The First Two Pages: "Making Up for Lost Time" by C.W. Blackwell

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An Essay by C.W. Blackwell

One piece of writing advice you often see floating around has to do with opening sentences: they should spark intrigue, establish a sense of place, hint at conflict, identify a protagonist, etc. I'm generally skeptical of these kinds of off-the-shelf tips, since newer writers tend to take them to heart. Rules are meant to be broken, after all—and this goes double for the arts. But this is one of those pieces of advice I tend to believe in. I sometimes imagine a short story like a carnivorous pitcher plant. The goal is to lure the reader toward the edges of the story where their attention becomes trapped. Once there, their suspension of disbelief is dissolved and they become a part of the story—and the story becomes a part of them. A key part of this process, of course, is the lure.

Here is the first line from "Making Up for Lost Time."

> It wasn't the first time someone told me I looked like Tag Sandoval, the famed Silicon Valley tech CEO, but it carried an unbearable irony now that I was living in a downtown shelter with two dozen men whose luck had run completely dry.

I'm happy with this sentence because it does a few things very quickly. It establishes a confessional, noir voice like someone is about to tell a revealing yarn—sort of a *"Psst. Come here and listen to this"* kind of thing. It also establishes

that the character lives in a homeless shelter and contrasts his ill-fortune with the "unbearable irony" that he looks like a famous rich man. This also raises the theme of income inequality, a very important issue where I live on the Central Coast of California. The main character is not alone in his misfortune, after all—he's living there with two dozen other men who are also homeless. But most importantly, it teases a potential conflict that makes you want to read on. *Could he come face-to-face with his wealthy doppelganger? What would happen if he does?*

To push this further, I doubled down on the physical resemblance, as well as the widespread economic disparity:

> "Maybe not twins," Jerry said. He was a new social worker on shift, one of those guys who had a ready comment for everything. He studied my ears as if they had something to do with the resemblance, but I'd always thought it was my nose and jaw that were most similar. "But you could be his older brother. Cousins for sure."
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> "Maybe I'll ask Sandoval for a bridge loan," I said. "Since everyone thinks we're long-lost brothers."
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> "Ask him for me, too. I'm this close to getting a cot here myself."

There's not much of a dividing line between the folks running the shelter and those sleeping on the cots, and this is an important—and realistic—element of the story. It's important to me that my stories are told from a clear moral and political point of view, so in the very next section, I chose to elaborate on how rampant greed is eviscerating my community, while further developing a sense of place. I also feel

it’s important to bring wry humor to let the reader know I won’t get too preachy about it.

> There’d been a recent analysis of the most expensive rental markets in the country, and Santa Cruz topped out at number one. Basic supply and demand, they said. Everyone wanted to live in a coastal town surrounded by redwood forests, where fog cooled the hot summer days, and the winters never dropped below freezing. But I knew there was more to it than that. Silicon Valley had produced a new class of billionaires so incomprehensibly wealthy they could buy homes no matter the price. You could shake their sofas and million-dollar bungalows would drop out. Rich men like Tag Sandoval bought vacation homes they never used. Homes for their children. Homes for their secret mistresses. Homes for their personal dieticians and their numerology consultants.
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> Meanwhile, the tent cities grew.

But where’s the story? At this point, I’m going to get into trouble if I don’t start introducing some real-time conflict for the protagonist. The previous paragraph was mostly for me, and now I’m in debt to the reader. I think about this quite a bit—how much of the story is for me and how much is for the reader. If the debt grows too deep, the reader will take their chips and walk away before they get too invested, so I must get to the point by the end of the first two pages. Now I must show that the protagonist isn’t just a caricature—he’s someone with a complicated backstory.

> I was strolling past one of the latest tent cities to pop up on River Street when my ex-wife called. I had counted at least a dozen tents, all different colors. There was a woman with long gray hair setting up a new one in the back, close to the levee. It had started to drizzle, and her hair looked wet and stringy as she fumbled with the tent poles.
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> I answered just before the call went to voicemail.
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> “Where are you—are you okay?” Jennifer asked. She was trying to sound concerned and sympathetic, but I knew what she wanted. I’d

been stalling on signing the custody agreement for our five-year-old daughter, Alex. A part of me was holding out for a miracle, a stroke of luck big enough to even the scales. “You didn’t return my call this morning.”

“I’ve been busy. You know, looking for work.”

“Where’d you sleep last night?”

I lied and told her I’d slept on a friend’s sofa. I wasn’t too proud to sleep in a shelter if I needed to, but I didn’t want her to know about it right then. Just another point in her column, more proof that she’d been right that I wasn’t husband material after all—or father material, for that matter.

“I need those papers signed,” she said. “I’ll give you another day to keep job hunting, but if you don’t sign by Monday, my lawyer will take things in a different direction.”

I didn’t know exactly what that meant, but knowing Jennifer, she wasn’t bluffing.

“How’s Alex?” I asked. “Can I talk to her?”

“She’s napping,” she said, a little too quickly. I heard a door shut as if she’d entered a private space where no one could hear her side of the conversation. “She’s comfortable here. She has her own room, and we’re using my dad’s old Toyota to get her to school. She misses you, but it’s the best place for her. You have to know I’m right about that.”

I got off the phone. It hurt so damn much.

Now we have a fully-fledged character in the middle of a crisis: homeless, unemployed, recently divorced, reckoning with losing custody of his daughter—and a *wink-wink* suggestion that he may confront a lookalike with vast and unimaginable resources. What could possibly go wrong? *Don’t you want to find out?*

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