people (especially when coupled with a free lunch).

Sometimes I write stories for catharsis. Thinly disguised autobiography tumbles onto the page. But other times, especially with mystery, creating the story offers the same pleasure as reading one: there’s a puzzle to be worked out. That’s especially true when starting with a prompt. The process resembles the Food Network’s *Chopped* Challenge: What do you make with mandatory ingredients?

I enjoy such challenges (even when they mean research) and recommend writing to a prompt for anyone stuck in his/her creative process. The way I untangled how the reverse con works in “Perfect Partner” delivered the same smug satisfaction as getting the Wordle in two.

The First Two Pages of “Perfect Partner”

MONEY. HE NEEDS MONEY. IN another minute, he’s going to follow up his text to me with an ask.

I’ve been an idiot. A complete moron. Heat crawls up my neck. I nip at my embarrassing nub of a fingernail.

Right now, Adam is waiting for my response. Poor Adam, arriving at the airport to discover he has his ticket and passport, but his wallet—his cash, his bank card, his credit cards—gone. Lost or stolen.

Right.

I could tuck my phone in my pocket. End the communication right now and go on with my Santa Cruz life. But I don’t think so.

I text him OMG and a pile of poop emoji. If he were in front of me, I’d grab a handful of his dark, wavy hair and push his head into that poop. Except after two months of interaction, it’s dawned that I have no idea what he looks like. He could be a 200-pound Russian gorilla. If he’s a “Nigerian Prince,” he’s avoided any weird, telegraphing syntax.

At the roar of the espresso machine, I look up. The barista gives a headshake that sends her large skeleton earrings dancing and lifts an index finger to indicate one more drink before my latte.

A new text pops up.

Adam: I’m in a bind here, Blanche. This chip deal will make or break my start-up.

Ah, yes, the chip deal. With the global-supply-chain issues, Adam’s trip to Geneva is an opportunity to scoop up a secret cache of cut silicon wafers to save his company, a Fitbit competitor making monitors in hip shades of mauve and neon orange. A “business” he no doubt tailored to my profile interest in “well-being.”

I write back:

Me: At hospital with Mom.

A preemptive delaying tactic. My mom is seated at her home computer fretting away with worry about her future given the crushing cost of residential-care facilities. I wonder if fears for my mom's early onset dementia flagged me on Perfect Partner as a vulnerable mark. I still am, I suppose.

I tap on Perfect Partner, a dating website, its logo two Ps, the second one reversed, each letter anthropomorphized with an arm and hand reaching to join the other's. Clever with the non-gender-specific figures. Cute.

In 20/20 hindsight, too cute for someone with a profile like Adam's. And Adam. How had that name not tipped me off? Adam Williams. The name should have semaphored red flags. It was the kind of name attached to photos of clean-cut military men on otherwise blank Facebook accounts to lure lonely, middle-aged women into "friendships." How pathetic that I, a thirty-eight-year-old, have fallen into the trap. A hot flash of embarrassment sears my cheeks.

But there'd been my break-up after a five-year relationship because of an ego-bruising, twenty-five-year-old other woman. Then the move to a new apartment. My mom's declining mental health. . . .

I try to cut myself slack. Adam was slick. And I had taken precautions. I'm not Blanche Dubois, and this professional scammer missed the reference—hadn't raised a virtual eyebrow at the name.

That lack of curiosity should have tipped you off, Maya. Except my peers can be shockingly ignorant of masterpieces like *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

While I've moved over to Shutterstock to search the images for dark wavy-haired male, he's responded with a care emoji. Asks about mom's prognosis.

Me: Not good.

I relish the idea of "Adam" squirming, reformulating his angle to ask for money. But is he even breaking a sweat? Patience has been his modus operandi from the start. He has his fish. He'll take his time to reel me in slowly.

Works for me.

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[Vinnie Hansen](#) fled the howling winds of South Dakota and headed for the California coast the day after high school graduation. After the ignominious start of arriving at the downtown LA bus station in the middle of the night, she soldiered

on to earn a BA in the writing program at U.C. Irvine and an MA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from SFSU.

A two-time Claymore Award finalist, she's the author of the Carol Sabala mysteries, the novels *Lostart Street* and *One Gun*, as well as over fifty short works.

She claims to be sane(ish) after 27 years of teaching high school English in spite of evidence that she tickles the ivories with ukulele bands. Vinnie lives in Santa Cruz with her husband and the requisite cat.