

The First Two Pages of “Everybody’s on the Run” by Laura Oles

From *The Great Filling Station Holdup: Stories Inspired by the Songs of Jimmy Buffett*
Edited by Josh Pachter (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Laura Oles

As the inspiration for a crime story, the title of Jimmy Buffett’s “Everybody’s on the Run” is, in my mind, pure perfection. It could sustain an entire novel, if not a trilogy. Granted, Buffett’s lyrics are more upbeat, touching on what it means to not stand firmly footed in the present moment lest it escape without notice. Still, using the lyrics as steppingstones, this particular song provided a wealth of paths to explore. In the end, the story of two siblings joined by one dangerous decision opened a door and invited me in.

My first two pages is written to bring the reader into the world of Lex and Jack and to show the dynamics that have remained between them even though their childhoods are long gone. They are grown adults, but their established roles in their family remain staid.

The story opens:

A cloud of dust trails behind me as I make my way down the dirt road. My rearview mirror offers little in the way of compelling scenery. It’s the same long stretch I’ve traveled over the last thirty miles, familiar and slightly hypnotic. Gypsy, my Australian Shepherd, rests his head on the bottom of the open passenger-side window, the wind blowing his patterned fur back. It’s the middle of February now, so the southwestern Texas desert has been more forgiving during the day than she is in the summer months. The temperature is in the fifties, and I keep my window down to let cool air fill the cab. My mind drifts for a moment, away from current concerns, but not for long.

My brother Jack is in trouble.
Again.

My goal when referencing a locale is to treat it as a backdrop that interacts with the characters' actions, challenges and reflections. In this particular case, this well-traveled road and its isolation are meant to provide comfort, a chance for Lex to clear her head before she steps into the role her brother has asked her to fill.

Again.

Like Lex's pup's name, there are references from the song's lyrics scattered like leaves throughout the story. It was an added treat to take inspiration from Buffet's words and weave them in this world.

Texas' temperate February would normally not provide pause but, as I write this essay, our state has experienced a once-in-a-lifetime snowstorm coupled with single-digit temperatures that have left most of us without power and water for the better part of a week. A state that is better known for brutal triple-digit summer temperatures now finds itself awash in snow. A plot twist, some might say.

In the next paragraphs, we meet Jack and learn more about how he might have come to this moment in time when he again calls to his sister for help. It also hints at the belief that Jack's path wasn't entirely of his choosing.

Jack is a decent human being with a knack for making bad decisions. He's one of those people who has to learn things the hard way. Some people see red coils and know the stove is hot. Jack needs to put a finger on it to make sure.

Even though he was born first, Jack is the baby of the family, so it feels like I'm his "big" sister. Somehow, the universe jumbled up our birth order and it's been a tough go ever since. I don't fault the higher powers entirely; our family's foundation is built on generations of bad decisions.

My intent with these paragraphs was to shine a light on Jack's choices and how they have been informed, at least in part, by his family legacy. Specifically, he has looked to earlier generations and taken their choices as cues for what is acceptable and expected. These paragraphs also challenge the long-held stereotype that the firstborn is usually the one to take charge in a sibling dynamic. In Jack's case, he's the eldest and also the one who is most likely to reach out for help. My goal was to show Lex's compassion for her brother, an understanding that he is a good man whose family history casts a long shadow. Lex knows this because she stands in the same shade.

The next paragraph further explores the location where Lex and Jack have chosen to meet and why this place is so important:

I roll my up window, and warmth returns. Flecks of dust drift in the air, settle on the dash. I haven't passed another vehicle in miles, but that isn't unusual. The cabin is near Terlingua, a remote Texas town that has in recent years become a tourist attraction. Its mining history and ghost-town status draw curious vacationers just long enough to snap a few photos for their Instagram stories.

My grandfather used to say who people come here are either running *from* something or searching *for* something.

The Donnamore clan checked both boxes.

Here I ask the setting to reflect on the Donnamore family's lore. Terlingua's pull provides a parallel with Lex and Jack's family history. It also merges the town's origin stories with its current role as a curiosity for road trippers and travelers. It's both a revealing look into the past as well as an unflinching snapshot of current times.

These paragraphs also explore the power of a family's internalized mythology, for better or worse. The idea that Lex described her family both running from something as well as searching for something ties to the song's lyrics. She does not challenge the idea but, instead, accepts it as part of her family story. The next line is designed to give the reader further insight into why Lex and Jack have chosen this specific place for their meeting.

The cabin is our family's beacon, the place my brother and I regroup during times of crisis.

This sentence tells the reader this isn't the first time they've come to the cabin, but rather, this meeting is simply the latest in a lifetime of sibling support. The Donnamore family is no stranger to turmoil. The cabin was built as a secret abode for times of trouble. But this time is, indeed, different. Now it's up to Jack and Lex to walk through this door. There is little doubt that danger will follow.

#

Laura Oles spent twenty years as a photo industry journalist and columnist before turning to crime fiction. Her debut mystery, *Daughters of Bad Men*, was an Agatha nominee, a Claymore Award finalist and a Killer Nashville Readers' Choice nominee; she is also a Writers' League of Texas Award finalist. Her short stories have appeared in several anthologies, including the Silver Falchion winner *Murder on Wheels* and the 2019 Bouchercon anthology *Denim, Diamonds and Death*. For more information, please visit <https://lauraoles.com>

