

The First Two Pages: “Hunter” by Jen Conley
From *Jewish Noir II: Tales of Crime and Other Dark Deeds*,
edited by Kenneth Wishnia and Chantelle Aimee Osman (PM Press)

An essay by Jen Conley

When Ken Wishnia invited me to write a story for the anthology *Jewish Noir II*, I was honored and yet nervous. What could I say about the Jewish experience when I am not Jewish? And how could I turn this experience into a tale of noir?

Ken suggested I tackle a story from the outside—meaning, my main characters didn’t have to be Jewish. He knew I lived in northern Ocean County, New Jersey, where a large Orthodox Jewish community resides. I decided to use this as a backdrop to my story, which would then rise to the front as we get deeper into the lives of my characters. The main theme I chose to explore head on was aggression, particularly male aggression. “Hunter” is the name of the story because it is the name of my aggressor.

When I write, I am very particular about the names of my characters. I decide what year my character was born, search the top 100 baby names for that year, and choose one that suits the character I have in mind. For example, in my YA novel *Seven Ways To Get Rid Of Harry*, which takes place in 1983, the main character is named Danny. To me it was great name for an immature 8th grader

who needs to develop a mountain of grit to face off his mom’s horrible boyfriend, Harry. Plus, “Danny” was a popular name for a boy born in 1970—so it fit.

When I was looking for a name for this story, by sheer luck, “Hunter” popped up as a popular name for boys born in the late 1990s. It was perfect. In the story, which takes in our present day, Hunter is a twenty-four-year-old man who lives with his mother and works at a convenience store. Despite his many attempts to hunt for a girlfriend, he has been unsuccessful and has chosen therapy to pinpoint why women don’t like him.

First lines are important for a short story or a novel. The way I usually go about is simple: the first line introduces the character, setting, and a problem. In “Hunter,” the first line reads:

The door to the waiting room creaked opened.

It seems like a benign first line filled with regular words: *door, waiting room, opened*. Yes, I didn’t name a character, but it’s implied that *someone* opened the door. As for setting, it’s nothing special—a waiting room. However, by using the word *creaked* and leaving the sentence to stand on its own, I hoped that the reader would feel unsettled, feel that something isn’t quite right.

The next line moves into a paragraph that introduces the main character: Lori Kellan. She’s a psychologist who, while in her office, is the person who hears the door creak open. She is relieved that her next patient, who is new (this would

turn out to be Hunter), has arrived for his appointment and has been punctual about it. It's night, and Lori is anxious to end her day. Unfortunately, she is still in session with Jessica, who is once again complaining about her boyfriend, who may or may not be cheating but is definitely up to something. We learn that originally Lori counseled both Jessica and her boyfriend (whose name Lori can never remember—my tongue-in-cheek way of saying that Jessica needs to forget his name, too), but lately, only Jessica comes to the sessions. This is another way of showing that Jessica is doing all the work in the relationship and clearly shows that the boyfriend is not a good guy. However, instead of working on getting out of the romance, Jessica uses her sessions to complain about him. Not only does this frustrate Lori, but it also brings up uncomfortable and humiliating memories of how she behaved passively while married to her first husband, who was very selfish and sneaky. This point is brought up early in the story to show that Lori has an Achilles heel: a certain type of man can mentally overpower her.

The overall goal of my story is to build a world that is getting worse and worse for Lori, who counsels an unstable man and counsels him at night in a lone office building that is mostly empty. Subtly, with the first line, I started with a low-grade unsettledness. Next, I wanted to disarm the reader with what seems like Jessica's arrested development (but is really about her being emotionally snared into a borderline sociopath's web) while giving a little backstory about our main

character, Lori Kellan, the psychologist. I suppose after the first line, I wanted the reader to relax, settle in, like you'd settle into your own therapy session. Sure, sometimes in a therapy session you may dredge up uncomfortable or traumatic memories, but overall, it's a safe place. It was important to me to begin this story like a safe, gentle therapy session.

Because when Jessica leaves and Hunter walks in, things get very unsettling indeed.

The First Two Pages of “Hunter” by Jen Conley

The door to the waiting room creaked opened.

Lori Kellan heard it from inside her office and breathed a sigh of relief. Her last patient of the day—night, actually, 7:30 pm—was ten minutes early, most likely taking a seat in the chair outside her office door. This was good. His name was Hunter and he was a fairly new patient, a bit strange, but punctual. Lori liked punctual.

First she had to finish up with Jessica. Jessica, cute and sweet, always dressed in adorable dresses and low-heeled boots, a catch for any decent guy, was anxiety-ridden and nervous because she lived with a shit of a boyfriend. Sure, there were sad stories from her childhood, her parents' contentious divorce and all that went with it, but Lori believed in directing patients like Jessica, those without monstrous childhood trauma, into creating boundaries, taking control, and dropping the victimhood. Lori was trying to gently guide Jessica into making move—figuratively and literally—but Jessica, twenty-nine, was highly concerned about losing...what's-his-name. Lori seemed to always forget the boyfriend's name, even though Jessica talked about him *all the time*. Jessica's sessions had originally been couples' counseling with said shit boyfriend, but he said he was “fed up taking the blame for their problems,” so he stopped coming. He was a clean-cut guy but he was indolent and unfaithful, even if he claimed otherwise. During the last of their sessions, while he sat slouched back in the chair, Jessica, sitting on the edge of the sofa, stated that she'd found proof of his unfaithfulness because she saw his

text messages. This perturbed him. He said that she had no right to pry. She said that he had no right to cheat. He said the woman in question was just a co-worker whom he bantered with, no cheating. Jessica cried and then apologized for snooping.

That was five weeks ago. Lori considered herself an extremely patient therapist but she always struggled with young women who wasted their time with lazy, unfaithful men. Lori had seen enough of forty-something women, former Jessicas, who, at the dawn of mid-life, finally saw the light and kicked their no-good husbands out, only later to complain that they weren't paying child support. The entire scenario was difficult to deal with, especially since Lori had been both a Jessica *and* the forty-year-old who had seen the light.

Jessica's eyes were tearing up now, but she kept talking. "Then I go, 'Josh, this entire thing is making me uncomfortable. Don't you care?' and he says, 'You're making a mountain out of a molehill.' Do you believe it? Classic gaslighting, right?"

"Absolutely," Lori said.

"So then I go..."

Lori pushed her glasses up on her nose, handing Jessica a box of tissues, but losing all interest in the poor thing. Lori tried to recall what made her stay in her own first marriage for so long. Was it the sex? Sure. She had been young when she met him, twenty-three to his twenty-eight, and he was rugged and handsome and mysterious. She'd been hooked from the moment they first spoke and for the rest of the relationship, she tapped danced to keep him interested. Her mother had called him a "loner" and prophesized that he'd always be a loner, but that didn't deter Lori one bit. Lori had seen her ex-husband as an enigma, a fascinating puzzle she tried to solve for sixteen years until she finally concluded at age thirty-nine, that he was simply a fucking sneaky self-centered asshole. She filed for divorce. Moved on.

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Jen Conley is the author of the YA novel *Seven Ways to Get Rid of Harry* and the collection *Cannibals: Stories from the Edge of the Pine Barrens*. Her stories have appeared in *Pulp Modern*, *Thuglit*, *Needle: A Magazine of Noir*, *Crime Factory*, *Beat to a Pulp*, *Out of the Gutter*, *Grand Central Noir*, *Trouble in the Heartland: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Bruce Springsteen*, and many others. She has contributed to the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and is one of editors of *Shotgun Honey*.