

BETTER DAYS

by Art Taylor

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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.

"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 thirty-two-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.

Should I have told him that he was the reason I stayed? Him in his early seventies, 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 wispier by the day.

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

Or entirely true.

* * *

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 eight 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.

"This here, it's a friggin' gift. It's like . . . It's like heaven opened up"—lifting his arms again—"and oh, yeah! It let down its light and put it in a glass and . . ."

Randy wore a rumpled linen jacket, cuffs rolled loosely, and khaki cargo shorts. Charley faced him from the other side of the bar—long blond hair tucked up in a tortoiseshell clip, a cocktail shaker in her hand, a blush on her face. She generally shied away from too much attention.

Randy leaned down—bowed, really—then took another drink of the pale green liquid. He smacked his lips, almost like a kiss. "This is the bomb," he said. "A round for everyone." Cheers from the crowd, locals and tourists both, no matter who knew him.

Truth was, none of us really did.

Charley put down the cocktail shaker, leveled her chin at him. "You know how much that'll cost?"

"The money? You think that matters?" He made another gesture at the glass. "This—this is worth every dollar."

From his grin, the way his eyes drank in Charley herself, I caught the message underneath: She was worth it too.

But it wasn't his look that had me stumbling. It was hers—her unlikely giggle, that half-turned-up smile, the flicker of mischief in her eyes.

I don't own her, I reminded myself as I settled onto a barstool. Neither of us has committed to the other. Hell, we weren't even dating.

Still, it stung.

Randy Backus had been in town only about a week. Pulled up to the boardwalk on about a sixty-foot Hatteras named *Better Days*, Florida registration numbers on the hull. Had a two-man crew running it—the same burly guys flanking him at the bar now, drinking off the credit card he'd just tossed down on the counter. It was a platinum card, and he'd been waving it all around town, I'd heard, lavish dinners at those waterfront restaurants, late nights at the bars, and then more drinking on the yacht, music and laughter echoing along the waterfront.

Not that I'd been paying any attention.

Charley didn't notice me until she and her barback served up that round of drinks for the house—twenty coupe glasses or so, probably twelve to fifteen dollars a pop.

"Hey," Charley said, a flash of surprise as she handed a glass my way.

I waved off the drink. "I'll order something in a minute."

She narrowed her blue eyes, confusion in place of mischief, started to say something. Randy spoke first.

"I wouldn't turn down a Midnight Tryst."

I glanced his way. "What did you say?"

"It's the name of the cocktail," Charley said, passing my glass and another to a couple who'd taken up residence at the end of the bar.

Randy raised his drink in my direction. "Gin, creme de cocoa—"

"Cacao," Charley called over her shoulder.

"*Excusez* me." Randy purposefully mangled a French accent. "And what else?"

"Fernet-Branca," Charley said, "plus a couple of secret ingredients."

"Right there when I need you." Randy winked. I'm not sure Charley saw it. "And a little bit of mystery? She knows how to play the game." He pointed at me, fingers shaped like a gun, his thumb wagging a couple of times—trigger pulled. "You don't know what you're missing, friend."

We'd never been introduced. He didn't ask my name now, just turned to watch Charley again, the curves of her, delivering the last of the drinks.

I watched too. I did know what I might be missing.

Randy reached across the bar and grabbed one of the glasses that Charley hadn't served yet. She caught him doing it. Anyone else, she'd have bit the guy's head off. But she just shook her own.

"A toast." Randy stumbled climbing his barstool, one of his crew members leaning in to support him. "To the best bartender—whoa, no—best *mixologist* on the East Coast."

Charley blushed again—embarrassed at the attention.

But then I realized it wasn't embarrassment. It was pride.

* * *

"That guy's unreal," I told her later that night.

"Yeah, he's over the top, isn't he?" Charley had been corking some of the homemade mixers, cleaning up the counters. Swabbing the deck, she called it. She'd already sent her barback home, which I took to be a good sign. The two of us alone.

Stifling some other instincts, I'd stayed at the bar for hours. Trying to prove what? Backbone. Dedication. Or was I keeping an eye on the situation? On Charley herself?

