

**The First Two Pages: “The Boy Detective & The Summer of ’74” by Art Taylor  
From *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, January/February 2020**

The first complete draft of the story that became “The Boy Detective & The Summer of ’74” was written in the early 1990s; the title then was “Burying the Bone,” and it ran around 3500 words, compared to the nearly 12,000 of the final published story. At other points over those years, the story was much longer: expanded considerably as one strand of a full-length novel manuscript (never published) and then that strand extracted from that manuscript as a standalone novella around 18,000 words. Revisiting, revisioning, and revising the manuscript was always a process of expanding and condensing: elaborating, developing, folding, cutting, moving, restructuring, developing more, trimming more.

While the original draft (and a couple of additional iterations) began with the discovery of the animal bone which sets the mystery in motion—start with the action, right?—I kept coming back to using a preface of sorts, which introduced several aspects of the world of the story. As with the full story, that introductory section grew and shrank—and the final published story condenses what was once several pages into a little more than half a manuscript page:

That summer, the summer of 1974, all the boys in the neighborhood wanted to be Evel Knievel—John especially, who’d gotten a brand new bike with chopper-style handles for his birthday. He and his younger brother Paul and I, like a brother myself, raced constantly around the hot asphalt of the

small block where we lived. We built rough ramps out of old bricks and leftover plywood, jumped Tonka toys, a rusty wagon, a battered Big Wheel.

Other times, we tried to be like the Six Million Dollar Man, sprinting from yard to yard, mimicking with our lips that metallic reverb that meant we'd engaged our bionic powers. We liked Kwai Chang Caine from the *Kung Fu* show too, and Paul sometimes thrashed his arms in karate chops as we wandered into the woods and fields behind our neighborhood—land that my father owned and that he was waiting to develop, same as he had built each of the nine houses that made up our small corner of that North Carolina town.

Turns out that while we aspired to be Evel Knievel or Kwai Chang Caine or the Six Million Dollar Man, my father had his own ambitions for me—that was another thing about that summer.

But one dream was mine alone. Secretly, I wanted to be Encyclopedia Brown. And the summer of '74 offered the chance for that dream to come true.

I clung to this introductory section for several reasons. First, I wanted to lay out quickly the key relationships (most of them) as well as a portrait of the setting: three boys—two brothers and a narrator like a brother—and then not only small town North Carolina in 1974 but also a sketch of what life was like for such children in such a place. The bicycles, Tonka toys, and the Big Wheel help to establish a sense of daily routines and childhood values, but the adjectives *rusty* and *battered* suggest that these kids are slowly aging out of these toys—a hint toward this being a coming-of-age tale—and the inclusion of those ramps (daredevil feats in their own backyard) hopefully helps reveal other aspects of these characters: boys-will-be-boys recklessness perhaps but also an added dose of daring and or restlessness and of desire and curiosity too—echoed as well in those wanderings through the world just beyond the neighborhood.

Similarly, the references to cultural heroes—Evel Knievel, Kwai Chang Caine, the Six Million Dollar Man—gesture to the world beyond this small town and speak to the boys' ideals and ambitions. Who are their heroes? What are the qualities of those heroes, and how do they try to emulate them? Grow toward them? Needless to say, pantomimes of heroism aren't the same as the real thing.

These questions of growing up—of who you want to grow up to be—are integral to the larger story. And while the focus is on the childhood doings and childhood dreams, there's an adult presence here too: the narrator's father, who has values and expectations of his own.

While this section doesn't get to the mystery at hand, it does set up some of the story's other (more?) significant goals and conflicts. As I tell students in the writing workshops I teach, traditional storytelling relies on characters who want something, who do something, and who overcome obstacles standing in the way of those desires and actions. By the final lines of this section, I hope I've laid that foundation—embedded not only in the narrator's desire to be a detective (and this summer offering him that chance) but also in the fact that this desire is secret (tension) and is at least implicitly at odds with what his friends value/desire and what his father envisions for him.

This stage set—and a small section break to add a moment's pause for weight and drama—the next section moves more immediately into the mystery at hand, beginning to explain in detail about the opportunity offered to the narrator during the Summer of '74.

