

The First Two Pages of “Raúl and Rita in *It’s a Wonderful Wife!*”
by Richie Narvaez (Crippen & Landru)

An Essay by Richie Narvaez

I’m much more Early Episode Grinch than Late Episode Grinch, so when Jeffrey Marks, publisher Crippen & Landru, invited me to write a story for their annual holiday chapbook, I was planning something noirish. Perhaps a dour detective dirge that ends sadly but takes time out to comment on unfettered capitalism. But nothing coalesced. Then Jeffrey offered some advice: “Have some fun with it.” This did some unfettering in me. Or it could have been the bourbon highball I happened to be having at that moment. In either case, I quickly scribbled what was to become the story’s first sentence and also its first paragraph. With tinkering and edits, this is what it became when it was published:

After *finally* finding the liquor store, Raúl and Rita Roman drove forty more miles and at last roared their cabernet red Talbot-Lago into the curved driveway of Donna Berry’s country home in Connecticut, and as soon as Donna ushered them in with excited screams, smiles, and tears, the snowstorm that had been nipping at their wheels all the way from New York piled up to the door and covered it with five feet of drift.

Yes, it’s long. I felt the story needed to start on a high note, and this is a full-throated blast. It’s a purposefully breathless sentence, and in short order it introduces my leads (the Romans), sketches in setting/era (country, winter, Talbot-Lago), and establishes a playful tone. That’s a lot to ask from a sentence, so my scribble was long, and in revision it got even longer. So much so that the copy editor wanted to chop it in two, but I statted that because this version retains the celebratory energy I was looking

for. There's also information seeded in there, using one of my favorite whodunit tricks: sneak in a clue before the reader even knows what to look for.

The story is told in third person close POV. While the Romans clearly were inspired by Dashiell Hammett's Nick and Nora Charles, I wanted Raúl and Rita to be similar to them but different. The Charleses had a progressive, idealized relationship—except when it came to sleuthing. At least twice in the film series, if I remember correctly, Nick locks Nora away in a room while he goes off to investigate something. I wanted Raúl and Rita on a more equal footing when it came to investigating, and so I wanted to be able to pop into both their minds equally. This helped loosen up the story—they didn't both have to be in every scene together, and divvying them up allowed for more character interaction/development and more clue planting/discovering.

The protagonists enter (“‘Greetings! Salutations!’ announced the Romans at the doorway to the other guests, who shouted back, ‘Raúl and Rita!’”), then we're introduced to our suspects *tout de suite* in the third paragraph.

Grinning broadly and extending a beefsteak hand was ex-boxer and matinee idol Eddy Valdez, accompanied by his Swedish starlet wife, Anja. The novelist Finny Brown stepped up, roughly kissing their cheeks, followed by her companion, Susan Livingston, stylishly outfitted in a Molyneux dress that Rita declared “Divine!” Meanwhile, ho-ho-hoing and waving from the bar was a rather bedraggled-looking Santa Claus.

That's a lot of characters at once. Whodunits need a good amount of them in order to spread the suspicion around. Since this is a short story, there isn't much time to introduce them one by one or, frankly, to develop them all substantially. Here, the reader

conveniently meets them in a bunch at the same time the Romans meet them. In order to distinguish the guests, each gets a strong, memorable name and a superficial defining trait.

Then, to keep the festive atmosphere going, and to simulate the Golden Age of Hollywood the story is set in, the Romans perform a song. Out of pure self-indulgence, I wrote a ditty for them, with suggestive lyrics. They sing the verse and then go into a call-and-response mode.

“Oh, you better stay home for the holidays!
If you go roaming, I don’t know what I’ll do.
Oh, you better stay home for the holidays,
You know my mistletoe is only for you!”
“Hey, don’t go flying to Caracas while I’m freezing my maracas!”
“And if I call from Biarritz?”
“Then I’ll toss out all your gifts!”
“If I post you from Hawai’i?”
“I’ll consider that bye bye-ee!”
“So you better stay home for the holidays . . .”

I spent far too long inventing those silly lyrics, but doing so helped me get into the minds of my sleuths and helped me inhabit this world I was creating.

After the song, the sleuths split up. Raúl interacts with Santa (“Merrrrrrrry Christmas!” the apparently pickled St. Nick said as Raúl walked by. Raúl said, “And to you!”). Then he goes to the kitchen to make some *coquito* (a Puerto Rican holiday cocktail) and chat with other guests.

Raúl scraped then mashed the coconut while Cookie measured the sweetened condensed milk and the evaporated milk.

“Say, what is this concoction?” asked Finny, who had floated into the kitchen on a cloud of sandalwood and cigarette smoke. Susan stood behind her, her chin on Finny’s shoulder.

“Oh, I guess you’d call it Puerto Rican eggnog,” said Raúl. “Only served around the holidays. It’s sweet, it’s tropical, and it packs a punch. Speaking of which—Cookie, the rum!”

This helps establish his *bona fides* as a charming and experienced tippler while allowing us to get to know other characters. Plus: More early clues are dropped.

Meanwhile, Rita has a private chat with the hostess, Donna. It’s their conversation that lays the ground for the first mysteries of the story.

Upstairs in Donna’s book-lined office, Rita asked about a pile of papers by the typewriter.

“Oh that,” said Donna. “I’ve gone back to journalism. To fill the time, keep my mind occupied. I took an assignment for *The Saturday Evening Post*, looking into one of the local bigwigs. Corruption. Bribery. The usual.”

“That sounds like a great way to keep busy. Tell me more about it.”

“I will, and I would love to know your thoughts. But I feel like I’ve yammered on about it with this crowd for days. Do let’s talk about it later.”

“Of course. How have you been, dear?”

Donna turned toward the window, her face inscrutable. Snowflakes pecked on the glass. “Oh Rita. It’s been six months without a word. He could be dead. He could be in Fiji, for all I know.”

I had Joan Crawford and Bette Davis on the brain here and wanted this moment to take on the sheen of old-fashioned melodrama. Toward that end, I used mannered theatrical dialogue (“Do let’s talk about it later”) and action (“Donna turned toward the window, her face inscrutable”). At the same time, the reader is prompted to start asking questions: Journalism? Bigwigs? Death? Sure, parties are fun, but we need intrigue to keep the reader turning pages.

We also get a hint here of Donna's backstory. She's returned to being a reporter in order to get past the disappearance of her husband, who may be dead or just have made tracks. Now, that mention of Fiji connects later to the sudden reappearance of Donna's missing husband, whose reason for leaving is as an allusion to the holiday movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, another inspiration for this story. But that's on page three.

I wanted these first two pages to set a festive holiday tone, which I felt was what Crippen & Landru's holiday chapbook readers would be looking for. We meet the rollicking Romans, and my hope is their energy and their interactions are enough to keep the reader going until the mystery and the murder(s) fully get rolling.

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Richie Narvaez teaches writing at the Fashion Institute of Technology. His first book, *Roachkiller and Other Stories*, received the Spinetigler Award for Best Collection. His short story collection *Noiryorican* was nominated for an Anthony Award in 2021, and his whodunit *Holly Hernandez and the Death of Disco* received an Agatha Award and an Anthony Award in 2021.