Dialogue Examples

By Holly Lisle

NOTE: If you’ve landed on THIS page instead of coming here from the dialogue workshop, realize that the dialogue examples are much more useful if you’re working your way through the free workshop on the previous page.

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DIALOGUE — EXAMPLE #1

Jesus, you startled me. I wasn’t expecting you here.

It’s been a real day for expectations. Where were you? I’ve been waiting here for an hour. You didn’t leave a note or—

I wasn’t planning on going anywhere—

I can see that. Where’s your coat?

I left the house in a hurry. I… um… my mother…

The hospital reached you? God, I’m sorry. That’s why—

The hospital?

They called me when they couldn’t get you.

I don’t understand.

Your mother. You said —

I ran out to buy some flowers for her. She’s been so down.

For three hours you’ve been buying flowers?
And then I drove around. I’ve had... a lot on my mind. But I’m fine now. Fine.

You didn’t go by the hospital?

No. Look, I’m freezing. Let’s go inside. Why did the hospital call? Does the doctor need my signature for more tests?

We have to go to the hospital.

I’ve had a terrible—

We have to go to the hospital. Now. The rest of your family is already there.

Oh. Oh, God. Mom’s all right, isn’t she? Oh, Christ, she isn’t. I’m being punished... she’s dead.

NOTE: He came home to tell her that the hospital called him because it couldn’t reach her, to tell her that her mother died. She has been having an affair, and broke it off today. You’ll notice that this has some awkward places in it, and some places that are already pretty good.

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<! — –> DIALOGUE — EXAMPLE #2

Lisa had just gotten out of the car and was heading around the corner of the garage when she ran into Brian. “Jesus, you startled me. I wasn’t expecting you here.” His face looked sort of pale and pinched. He’s found out, she thought. I finally broke it off, but I was too late.

He said, “It’s been a real day for expectations. Where were
you? I’ve been waiting here for an hour. You didn’t leave a note or—”

“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere—” Which sounded like bullshit when she said it, and she knew it. She was wearing a navy dress with a fitted waist and a low neckline, which had been a gift from Kevin. Heels. Hose. Make-up. The last time Brian had seen her in make-up when they weren’t on their way to church or a restaurant had been right after the second baby was born. Eight years ago? Yeah. About that.

He raised an eyebrow. “I can see that.” Pure sarcasm. For a moment his face lost the pinched look, and she saw suspicion in his eyes. “Where’s your coat?”

“I left the house in a hurry. I… um… my mother…”

The pinched look was back around his eyes, and she stopped, suddenly frightened. He knew she hadn’t been visiting her mother in the hospital. Maybe he’d hired a detective to follow her. The sound of her heart pounding roared in her ears. If he really knew, she would lose everything. The boys. Brian. Her home. Her friends.

But he was saying, “The hospital reached you? God, I’m sorry. That’s why—”

Now the scared feeling was worse. Different. But worse. “The hospital?”

“They called me when they couldn’t get you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your mother. You said —”

The lie came easily, easier than the lies that had preceded it over the last three months, pouring out of her mouth without any effort on her part. She shivered and rubbed her arms and said, “I ran out to buy some flowers for her. She’s been so
down." Breast cancer and a modified mastectomy at fifty-eight. Mom was in the hospital doing chemo, and she was coming through it like a trooper, but she really had been down. Not that Lisa had done much to cheer her up. She’d had her mind on… other things. No more of that, though.

The suspicion was back in his eyes. “For three hours you’ve been buying flowers?”

“And then I drove around. I’ve had… a lot on my mind. But I’m fine now. Fine.”

He looked a little sick. “You didn’t go by the hospital?”

“No.” She’d been saving that for when she could look her mother in the eye again. No, mom, I’m not cheating on my husband. I’m not cheating on my family. I’m a good wife. A good mother. Now she could do that. “Look, I’m freezing. Let’s go inside. Why did the hospital call? Does the doctor need to talk to me about more tests?”

He was shaking his head—no, no, no—and his eyes were as bleak as the day. “We have to go to the hospital.”

Her mother was being demanding again. She couldn’t face that right now. Not after the scene with Kevin. That had been ugly. Ugly. Never again, she promised herself. “I’ve had a terrible—”

He cut her off. “We have to go to the hospital. Now. The rest of your family is already there.”

Everything shifted. He hadn’t come home because he knew about the affair. He hadn’t come home because the hospital had been trying to reach her about another of her mother’s demanding snits. Everything she did to make things right, she had done too late. “Oh. Oh, God. Mom’s all right, isn’t she?” But the look on his face told her what she already knew. “Oh, Christ, she isn’t. I’m being punished… she’s dead.”
NOTES: In an additional edit of this, I think I might let Lisa tell her husband that she was at the hospital visiting her mother before he has a chance to say anything. Since he came home because the hospital couldn’t reach her, that would not only dump her mother’s death on her head at a terrible time, but would also let him know she was lying and maybe blow open the defunct affair. But those are all changes for later drafts. This at least gives you a look at a first draft and a second draft.

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