Either way, I'd kept my seat, paced my drinks, declined another free one when Randy bought a second round, kept up a smile when anyone glanced my way. I chatted with another woman who'd come in—a woman I'd dated briefly, still friendly with me even though things hadn't worked out. At least it had been a distraction from Randy and his antics.

"Throwing money around. Everything high energy, high volume." I shifted my drink in a circle. It was half-full—still pacing myself. "It's all so . . . performative."

"Ten-dollar words." Charley waggled a cocktail strainer my way—playful, another good sign. "Think of the little people."

"This whole big-money thing. Showing off. But just listen to him—he sounds like he fell off the back of a hay wagon."

"Rich people only talk certain ways?" She tossed the strainer on the counter. "In these parts, a lot of good old boys earn a lot of money—not that you could tell it listening to them."

"Understood," I said. "But it's not just the way he talks. It's . . . Well, look at those two gorillas having to prop him up at the end, carry him out." Randy had been babbling as they helped him weave through the door: *Charley was a great mixer, she needed to come out on his boat, she needed to mix it up there.*

She laughed. "He'll be feeling it tomorrow."

"Maybe that's what I mean. He doesn't seem like a guy who even thinks about tomorrow."

Charley pulled out a short step-ladder, stepped up on it. She was wearing a loose skirt, and her calves tightened as she stretched to return some liquor bottles to their shelves.

"Don't tell me you've never been hung over," she said. "After some big night on the town. Your wild dates."

An edge to those last words?

Maybe.

As proprietor of the nicest cocktail spot in town, Charley had been front and center to too much of my dating over the last year—one of the potential stumbling blocks between us. There'd been a number of women after I'd moved down, more than I'd like to count. I'd felt like a hot commodity for a while—fresh on the scene, a little worldly with my big-paper, big-city experiences, charming enough with a little bit of effort, vaguely handsome too, I guess, at least that's what others had told me.

Or maybe it was some deeper truth about me they found attractive. After all, some women like a project.

Either way, it wasn't just Charley being cautious about dating me. Too many relationships over the last year, too many that had gone wrong. I liked Charley too much to be cavalier about adding her to those lists.

"Those days are behind me," I said. When she turned to roll her eyes, she caught me staring at her legs. I feigned ignorance, innocence. "What?"

"I'm just saying"—stepping down from the ladder—"some people are *work hard, play hard.*"

But she'd hit my point again. I didn't see Randy—that recklessness, that over-the-top, nothing-to-lose attitude—as someone who'd ever put in enough effort to buy a boat like that. "Work hard?" I said. "Randy doesn't have what it takes."

Something stopped then—Charley stopped, I mean, but something bigger too. The look she gave me was chilly enough that it felt like the temperature dropped ten degrees. She propped her hands on her hips, fists tightening. The quiet was sudden, deep.

“You know,” she said finally, “that’s what my mom used to say about me.”

Charley had grown up poor, bartender in some rough spots before saving enough to build her own business, to be her own woman. Late nights recently, she’d been telling me more about it—both of us sharing things, about ambitions and frustrations, about family, about each other.

I didn’t want her to stop telling me things.

“Hey, hey,” I said. “This isn’t about you.” *Not that way, at least.* I ran my fingers through my hair. “It’s just—I mean, I don’t understand why you’re defending him.”

Long pause, deep breath. Her fists loosened. The room felt no warmer.

“Whether he works, doesn’t work—who cares?” She gestured at the credit-card machine behind the bar. “Card went through, right? That’s all that matters to me.”

“Is it?”

Another deep breath, this one not a release. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I saw the way you laughed at his jokes, the way he reached out and brushed your hand, the way you didn’t pull away quick enough.

“Look,” I said. “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Because you’re looking out for my better interests, is that it?”

“Because you’re a friend—”

“Glad we clarified *that*.”

—and I think your head’s getting turned by the new guy.”

Her snort of laughter sounded like my dad’s. “I’m not dumb enough to have my head turned by the new guy.”

Definitely an edge this time.

“Speaking of turning heads,” she said, “I saw you and your old flame talking. Rekindling something there?”

“Not hardly.” My turn to laugh, to break the mood. “She’s—”

“I wouldn’t rule her out, if I were you. Just saying.”

No laughter from Charley. Not even half a smile. Nothing mischievous.

I swirled the glass again, pretended I was musing over something instead of kicking myself.

