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Storyteller as a Cultural Leader

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Humanities and Teacher Education Division

Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Brielle Yuke Li

July 2020

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This thesis, written by

BRIELLE YUKE LI

under the guidance of a faculty committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Storyteller As Cultural Leader

Story has been playing a significant role in human lives and society since the formation of language systems. As Robert McKee concludes, “[t]he world now consumes films, novels, theatre, and television in such quantities and with such ravenous hunger that the story arts have become humanity’s prime source of inspiration, as it seeks to order chaos and gain insight into life” (McKee 12). Serving as a source from which many people gain intellectual and emotional satisfaction, story could significantly influence our perceptions of our reality, and hence has the power to shape the world. Writers are the creators of stories, who have the potential to produce both positive and negative impacts on the world via storytelling. It is a personal choice of what kind of writer one aspires to be. I believe I shoulder the responsibility to create valuable stories that could elevate the good in the world, as well as to propel myself to grow into a more sophisticated and better human being. Through my studies in the MFA Screenwriting Program at Pepperdine, I have decided to become a writer who is a cultural leader. After closely reading the works of some filmmakers regarded in that category, I have developed my understandings of it as follows. I argue that a cultural leader should be keen on contemplating our society and human conditions, and should push further in exploring them profoundly through a sympathetic instead of judging lens. A cultural leader should be someone open-minded toward sentiments, beliefs, values, and artwork pieces from different backgrounds and contexts, no matter in which sphere—the social, the political, the economic, or the cultural. A cultural leader should acquire professional expertise in expressing and disseminating valuable messages to enlighten people and our society. Finally, a cultural leader should be someone who bears the interest of all humankind in

mind, and believes that the good in humanity is worth fighting for, and is willing to take initiatives to fight the battles that others may fear. As an international student, I am given the precious opportunity to view different cultures from my unique perspective, as well as to realize that the same object may contain different and so much as opposite connotations in various contexts.

This realization has enabled me to acknowledge the broad and deep complexity of our world. We are all the same, but we are all different. My value as a writer is to strive to be qualified as a cultural leader by my own standards. I will strive to bring compassion and understanding by creating universally relatable stories that explore complex humanity and the eclectic world profoundly and reflectively. Many writers and filmmakers have inspired me on my journey. Two of them have sculptured me as a writer in clarifying “what stories to tell” and “how to tell a story.” Ang Lee has set an example as a pioneer who explores human’s internal conflicts in diverse contexts, and Phoebe Waller-Bridge has enlightened me to embrace my voice of creating bitter-sweet dramas with comedic touches.

Coming from an Asian background, I find it thrilling that Asian-American representation in the film industry is gaining more exposure and receiving growing attention in recent years. TV shows like *Fresh off the Boat* and movies like *Crazy Rich Asians* have come into the public eye, but given that most creators were born and brought up in the American context, their exploration and representation would only be restricted to a less culturally discorded perspective, with their American-ness being dominant and their Asian root much compromised. However, for the generations trapped in between who have a foot in both environments, the cultural conflicts rarely discussed in public discourse are their common struggles. This accounts for why I appreciate

Lulu Wang's genuine effort in *The Farewell*, which alludes to the underlying complexity of cultures, instead of thoughtlessly putting forth a simplified judgment like many others. In a Roger Ebert movie review, critic Christy Lemire says about Wang, "[i]t's here that Wang explores cultural differences between East and West and between generations without judgment or pronouncement as to whose approach is best. It's as if she wants to see all sides of the delicate argument with a kind heart and an open mind... She's told a story about cultural clashes without ever leaning on wacky stereotypes or lazy clichés" (Lemire). Another example similar to Wang is the legendary Ang Lee. He is a real pioneer in representing cultural and internal wrestles, and a giant figure who motivated me to challenge myself by studying abroad in the first place.

