

A Conversation About Chicago

by

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Over Black.

We hear the sound of city noise in the distance.

But loudest of all, HEAVY PANICKED BREATHING.

FADE IN:

EXT. APARTMENT ROOF - NIGHT

We open on a man on the ledge of the roof. This is JAMES (Late 20s, African American). His shirt stretched at the collar, like he or someone has been tugging on it.

We pan down to see...

He's wearing NO SHOES AND NO SOCKS.

James' eyes are clinched tight - afraid and hyperventilating right in front of ours. We get close enough on his face to see that sweat covers his forehead and cheeks.

James clinches his jaw and scrunches his face repeatedly. He is, very clearly, going through hell.

We pull out and see his whole body shake now. Then, tears streaming from his eyes to his chin. It's excruciating to watch and it lasts for several beats.

James closes his eyes. Somehow he's panting heavier than ever. And with his eyes shut tight, we move in on his face, feeling his desperation as he...

...Slowly lifts one foot off the ledge of the building. And with both arms raised in the air at his sides, he begins to lean forward. And just before he falls off the ledge...

CUT TO:

EXT. LEIMERT PARK VILLAGE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

James, an entirely different man from when we first saw him, is skipping down the sidewalks of Leimert Park Village. He wears a suit with a loosened tie as he walks into one of the street shops.

INT. NATURAL OILS STORE - CONTINUOUS

Over music:

James smiles at the clerk in the store as he looks around.

He looks up and down the shelves. Picks up oil bottles, examines them, puts them back.

He smells oils and incense - smiling the entire time.

James shows the clerk two different oils. She takes them both and explains the difference to him, perhaps giving him advice.

They speak but we do not hear them as music plays over the action.

James keeps on smiling and now he's picked up another oil. The clerk opens it and let's him smell it to his delight.

HIS EYES CLOSE AND HE INHALES DEEPLY.

EXT. HARUN COFFEE SHOP - DAY (EARLIER)

James sits at a table outside of the coffee shop. With him, is his friend Jackson (late 20s).

The two of them chat indistinctly over coffee until...

JACKSON
When does she get in?

JAMES
Tonight. I'm so happy. It's been
four months.

Jackson pats James on the shoulder - genuinely excited for him.

JACKSON
Good for you bro.

INT. NATURAL OILS STORE - DAY (LATER)

James is at the register buying his selection of oils. As he completes his purchase we hear...

JAMES (V.O.)
I can't wait to see her. I miss her
so much. I don't know how I
survived this long without her.

The clerk hands James his items. He's all smiles as he walks out of the store.

EXT. LEIMERT PARK VILLAGE - CONTINUOUS

We see James, bag in hand, walk along the sidewalk. He's beaming with happiness, floating - majestically so.

JACKSON (V.O.)
So like, what'd you miss about her?

JAMES (V.O.)
I miss everything.
(beat)
Everything. Down to every flaw.
(smiling)
But she has none really.

EXT. HARUN COFFEE SHOP - DAY (EARLIER)

Sitting at the table outside the cafe, James continues...

JAMES
And she loves me too, you know. I
don't know how or why but she does.

Jackson has no choice but to be happy for his friend.

JAMES (CONT'D)
I have our whole night planned. I
want her to fall in love with me
all over again.

We're now close up on James' face. His eyes damp - we know without a shred of a doubt, he's in love, as much as anyone could ever be.

JACKSON
(laughing)
Damn bro. That's beautiful, shit.

I gotta find a good one like you. James smiles sympathetically, but we can tell he's in his own world, thinking about reuniting with his love.

INT. ESO WON BOOK STORE - DAY (LATER)

James walks the aisles of a small book store. In a MONTAGE we see him browse the shelves. Picking up books, reading their back covers, putting them back on the shelves. There isn't a aisle he doesn't scan. All smiles the entire time.

We cut from section to section moving with James as he looks at books on MENTAL HEALTH. And then we cut to James paying the clerk (50s African American), for two books and what looks like an African American heroes calendar.

EXT. LEIMERT PARK VILLAGE - CONTINUOUS

James walks down the street and comes up on a pop up grocery store. We see James chat with the pop up workers over produce. He hands them cash and buys a basket. Filling it with greens, herbs, and fruit. He even buys a small bouquet of fresh flowers.

James is still smiling, ear to ear, as he walks toward...

INT. HUBERT LIQUOR STORE - CONTINUOUS

James walks into a neighborhood liquor store. He heads to the back to the wine aisle. James looks the aisle up and down. Grabbing bottles, looking at them, putting them back.

Finally, he decides on a cabernet. James pays the clerk, still, as happy as can be.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - LATER

As James enters his studio, we get a clear glimpse of a PRESCRIPTION PILL BOTTLE on the night stand.

Kitchen

He begins to prep the makings of a romantic evening. He makes the bed, sets the BOOKS and OILS he bought on top. He unbags the groceries and wine - sets them on the counter.

He turns on the stove, boils water, chops vegetables, and sautees.

JAMES (V.O.)

This time is going to be different.
I've never been happier. And I want
to be with her for the rest of my
life. I just want to hold her hand.
And brush her hair out her face
when we lie in bed together.

