

# HOW *Story* WORKS

## Supplemental Material: Narrative Units – Beats

I wandered down the hallway, running my hand over the lockers. They'd been light blue in my day; now they were a bright red, matching the school colors. The school district had apparently changed the numbering system when they'd swapped them out, but I knew my locker, my space... two doors down from Mr. Dennett's room, where I took all my social studies classes in high school. He'd been a good guy, Mr. Dennett. He was funny, and he was the only teacher in that school who thought I might make something out of myself. He wrote the recommendation letter that got me into college.

He died four years ago. I sent his widow signed DVDs of *Poppy*.

That's the first beat; we're seeing Lottie fighting with herself. She's reaching out, trying to touch the past, and she can't. Her favorite teacher had gotten her into college, and when he died, she sent his widow DVDs of her TV show. She can't be her actress self, and still connect with her hometown self.

I got to my locker and twirled the combination lock. It wasn't mine now, it belonged to some other kid. I don't know why I was surprised; it wasn't as if I'd expected they would retire it, like a jersey from a star athlete who'd gone pro. Didn't matter; it was still my space. I'd owned this corner of the second floor. I'd held court here, and had pretended I didn't notice and take extreme joy in the way some of the kids lowered their heads when they walked by, afraid of me and my friends because we held the power of popularity, and wielded it with that particular mixture of whimsy and insecure cruelty only teenage girls can master. I had a feeling it maybe didn't say great things about me that I looked back on that with equal amounts nostalgia and shame, but fuck it. It was high school, right?

Another beat, very similar to the first. Her past is gone; she can't touch it. And she can't be the TV star and that girl who lived in this town. She can't reconnect with her past.

It's kind of a redundant beat to the first one, though, isn't it? Does it earn its space? That's a question I'm asking myself as a writer; remember, this is not finished. It's still in draft mode. Two separate beats, very similar. I'll have to think about which one to keep, and which one to kill. This is where an understanding of beats can be valuable to a writer.

“Can I help you?”

I looked up to see a tall man with messy hair and a blue tie skewed slightly to the left leaning against the doorway in Mr. Dennett's room.

I knew that guy. At least... I thought I did.

And then it hit me.

"Holy shit!" I said as the realization dawned. "Zero?"

He gave a small laugh, but didn't seem that amused. "I go by Henry now. Of course, I went by Henry then, too, not that that ever stopped you."

Here we have the first bit of conflict with Henry-slash-Zero, her high school boyfriend's younger brother, and the hero of our story now. She is holding on to the past, calling him Zero, which conflicts with who he is in the present.

"Wow," I said, checking him out. His hair was still out of control, but not in an unattractive way. The color of a caramel latté, lighter and darker shades mixed together, giving him what I might generously call a disheveled charm. I reached out and messed his hair up a little more, then laughed again as he smoothed it back. It was surprisingly good to see him.

There's a beat; she's attracted to him, even though she's deliberately trying to annoy him. She's in denial about it. This is complicating our conflict; she likes him, but he doesn't seem to like her much.

"Zero. I didn't think I'd ever see you again. With your grades, I thought you'd go out and do something, you know. You never did anything with your life?"

He seemed surprised for a moment, then gave me a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Oh, yeah. No."

"Aw, that's too bad," I said, and gave him a playful punch on the arm.

"I mean, I didn't go to Hollywood and become a big star," he said. "I did, you know, go to college."

That stung a bit, but I kept smiling. No need to be petty. "Oh, that's great."

"Yeah. Finished, too. Graduating summa cum laude wasn't like being the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, but you know... not all of us can make something of ourselves. Some of us have to just make do with what we've got."

I let out an edgy laugh. "Okay, fine. I deserved that. So how is—?"

He cut me off. "I got a bachelor's in drama and then just..." He shook his head and *tsked* regretfully. "I just didn't *do* much with it. I toured with a theater company, traveled the country. You know, that trading water stuff all the losers end up doing."

"All right, Zero, I get your point. You can stop now."

“*Hamlet. Death of a Salesman.* I played Nathan Detroit actually *in* Detroit. Yeah, that was just embarrassing. I mean, I won a couple of awards, but it’s no *Poppy*, right? I should just throw them away, make room on the shelf for *Poppy* DVDs. Saw them at Walgreens the other day. \$5 a season. Hell of a deal.”

It was feeling significantly less good to see him now. I crossed my arms over my stomach. “Done yet?”

“Nope.” Finally, his smile reached his eyes; he was enjoying himself. “It wasn’t until I spent a summer helping a bunch of underprivileged kids from Queens put on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that I really hit rock bottom. All that meaningful work... it was a nightmare. So I went back to school, got my master’s and, well... here I am.” He let out a sigh, faking his shame. “But enough about me. You’ve probably used all the time and energy you’ve allotted for talking about someone besides yourself. Let’s talk about *you*, Lottie. How are *you*?”

