

## Grabbing by the Throat

Alan Orloff

Ah, beginnings. What could hold more promise than a blank page? What could hold more terror?

For me, beginnings are crucial. As a reader, when I open up a book or story, I'm waiting to be pulled in—yanked in, really—and if my interest isn't captured quickly, I set the story aside. Too many things to read, too little time to waste on things less than compelling.

Therefore, as a writer, I feel great pressure to ensnare my readers from the get-go and force them to keep on reading.

In this particular story (*One of Them*, appearing in the anthology *JEWISH NOIR*, from PM Press), my goal is to accomplish a few things ASAP: establish the voice of the narrator, set the tone, and begin outlining the story's conflicts.

*"Hy Perlstein might be a fat, lying prick, Pop," I said. "But you're not going to kill him."*

I don't usually start a story with dialogue, but in this case, it felt right. Because I want to establish the voice of the narrator and the tone of the story quickly, I employ a snippet of dialogue that addresses a serious topic (murder) with a somewhat flippant tone ("might be a fat, lying prick"). I introduce two of the main characters (three, if you include the narrator), while also raising a question about the central conflict (Pop wants to kill Hy for some unknown reason).

*My father cleared his throat, a thick, phlegmy glechh that seemed out of place in his serene, book-filled den. So did talk of murder. "You want me to turn the other cheek, Daniel? That's the excuse goyim use for chickening out."*

*"You don't have to turn the other cheek. But you can't kill Hy."*

*He tilted his head at me, like he'd been doing for the past twenty-five years whenever I said something he didn't quite agree with. "I can, and I will. And it's Uncle Hy, to you."*

I want to portray what kind of person Pop is: Jewish (who else would use the term goyim?) and biased against those not of the faith (asserting that goyim use excuses to *chicken out*). We get a glimpse of the relation between Pop and Daniel (the narrator), namely that they haven't always agreed during the past twenty-five years. Pop takes this opportunity to remind his son how close Hy is/used to be to the family ("it's Uncle Hy, to you"), which also serves to underscore the ambivalence Pop might have with regard to his own relationship with Hy (he seems to hate Hy enough to kill him, yet he wants Daniel to show him some deference by calling him "Uncle Hy").

*Hyman Perlstein was not my real uncle, but he'd been Pop's best friend since before I was born. When I was a kid, his family celebrated most of the Jewish holidays with us, and Hy proudly took his seat at the table, right next to a couple of actual uncles. He and Pop had a falling out a few years ago, and when Mom told me about the dust-up, I hadn't wanted to hear the details, figuring it as simply two stubborn old men arguing over something stupid.*

*"He's not my uncle, but that's beside the point. What did he do to get you so riled up?"*

*My father wagged a finger at me. He'd aged about fifteen years since I moved away two years ago. "That gonif stole our life savings."*

*I'd never liked Hy much, a feeling that began when he gave me a sweaty handshake as he slipped me a check at my Bar Mitzvah. He'd smelled of cheap aftershave and mothballs.*

Here, I describe Hy and his relationship with Pop, and then encapsulate the main conflict as efficiently as possible (Hy swindled Pop out of his life's savings). I also describe the narrator's feelings about Hy. It's obvious now what central conflict will be driving the story. Will Pop kill Hy? Will the narrator (Daniel) be able to stop him?

*"Seriously? How'd he do that?" I asked. Mom said Pop's mind was going, and the deterioration had been accelerating. Listening to all his wild stories and paranoia, she figured only about fifty percent of what Pop said these days was true. The trick was determining which half to believe.*

Not only has Pop lost his life savings, now we learn that he's going senile. Does this revelation mitigate his bigoted outlook on life? Given that his mind is going, how reliable is Pop as he relates what happened? Does this add a "ticking clock" to the conflict, ie, will he be able to settle the score with Hy before he dies?

*"He's been handling our investments for years. Three quarters of the shul's, too. Things seemed to be going fine, then Morty Abel wanted to cash out. Came to find it was all a scam. One of those schemes. You know, with the wop name."*

*"Ponzi?"*

*Pop nodded. "Yeah. Ponzi. So then we all wanted to cash out. One thing led to another. Poof! No money."*

*"Hy admitted that?"*

*"Of course not. Said to be patient, he's got some kind of mammoth deal in the works and needs all the money as collateral. Horseshit."*

*“Why don’t you report the theft?”*

*He waved his hand in the air. “Me and the police don’t get along too well.”*

*“So what did the others do? Anybody call the authorities?”*

*“What do you think they did?” Pop sat up straighter, and something flickered in his eyes. “They called me to take care of it. To make things right. Like always.”*

*“Oh, Christ. I thought you left all that behind. I’ve been trying to.” A few years ago, when Pop’s health started to decline, they sold the dry cleaners they’d owned for five decades. It had also doubled as a different kind of laundry operation—a money-laundering one. To round things out, they dabbled in running numbers, protection rackets, and similar law-skirting avocations. But if you asked Pop, it was all in the name of altruism. Using his money and his stature, my father took pride in being able to help those in the local Jewish community who needed a hand. He’d watched *The Godfather* too many times.*

A little more background on the alleged crime, more bigotry, and the big reveal here: we learn that Pop used to be a crook—and that he’s held in high regard by the Jewish community (feeding his own delusions of being a Jewish Godfather). Of course, maybe that’s only because he’s the one they turn to when they need someone with his particular skill set.

*Aaaand* that’s the first two pages.

All in all, I was pleased with how I managed to squeeze a lot of stuff into these pages without bogging down the scene.

*One of Them* was a fun story to write, and I’m very pleased (and honored) to be included in this great collection!



Alan Orloff’s debut mystery, *DIAMONDS FOR THE DEAD*, was an Agatha Award finalist for Best First Novel. His seventh novel, *RUNNING FROM THE PAST* (Kindle Press), was a winner in Amazon’s Kindle Scout program.

His short fiction has appeared/will appear in *NEEDLE: A Magazine of Noir*, *SHOTGUN HONEY PRESENTS: LOCKED AND LOADED*, *BOTH BARRELS, VOL 3* (One Eye Press), *JEWISH NOIR* (PM Press), *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and *CHESAPEAKE CRIMES: STORM WARNING* (Wildside Press).

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