(beat)

I'm going to surprise her...

EXT. HARUN COFFEE SHOP - DAY (EARLIER)

James and Jackson are still outside the coffee shop when... James pulls a BLACK JEWELRY BOX out of his pocket. Jackson looks on in shock.

JACKSON
Forreal bro, like that.

JAMES
(laughing)
Yup.

JACKSON
Let me see that thing.

James shows Jackson a closer look, then snatches it back, giving Jack a hard time.

JAMES
Get cha own man!

James and Jack share a laugh.

JACKSON
But naw, you good bro? Everything
been going good with...you know,
the medications.

JAMES
Yeah. Yeah I'm good.

James looks away a bit here, avoiding eye contact, like he's not being fully truthful.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - LATER

James sets the table for two, placing the Cabernet in the center. He turns to the stove and we stay on the table to reveal A DIAMOND RING inside the black jewelry box. Underneath it, a FOLDED PIECE OF PAPER. James takes a beat, taking everything in. He smiles - it's absolutely perfect. And at that exact moment...

We hear a LOUD VIBRATION.

James' phone rings on the counter. He answers it.

JAMES
Hello?

THERE IS AN ABSENCE OF ALL SOUND FOR A BEAT.

MARIAH (O.S.)
(Softly)
Hi.

JAMES
Mariah! Oh my god babe, hi.

Mariah is silent on the other end of the line.

JAMES (CONT'D)
(still excited)
Whose number is this?

MARIAH (O.S.)
It's my counselor's at the
facility. They usually don't do
this sort of thing but I asked a
favor.
(laughing now)
The landlines here are always busy.

JAMES
(slight chuckle)
Everybody's got someone to call
right.

Beat.

MARIAH (O.S.)
It's been hard not to talk to you.

JAMES
The hardest time of my life baby.

James pauses, thinking, when something hits him...

JAMES (CONT'D)
Hey...babe.

MARIAH (O.S.)
(Crying)
Yeah...

JAMES
Shouldn't you be in the air by now?
Your flight gets in at 6:45.

Beat.

MARIAH (O.S.)
James...

JAMES
Don't tell me it got delayed.
(Smiling)
I can't wait any longer to see you.
My chest is going to fucking
explode.

We hear Mariah crying softly through the phone.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Babe what's wrong?

Mariah, fighting through tears, can barley get a word out.

MARIAH (O.S.)
Ja -- James...

JAMES
Did something happen? If someone --

MARIAH (O.S.)
James...

JAMES
Yes.

MARIAH (O.S.)
I'm not coming home.

James reacts, confused.

Beat.

JAMES
Mariah what are you saying? Do they
need to keep you longer?

MARIAH (O.S.)
No. I got discharged this morning.

James is silent. He pulls the phone from his ear for a quick
beat, composing himself.

MARIAH (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I'm going to Chicago. The people
here are helping me make
arrangements.

JAMES
Mariah what-- what's in Chicago?

MARIAH (O.S.)
I don't know. I just need to go.

With that a single tear falls from James' eye. And then they flood.

JAMES

Do you want me to meet you? I'll come right now. I can come right now.

MARIAH (O.S.)

(Crying)

No. If I'm going to get better I have to do this myself.

JAMES

But Chicago? Why Chicago?

MARIAH (O.S.)

I've always wanted to visit.

JAMES

Mariah please. You need space, I'll give you space.

Mariah doesn't respond. James starts to speak frantically.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Baby. Baby don't do this. We can work it out. Whatever it is.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I'll help you get better. We can do it together.

MARIAH (O.S.)

James listen...listen to me.

MARIAH (CONT'D)

I'm scared. I'm so scared. And I don't want to be.

(beat)

You, are perfect. And I love you, okay. I love you so much.

JAMES

(Softly)

Mariah.

MARIAH (O.S.)

I'm sorry.

The next thing we hear is a CLICK of the phone.

James slides against the wall and onto the floor. We're close on his head now, tilted down, still holding the phone to his ear. And one last time he says...

JAMES
(Into the phone)
Please.

We zoom out to see the pot of water still boiling - the table set, wine in the center, the diamond ring glistening on top of the folded piece of paper.

EXT. HARUN COFFEE SHOP - DAY (EARLIER)

Jackson and James sit at the table.

JAMES
I wrote a letter for her. Do you
want to hear it?

JACKSON
(hesitates)
Yeah. Yeah of course.

James smiles. He pulls a folded piece of paper out of his pocket with genuine glee, and begins to read.

JAMES
OK here goes...

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - EVENING (LATER)

We hear James read his letter over a MONTAGE of him alone in his apartment.

JAMES (V.O.)
Dear Mariah, If you're reading this
right now that means you've made it
home. I'm probably sitting across
from you as you read it, watching
you like usual.

James sits at the kitchen table alone. The remnants of his romantic setting still in place.

JAMES (V.O.)
I'm so happy to be with you again.
I couldn't go another moment
without seeing you. And I never
want to go another day without
being by your side.

James cries to himself.

JAMES (V.O.)

I loved you the very moment we met.
It was the chemistry. You know it's
true.