That’s a long beat, and that’s okay. They don’t all have to be super short. Too many beats with the same rhythm will start to make a scene boring; you want to mix it up.

The meaning here is that Lottie is being condescending to Henry, and he’s having none of it. She’s a bit arrogant, and he’s taking her down a notch. We’re seeing that they’re equally matched, in acuity, humor and edginess.

“I’m...” I glanced back at my locker, feeling suddenly very small. “I’m just here visiting my father. You know. Family’s important.”

“Yeah,” he said. “So important. Crazy we never bumped into each other on all those other visits you’ve paid him over the years.”

Ouch. It was one thing to take a shot at her profession; she’d taken a shot at his. But talking about her father, her only family... that’s kind of low, and he knows it. He’s known her since high school; he knows where her vulnerabilities lie. So Henry is nobody’s punching bag; we’ve learned that.

We also establish that Lottie hasn’t come back home since she left, fifteen years earlier. We already know this, but we’re seeing the cost of it here. That’s what this beat means, and it’s building on the essential conflicts of the other beats—both with her overall internal central narrative conflict, and with her scene-level conflict with Henry.

I met his eyes, and was about to tell him where he could shove his sanctimonious bullshit, but then the bell rang and the hallway filled with kids, looking like ants streaming out of their little hills. I glanced at the door behind Zero.

“No students?”

“I had a free period. Spent it—”

“Hey, Mr. C!” An unnaturally tall student walked past and raised a hand to high-five Zero as he passed, before beelining into Zero’s classroom. Zero high-fived back automatically, not pausing in his speech.

“—grading papers, guiding the future. You know. That kind of loser stuff.”

I let out a rough sigh. “All *right*, I’m sorry already. Jeez. Defensive much?”

And that’s a beat; she’s giving in. He wins.

Two girls called out, “Hi, Mr. Cas!” and Zero smiled at them, then turned cold eyes on me. He was obviously done messing with me, and I was a little grateful for that, but in a weird way, I’d also kind of liked that he’d given me such a prodigious amount of shit. Don’t get me wrong, I loved the way people were insanely impressed with me for having what amounted to a lightning strike of good luck, but it would have been kind of sad if Zero hadn’t been above that. I respected that he stuck to his I-hate-Lottie-Shipp guns. Good for him.

And here we see that she likes being challenged, and respects him for it. That beat adds a level of complexity to the conflict; they’re still fighting, but she kinda likes it.

“You should go see Zach,” Zero said, out of nowhere. “I think he’d be really happy to see you.”

My heart jumped in my chest. “Wait. *Zach’s* still in town?”

“Yeah, he’s...” Zero looked genuinely confused. “You didn’t know?”

“Know what?” I looked around in the hallway, almost expecting to see him.

“Does he coach football here or something?”

Zero gave me a look that didn’t even care enough to be cold. “You really didn’t look back even once, did you?”

Zach is the high school boyfriend, Zero’s older brother. There’s something we don’t know about Zach yet, something that will apparently have an impact on Lottie. We get a little bit of context here that there’s a shoe waiting to drop, but then we interrupt this beat to move into the next one.

“Holy shit! Is that *Poppy*?” At Zero’s door behind me, three girls pointed at me and giggled, one of them jumping up and down.

Zero kept his eyes on me as he spoke, loudly. “It’s no one, Ms. Jeffers,” he said, then looked back at the girl. “Watch your language, and go sit down.”

Lottie’s fame is still part of her experience; Henry denies her fame. To him, she’s not famous Lottie. She’s hometown Lottie, making this beat serve both the scene-level conflict, and the central narrative conflict.

“Okay, Mr. Caswell!” the girl said cheerfully, and then wandered into the room, giggling with her friends, and suddenly I felt about as ridiculous as I must have looked. But, surrounded by all these bustling kids, forced to stand with Zero in the small space between the end of the lockers and the classroom door, I couldn’t quite make a graceful exit. Zero, seeming to enjoy extending my awkwardness, stood next to me in that silence while we waited for things to calm down. Finally,

the wildness dissipated as the students found their classrooms, and he met my eyes without a hint of a smile.

“Great to see you, Lottie,” he lied politely.

“Yeah. You too, Zero.”

He turned his back to me. “It’s still Henry,” he said, then went into his classroom and shut the door behind him.

And the final beat; a moment of attraction, combined with the continued conflict between them. Push, pull. It speaks to the romance, the conflict of the scene, and the internal conflict that Lottie’s struggling with.

And those are beats.

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