

The First Two Pages: “Pier Pressure” by Kate Fellowes  
From *Gone Fishin’: Crime Takes a Holiday* (Wolf’s Echo Press)

An Essay By Kate Fellowes

When I first heard the theme for the 8<sup>th</sup> Guppies Anthology, *Gone Fishin’: Crime Takes a Holiday*, I marveled at how perfect it was.

Vacations are, by their very nature, something out of the ordinary. They are time away from our usual, perhaps dull, routines, when we do different things in different surroundings, which can be totally new to us or as familiar as dear old friends.

In a fictional world, crime, too, is out of the ordinary. When the applecart of daily life is upset in ways intriguing or dangerous, every character is put on edge, giving a story energy through friction.

In “Pier Pressure,” I wanted to put my big-city cop into a very small space. The Northwoods resort, Franks’ Landing, was the perfect place. Almost the entire first page of the story is dedicated to setting this scene, using every sense we possess. To me, it’s always been important to layer on the details with setting, to make that setting a character by its own right. The story couldn’t happen anywhere but here, that’s what I want to convey.

We meet Olivia Payton in the first sentence. Newly retired from the police force after a life-threatening injury during an arrest, she’s come to this idyllic spot,

where she knows no one, to reassess her life and choose a path forward. Those big decisions need wide horizons, and she is looking at one as the story opens.

Before her, the lake was a vision of blue, punctuated by humans at play. Motorboats cruised past, one trailing someone on skis. A young couple in kayaks paddled by, not disturbing two ducks bobbing a few feet away.

Can you see that scene? Hear the motorboat? Are you watching the ducks go bottom up? I hope so.

As Olivia takes in the view, she's remembering the instructions of her therapist after the shooting that led to Olivia's retirement. How she should be mindful and in the moment and all that. This is a struggle for her, still unsettled in her mind after her brush with death. She hears the words, and she knows she needs to act on them. But can she? Here is a woman at a crossroads, alone. Only she can find the way to come to terms with her life now. Only she can decide what she will do next. "I'm glad I booked in for a whole month," she thinks, because this is going to take some time.

In the next few paragraphs we meet the other residents of the resort. There's a family with three children: two young girls and one teenaged boy. While the boy, rather naturally for his age, wants to keep his distance from his sisters and his parents, the little girls play happily in the clearing between the cabins, by the shore of the lake. Olivia notes: "The girls' parents were nowhere in sight, but that was

the joy of Franks' Landing. They were all safe here. No urban crime would creep in on paradise." The astute reader will know that can't be true, and I wondered as I wrote it if Olivia, hardened by her work on the police force, could truly believe it herself.

Then there's an older couple, who have been married for a very long time, a fact obvious to Olivia based just on their behavior.

Larry settled sunglasses on his generous nose before heading to the car where Marian waited.

"I don't know why you keep locking the car, Larry," she scolded. "There's nothing to steal and no one to steal it."

Larry made no reply.

In a few sentences, we see people we have all seen in real life. But I have also managed to sneak in a clue that comes into play later in the story, plus another hint at the peaceful life one can expect at Franks' Landing, where theft would never be an issue. At the end of this scene, we've met everyone but the local police officer, who shows up in a page or two.

I've made Olivia an outsider here, in every way. She sitting by herself, watching people she doesn't know, in a place she's never been. It should be the ideal recipe for a rest cure.

Except that a nightmare invades her dreams that night just before dawn. The dream is a leftover from her ordeal, plaguing her with regularity. We've all woken from a bad dream at least once or twice in our life, so the hammering of Olivia's

heart should be familiar. The breathlessness upon waking, the need to get out of bed to shake it off will, I hope, make readers feel Olivia's discomfort, and, hence, feel for her.

In the early morning light, she looks out the window, noticing people on the dock at the lake. She instantly begins to analyze the situation, showing us she may be retired from service, but she retains her skills as a trained observer.

The scene she witnesses will be key in the rest of the story, so I make it as detailed as it would be when viewed from a bit of distance, in dim light, when newly awake. I want it to have that haze of memory when she recounts it later, making her need to close her eyes to call it back. I want readers to pick up on her unconscious, unspoken wish to have paid more attention, even though the assessment she's able to supply will provide vital information.

Sensing movement, she squinted, making out three figures standing on the pier, talking by the rowboats. Larry, and Marian, the old married couple. And with them was... yes, Russ Franks, the resort's aging owner. Assessing the situation out of habit, Olivia thought their conversation looked serious, not casual, but a moment later Marian kissed Larry's cheek and he stepped into a rowboat and pulled the cord to start the outboard. She raised a hand in farewell as he pattered off across the calm water.

But at the end of page two, Olivia doesn't know—and neither do we as readers—that what she's just watched will have any importance, at all. With a yawn, she returns to her bed, the spell of the nightmare broken.

By this time, the story is well underway. As the author, I know where I'm going, the ending clear in my mind, my only job being to write steadily toward it.

And for readers, I hope the lure of wondering what is to come to this peaceful place, early on a summer morning, will keep them turning pages.

For all is not well at Franks' Landing. Olivia is not the only one trying to quiet the past.

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Kate Fellowes is the author of six mysteries. Her stories and essays have appeared in many anthologies and periodicals including *Victoria*, *Woman's World*, *Brides*, and *Romantic Homes*. As winner of the San Diego Public Library's Matchbook Short Story contest, she met the challenge to craft a mystery just fifty words long. A founding member of the Wisconsin Chapter of Sisters in Crime, her working life has revolved around words—editor of the student newspaper, reporter for the local press, cataloger in her hometown library. She blogs about writing and life at <https://katefellowes.wordpress.com>.