(Laughs)

Now not a day goes by you're not
in my thoughts. I imagine our life
together often. I don't ever think
of where we are because that
doesn't matter. All that matters is
that we're together.

James paces the kitchen now. Using his phone to call Mariah's
cell, only to get a voicemail message.

The voice over pauses long enough for us to hear:

THIS IS MARIAH. I MISSED YOU. BUT LEAVE A MESSAGE AND I'LL
CALL YOU BACK.

JAMES (V.O.)

I know things haven't always been
perfect, or easy for that matter.
But that's okay, because I don't
believe in those. And I know you
feel the same way.

We see James back at the table, this time fiddling with the
ring.

JAMES (V.O.)

As you can see by now, I got you a
ring. I wanted to give you
something that let you know I am
yours, and if you'll have me, I'd
like you to be mine.

EXT. HARUN COFFEE SHOP - DAY (EARLIER)

Jackson listens to James intently, happy for him but also
concerned.

JAMES

(Reading)

I used to not believe in
possession. But I can honestly say
I have no interest in ever giving
myself to anyone else.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - EVENING (LATER)

James stares out of the kitchen window and looks up toward the roof.

JAMES (V.O.)
I could tell you a million times
that I love you and it still
wouldn't do justice to the way I
feel about you. So instead, I
thought I might describe it to you
in this letter.

We get close up on the letter still folded on the table.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - BED - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

James lies in bed. Eyes wide open - looking through his phone at pictures of Mariah.

JAMES (V.O.)
Everything I do revolves around
you. You're my last thought before
I close my eyes at night and my
first as soon as they open in the
morning. These last four months
have been the hardest of my life.
Reminders of how things were before
I met you.
(beat)
I can't focus on anything to save
my life because I can't think
straight without you.

James is sitting at the edge of the bed now - feet tapping incessantly, legs shaking uncontrollably.

JAMES (V.O.)
I can't breathe. I can't move. A
lot of times I don't see a point in
living if you're not around. And I
don't mean to scare you. I just
thought you should know that you've
saved me. You make me feel like
everything is going to be okay. You
make me feel like everything is
okay.

We see James in bed again. Lying down but in immense pain. Tossing and turning. Curling up his body. Just trying to breathe through it all.

JAMES (V.O.)

You calm my anxiety. Cast away my nightmares. And melt away my fears. I wasn't praying for you but the universe sent you to me anyway. It sent me your energy and your aura, which are like magic. Because when I'm in your space, everything just stops...

INT./EXT. A BLACK HOLE - UNKNOWN

THERE IS THE ABSENCE OF ALL SOUND

We're close up on James - breaking the fourth wall. We slowly zoom out to see he's standing in an empty, quiet black space.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

James wakes up violently, gasping for air.

JAMES (V.O.)

For a long time I'd wake up in the middle of the night gasping for air.

(beat)

My heart beating so fast I thought it was going to explode.

He opens a bedside drawer, grabs a pill bottle and pops one in his mouth. He rushes to the bathroom, flips on the light, splashes water on his face and drinks from the sink - swallowing the pill.

Then he stares at himself in the mirror, blinking several times, massaging his face, trying to see if he's really there.

JAMES (V.O.)

I'd need to splash water on my face just to know I was real and I was alive. That there wasn't a gaping hole in my chest.

(beat)

Please don't be sad about any of this. All I mean to say is... you've made me truly happy and whole for the first time in my life.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - EVENING

James is at the kitchen table again. This time clutching the letter he wrote for Mariah. His tears have dried. He looks numb, hallow.

JAMES (V.O.)

I've experienced the most joy with you. More than most ever get a chance to. And that is a gift. You've given me the gift of life. And I want nothing more than to spend a lifetime paying you back. Love Always, James.

EXT. HARUN COFFEE SHOP - DAY (EARLIER)

James finishes the letter. Jackson is unsure what to say. He just gives his friend a supportive pat on the back and sips coffee with a slightly forced smile.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - EVENING

James sits on the edge of his bed. Head in his hands. On the bedside table, we get a CU of his pill bottle. Empty, laying sideways.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - MOMENTS EARLIER

James walks from the kitchen table to his bedside drawer. He opens it, grabs a pill bottle. Shakes it - empty. Tosses it down.

He sits on the edge of the bed. Head in his hands.

We stay here for a beat.

Then James turns his head, looking out the window.

EXT. APARTMENT ROOF - NIGHT (PRESENT DAY)

James is on the ledge of the roof. Arms up at his sides. One foot lifted off of the ground - he begins to lean forward. His eyes are shut tight. His breathing is heavy. We stay on him here, up close, as he searches his mind for what comes next...

INT. JAMES' BED - UNDER BLANKETS - DAY (FLASHBACK)

From James' POV we see the silhouette of a young woman. Sunlight shines through the blankets, though we can't make out her face.

Now facing James, we see him smile directly into the camera.

And then we cut back to...

EXT. APARTMENT ROOF - NIGHT (PRESENT DAY)

James on the roof. But now he has a slight smile. And we see his smile slowly widen - perhaps...

We see hope.

FADE TO BLACK.