The First Two Pages: "Yorkshire Ripper" by Mysti Berry

From *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* (September/October 2019)

"Yorkshire Ripper" is a departure of form for me: instead of a disadvantaged protagonist at war with The Man, everybody in this story is on equal footing. I didn't do that on purpose, nor did I set out to combine humor and murderous acts—it just sort of happened. Fixing it so that the tone didn't shift too rapidly or alienate the reader was deliberate and took a lot of tinkering. Let's walk through the first two pages and see how humor and pathos work together in a murder mystery with only two viable suspects.

The opening paragraphs contain metaphors of appearance vs. reality, as many a murder mystery does.

My coworker Pauline, my own personal Yorkshire Ripper, made a little gasping noise as she realized we were alone together, waiting for the elevator. She spun away from me as if I didn't exist, one hand tugging at her asymmetrical hairdo, the other hand desperately searching for something on her cell phone. The dirty white walls of the vestibule were a sharp contrast to the rest of our floor, which was decked out in Early Modern Brogrammer blues and whites, but this one scarred and barren area evoked the building's previous life as a warehouse on the edge of the San Francisco Bay. It felt all the more unreal to share the forgotten space with a live human pretending I didn't exist.

I stared at her, willing her to turn back around and acknowledge me, for two long minutes, until the elevator whisked her away.

"Jane?" My boss Heather had slipped into the elevator waiting area behind my back. As I turned, she gave me her "I'm in charge" face.

I wondered how long she'd been watching. "Hello, Boss."

She looked annoyed. "I've asked you not to call me Boss."

I distracted her by reminding her that we still needed specs from our software developers on Project Gecko, and then hopped on the next elevator before she could think of something stupid to tell me to do. Heather enjoyed telling people what to do.

Back at my deskicle with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge, well, a tiny slice of it, I tried to focus on finishing the release notes as the seven other tech workers, all men made noise around me. Every week we published a list of everything that had changed in our software, so the customers would know what to expect. This one page got more scrutiny than the rest of our content put together--and in the past, the customers had not been happy with it. I worked hard to make our content easy to scan, and use words and sentences as simple and concrete as possible. An hour slipped by as I made sure any required action by the customers stood out in sharp relief.

The "old San Francisco" interior elevator, rough and unpolished, contrasts with the carefully curated parts of the building that customers see, standing in for the layer of tech posh that smothers parts of San Francisco these days. A handful of tech companies have fostered an economy and ecology to serve themselves, and much of old San Francisco has faded away or moved to Vallejo. The very city itself is off-kilter—how could the residents be anything else? Right away the reader knows this story won't be cozy. The slightly elevated diction of the narrator, a software technical writer, tells the reader it won't be a back-alley noir, either.

This opening also contains literal and metaphorical representations of the psychological ills of software work: isolation, disconnection, and far too much

living in your device or your own head. And finally, the opening sets up a passive-aggressive contest between the protagonist narrator and the antagonist Pauline. The narrator waits for Pauline to acknowledge her, knowing she won't and lacking the self-awareness to wonder why she even cares, or the courage to force Pauline to turn around. The reader knows such a situation can't go on forever, igniting the first bit of suspense.

Next, a brief scuffle over adverbs serves up a concise metaphor for the battle between consensus reality and that crazy stuff other people believe.

As I prepared to push the latest changes for publication, I noticed a rogue adverb in the middle of my perfectly concise sentences. Rising out my chair, trying not to stomp, I hustled over to Pauline's deskicle a few rows away.

"Why did you insert this adverb?" I pointed at my laptop like a lunatic.

"It's better that way."

My voice cracked. "It's *not* better."

"I like it." Pauline turned her back to me.

I set my laptop down on her desk hard enough to make her jump.

"Pauline, it's a commonly accepted best practice in every form of writing to remove adverbs and replace them with strong verbs and nouns. Adverbs weaken a sentence."

"That's a matter of opinion."

