

The First Two Pages: Blood Diamonds

Mystery writer Kris Rusch/Nelscott ran a mystery workshop where she first asked us what historical time periods we felt familiar with, even if it was only through the movies. Then she told us to write a historical mystery set in that time period, with bonus points if we wrote about a crime that was no longer a crime, e.g. during Prohibition, you couldn't sell alcohol, but now it's legal.

My family moved to Frankfurt, Germany, when I was ten years old. So you might be able to guess what time period I chose. But first, I was concerned with character and setting. Kris and her husband, Dean Smith, emphasize both of these for mystery. (They only ranked plot as third, which surprised me, but also gave me some relief, since I tend to drown in my own plots for mystery/thriller/suspense novels.)

Karin kept the laboratory room at a cool 16 degrees centigrade.

She did this for several reasons. The first, although she would never admit it, was vanity.

What kind of person is Karin? A woman who works in some sort of lab. She values control over her environment's temperature. And she is vain. Since setting is perceived through the character's point of view, I didn't dive into the glass pipettes immediately. Karin is accustomed to her equipment. She's more interested in keeping up an appearance of literal coolness and collectedness.

The second reason was to contain the smell. She was quite sensitive to scent. One of her first memories was of her parents allowing the dog to dry itself by the fire, despite the terrible stench of wet fur permeating their house. The laboratory air smelled even worse. Fortunately, Karin had grown into a woman in control of her environment.

More hints about the setting, but Karin is self-involved. She's not telling you much about her macro world, just the micro/internal world (her old dog, the present stench).

She unlocked the top drawer of her lab bench and withdrew a tiny glass vial. She unscrewed the lid, drew up 0.1 cc's of clove oil with a sterilized dropper, and applied two drops of the light brown oil to her upper lip, one under each nostril. This would further dampen any unpleasant odors. Then she replaced the oil in her drawer, locked it, and placed the dropper in the autoclave.
She was ready.

I love this because I'm a doctor, and we use clove oil or other smells to disguise the reek of abscesses, exactly like this, except we apply it to our face masks. Some surgeons/residents carry around a bottle of clove oil in their pockets in case they're called on to open a particularly unpleasant infection.

She refused the turn on the light; she often berated her colleagues, especially Dr. Schreiber, for wasting electricity and hot water, resources that must be conserved for vital research.

This is her first hint of conflict, and of another person working in the laboratory. So of course that doctor must make an appearance.

“Good morning, Dr. Schreiber. Did you sleep well?”

“Better than you, I suspect. Did you sleep at all?” He smiled broadly, revealing his teeth, which seemed too big for his mouth.

Karin was careful not to show her disgust. Klaus was nearly twenty years her senior, but had completed very good work on genetics in his time. She shook her head. “I slept very well,” she lied.

Dr. Schreiber is her opposite. I wanted to make him distasteful to her yet jocular for the reader as he teases her.

“Did you have time to put on those earrings I gave you?”

Karin made sure her voice remained steady and that her face did not betray her. “I did not find them suitable for the laboratory, Dr. Schreiber.”

I struggle to stay tactful with people in real life. Imagine how Karin must feel, always controlling her emotions with people she doesn't respect.

“So modest. You are a credit to the fair sex, Dr. Rasmussen. The spring of life, indeed!”

Karin's hands quivered, this time in anger. She felt her face flush, despite the coolness of the room. Karl's phrase was a crude pun about the homes where pregnant unmarried women could give up their babies. Although Karin was not past childbearing age, she was no longer in her prime, and it was cruel to remind her of that, even though she had never longed for marriage or children.

Here Dr. Schreiber starts to cross the line. He is likeable yet unlikeable at the same time. As are most people. Then he basically states the theme of the story:

“When are diamonds ever improper? Ah, well. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, ‘A true man wants two things: danger and play. For that reason he wants woman, as the most dangerous plaything.’”

When I read the beginning of “Blood Diamonds” at a presentation at Brookline Booksmith on Jewish Noir, I knew one thing: I loved ending with that intriguing quote. The original title of the story was *The Most Dangerous Plaything*, before I integrated it with two other stories, at editor Kenneth Wishnia’s request, and turned it into “Blood Diamonds.”

Happy reading (she said ironically).



Melissa Yi’s newest Hope Sze medical thriller, *Stockholm Syndrome*, focuses on a hostage-taking on an obstetrics ward. *Stockholm Syndrome* just hit the Kobo bestseller list. For the next two weeks only, the First Pages readers can obtain a free copy of *Stockholm Syndrome* by going to <http://bit.ly/11GaLH8> and entering the code STOCKHOLM100.

Melissa’s work has been published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, *Sleuth Magazine*, *Fiction River Special Edition: Crime*, and *Indian Country Noir*, as well as *Jewish Noir*. Her short story “Because” was shortlisted for the Derringer Award this year. “Blood Diamonds” appeared in *Jewish Noir*, edited by Kenneth Wishnia and published by PM Press.