

Setting Up the Setting: The First Two Pages in “Killing Kippers”

By Eleanor Cawood Jones

The first thing I want to say is, it’s not my fault. Not my fault I really did get snowed into Green Bay, Wisconsin at a hotel hosting a clown convention. (One of the darker weeks of my life.) But I attract weird, which is fortuitous for a writer, or so I believe. Also not my fault: Some twenty years later the Malice Domestic mystery convention put out a call for anthology stories with the theme, Murder Most Conventional. It was—you guessed it—all about murder at a convention.

Well. Did I have an idea for *that*. But how to set it up to reflect that darkly hilarious moment in time, add fiction to reality and make it believable, and, as all mystery writers ask themselves on a fairly regular basis, who was to die?

Snow in the Midwest in January is hardly news. So it didn’t make headlines on that Thursday afternoon when the temperature and dewpoint combined to dump nineteen treacherous inches of snow and ice on Green Bay, Wisconsin. Salt trucks and snowplows drove in circles, but the rest of us stayed put. Put, for me, was the Running Stick Resort and Casino. I was in town on business. The clowns, including the one on the barstool next to me, were at the end of a four-day clown convention. News to me, that clowns convened.

There’s a lot of information here. The weather. The hopelessness of being stuck, the staying put and going in circles. The endless cycle of waiting for the storm to be over. And the clown next to you. The one you’d like to get rid of. But you’re stuck in a snowstorm. With booze. At a casino.

Oh, the possibilities in that one first paragraph.

I remember this opening well. I sent the draft story off to a writer friend who immediately wrote back and said, “Clowns have conventions?” Then she wrote back a few minutes later and had sliced off practically all of the first two pages, which in hindsight were mostly about the weather so the reader would feel good and stuck, and added the ending to that first paragraph.

Being a journalist, I am all about finding that perfect, tight lede, so I was a bit humbled by that gigantic edit. But being a writer, I also appreciate the heck out of a good suggestion. Plus, I was way over the word count for the anthology submission so this was a real help. Five hundred words about snow, ice, and snowplows in the trash. Poof, like magic. And right back to the clowns. And hopefully a paragraph that hooks the reader right into that magical moment of sticking around to find out what happens next.

A good lesson in setting up the setting. A short story, being, well, short, only gives you one solid chance to bait that hook. I like to think this opening does that nicely.

And the story continues, as the clown on the barstool makes herself known through her own

dialogue:

“Two days,” Kippers the Klown moaned into her Jim Beam and ginger ale, and downed the dregs. She made a sucking noise to get every last drop and plinked the glass on the bar. “They say we’ll be snowed in for at least two more days before the planes run. I’m going to miss two gigs, and I really need the money.”

I made a noncommittal noise. Kippers had already told me at least six times how she would miss a Shriners’ breakfast and a cat’s birthday party. That’s why I planned to spend the next two days hiding—hiding in the casino, in my room, in the lobby, in the parking garage, and in a bottle. (Mostly the bottle.) In short, hiding any place where Kippers wasn’t. I’d been barnacled by this wanna-be entertainer since last night, and she was shaping up to be not only seriously not funny, and in fact whiny, but an alcoholic to boot.

Kippers the (Depressing) Klown was, in fact, pickled, and had been since I’d made the mistake of asking to borrow her phone charger the night before, seated at this same bar. I’d forgotten mine and the hotel gift shop was sold out. Apparently the charger came with a price of everlasting friendship. She’d been following me around since then, showing up at breakfast and turning my time in the casino afterward into a disaster.

I calculated. If I only used my phone for essential calls, like to my therapist, who understood how I felt about being trapped in general and with clowns in particular, I could surely drag it out for another twenty-four hours before I had to borrow her charger again. Maybe in the meantime I could find a way to ditch her and her constant moaning and carrying on about how the other clowns didn’t like her, the lack of work at parties, and how, if clowning was her calling, why was it all so hard?

Poor Kippers.

So now we know more about the setting. Successful businesswoman, trapped either in her room, lonely, or in the community bar with a barnacle-clown attached, perhaps equally lonely. And the casino is also an option. (If you have spent any time in casinos, you already know they can be lonely as well.)

And here’s where you might start to think the story is going to turn depressing, but I’m going to have to beg to differ. Because the more our narrator is imbibing, the more interesting things are about to become. And as you may have guessed from the title, things are about to get particularly interesting for Kippers.

I took a swig of my manhattan and glanced at Kippers out of the corner (kornor) of my eye. All five-foot-nothing of her. What kind of clown dresses in all-black sequins—who knew they even made sequined pantaloons?—topped by a colorful dunce cap with her short, scraggly, bleached blond hair poking out the bottom of it? The effect was black and shiny and round with a burst of color on

top. Audrey Hepburn, Kippers was not. More like Tweedledee.

Or Dum. Whichever.

“My boyfriend will miss me. Who knows what he’ll get into? And my poor, sick kitty needs me.”

Kippers had a boyfriend? Boggled the mind. The cat I could understand. Twenty-seven cats would be even more understandable. This Klown had all the makings of a Krazy Kat Lady.

“I’m sorry about Kibbles, Kippers,” I said for the seventy-second time. Kibbles the cat has gout and needs a special diet and exercise routine, according to Kippers.

Kippers turned to me as if seeing me for the first time. “You got a boyfriend back home?”

“No,” I said shortly. No boyfriend, no husband. Not anymore, anyway. No cat, either. But a manhattan? A manhattan I did have. I took another, heftier swig and signaled Peet the bartender for a refill. (Earlier I made the mistake of asking Peet about the unusual spelling of his name on his employee badge. He told me his mom had spelled it that way so he wouldn’t get confused with his twin brother, Pete. Yep, I was in Crazyland for sure.)

So now we know a little bit more about our narrator as well as Kippers. And this is where the story is moving comfortably from setup into the meat of the tale. Not to give anything away, but you’ll get new characters entering stage left, some rather dramatic and fast-paced action, and the kind of dialogue that I wish would come as easily in every story I write.

I had a ball writing this story. I was delighted when it was accepted, the final edit was tough but went well, and mostly I got to have all the fun of writing my first (and perhaps only) short story in first-person-drunk. (The narrator’s point of view; not me writing it.) That turns out to be a kind of no-holds-barred thing when it comes to what the narrator says and thinks, and even how she moves. So I leave you where the action just starts to get going. Hopefully you’d like to see what happens next. And if you do, you can read all about it on my website, where the complete story is posted at <http://www.girlsgonechillin.com/killing-kippers/>

Thank you, B.K. Stevens, for allowing Kippers and me to guest on your blog today.



Eleanor Cawood Jones began writing in elementary school, using a #2 pencil to craft short stories about the imaginary lives of her stuffed animals. While attending Virginia Tech, she got her first writing job as a reporter with the Kingsport, Tennessee, *Times-News*, and never looked back. Eleanor lives in Northern Virginia and is a marketing director, freelance copywriter, avid reader, traveler, and remodeling-show addict who spends her spare time telling people how to pronounce Cawood (Kay’-wood). Her short-story compilations include *A Baker’s Dozen: 13 Tales of Murder and More* and *Death is Coming to Town: Four Murderous Holiday Tales*. Learn more at

<http://amzn.to/15q8QM5>.