

The First Two Pages: “The Tourist” by B.K. Stevens
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Analysis by Art Taylor

In April 2017, B.K. Stevens ran two essays at the First Two Pages that argued against the conventional wisdom of starting short stories at moments of intensity and conflict. One of those essays was hers, on her story “The Last Blue Glass.” The other was mine, on my story “Parallel Play.”

In her essay “Dropping Hints, Building Conflicts,” Bonnie wrote:

Conflict, we know, lies at the heart of fiction. That seems especially true of mystery fiction, where conflict usually leads to crime. But it’s not always possible or appropriate to open a mystery with a moment of intense conflict. Sometimes, I think, it’s more effective to begin with a quiet scene that drops hints about conflicts to come.

My own essay, “Slow Beginnings and Lines of Action,” echoed some of the same sentiments—drawing in part on Patricia Highsmith’s *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, where Highsmith admits that she likes “slow beginnings” and talks about weaving conflict into scenes where nothing seems to be happening.

Neither Bonnie nor I had known in advance what the other was writing, but reading the essays back to back, I understood what I’d sensed all along—that Bonnie and I were kindred spirits when it came to short story aesthetics. (And kindred spirits in other ways as well, including a love of fine bourbon—a drink also savored best at a measured pace.)

But it's the mark of a great short story writer that she can work in any variety of modes—which brings us to the opening line of “The Tourist,” Bonnie’s final story for *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*: “They’d brought him no joy, those first three murders.”

Forget quiet scenes or slow beginnings. With nine words (and a mere ten syllables), “The Tourist” grabs the reader—here’s a serial killer, in simple language—and leads that reader ahead, pulled along by a series of questions: Who is this *him*? How many murders have happened? More ahead? What’s his motive? Why did the first three murders bring no joy? And should they have brought joy?

The paragraph continues—answering some questions, introducing others:

He’d wondered if he’d get a perverse thrill from taking a human life, if it would make him feel powerful or godlike, perhaps give him some kind of insight. But it hadn’t. It had been unpleasant and hard, and he’d just wanted to get it over with and leave. At this point, he wasn’t even looking forward to killing Margaret.

...the biggest questions being: Who is Margaret? Why is she slated to die?

Why has he lost that joy too? And will she, in fact, still become his victim?

That answer, as the next paragraph explains, is *yes*:

He’d go through with it, of course. It was the only reason he’d started this whole thing—stopping now would make no sense. And once Margaret was gone, his life would be significantly better. He still looked forward to that.

In the “Writing Suspense” course that I recently taught at George Mason University, one of the things I told students was that suspense relied upon

measuring out information—what to provide, what to withhold, how to pique the reader’s curiosity, how to lure them into turning the page. In Bonnie’s essay that I quoted above, she adds that “if our characters are so engaging that readers both expect and dread the conflict, that can be a good way to keep them turning pages.” And the opening paragraphs of “The Tourist” introduce a character that engages (all those questions above) and a conflict ahead to be expected—and perhaps dreaded: the next murder, Margaret’s murder. And Margaret herself is another character who might prove engaging. What will we find out about her? Will we find ourselves on the edge of our seats, hoping she escapes? Or—it’s not unheard of—will we be rooting for the killer? He is, after all, our point of view character, even if we don’t even know his name until the next paragraph—a paragraph that also gives us our first scene, a flashback, and a little more background information on character, on motive, on the already unfolding plot.

Charles had never actively thought about killing her, though, until that day at the orthopedic center. He’d been sitting in the large central waiting room with over a dozen other people, and he’d been leafing through one of the newspapers set out to keep patients docile. While he was skimming an article about some serial killer in Oregon, he heard a loud female voice and looked up. The woman, a few feet away, was the same basic physical type as Margaret, a petite blonde with a pale, pinched face. She was talking on her cell phone, frowning.

“Can you take a message, then?” she said in a strident voice—another similarity to Margaret. “Tell him Vanda Domokos called. That’s D-o-m-o-k-o-s. Tell him I can’t meet with him today. I’m flying to Houston in a few hours and won’t be back until Thursday night. I’ll call on Friday morning, set something up for next week.”

What an idiot, Charles thought. She's sitting in a room full of strangers and announces her name, even spells it out. Then she says she'll be out of town for three days. Anyone could look her up online in the white pages—wouldn't have any trouble, since her name's so unusual—and find her address. If I were a criminal, I could burglarize her house while she's gone.

Or, he realized, I could kill her when she gets back.

He couldn't have said why, but he found the idea charming. To test his theory, he took out his phone and looked her up. No trouble finding her, as he'd expected.

His doctor's assistant called his name then. He put the newspaper down and took one last look at Vanda Domokos—really, quite a striking resemblance to Margaret.