“Closing up.” She gave the counter a sharp wipe, shot a quick nod toward my drink. “You’ll need to finish that.”

She went to the back room without another word. I waited a few minutes, listening to the lonely hum of the ice machine behind the bar, then left the dregs in the glass before heading out myself.

* * *

I steered clear of all of it for a few days. The Sunday edition was the biggest of the week, and even though I wasn’t working on any important stories (did I ever?), I kept my attention directed anywhere I could.

While the major papers had found themselves on more solid footing, small markets like ours still struggled, and our editor, Bruce Hensley, big-boned,

big-voiced, big personality, tried every trick he could to boost readership and revenues.

“You find your audience by meeting them on their turf,” he said—which meant lots of social media, an occasional podcast (which didn’t bring any traffic), some live video (which did). So I interviewed fans on camera before a country-western variety show, then wrote a review after the fact—keeping a running log on both Facebook and Twitter, with a quick clip from the show itself. I covered a house-and-garden tour, pics and videos both. I got a head start compiling next week’s events calendar, huddled at my desk, then wrote up a brief on a zoning challenge.

Through it all, Dad’s words echoed, as did the memories of the *Post*.

Maybe the only thing holding me back was me.

Try as I might to forget him, Randy Backus nagged at me, and not just because of Charley. None of it sat right—the clash between the drunk, boisterous guy and the sleek yacht on the boardwalk, between his reckless lack of control and whatever it would take to buy that boat.

Maybe I was just naive. Many ways to earn cash, and the Florida registration on the boat suggested too many images. Running drugs from the Caribbean? Mafia ties in South Florida? Easier to picture Randy lording it over some Miami nightclub than in a tucked-away NC bar.

And then second-guessing myself, third-guessing maybe, because what the hell did I know about Florida? Randy’s jacket reminded me of Don Johnson’s in *Miami Vice*. Drunk Randy had Al Pacino’s glazed look in *Scarface*, slumped in front of a mound of cocaine.

I needed to find out more about the real Randy.

Google was my first stop—and what seemed like pay dirt on my first dig, because the Randall Backus in Jupiter Island, Florida, looked a good thirty years older than the man waving his credit card around Bar Charley.

The real Randall Backus was balding, a circle of gray hair bushed over his ears like a monk. Bags swelled under his eyes, his jaw clenched sternly, his cleft chin jutted. He’d recently retired as head of a big energy group, shipping and distributing fuel throughout the Southeast. The company website carried a press release about his service over four decades. A longtime secretary called the moment bittersweet, praised him as ambitious and generous in equal measure. Former Governor Charley Crist talked about his service to state and country.

“Identity theft.”

I didn’t realize I’d said it aloud until my editor, passing behind me, said, “Got something?”

My embarrassment was probably obvious—following something personal like this on work time.

I told him what I was working on, skipping the why.

Bruce leaned over me, added a “Jr.” to Randall Backus’s name, and hit enter—and there was Randy, smirk and all, staring back at me.

“Big-city reporter, yeah?” He gave me a wink.

“It would’ve been my own next move.”

I scanned quickly through the images on the screen: Randy with cocktail in hand on some West Palm Beach high-society blog; Randy’s Facebook profile picture; Randy leaning against that stern father of his, both of them in dark

suits—pictures from some corporate function, I figured, then saw it had been snapped at a breast-cancer fund-raiser.

Either way, riding his father's coattails, and he sure fit the type: entitled, spoiled, irresponsible.

"Anything else I can help with?" Bruce asked. I'd forgotten he was there.

"You know how to find who a boat is registered to?"

He shrugged. "Live here as long as I have, you make friends with the Wildlife Commission. I'm sure they could reach across the border."

Half an hour later, Bruce confirmed it. Randall Senior owned that yacht. Randy was indeed living off his daddy's money.

But nothing illegal about that. Nothing worth writing about. Nothing to tell Charley.

* * *

On Sunday afternoon—that day's edition behind me and most of a reclusive weekend too, binge-watching bad TV alone at my place—I leaned on the boardwalk railing and stared at that sixty-footer. Along the docks, other boats were coming in, windows caked with sea spray, couples tanned and languid, families tuckered out after day trips over on Shackleford Banks. People were already spraying down their boats, calling it a day. But on the big boat at the end of the dock, no one worked. One of the *Better Days'* crew members sunned himself on the bow; on the stern, the other hoisted back beers with a woman in a bikini. And where was Randy? Recovering from another bender? From another night at Bar Charley? Worse, was Charley there with him?

