

The First Two Pages: “Help Me” by Abby Bardi
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An Essay by Abby Bardi

About a year ago, I noticed on Facebook that Josh Pachter, an old friend and former colleague who is a prolific writer and editor of crime fiction, was doing a reading at my local library, so I decided to go.

I had recently published a novel, *Double Take*, that was basically a mystery but had not been marketed that way, and I wanted to know more about the genre. (Full disclosure, I wrote my Master’s thesis on Dashiell Hammett, but that was many years ago.) At the reading, Josh happened to mention that he was in the beginning stages of putting together an anthology of crime stories inspired by the songs of Joni Mitchell. Suddenly I felt that familiar tingling you get when a writing project is about to take hold of you. By the time I got in my car, I had hatched the plot of “Help Me” and was scribbling notes for it.

One reason this project grabbed me from the beginning is that I have been a huge Joni Mitchell fan since she was a brilliant, unrecorded young songwriter whose classic “Both Sides Now” had been beautifully covered by Judy Collins. When Joni did a concert at the University of Chicago just before her first album was released, I went to see her and was enraptured by the velvet-gowned blonde

waif who seemed to emanate a mystical aura (perhaps an effect of stage lighting). For many years, inspired by her, I wrote and performed my own songs, and every so often someone tells me I remind them of her, though as a singer-songwriter I am not fit to darn her socks.

I immediately knew that “Help Me” would start where it did: The protagonist is driving down a highway when she notices a black Mercedes with something written on the back window. As she draws closer, she sees bound hands writing the words “Help Me” in red lipstick. Somehow I also knew that the writing was in Cyrillic and that my unnamed protagonist—let’s call her X—was trained in Russian and would recognize the phrase, although it used a Cyrillic X instead of an H.

With the knowledge that X was a Russian linguist—why? I don’t know—I found her backstory unspooling. I knew that she must work at NSA, the intelligence agency relatively near where I live. I’ve known a lot of people who worked there, some of whom were linguists, so I know basically what they do: They’re trained in a language and then their job is to listen to conversations by persons of interest using those languages. I know that some listening is done by computers that are sensitive to various phrases, but I assume—or imagine—that there is a community of nerdy language specialists who bring the “intelligence” to the job. I have always been fascinated by NSA, partly because of its extreme

secrecy—it has often been called No Such Agency—and because I sometimes drive by its sprawling campus on my way to work and marvel at the hideousness of its landscape, the bulbous listening towers and warrens of buildings. I've often been tempted to turn off the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, on which I have spent a lot of time, into their secret entrance.

Part of my inspiration for the NSA employees in the story was my fascination with Edward Snowden, who worked for the NSA and then seems to have defected to Russia, selling state secrets as he did so. He interested me because he was somewhat local, and when I saw his picture, I remembered—or imagined—that I had seen him sitting alone in a coffee shop in my town. His bespectacled normalcy concealed incredible deviousness. X's coworker Bradley, the antagonist, has a similar ability to mask sociopathy with a genial exterior.

In my first two pages, not only does the Mercedes that the story pivots around appear front and center, but X's backstory becomes apparent. Originally the story contained a lot more of it, but Josh wisely suggested I reduce it, since it was a distraction from the crime-story elements. X's situation is consolidated in the first few paragraphs, which summarize her plight: "I had quit my job, had a breakdown, gone on mental-health disability, and just for fun gained a hundred pounds" as a result of a trauma that the story will gradually unfold. Without giving anything away, let's just say that it is the nature of her trauma that draws her to the writing

on the rear window of the Mercedes and her desire to help whoever is writing it because, as she says on page one, “No one had helped me.”

A couple of technical notes about my choices at the beginning of the story. For me, it was important that the words “Help Me” (but with an X) be the first thing the reader sees because it is this image that sears itself into X’s brain and is the hub of the story. It was also important to establish that when she called 9-1-1 to report the incident, she was not listened to; this mirrors what happened to her in the past when she tried to address her trauma. It’s also important to show how her life has fallen apart to a degree that has made her reckless. And finally, we get a taste of her self-deprecating sense of humor with the phrase about gaining weight “just for fun.” In reality, the reader knows that there is nothing fun about anything that has happened to X—until she runs into that Mercedes and everything changes for her.

