

The First Two Pages: “The First Day of the Year” by Gabriel Valjan

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“The First Day of the Year” marks my debut in a *Malice Domestic* anthology. The editors called for a cozy mystery with a culinary theme. A “cozy,” to those unfamiliar with this type of crime fiction, is a mystery devoid of explicit profanity, sex and violence, unlike its darker cousins in crime fiction, noir and the suspense thriller. I liken cozies to procedurals, with a premium on the rigorous deduction of an amateur or professional detective. In the first two pages of my story, I adhered to the conventions of the genre, but at the same time I subvert expectations.

Contest judges are readers, and readers are judges. Everything must work. A hook should reel in the reader, set the tone from the start, and compel curiosity. Think of it as an establishing shot in a movie or an infectious and memorable riff in music. This hook could be the opening sentence or the first paragraph. My hook tries to spark interest, suggest a theme, and show something is amiss.

Everyone has to eat, everyone has to die, and death had an appetite that morning. Mothers and cops have that special something that alerts them when something is wrong. Call it instinct. Max not waiting for me in his laced-up Nikes and sweats was the first clue something was off. He might’ve worked late last night at the Wolf & Lamb, but he was fanatical about fitness. It being the first day of the year was no excuse.

It's subtle, but I start off with a little misdirection. Most of my writing is in third person, but I'll switch from the global view of third-person to the "I" of first-person narrative to establish intimacy, like a camera's close-up. In first-person point of view, the reader should know as much as the narrator, although I'll show you ways around this.

Read enough cozies or procedurals and you learn that a crime involves Five Elements: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. Establish the crime scene soon. In my first paragraph, we're not sure if our narrator is a cop, though we know Max did some kind of work at the Wolf & Lamb, and jogging and fitness are important to two people.

We now proceed into exposition that balances Show and Tell. Our protagonist performs certain actions, makes observations, and the reader is given potential clues. Sharing the same information, the reader and sleuth try to solve the mystery.

Then I saw it.

A profanity later, I fumbled for my keys and rushed inside. His feet were in the hallway, toes up like the witch under Dorothy's house. The rest of him was inside the bathroom. My first thought was heart attack.

And there he was in front of me, inches away from the toilet, a gash to his temple, the blood crusted and a sweet scent around him like a halo. My training kicked in and I followed the ABCs of CPR, but it didn't matter. Max was dead.

I dreaded making the call. I recognized the voice as Garcia's, who had the misfortune to have been tagged to hump the calls to the

desk. I conveyed the address and told him to send the body snatchers and requested two suits from homicide.

“Are you sure it’s a 187?” he asked.

We have our proverbial body on the floor, an ambiguous Cause of Death, some hints about our narrator’s professional expertise, and our first instance of dialogue. *Mystique* prevails. Is he a paramedic or a cop, and why does he have a key to the apartment? Tease in sufficient clues, you make readers complicit in solving the crime, asking the same questions as your protagonist. The best mysteries surprise readers with logical solutions that click the way a box closes. In the dialogue, the protagonist has decided that Max’s death is a homicide, and he delegates actions to Garcia.

Is this intuition he shares with all great detectives talking? Preliminary evidence suggests a fall. His bold action to give orders—and that someone obeys him—indicates our man is not the meek and mild vicar or amateur sleuth of traditional cozies. Stakes increase now because he’ll have to justify his decision at some point. Solving a crime always tries to ferret out the *Why*, the motivation. Our crime has become a *How* and *Whodunit*.

The dead cannot speak for themselves, so the reader is dependent on what is said about the deceased or must infer qualities about them somehow. Just as in real life, trust in fiction is earned. Experienced readers are acquainted with unreliable

narrators. Our narrator describes his relationship (subjective) with Max and details about his friend (objective).

We were an odd couple. The only thing we had in common was we were working-class Joes. I was a cop and he was a chef turned food critic. Max was a self-made man, a real polymath who had taught himself languages to read the cookbooks on his shelves; had learned wines well enough to become a sommelier; cheeses, to be recognized as an *affineur* by the American Cheese Society. In his teens, he enlisted as a dishwasher and he worked every station on the line before he became executive chef and earned three Michelin stars at the precocious age of twenty-five.

We shared a love of crime fiction, for those many books in his vast library. People compared Max to the French intellectual Foucault because of his bald head, the scowl and intense stare—a comparison Max loathed. He preferred James Ellroy, the opinionated and self-proclaimed “Demon Dog” of American noir fiction.

We learn lots about Max and our narrator; they are both self-made men in two different spheres of activity. I had taken a risk here. Not all readers may know who Michel Foucault and James Ellroy are, and these two allusions would fail had I not described the physical appearances of the late French intellectual and the outspoken and unapologetic author of crime fiction. Our narrator is well-read. His descriptions of Max hint at a personality, his recent profession as a possible motive for a murderer, and perhaps that our narrator himself is no conformist, who doesn't play by the rules to solve the case. To solve this culinary crime, the reader has to be as smart or as unconventional as our narrator.

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