

**The First Two Pages: “Authorized Treatment” by Twist Phelan**  
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An Essay by Twist Phelan

For me, the crime is the least interesting part of a good mystery story. It’s usually in the foreground—the heist, the kidnapping, the murder. In the background is the quiet hum of what the story is really about—the justice, the despair, the redemption. While the crime commands attention, it’s never what gets truly resolved at the end of the story. It’s the less obvious elements that draw in the reader, give the story heft, make it memorable.

For that reason, my stories—while sometimes beginning with a crime—always include a lot of background in the opening paragraphs, presented (I hope!) in a way you don’t notice. A short story is like a racehorse—it needs to be running from the start. That means the reader has to be drawn into the characters immediately.

In “Authorized Treatment,” there’s more going on than what appears on the surface. Before we get to what the story is really about, though, there’s a lot I have to lay out first, all at a good clip.

Here’s how the story opens:

Nina had chosen a table in a corner of the room, far from where the bar twinkled dangerously, light sharding off the bottles. Her team lead, Ari, joined her. “I can’t figure out how that guy walked through the sheet of glass,” Ari said as he plopped into the chair beside her.

His face glowed red from an afternoon lying on a lounge chair under the carcinogenic Vegas sky. Nina sipped her Coke, wishing it were rum and. “I liked the guy who kept making wine bottles appear under the empty cardboard tubes.”

I drop readers right into the middle of a conversation about magic tricks. No setup, no explanation of where we are or who these people might be. The Vegas setting sneaks in through details—the “carcinogenic Vegas sky,” the magic show they’ve just watched, the casino bar atmosphere. More importantly, as the magic theme runs through the whole story, I wanted it front and center from the first paragraph.

Notice Nina sits “far from where the bar twinkled dangerously.” That word “dangerously” does double duty. It hints at Nina’s drinking problem that shows up later, but it also suggests someone who’s careful, maybe overly cautious. Someone who protects herself. Which turned out to be exactly wrong about Nina—she’s reckless in ways she doesn’t even realize. And the incomplete phrase “rum and” was deliberate. Nina can’t even finish the thought of what she wants. She’s cut herself off, literally and figuratively.

Next, I had to get Nina’s backstory in without grinding everything to a halt. Medical school, student debt, the decision to postpone her residency—that’s a lot of exposition. But it’s also the emotional core of the story. Nina started with good intentions; she wanted to be a pediatrician, help kids. The system crushed that dream with debt, and she made what seemed like a reasonable compromise. One

thing led to another... I tried to show her moral slide through specific details instead of just telling readers she became corrupted. Like this part:

So she began skimming each request for anything out of the ordinary. If she didn't see something other than the usual cancer blah blah...treatment could extend life blah blah...medicine necessary blah blah... after the first minute, she'd hit the thumbs-down emoji at the bottom of her screen and move to the next.

The phrase “cancer blah blah” shows how Nina has turned human suffering into background noise. But here's the sneaky part—I'm also planting specific medical terminology in readers' heads without making it seem important. Words like “cancer” get buried in Nina's dismissive attitude, but they're doing work the reader won't recognize until much later in the story.

The Vegas company retreat setting let me show Nina's success through lifestyle details—the spa visits, the condo, the Tesla—without having to spell out that she's sold her soul. Vegas is perfect for this kind of story because it's all about artifice and illusion. Everyone's pretending to be someone else, everything glitters but isn't gold.

The first two pages set readers up to think they're reading Nina's story. She's the viewpoint character, we learn her history, we see her moral compromises. I wanted readers invested in her journey so the final revelation would hit harder. Because this isn't really Nina's story at all—she's just one piece of a larger puzzle. The real protagonist doesn't show up until page 5, and even

then, readers won't understand who he is until the very last word. That's the magic trick, really; making readers care about someone who turns out to be a side character in someone else's story. The opening pages have to earn that investment before they can cash it in for the twist.

One last thing: My titles usually include a double meaning. I'm not going to talk about this one because I don't want to ruin the story in case you give it a read. But if you do read it, when you're finished, give it a think.

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Twist Phelan is the award-winning author of eleven mystery novels, which have been praised by *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, and *Booklist*. She also writes short stories, which have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and various anthologies. Accolades for her work include two Thriller Awards and the Arthur Ellis Award, plus multiple nominations for the Thriller, Ellis, Shamus, Anthony, Derringer, Silver Falchion, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine's* Readers Choice, and Lefty Awards, as well as the Crime Writers of Canada's Award of Excellence and the Irish Book Awards. Find out more than you probably want to know about her at [www.twistphelan.com](http://www.twistphelan.com).