

The First Two Pages: “Better Days” by Art Taylor

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The narrator (unnamed) of “Better Days” is a journalist, and like him, I tried to a cover the five W’s as quickly as possible in the story’s opening—though not as directly as a reporter might tick them off. Here are the first paragraphs of “Better Days,” which hit at least the *who*, *where*, and *when*:

Maybe I wasn’t the only one on our stretch of the North Carolina coast who picked up the *Washington Post* on a regular basis, but I doubt anyone else read it like I did—scanning the bylines, measuring the thickness of the paper and the heft of it, stifling the envy.

The new boom in journalism. Who’d have thought it?

“You want to go back, go back,” Dad said one morning, breakfast on the rear deck of his boat, the sun still low enough that things weren’t yet unbearable.

Well, the heat at least.

“I’ve got a job here now,” I said—evasion better than lying. I edged the *Post* an inch higher between us. Tucked under the edge of my plate was the Wednesday edition of the paper I worked for now, unopened.

Who—two characters: a reporter and his father. The former used to work for the *Washington Post* (“You want to go back, go back”), writes for a smaller paper (“I’ve got a job here now”), and perhaps isn’t entirely proud of that (“unopened”).

When: in the shadow of the newspaper crisis of the 2000s but likely sometime after the sale of the *Post* to Jeff Bezos in 2013—that “new boom”—and perhaps during Trump’s candidacy or presidency, given the fresh surge of attention to newspapers and journalism?

Where: “our stretch of the North Carolina Coast” (later narrowed further).

As for *what* and *why*, we begin to get increasing hints of conflicts (both external and internal) and motivations as the scene proceeds:

“Easy to imagine how that would keep you tied down.” The sound Dad made was half snort, half laugh. “Who else is going to report on the latest garden tour, right? Or some petty little zoning change?”

The *Post* partly blocked him, but Dad stared steadily anyway, fork and knife idle in his hands. It was a small table on the stern of his 32-foot Back Cove, no room to maneuver away from the conversation.

The boat rocked gently, waves lapping at the hull. Even here on the sound, shielded from the wind off the Atlantic, the waterway was choppy. In the morning sun, whitecaps shimmered and glistened. Was that where the phrase Crystal Coast came from?

Potential feature, I thought, already planning to pitch my editor—then immediately dismissed the idea. Even now, a year after moving down for good, I remained an outsider. The locals, they probably already knew.

A gull landed about an arm’s length away. Dad shooed it off, his gnarled fingers still holding the fork, then dove back into his sausage and eggs with an irritation that reminded me I hadn’t bothered to answer his question. But really, had I needed to? He’d made it clear more than once that I was selling myself short.

He only wants the best for you—my mother’s words, echoing.

But she wasn’t around anymore to advise me how to navigate those best interests.

Sometimes when he was dismissive of the local paper, I made a joke of it: “Breaking news, three issues a week.” Sometimes I got defensive. Other times—now—I simply went silent.

Note the small tensions between father and son (the conversational jabs, the questions that don’t get answered, that raised newspaper,) and then the internal conflicts as well: the narrator’s back and forth on what might be a good story, what

he knows and doesn't; the back and forth about how to respond to his father's taunts; and in between, the memory of his mother, urging him to understand the father, urging patience. A couple of questions thread through all of it: Does the narrator want to go back to the big-city paper? And if not, why not?

Additional W's—*why stay? why not go back?*—gets played out in the final paragraphs of the story's first section, as explicit questions:

Should I have told him that he was the reason I stayed? Him in his early 70s, here on his own aboard *I Dream of Doris*, the boat he'd bought after Mom died. Was I indeed selling myself short by relocating here, taking this job after mine got cut at the *Post*, me just another victim of the economic downturn in journalism? Or was it a noble sacrifice to be the dutiful son, to sideline my own ambitions while trying to mend things between us?

Dad pushed his plate aside while my own breakfast grew cold. Age spots mottled those knobby hands, his forearms, his face. His hair seemed to grow wispiest by the day.

But saying that his age was what held me back—it wouldn't be fair.

Or entirely true.

Then, as the story's opening section tips toward a second scene—still the manuscript's first two pages!—a series of other W's round out the main characters, settings, and conflicts:

Another factor tying me here lately was Charlene Ramsey—Charley to her friends, and more and more I hoped to become a better one.

Just past 8 p.m. that same Wednesday, Bar Charley didn't have any more customers than usual, the same mix of locals and tourists, of AB Surf Shop T-shirts and jeans against Vineyard Vine Polos and seersucker shorts. But beach music blasted through the speakers instead of the usual background jazz, and then a small group crowded

the bar, loud and raucous. At the center of it, this guy with slicked-down hair—Randy Backus—raised his hands high like he was leading a cheer.

Another answer to *Why stay?* A love interest. And then: *What other troubles?* Randy Backus stands out there, surrounded by some unexpected and unwelcome changes: shifts in music, a surge in volume—signs of troubles ahead.

You'll notice, perhaps, that the first two pages include no mention of a mystery to be solved or resolved.

A crime is indeed central to the story, and the opening hopefully lays that groundwork too: on the plot side, a journalist looking for a story and (suggested by his profession) his skills for investigating one, and in terms of theme, attention to relationships, both romantic and familial, each of which will inform and then provide the keys to solving the mystery ahead.

As much as “Better Days” is a crime story, it’s also the story of fathers and sons, and I tried to maintain that focus from the very start.

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Art Taylor won the 2019 Edgar Award for Best Short Story for “English 398: Fiction Workshop,” originally published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. He is the author of *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories*, winner of the Agatha Award for Best First Novel, and he has won three additional Agatha Awards, an Anthony Award, two Macavity Awards, and three consecutive Derringer Awards for his short fiction. His work has also appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories*, and he edited *Murder Under the Oaks: Bouchercon Anthology 2015*, winner of the Anthony Award for Best Anthology or Collection. He is an associate professor of English at George Mason University.