

## **The First Two Pages: “The Silky Veils of Ardor” by Greg Herren**

From *The Beat of Black Wings: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Joni Mitchell*, edited by Josh Pachter (Untreed Reads)

An Essay by Greg Herren

Nothing causes me greater grief than trying to analyze my own work.

Rereading it is often an agony, as I always think *oh, I could have said that better or really, you thought that sentence was a good idea?* Inevitably, I am my own harshest critic, and I always find something, anything, many things, I could have done better. But I am fairly pleased with how “The Silky Veils of Ardor,” written for Josh Pachter’s *The Beat of Black Wings* anthology, turned out, and the beginning, as the song says, is a very good place to start.

The elevator doors opened. Cautiously, her heart thumping in her ears, she walked out of the elevator into the hotel lobby and paused, taking a quick look around. Over at the front desk the young woman in uniform was checking in a couple. They didn’t look familiar. But it had been so long since she’d seen any of them...could she recognize anyone?

She didn’t notice she’d been holding her breath.

She walked across the lobby to the hotel bar entrance. A reader board just outside said *WELCOME BACK ROCKY BEACH HIGH CLASS OF 1992!*

The black background was faded, the white plastic letters yellowed with age.

The urge to just head back to the elevators and punch at the up button until the doors opened, get upstairs and run back to her room and pack all the clothes back into her suitcases, the clothes she’d just carefully unpacked and put away neatly in drawers and hung in the closet, was strong. She resisted, recognized the need as irrational,

closed her eyes, clenched her hands until she felt her ragged bitten nails digging into her palms.

*You can do this you can do this you can do this you can do this.*

The theme of the anthology was that every story had to be inspired by the lyrics to a particular Joni Mitchell song. Having already written a story for a similar anthology earlier in that year (inspired by the music of the Go-Go's), I felt that tackling this would be an excellent challenge for me. While I was an admirer of Joni Mitchell's music, I've never listened to or owned an entire album of her work; my familiarity was limited to her hits, heard on the radio over the years ("Help Me," "A Free Man in Paris," and "Big Yellow Taxi," et al.) and I wanted to tackle something a little less obvious and a little more obscure. I asked a friend who was a fan for a recommendation, and he immediately responded with "You should do 'The Silky Veils of Ardor.' It's about the good-looking guy all the teenaged girls in high school swoon over." I googled the lyrics, read them, and the story began to take shape in my mind.

It was important to me as I opened the story to let the situation unfold to the reader gradually; I rightly thought that opening baldly with a "Lany Taylor's twenty-fifth high school reunion was being held in a chain hotel that had seen better days, and she was nervous." That's *telling*, and as every writing instructor and editor will tell you, *showing* is better than *telling*, hence my decision to let the reader experience her nervous excitement and trepidation by showing how she's

feeling: her heart is thumping, she's unconsciously holding her breath as she steps out of the elevators, she takes a quick, furtive look around the lobby to see if there's anyone there she recognizes, and she considers, briefly, getting back in the elevator and going back to her room. Her ragged, bitten nails digging into her palms is another clue to the reader about her state of mind, and of course, the aging reader board outside the hotel lobby bar is another sign that the hotel itself is disheveled and in a state of slight disrepair.

*You can do this you can do this you can do this you can do this.*

There was a dull murmur coming from inside the hotel bar, laughter and talking, the rattling of ice against glass, the occasional whir of a blender. From where she stood she could see the bar was crowded, cocktail waitresses in too-short black skirts and white blouses maneuvering expertly around groups of people with trays balanced on one hand.

Maybe nobody there was from the reunion. Maybe she was early. Maybe—

*You can do this.*

She'd always had social anxiety. She'd never made friends easily, couldn't make small talk, sometimes saying the wrong thing, somehow alienating people without even knowing what she'd done. Parties and dances had always been agony for her growing up. Even with friends, people she felt relatively certain actually did like her, she always had an irrational fear she'd say the wrong thing, forget a birthday, commit some horrific social faux pas that would make them turn against her, letting them see what a damaged, worthless person she actually was. She'd started seeing a therapist after college, years after she should have, but her parents thought therapy was all touchy-feely mumbo-jumbo for the weak and all you had to do was suck it up and forget about it, not worry, lock it all away in a dark corner of your mind and move on.