I took a deep breath. "Linguists and content specialists have measured these things. I'm not making it up."

She leaned toward me, nostrils flaring rabbit-style. "I don't know what you're on about."

"That, my dear Ripper, is the problem." I snatched up my laptop.

"Call me that again and I'm telling HR," she said, her Yorkshire accent garbling the words. She hadn't liked Yorkie, either.

This is a world in which someone might convince themselves that murder is the best solution to a problem. One character can't allow a single adverb in her writing, and the other one won't acknowledge generally accepted prohibitions against the offending word. This petty argument serves as another small beat that heightens the expectation of greater conflict to come.

The reader knows all she needs to for the body to fall.

> Removing the errant adverb and pushing my topic out to our customers fixed the immediate problem, but I was still in need of a primal scream. It wasn't yet 10:00 AM.
> I finally found an open meeting room on the second floor. The lights were out and the door was open. The little tablet we use to book the rooms said, "Open," so I touched it to reserve the room. I'd need a good ten minutes of silent swearing to get my head straight.
> When I pushed the door open, my boss Heather's bad hair caught my eye. She looked like she was taking a nap. Her hair, ruined by too much dye and blow-drying, looked more like dirty straw than human mane. It took me a long minute to notice the blood. Her blood. Oozed all over the desk underneath her torso.

Here the challenge is to manage the transition from snarky office politics to a human life being snuffed out. I worried about this transition, but never worked out a solution. Luckily my subconscious filled the void with a device I call tendrils: brief noun phrases with rich connotations that combine unexpected words to wake up and amuse or intrigue the reader. Tendrils provide flashes of humor without completely changing the tone of the scene:

> "I was still in need of a primal scream."
> "…rogue adverb"
> "…nostrils flaring, rabbit style."

After the truly horrible discovery of a dead body at work, the narrator's body reacts before her brain does, reminding the reader that this narrator is at best slightly unreliable. Since Pauline and the narrator are the only two possible suspects, I need to keep everyone guessing about who killed Heather until the last possible moment. I needed readers to genuinely suspect the narrator, so I show her flaws:

> A giant glob of gas rose up from my stomach, and it felt like race between nausea and unconsciousness. Then I thought, 'Who's going to do the Ripper's dirty work now?' And I laughed a little before I started screaming.

We jump immediately from the discovery of deceased Heather to the police interview, which saves a lot of story time, and allows me to build suspense for the reader—how are these two lunatics going to behave now that they are forced to sit together, face-to-face, the only two credible suspects in a heinous crime? It's a twisted version of those dreaded HR conversations in corporate America, when two life-and-death combatants must shake hands and pretend to be friendly to keep their jobs.

> Pauline sat across from me in a tiny break room off the office kitchen, trembling with anger so intense that an EMT mistook it for shock and tried to wrap her in a blank. She shook him off and fixed him with The Look. After that, no one came near us. True to form, she never looked at me while we waited.
> Finally, a detective joined us. She didn't seem to notice how the Ripper refused to look at me. I shook my head as Pauline preened the

right side of her hairdo over and over, as if all the anger in her little head could be pulled out if she groomed hard enough.

       Detective Dezek sat, calm and poised, a comforting presence despite the circumstances and her ugly gray suit. The Ripper would of course be unfailingly polite in the presence of authorities. She was good at that.

The detective in this scene is based on the most brilliant woman I've ever met, Andrea Leszek. She has always been the voice of reason in a crazy work world. I knew that if I was going to whine about workplace injustices, I needed to also model what's truly great about working in software—contact and connection with some of the smartest and most creative people I've ever met outside a crime writer's conference. Where Pauline and the narrator are immature, focused on themselves, Detective Dezek is mature, wise, and on to them both from the start.

Thus, in two pages the story is up on its legs: the reader has both suspense and anticipation—something MUST happen, but what? Who killed the boss, and why? And will the killer get away with it? These questions represent the Act I sweet spot for any murder mystery.

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