That imagination again.

That's what I was telling myself when I felt a clap on my shoulder.

"Friend." Randy's voice. "Looking for me?"

I turned. Tried to keep a straight face.

"Sleek boat," I said. "How long have you had it?"

The sun reflected hard in Randy's mirrored sunglasses, blinding my eyes.

"Few years now. The time blurs a little, you know."

That image again of him stumbling out of the bar, slurring, stammering about getting Charley on his yacht, mixing things up with her.

"You spend most of it out on the water? Traveling?"

"It's the life." A glance at the yacht. "Come aboard?"

Never turn down an invitation? Know your enemy?

Maybe sometimes we simply do the things that hurt us.

Neither of Randy's crew got up when we stepped on board, though the guy in front raised his beer in greeting. A bulging bag of trash was propped against the inside of the hull, a trail of fluid leaking onto the fiberglass. It smelled sour—like sweat or vinegar or worse. Randy guided me through a hatch into a room that was all teak and windows—a circle of them, flooding the room, sunlight from all angles, as blindingly bright as those mirrored sunglasses.

"It's pronounced *salon*," Randy explained, "even though it's spelled with two Os: s-a-l-o-o-n. I actually like *saloon* better. A drinking spot. That Wild West feel too." He held his fingers in little guns like that night at Charley's, then took a couple of steps up to the galley. "Wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Wasn't expecting to be here," I said.

"Funny how things work, ain't it?" He was pouring a drink, standing by a

granite countertop crowded with liquor bottles and crusty glasses. As he rattled on about one thing or another—how much he liked the area, the best meals on the waterfront, best tuna, best swordfish—I studied the room, maybe looking for the *Scarface* mound of cocaine behind all that liquor.

In the sunlight streaming through those wraparound windows, the saloon offered the same odd mix of sleekness and frat-boy sensibility that Randy seemed to embody. Cushions sat askew on contoured seating areas, covered with blankets and beach towels—one blazoned with “My Boat, My Rules.” A big beer stain marred the floor, like somebody had emptied a full can and walked off. At least it smelled cleaner inside—but hardly good. Fragrance spray layered over bleach. A frat boy’s idea of cleaning.

“Here’s to you,” Randy said, handing me a tumbler, some kind of whiskey over ice. I took it by reflex, then immediately regretted it when he added, “Glad to see you taking a free drink from me this time, hey, buddy?” He plopped down on one of the beach towels—smug and smirking as always.

I leaned against a wall, made a point of not sitting—then paid for it, snagging my shirt on a nail jutting out of the teak. Two of them, I saw when I turned, maybe where pictures had once hung.

“Sorry,” Randy said. “You caught us in the middle of redecorating.”

“Barging in at the wrong time.”

“No worries, man. I invited you. And maybe I’m the one who should apologize for barging in.”

“How’s that?” I stood awkwardly now, middle of the room.

“You and the little señorita at the bar.” He raised his tumbler. Sunlight glinted like a wink off his sunglasses. “Maybe there’s been something there?”

“What gave you that idea?”

“The only skill I have—measuring people up, what gets them going.” He scratched his chin. “What they want, what they’re afraid of, where they’re weak. Seems to get the job done.”

I started to disagree, but then . . . he’d hit the mark pushing my own buttons. Was I underestimating him again?

“What *is* your job exactly?”

Randy spread his arms across the cushions. His drink sloshed, another stain for the floor. “Living the life.”

A knock at the door. One of the crew stepped in, his beer still in his hand. “Your visitor, boss.”

I didn’t need to turn to see who it was. Randy’s face said it all—his smirk widening and the image reflected in those damned glasses.

Charley, easing her way through the hatch.

* * *

Dad called me at the paper midmorning Monday. What was I doing for lunch?

Fuming, I could’ve said. Kicking myself. I couldn’t concentrate, reliving everything I’d said to Charley—*Fancy meeting you here* and *Didn’t know you two had a date* and *No worries, won’t stand in your way*. Everything I shouldn’t have said, everything I maybe should’ve.

