Hi Kayla,

Thanks for sharing your story, “Addictions.” It’s a mystery thriller about the deaths of members of a Nicotine Anonymous group whose members die under mysterious circumstances.

**What’s working:**

You put considerable work into the plot to make this story a compelling mystery with a classic red herring and a twist at the end about the actual murderer. You used Chekov’s gun to a tee—the cigarettes smoked by Elise become the clue in the end that she’s the person who murdered two of the group members. I also like Arbor and how you described her on page two, saying, “Elise wondered what she looked like when she wasn’t housed in a tent of insecurities.”

The decision to include more hardcore vices the Nicotine Anonymous members partook in was a nice touch—nicotine is the least of their worries. My favorite character was Arbor; she was the most complex and compelling character, and I related to her and sympathized with her the most.

The pacing of the story was good. Nothing dragged on, yet nothing felt too quick; it was the perfect balance between exposition and action, driving the story forward.

**What needs work:**

With that said, the characters need work. Besides Arbor, I found the characters to be generic, especially Elise—her motivation to kill members of the group wasn’t clear, and I was confused why she was the murderer and not Leon, who would’ve been a better twist since he’s the “golden boy.” The red herring was too obvious and cliched, making Arbor (the most disreputable character in the bunch) the supposed killer has been done many times before, and it felt too easy to blame her for the murders. Furthermore, I had difficulty putting names to faces, and the characters blended together for me, even Elise.

It's crucial that you establish upfront, very quickly, that Nicotine Anonymous is a real thing because I initially didn’t believe it and had to research it to ensure it was real. I would suggest a quick history lesson on the organization at the beginning to let the reader know that Nicotine Anonymous exists because this program is the lynchpin of your story, and the reader could assume—at least I did—that it was made up purely for the story. I would also suggest you research drugs if you plan to include them in the story because I was thrown off when Elise noticed Arbor shaking and asked herself if she just used heroin, and I’ve never seen a twitchy heroin addict unless they’re withdrawing. I would suggest methamphetamine as her drug of choice because it makes people twitchy and paranoid, so it’d fit into the story of accusations being thrown around.

Lastly, the tense and narrator’s point-of-view are inconsistent. The story jumps between past and present tense and switches between third-person omniscient and third-person limited. I also suggest changing the main character and narrator from Elise to Arbor because she’s the most compelling character, and having your narrator also be the person who’s in the twist at the end limits what you can do without tipping off the reader; this would allow for more narrative flexibility unless you’re trying to go for an unreliable narrator style, in which case I suggest reading some examples of unreliable narrators because it’s very tricky to do.

I’m interested in seeing what the revision is like. There’s a good idea here: the base theory is strong, but the structure itself needs TLC.

All the best,

Payton Ison