We found the first bone about mid-morning one day in late June—the sun already high, the heat rising too. Meat still clung to it, chunks of muscle, scraps of reddish brown hide. The smell had drawn us to the small drainage ditch that separated John and Paul’s yard from the road, and as soon as I saw it, I’d rushed home to get the Polaroid camera my father had forbidden me to use—the camera I begged my mother not to reveal I’d borrowed. (“It’s a mystery,” I’d told her. “I need evidence, please don’t tell, please, Mom, please.”)

“It’s not a leg,” Paul said as I photographed what I already thought of as the crime scene.

“Well, what do you think it is, stupid?” John said. “An arm?” He gripped the chopper-style handlebar of his bike, twisting his wrist back and forth like he was revving an engine.

“I’m not saying it’s an arm,” Paul said. “I’m saying it’s not a leg, not a human leg.” Then under his breath: “Idiot.” He puffed up his chest. He wore a *Keep On Truckin’* t-shirt, his favorite, which seemed to give him courage.

“Animals have legs,” Christine pointed out, reminding us she was there—the new girl in the neighborhood, the one we didn’t yet know what to do with. Red hair and big moony eyes and this slack-jawed look, like she was being surprised every minute of her life. When she’d moved in after the end of the school year—a military transfer, her father overseas already—our mothers had warned us to play nice.

“Who asked you?” they shouted at her, and “We’re not stupid” and “We *know* animals have legs.”

Christine peered over my shoulder. “What do *you* think it is, Cooper?” she whispered, close enough that the front of her shirt brushed against me.

This section opens near the bottom of the first page of the manuscript—importantly, I think, in order to give the reader a bit of plot at least within sight from the beginning. The scene is meant to be vivid—both in terms of the descriptions (“the heat rising” and “those chunks of muscles” and the “smell”) and in terms of the verbs: *clung*, *drawn*, *rushed* in the first paragraph and later *gripped*, *twisting*, *revving*. I hope those verbs contribute to the simmerings of conflict and

tension, and I tried as well to fold in other details to further tighten the conflicts from the previous section (the bickering between the boys—those divisions beginning to appear—plus the fact that the camera’s use had been “forbidden” by the father) and to build additional aspects of the cast and community, through the parenthetical conversation with the mother, for example—establishing a sense of the narrator’s relationship with her, his trust in her. Without giving away too much: The narrator’s relationships (plural, distinct) with his parents are fundamental to the story.

Another relationship here provides a final important aspect of the larger dynamic: the new girl in the neighborhood—almost forgotten but persistent in her presence. As I said, this is ultimately a coming-of-age story—and the presence of a new girl in the midst of three boys, boys who’ve been friends their whole childhood, should already promise trouble ahead. But here too, I try to accelerate the movement toward that trouble. While the two brothers swiftly turn anger and derision toward Christine, she herself establishes a closeness with the narrator—a physical closeness (peering over his shoulder, whispering into his ear, brushing against him) and a different kind of intimacy too: she turns toward the narrator as an authority, setting him up in the detective role he’s seeking (whether she knows it or not), and she’s the first person in the story to use his name. Cooper and Christine are connected here, for better or worse, and as with the parents, Cooper’s

relationship with her serves as its own plotline, running beneath the surface of the investigation.

And bringing the parental plotlines and this plotline together, there's a reference to the boys' mothers having warned them to play nice—another challenge, with fresh stakes. Will they? Should they? And what does growing up mean where girls are concerned? As Cooper explains, “we didn't know what to do” with her—but this summer will give him the opportunity to figure that out as well.

The second page of the manuscript ends with that image of Christine leaning in and asking her question, and I hope that readers will read beyond those first two pages to find out what Cooper's answer is, and where his investigations—into that bone, into the world of girls, into the wider, stranger world of his community—might take him.

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Art Taylor is the author of *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories* and of the forthcoming collection *The Boy Detective & The Summer of '74 and Other Tales of Suspense*. He has won many of the major awards in the mystery genre, including an Edgar Award, two Anthony Awards, four Agatha Awards, three Derringer Awards, and three Macavity Awards. He is also an associate professor of English at George Mason University. Find out more at [www.arttaylorwriter.com](http://www.arttaylorwriter.com).