But she always worried, never able to relax, never able to be honest with people, be herself, share her secrets.

*You can do this. You CAN. You can do anything.*

Again, this section is intended to reveal more details about Lany and why she is so nervous and tense about going to her high school reunion. I also wanted the reader to relate to her; the anxiety and nervousness about heading into a crowded bar, potentially filled with people you haven't seen in twenty-five years is something I think everyone can identify with. The shyness and reserve, the social anxiety is also something that even an extrovert can respond to with sympathy; the sheer torture of always being on your guard, certain you won't say the right thing, won't respond in the right way, and that fear of being judged for not being able to fit comfortably into social roles—everyone experiences that at some point (or at least, I certainly do).

The Xanax had made the airport and the flight bearable. But it was wearing off now, and she didn't want to take another to handle the bar. Dr. Silverman had been so happy, so proud, when she told her that she wanted to come to her twenty-fifth high school reunion. "I'm so proud of you," Dr. Silverman had practically beamed at her. "This is a huge step for you."

*You can DO this.*

"Lany?" A soft, feminine voice said. "You *are* Lany, aren't you?"

She smiled hesitantly at the short woman in the mom jeans and ugly beige knit sweater with sequined cats appliqued to the front. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but Lany couldn't place her face. She'd considered studying the faces in her senior yearbook, just to be safe, but put it back on the shelf. It had been twenty-five years. She certainly didn't look like the Lany Taylor they remembered any more—if any of them did remember her—so there was little chance any of them would look like their air-brushed and carefully shot senior pictures, or even the way she remembered them. But this hesitant, short, round woman in an ugly sweater had

recognized something of Lany's teenaged self in her face, hadn't she? She was smiling more broadly, stepping closer, looking over the top of her silver-rimmed glasses at her.

The details about taking a Xanax and her therapist are intended to draw the reader in even further, and to feel even deeper sympathy for Lany. Her social anxiety isn't merely the normal nervousness most people will feel in an uncertain social environment; it goes far deeper, and attending this reunion is an enormous (and brave) step for her in dealing with her intense fears.

And as she is steeling herself to face the bar and potentially former classmates without taking another anti-depressant, she is actually recognized by someone—someone she also doesn't recognize. We also glean another insight into Lany's character and who she is by how she views this stranger. Her description and thoughts about the woman's appearance and what she is wearing (“mom jeans and ugly beige knit sweater with sequined cats appliqued to the front”) reveal her to be a bit of a snob about clothing and body image, which also ties into her social anxiety, since how she sees other people often leads her to see herself through the eyes of others—and always, always found to be wanting.

With my short stories, I often open with insights into the main character and try to get the reader to identify with them by finding something universal in who they are as a person that most people can, if not recognize within themselves, at least identify and sympathize with. Lany's journey to her high school reunion is

not only a big step for her emotionally and psychologically, but also an attempt to get closure from a difficult part of her life, and without an emotional connection with the reader, her story won't resonate as strongly.

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Greg Herren is the author of over thirty novels and more than fifty published short stories. He has won two Lambda Literary Awards, two Moonbeam Medals for excellence in young adult fiction, and an Anthony Award. He has also been shortlisted for thirteen more Lambda awards, another Anthony, the Macavity Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, and many others. His short story collection, *Survivor's Guilt and Other Stories*, was published in spring 2019, and his most recent novel, *Royal Street Reveillon*, was released in October 2019. He is currently working on another short story collection, an essay collection, a novel, and a novella. He is also the current Executive Vice President of Mystery Writers of America. He lives in New Orleans with his partner of twenty-five years and a very needy cat.