When I’d finished writing, I thought, how sad that I’d taken a lovely, hopeful, optimistic song about romance and turned it into something dark and terrible. But then I thought: *Exactly*.

The First Two Pages of “Help Me”

The first thing I noticed about the black Mercedes was its diplomatic license plate, then, the bright red lipstick on its rear window. I was a few car lengths behind, but I tried to catch up to read what it said. Someone was writing letters slowly, laboriously, and

when I got closer I saw that the message was backwards but not hard to decipher: an *X*, then *E*, then *L*. As I sped up, I could see two hands bound together at the wrists with what looked like duct tape. They scrawled a *P*, then an *M*. That's funny, I thought. It looked like someone trying to write "helpmate," or maybe it was "help me," with an *X* instead of an *H*. I happened to know that in the Cyrillic alphabet, the *H* sound does not exist; the sound is *CH*, written as an *X*.

Finally, another *E*. *Xelp me*.

Panic shot through me. I floored my accelerator so I could get a better look, but a huge truck entered from an on-ramp and pulled in front of me so I had to slam on the brakes. By the time I could pass, the Mercedes was nowhere in sight.

When I was able to stop and use my cell phone, I dialed 9-1-1 and told them what I'd seen. The operator sounded vaguely amused but took all my information and thanked me for being a concerned citizen.

The balconies in my building were already twinkling with holiday lights as I made my way to the one apartment that didn't have any. Holidays were torture as far as I was concerned. When I was working, I'd always gone back to Ohio to have Christmas with my parents, but since I'd quit my job, had a breakdown, gone on mental health disability, and, just for fun, gained a hundred pounds, their faces no longer lit up at the sight of me. They no longer hung on every word as I told them wild tales—some made up, I admit—about my life as a spy, a word they liked to use, so I let them.

My sister had called a few times about holiday plans, but I hadn't responded to her message. My plan was to eventually say I was coming, then at the last minute develop car trouble or a contagious illness. It wasn't that I didn't like my family, but I had trouble being around them—or for that matter, anyone.

These were the things I was mulling over that day when I saw the writing in red lipstick, or thought I saw it. *Help me*.

No one had helped me.

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A week later, I was on my way back from the liquor store and thought I'd drive past the Agency, just to see if it was still there. Normally I try to avoid that road, but every so often I feel like seeing the hodge-podge of hideous buildings and listening equipment and remembering my former life. I had loved my job, hanging out with a bunch of smart, weird people and listening to conversations through

headphones all day. I had always been an introvert, but so was everyone else at the Agency, so we all got along. Eavesdropping is something introverts are gifted at, and it turned out I was pretty good at languages, too. I'd started in Arabic but switched over to Russian, which was easier and more fun. My colleagues and I would laugh about the crazy things "our" Russians said, though we weren't supposed to share what we heard.

On Friday nights, we'd hang out at a local bar. We weren't allowed to talk about what we did, exactly, but we were all intuitives and could easily guess what the others were up to. "I had Mink Man today," someone would say, and I knew that was the guy I'd heard the week before who kept trying to buy his mistress a fur coat on the black market. "Oleg and Tatiana are at it again," someone else would report, and we'd all groan, "Get a room!" I felt a pang now as I thought about my job, about the colleagues I no longer talked to, since they had sided with Bradley. I only barely remembered what it had felt like to have a normal life.

Just past the Agency, I saw the car again. I was pretty sure it was the same black Mercedes: I could tell from the diplomatic license plate. I wasn't sure what country the plate was from, since they were all encoded, but it looked like the same car. There was nothing written on the rear window, this time, but I followed it anyway.

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Abby Bardi is the author of the novels *The Book of Fred*, *The Secret Letters*, and *Double Take*, and her short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *High Infidelity*, *Grace and Gravity*, and *New Stories from the Midwest 2018* and in *Quarterly West*, *Rosebud*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *The Bellingham Review*. She has taught in Japan and England and now lives in Ellicott City, Maryland, the oldest train depot in America.