

The First Two Pages: “Talk to Me”

by Emily Hockaday and Jackie Sherbow

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An Essay by Emily Hockaday and Jackie Sherbow

The task for *The Beat of Black Wings* anthology was to write a crime story based on a song by Joni Mitchell. After some deliberation over which song had the most potential, we chose “Talk to Me,” giving us our story’s title and premise. We opened the story with a setting in which “talking things out” is paramount: the office of a couple’s therapist.

Our central character finds the titular invective painful, while his partner is driving the session. We wanted to display their at-odds mentalities in the first moments of the scene and also emphasize Lucas’s physical response to stress, which we felt could add a dark undertone and foreshadow the incidents to come.

Lucas slouched on his side of the therapist’s couch. As when sharing the queen-sized mattress at home, he and Jenna each staked out their space and stuck with it, week after week.

“Let’s begin,” Dr. Havermeier said, “with where you see yourselves in five years.”

“Like a job interview,” Jenna laughed, doing what she always did, trying to make a connection. She folded her hands together, and Lucas felt his own hands tense up.

Their doctor tries to guide the couple to discuss the future, and while Jenna reveals that she needs to discuss this to see the point in their relationship, Lucas studies the tray of plants in front of him.

“I want Lucas to *talk* to me,” Jenna responded. “When I ask him about the future, he has nothing to say. Does he want to stay here in the city or move to the suburbs? Does he want kids? A dog? These should be easy questions. If we aren’t going to take it to the next step, what’s the point in staying together?”

Jenna was perched on the edge of the couch, head tilted. She had stopped the hand wringing and now held her paper Au Bon Pain cup between her thumb and middle and ring finger, daintily, as though it were a glass of Scotch. Lucas pinched the bridge of his nose and studied the tray of succulents on the table in front of them. He couldn’t identify whether the plants were living or wax. They looked very lifelike.

Jenna’s string of questions is influenced by Mitchell’s song—a majority of “Talk to Me” is a list of questions or topics for conversation, none of which garner a response. Again, we wanted to show here the physical and internal—rather than outwardly verbal—quality of Lucas’s reactions to conflict, or what he perceives as conflict. He doesn’t know how to interact with the world; he isn’t even sure if the plants he is looking at are real. We try to set Lucas up as someone who perceives the world, including his partner, with suspicion, defensiveness, and maybe even aggression. The following excerpts from the first page show Lucas’s attention drawing to the bodies of the women near him in a sinister way:

“Can you answer any of these questions, Lucas?”

The therapist was looking at him, and he focused on the pale, freckled skin of her throat, imagined the two women turning to stone and never asking anything of him, ever again.

and

“You were always quiet,” she said. “That’s part of what drew me to you. Mr. Mystery.” The corner of her mouth nudged up, as if tugged by a string. “But it’s different now, and when I try to come up with solutions, you either get mad or you shut down. You let me spiral, and you never say anything.”

Lucas concentrated on her hands, clasped in her lap, and her wrists, imagining her pulse. One, two, three....

The second excerpt also serves as a way of showing Jenna’s mindset. While writing this story and coming up with the central conflict, we thought about how intense a plea “Talk to Me” can be, especially when speaking with a loved one, friend, or partner. “Mr. Mystery” is from the song, too, as the following lines are repeated there: “Come and talk to me, Please talk to me, talk to me, talk to me, Mr. Mystery.”

The Mitchell song is relatively playful, but the speaker of it does mention feeling too “loose” with words, and “paying a price” for talking. As our first two pages carry on, Lucas tries to use a story that Jenna told him in the past against her, but it backfires.

“Lucas,” the therapist said, “this is the kind of intimacy a lot of partners want. Tell me this: where do you see yourself living in five years?”

It was as though he hadn't spoken at all. But he had, hadn't he? He looked from one woman's face to the other and saw hope and disappointment, one moon rising while another set.

The next short scene finds our characters outside the therapy office in a moment of transition. We described their differences in stature and activity while doing something as simple as waiting (or not) at the corner.

Outside, the sky was overcast. Jenna arranged the items in her bag—phone, keys, MetroCard. Taking stock, as she habitually did before leaving or entering a space.

Lucas stuck his hands in his pockets and peered uptown into oncoming traffic to see if they could cross against the light, and Jenna looked at him, narrowing her eyes. The light changed, and he was a few steps into the intersection before he noticed that she hadn't followed.

At Jenna's suggestion, the two decide to go into an old favorite bar together, and the closing of the section emphasizes Lucas's internal-facing thoughts:

McCail's—an old pub and a neighborhood favorite—was just around the corner, in the shadow of Grand Central. He and Jenna had been there on one of their first dates, and over the last ten years they had broken up there once and made up there plenty of times.

A drink would be nice. He *needed* a drink.

This section also served as a spot to reveal some of the couple's back story: how long they've known each other and the nature of their past relationship. It also gives us a more specific setting geographically, and mentions a location that will come to play a bigger part later.

Before the first two pages end, the reader finds the couple on barstools, and Jenna continues (now exhibiting signs of nervousness) to talk about the problems

they're facing, which will lead to the next conflict. We put them by the jukebox—must have some music in a story inspired by the music of Joni Mitchell!

This is the first published story for both of us, and we both primarily write poetry. Looking back at the first two pages with that in mind, it seems surprising that we chose to write such a dialogue-based story. (Luckily we both read and edit a lot of wonderful short fiction!) In the first two pages, we strove to convey the frustration that can come with communication in a partnership, draw two vivid characters, and create a tense platform from where our conflict and plot could grow.

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