We haven't seen Margaret yet—not directly—but we're already getting a glimpse of her through this stand-in: her physical description, her voice, her attitude. And we're getting a sense of Charles' dislike of her.

But in addition to information on character, we're also beginning to get the outlines of the plot and the structure. "The Tourist" operates on the idea of stand-ins, of doubling and echoes—so it's fitting that we're not getting Margaret first but instead someone *like* her; in fact, someone *like* Margaret is key to the story. And the article he's reading—about a serial killer in Oregon—helps to spur his own imagination in the right directions too: "Or, he realized, I could kill her when she gets back."

It's not just a plan coming into being, it's a plot. And after that inciting moment, character and plot follow one another forward—impulse, desire, possibility. How far will it all go?

His appointment went quickly. He'd told people at work he'd probably be out all day, so he had some time on his hands. And he hadn't quite shaken off the idea that had started forming when he saw Vanda Domokos's address. Half smiling at his own silliness, he typed it into his GPS, drove out there, and parked across the street from her house.

It could work. Quiet street in a Richmond suburb, small house—she might live there alone. Of course, if she had a security system or a dog, that would cause complications. And he'd have to find a discreet place to park. Well, it was all foolishness anyway. He decided to put it out of his mind and go somewhere for a drink.

From the opening sentence and the fact that this is all flashback, we already know that Charles' wavering ("foolishness anyway") is only a stepping stone toward those "first three murders." But knowing those murders have happened—and then stepping back to see that path—may only increase our expectation and our dread. We know what's coming, we watch to see how it happens, we watch to see what will happen next.

And then, as we must, we meet Margaret:

By the time he got home, Margaret was making dinner. One of her odd, nasty little dinners—fish of some sort, a bowl of either couscous or quinoa, green things. She lifted an eyebrow when she saw him. Maybe she could smell the gin. That seemed unlikely, though, given the stink of the fish.

"How did it go with Dr. Kerwin?" she asked.

"Fine." It irritated him that she remembered his orthopedist's name. He'd seen the man only three times. Did she have to keep track of every last detail of his life? "He said I don't need to go back."

"Good." She poured a careful half glass of Chablis for each of them. In all the years he'd known her, Charles had never seen Margaret take a second drink. He'd never seen her finish a dessert.

“Then I guess,” she said, “there’s no reason you can’t fix those shelves in the garage this weekend.”

He didn’t bother protesting. He had no intention of fixing the shelves. “What is that stuff? Quinoa? Why did you make so much?”

Point of view means everything here. Surely some readers might not find Margaret murder-worthy, and Charles himself could easily come across as a complainer, not just irritated but irritating in his own right. But it’s Charles’ story, and his word choices speak worlds—*odd*, *nasty*, *stink*—as do the ways that he reads Margaret’s own words and actions: suspicious of his drinking, keeping track of him, both controlled (never a second drink, never a full dessert) and controlling: “no reason you can’t fix those shelves in the garage this weekend.”

But moving the plot into its next stage is the answer to that question about why there’s so much quinoa: “Because I’m going to Cleveland tomorrow. That means you’ll need leftovers.”

Her travel means something else to him as well, of course: an echo with that Margaret stand-in and her travel, another opportunity for the plans unfolding in his mind.

Two extra points about how the opening pages lay the story’s groundwork.

First: As I mentioned, “The Tourist” relies on stand-ins and doubling—but you’ll need to watch carefully how patterns continue to emerge beyond that: how Charles tries to control the patterns and how those patterns are read by others, including the police trying to track this new serial killer.

Second: Charles' gin and Margaret's half a glass of Chablis are parts of another of the story's motifs—another pattern to pay attention to.

Even with me pointing out those clues, I can almost guarantee you won't see the twist at the end anymore than Charles did. And as for him being unlikable in his own right... just stay tuned on that point too. Justice is a form of order, order follows its own pattern, and "The Tourist" wraps up all its many elements, not just satisfactorily but elegantly, with wit and flourish.

"The Tourist" is a fine story, careful with crafting its characters, superbly structured in terms of navigating flashbacks and forward momentum, and precise in the way even small details contribute to the overall effect.

Published in *AHMM's* July/August 2019 issue, nearly two year after her death in August 2017, Bonnie's final story is simply brilliant—testament to a master at work and, more importantly, at play. We can only wish there were more stories still to come.

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B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens published over fifty short stories, most of them in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, including her Anthony Award-winning novella "The Last Blue Glass." She's the author of the story collection *Her Infinite Variety: Tales of Women and Crime*, the novel *Interpretation of Murder*, and the YA novel *Fighting Chance*. Find out more at www.bkstevensmysteries.com.

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