

Foreboding, Omens, and (Most Important) the Hook

by Nancy Boyarsky

“The Swap” is a mystery in the Hitchcockian genre of the innocent abroad, the naïve traveler who accidentally puts herself in danger by picking up the wrong suitcase. In this book, my heroine Nicole puts herself in danger by arranging to swap her home in L.A. for the wrong couple in London. The Londoners never arrive in L.A. It soon becomes apparent that they’ve left something very bad behind them.

I wanted to get into the action or at least foreboding of it at the very beginning. I start with Nicole looking back at her arrival at the London house. She is the viewpoint character and remains so throughout the book. We see everything through her eyes. In this first paragraph, the reader learns that she’s entering a strange house and that, while the entry hall is disappointingly shabby, she has no inkling that something is about to go very wrong. We also learn that she’s with her husband, Brad:

Afterward, Nicole blamed herself for not sensing something wrong that very first day, when she stepped across the Lowrys’ threshold into their shabby front hall. But what, really, was there to notice, beyond the fact that the house was less than she’d expected? She was too exhausted from the long flight. If she was worried about anything, it was Brad’s silence, the impenetrable gloom that had enveloped him since they’d left L.A.

In the second paragraph, I put the hook, establishing that this is a mystery and what kind of mystery it will be. (Innocent abroad/in danger/no one believes her) I also foreshadow the violent episode that Nicole will soon experience. This not her only problem. From the start she is focused on the fact that something has gone wrong with their marriage. She doesn’t know what it is, but she wants to fix it. I go a little deeper into her relationship with Brad. He obviously isn’t thrilled to have her along on this trip.

After a day or two, when she began to suspect she was in danger, it was impossible to get anyone to believe her. By the time the car blew up with that poor man inside, she understood this was no

random act of terrorism. They were in serious trouble. Yet try as she might, it was impossible to convince Brad that the car bomb had anything to do with them, or the house swap, or the Lowrys, for that matter. But that was later. After landing at Heathrow on that first morning, Nicole followed Brad through the airport, struggling to keep up. With Brad, activities as routine as finding their luggage and getting through customs were competitive sports.

Nicole had been unable to sleep during the long plane ride. She'd spent the time hatching schemes to fix their marriage and, at alternate moments, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Now, in the airport's fluorescent glare, the rift between them was like a buzzing in her head—an insistent noise that blocked out everything else.

Now I throw in more foreboding. One of her suitcases is gone. This is an omen of things to come, as Nicole manages to shed a number of possessions as she flees from the people who begin to follow her:

They were just leaving baggage claim when Nicole said, "Wait." Brad kept walking, so she grabbed his arm. "My other bag," she said. "Where is it?"

"Your other bag," he repeated, setting the suitcases down and staring at them as if he'd never seen them before. He was tall and lanky with a broad face and dark brown hair that insisted on separating into curls despite stern measures taken with a blow dryer. The curls and his wide-set eyes usually gave him the look of an impish little boy. But this morning he was wearing a scowl and, after sleeping fitfully on the plane, seemed unusually cranky and distracted.

Looking back, she saw that the luggage carousel was empty and had stopped revolving. Nearby sat the only remaining pieces of unclaimed baggage, a carton tied with rope and a large aluminum trunk that looked as if it might contain a piece of movie equipment. The bag in question — black with tan leather trim, a slightly- larger version of the one slung over her shoulder — was nowhere in sight.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She could have sworn she'd pulled both of her

suitcases from the moving belt. Now she wasn't sure.

More bad vibes from Brad, who clearly resents her presence on this trip:

Locating the claims office and filing a lost baggage form consumed the better part of two hours. Before that, they'd spent forty-five minutes waiting in the long line in immigration. As they headed through customs toward the exit marked NOTHING TO DECLARE, Brad trailed along behind. His silence seemed to blame her for the lost suitcase and the delay. If she hadn't come, she imagined him thinking, he'd already have checked into a hotel and be on his way to the office.



Nancy Boyarsky was born in Oakland, California. After graduating from U.C. Berkeley, her first job was as an assistant editor in a tiny, long-gone publishing company in San Francisco. She has worked as a writer and editor all of her life.

She is married to the journalist Bill Boyarsky and lives in Los Angeles. She devotes herself to writing, editing, and reading and has added painting to her list of hobbies. She loves the theater, films and travel, especially to the UK, where her first mystery, *The Swap*, takes place.

Click here to watch a video about "The Swap"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3eqoV-mVWo>