And everything Charley had said too. *It’s business*, with the clear implication that it was *none of my business*, and then *I’m not sure what you’re assuming, but you’re dead wrong—again*.

“I’m free,” I told him. The word suddenly took on new meaning.

“Meet me at the marina.”

I figured lunch on the back of the boat, but once I was aboard, he started the engine and cast off the line.

“Nice day for a cruise,” he told me.

Actually, the heat was a like an oven, and the humidity like a shower of sweat, but that wasn’t my main concern. “Paper’s on deadline, you know.”

“Deadline’s tomorrow,” he said, raising his voice over the motor. “Everybody needs to slow down sometimes. A shift in perspective every once in a while, don’t you think?”

He probably took my lack of an answer as agreement. Maybe it was. I was grateful at least for another distraction.

Usually, Dad stuck to the sound side, short rides up and down the waterway, but soon he was turning toward the inlet, taking us out in the ocean.

“We heading somewhere specific?” I asked.

“A destination isn’t always a place.” He pushed the throttle further, cutting through the waves, riding the swells.

I tried not to be baited by his sudden crypticness. “Well, even if I’m missing work, you think we’ll be back before evening? I might have dinner plans.”

“You don’t.” Never took his eyes off the horizon.

Mom’s voice again, echoing: *He has his ways, I know, but he cares, he does.*

How far did we go out? A mile? Two?

Nautical miles, Dad would’ve corrected. I still didn’t know the difference.

My mind roamed elsewhere—more missteps, more mistakes. *No, you know what, I’m not leaving yet. Because I’m curious. Is this why you asked me aboard, Randy? Because this kind of scene amuses you? And don’t “wait a minute” me, Charley, because whatever you think this “business” here is about, he—*

My head was clouded with anger at the time, my memories clouded now by wondering what happened between them after I’d gotten the hell out.

Finally, Dad curved the boat around, faced us toward shore, throttled back.

“Can you see your house from here?” he asked.

“My house is in the middle of town,” I said.

“Okay. Any of those houses? Or the people out on the beach?”

I looked at the coast—the beach a stretch of tan, a swath of green above, lots of blue sky.

“What’s this about, Dad?”

“How about that big yacht you’re so worried about?”

I hadn’t seen him since our breakfast the Wednesday before, hadn’t talked to him.

Easy enough to point out that the waterfront was soundside, blocked from view same as my house, but that would’ve missed the point.

“That yacht may be sixty feet on the waterfront, son,” he said, “but from here . . .” He held his hand up like a magician—poof! Gone.

“How do you know anything about that yacht?”

He sat down on the captain’s chair. “Charley’s a charming woman, wouldn’t you agree? Makes a fine old-fashioned, and if you stopped by as soon as she opened instead of eight or nine o’clock at night . . . well, the bar’s pretty quiet then.”

I've got a job, that's what I started to say, but that would've circled us back into a whole nother conversation.

"She told me about you and this Randy fellow," he said. "Told me you think she's got an interest in him. Told me you think that interest is mainly in his money, and—"

"What? I never said that."

"You didn't ask her if all she cared about was his credit card?"

I thought back to the fight on Randy's yacht, then further back to Wednesday night. My shirt clung to the sweat beading on my back—and it wasn't just the sun boring down on our little patch of boat.

"No, what I meant was—"

"She's got a business to run, and that fellow, she says he asked her about working a private party."

"Private party, yeah, I'll bet."

"She likes you, son. She likes you a lot." His eyes stared hard at me. "Whatever his intentions may have been—well . . ." Another flutter of fingers, another *poof*. "Sometimes you need to have a little faith in people."

Out near the horizon, a cargo ship headed out to sea—or was coming into port? Hard to tell from this distance. Dad's shoulder and head framed the ship. The wind pushed through his wispy hair, strands of it dancing. I caught a sudden image of him not just as old man but as old man on a hill, philosopher, sage.

Talk to him, Mom had said—time and again.

And again: How much time did he and I have left? How quickly could things change?

So with the boat swaying and the world seeming like it was unsettled under me in even more ways, I bit back my usual instincts and I talked—about my interest in Charley, and my jealousy, and about my trying to find out something about Randy. My concerns, my suspicions, everything.

