

The First Two Pages: “Subterfuge” by Julia Buckley

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When I sat down to write “Subterfuge,” my main character, Sophia, emerged almost immediately. An intelligent young woman from an economically depressed small town. A woman with a limited support system and no career options. A woman who has much to say, but who is deprived of a voice. At only eighteen, Sophia verges on despair. In the first paragraph, Sophia identifies her birthplace as the source of some of her angst:

Rockville was an invisible town. It wasn't listed on any maps; it was an island surrounded by land. Everyone knew that girls in Rockville had only a few career options: become some kind of unskilled laborer and be unhappy; get married and be unhappier still; be a hooker down by the Dry Gulch Grill and be miserable; or turn to drugs and be stoned or dead. You could also try to get out, but not many Rockville girls had figured out a way to do that.

Establishing the setting at the outset was crucial, because Rockville's invisibility extends to Sophia, and its limitations become hers. The rock of her hometown becomes a symbolic boulder around her neck. This “island” of a town has no connections to the larger American culture; here education ends with high school and people choose one of several well-worn ruts to bring them into the future.

I used the first two pages to establish a binary opposition: Sophia and her friend Tamara, who becomes her foil. Sophia seeks a way out and a way up. Tamara, her high school friend, lacking in imagination and fearing homelessness, has chosen prostitution as her solution. They discuss this on page two: Tamara's failure to find other options distresses Sophia, who worries about her friend's safety.

She confided in me one day while we drank milkshakes at a tiny restaurant called Trudy's that she was already a regular—at least in the Grill parking lot.

Her face looked dead, and she had lost some weight, but she advised that I should parade around the Grill too.

“It pays good money. I'm saving up, and as soon as I have enough, I can go wherever I want, do whatever I want.”

“But you don't even have a plan,” I protested. “Get out of there, get a different job. Those guys can get violent.”

“It's not a big deal. You could do it, Sophia. It's not like you're a virgin. Just go in there, go through the motions, and collect your pay.”

“And go to jail,” I said.

In Tamara I was able to create a physical representation of Sophia's worst nightmare and to highlight the apathy of a town that looks the other way. Even the police, Tamara claims, go to the Dry Gulch Grill for more than food. When she assures Sophia that the “cops are our biggest customers,” she laughs, “but her eyes stayed sad.”

The interaction between the girls begins a tension which grows, allowing the reader to see that Sophia doesn't have a plan, either, and that Tamara's fate waits

for her, for every girl in town whose beauty can become a commodity in a realm of hopelessness. Tamara gives herself exchange value for the sake of a foggy future that she assumes will be preferable to a miserable present.

Page two ends with Sophia saying “No, thanks,” to Tamara and the Grill, but I want the reader to follow her with their own growing sense of hopelessness. I want them to see the way the cultural deck is stacked against her, and the minimal chances she has to escape a town which essentially conspires against itself.

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Julia Buckley has published three mystery series with Penguin/Berkley Prime Crime: The Writer's Apprentice mysteries, the Undercover Dish mysteries, and the Hungarian Tea House mysteries. Her short story “Evening Call” won the Sisters in Crime Chicagoland 30th Anniversary Short Story Contest in 2017. Her novel *A Dark and Twisting Path* spent two weeks on the Barnes and Noble mass market bestseller list. She has taught high school English for thirty years. Find out more at www.juliabuckley.com.