Dad's eyes narrowed as I went on. He stared toward the shore, like he was looking for that yacht himself. His forehead furrowed, some worry tightening the wrinkles around his eyes. I could see it brewing. *Son, you're being a fool. Son, how many mistakes can a boy like you make?*

But when he spoke, he surprised me. "The boat is registered in the father's name?"

"Randy's boat? Yeah."

"Smells like bleach? And you said nail holes in the saloon?"

"Not holes. Actual nails."

"And the crew, they're not cleaning anything?"

"It's a frat house," I said. "An insult to the boat."

Dad turned slowly and laid both hands on the wheel. He brought the boat alee, headed us toward shore.

He throttled the engine so loud, I could barely hear him when he said, "Poor guy."

I bristled, thinking at the time he was talking about Randy.

* * *

Dad borrowed the office at the marina when we got back—two chairs and a battered metal desk piled with invoices and waterway guides and a green tackle box. It had a landline—that was the main thing. A clearer connection,

more professional. Both of us leaned on the corner of the desk, the receiver perched between us.

Erma Wiggins was her name—that longtime secretary who praised Randall Senior’s ambition and generosity. She was still with the company and glad to talk about her much-loved boss.

“We’re doing a feature about Mr. Backus and his son,” I explained, after introducing myself as a reporter. “Part of a series called Starboard Spotlight on visitors to the area.” The title was off the cuff, but as I said it, I thought it might indeed be a good series to pitch Bruce.

“Oh, what a precious idea.” Erma’s voice came through crisp and chipper. I could almost picture her—a bright smile younger than her gray hair, her own phone held at precisely the right angle. “I was so terribly sorry that Mr. Backus retired, but he certainly deserves it. All those years of work, and then losing his wife just when they were planning this next stage of their lives.”

Bittersweet, she’d said in the press release. And then that photo of Randall and Randy at the cancer-awareness fundraiser.

“Is that why they named the boat *Better Days*?”

“That was one of Mr. Backus’s favorite sayings. Always a better day ahead. He’d counted on it, he and Mrs. Backus both.”

Dad stepped away from the phone then, took one of the chairs.

I wanted to reach out to him, but I was still on script, following through on what Dad had suggested, following up on what he’d told me must have happened.

“Maybe better days for him and his son instead, right?”

“I so hope that will be the case.” Erma’s voice brightened again. “They’ve had such a long . . . struggle, the two of them. And you say they’re doing well?”

“You haven’t talked with Mr. Backus lately?”

“Oh no. Mr. Backus took his retirement very seriously. No phone calls, no e-mails. He wanted to focus on his son. He didn’t want to put off those better days he and Mrs. Backus . . .”

But I’d stopped listening at that point. I’d heard enough to sketch out the rest.

Dad slumped in the metal chair, uncomfortably it looked like. What thoughts rushed through his head? What memories? Barely three feet between us, but he was miles and miles away.

And where was I?

Maybe a better question: Where did I want to be?

I pulled the phone to my ear.

“It’s heartwarming, don’t you think?” Erma was saying. “Just the two of them these days. I can’t wait to hear about it when they return home. And you’ll mail me your story in the meanwhile, yes?”

* * *

The front page of Wednesday’s edition carried the headline “MURDER AT SEA?” and a collage of photos: a headshot of Randall Backus, Sr., suspected dead; the *Better Days* cordoned off with yellow police tape; Randy in handcuffs being escorted from his boat, those crewmen shackled behind him. I’d stood nearby when our photographer caught the shot. As he passed, Randy had called out, “Hello again, friend,” a wild grin on his face. Then he’d spit at me.

There was another picture of gawkers gathered along the boardwalk railing.

I'd scanned all the ones our photographer took, looking for Charley, same as I'd looked for her at the scene. I hadn't found her.

The police were still working out the details—the crewmen not only contradicting Randy but Randy contradicting himself. What seemed certain: There had been an argument somewhere in the Gulf Stream between Jupiter and Jacksonville, an altercation in that saloon, a fight, a shove, a fall—no guns blazing, but a dead body just the same. An accident, Randy claimed, and him panicking in the aftermath. But it didn't look good that he'd bribed the crew to dispose of the evidence—or that he'd hired that crew himself when he and his father first planned the trip.

No body had been found. The Gulf Stream would've carried it deep into the Atlantic, if the sharks hadn't taken care of it first. But despite the bleach, forensics experts had already found evidence of blood in that stain on the floor and others on the cushions beneath those towels and blankets.

What had kept Randy from heading to sea as well? Hightailing it to some foreign country?

Boldness? Ballsiness?

Maybe he knew his luck would run out, and he just wanted to burn through the fortune first, best he could. He himself claimed that grief made him senseless—horror at what he'd done, hysteria. He wasn't thinking straight, he said, wasn't in his right mind.

"Quite a story," Dad said, folding the paper beside a platter of scrambled eggs—our regular Wednesday-morning breakfast. This time, the *Post* sat unread.

"Should've been your name there on the byline too." I took a forkful of eggs.

"You did the writing."

Dad kept glancing up the dock, his mind elsewhere, same as in the marina office two days before, but more distracted than worried now. I followed his gaze. The dock was empty, but at the ramp, a man was loosening a ski boat onto a trailer, struggling with it here at low tide. Dad was probably itching to help him.

"Still don't want to tell me how you figured it out?" I asked, and then that grim look came back.

I hadn't pressed before, hustling to get the story, and didn't now either. A reporter's trick I too often forgot in my personal life: Leave some silence and the other person will speak. Meanwhile, I could hang out there on the back of the boat, feel that sun on my face, feel the water under us. For a change, breakfast felt comfortable.

Dad glanced up the dock again, then out at the water. When he finally spoke, he stared down at his hands.

"Mostly," he said, "it was those nails."

"Nails?" I asked.

"And you."

"Me?"

His gnarled fingers intertwined, wrung against one another. I waited.

"When you were about twelve years old, thirteen maybe, you got mad at me one day—I don't remember what it was about, me telling you to do your homework, probably, or clean your room or . . . I'm sure I was just trying to help you grow up right, but I didn't always think through how to do it. I got loud and

you got loud and . . . You, you said some things you shouldn't have—about wishing I . . . wasn't there. Both of us said things wrong."

I'd been a shaggy-haired teen, sullen and moody. He and I had fought a lot. But I didn't remember this story in particular, whatever words I'd said, clearly worse than he was telling me. He struggled to get his own words out.

"You went off to school, I went to work—figuring it would blow over, same as it usually did. But when I got home, you'd taken down photos of me all through the house. You kept up the ones of your mother and you, but anything with me in it . . ." His lips trembled, twisted a little—disgust or pain, I couldn't tell. "You'd cut me out of a few, even, jagged cuts, put half a photo back in the frame. Then you'd taken down the ones of me alone, piled them up by the trashcan, left the nails sticking out of the bare wall."

I felt far away from whoever I'd been then—so far that none of this rang a bell. Something I'd blocked? Or just forgotten? The weight of mistakes sometimes seemed heavier from an adult perspective—things a kid, some dumb kid, would bounce back from.

"I'm sorry," I said—and I meant it. Whether I remembered it or not didn't matter.

"I appreciate it, son, I do." His mouth relaxed, untwisted at least. He loosened his hands, reached toward me, patted the top of the small table. "But it's not necessary. Everyone does things they regret. Forgive and forget, right?"

"But you *didn't* forget," I said.

Dad glanced up the dock again, and this time the smile came, a broad one lighting up his face. He raised his hand in a quick wave, called out, "I was expecting you a half-hour ago."

When I turned, there was Charley—stepping down the walkway, waving herself.

"Some of us work late," she called back.

Her blond hair glistened in the morning sun, a ponytail today. She wore a T-shirt and khaki shorts—more casual than the bar, some easiness in her step.

An unexpected easiness? Forced maybe? A vision of loveliness, that's what she should've been, but darker thoughts sprang up—my memories of the last conversation at the bar, the argument on Randy's boat. Resentment, guilt, both in equal measure, and—I hate to admit it—some lingering distrust.

"Forgiveness." Dad leaned in, whispering. "That's the more important step anyway. Appreciate what you've got, who you are. Have a little faith. In her. In yourself."

He tapped the table again with his hand to emphasize his point. Those knobby bones, those age spots. An opportunity there as well.

I put my own hand over his fingers, squeezed, just as Charley climbed aboard.

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