Ang Lee is currently no doubt the most established and well-known Asian filmmaker to the Western audience, who is also the first non-white individual to win an Academy Award for Best Director with *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). His Chinese martial arts masterpiece *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) was the first non-English film to have been nominated for ten Academy Awards. Born in the East and educated in the West, Lee is reputable for his achievements in creating diverse stories that are globally retable. Throughout his career, except for the ones that are aforementioned, he has stunningly created an English classic *Sense and Sensibility* (1995); a superhero blockbuster *Hulk* (2003); a Chinese erotic espionage period drama *Lust, Caution* (2007); a magic realist film *Life of Pi* (2012) following an Indian boy who believes in various religions; and an action thriller *Gemini Man* (2019) featuring the African-American superstar Will Smith. "He is a postnational artist because he has crossed and blurred the boundaries not only of the Chinese diaspora... but of the cultures of East and West" (Dilley 21). The grand

deed of his many achievements has hopefully proved to the world the possibility of offsetting cultural barriers while simultaneously receiving international recognition. Regardless of which cultural identity Lee explores, he throws his characters into a conflicted situation where different opinions crash into each other. And usually, he offers a tender reconciliation to end the story. The internal wrestles are basic human emotions that has universal resonance despite our differences.

Furthermore, Ang Lee spearheads in constructing situations where culturally different values—introduced by globalization and migration—confront each other head-to-head. His earlier father trilogy and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are powerful instances of his examination of interculturality and multiculturalism, specifically of the “conflict between the old Confucian virtue of respect towards one’s parents and traditions and the new Western virtue of seeking individual happiness” (Laine 104). Regarding the term “respect towards one’s parents,” I believe the essential spirit behind it adheres closer to “individuality’s subordination to old traditions and values,” which emphasizes social and filial hierarchy and the restraint of emotions in the traditional Confucian philosophical system. The battle between the grander value versus individuality is poetically and delicately inspected in the *wuxia* masterpiece *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Tiger* for short). “In the world of swordplay film and literature, the ideal martial heroes are usually the ones who exert control over any desire they might feel for women and demonstrate martial masculinity that honors brotherhood instead of romantic or sexual relationships with women” (Szeto 38). Yet Lee rejuvenates the concept of *wuxia* by humanizing Li Mu-Bai (Chow Yun-Fat), a male noble hero who possesses the Green Destiny Sword. He undergoes self-repression of his sexual desire for Jen Yu (Ziyi Zhang), a young woman dreams to “flee her arranged marriage for

a life of adventure” (Szeto 37). Li’s secret sexual attraction toward Jen Yu characterizes authenticity, humanization, and individuality. His obsession of taking her in as an apprentice serves as a metaphor of the oppression of the social circumstances where he has to find an excuse. Early in the film, Li once recounts Yu Shu-Lien (Michelle Yeoh), a woman warrior who has feelings for him, that he has been attempting to *dedao* but has never succeeded. *Dedao*, “getting the true meaning” in Taoism, has an inherent connotation for dehumanization of eliminating secular desires, reminiscent of a human’s pursuit for a higher spirit. This kind of strict requirement implanted in the Confucian tradition contradicts with the Western value of the freedom of self-expression.

If one was to say *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* takes a more ambiguous approach to deal with the discrepancy between the traditional Chinese Confucian value of restraint and the modern Western value of free expression, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)—the second feature of Lee’s father trilogy—pictures a direct contradiction between the two. “The construction of this film, in which the five main characters are trying to conceal things from one another, is complex and poignant” (Dilley 59). One of the aspects that makes the movie stand out from most is that the ending only offers limited reconciliations within a few secondary relationships, while the primary tension between the two strongest antagonizing force remains unresolved face to face. The father has accepted his son’s homosexuality, signaled by shifting his language from Chinese to English, and breaking the news of his knowledge of it to his son’s gay lover, Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein). More so, the film’s ending shot is the father raising his arms in the air, signifying a patriarchal surrender. However, the father and son never infringe the “pretense of

normality” (Dilley 59) comforting to a traditional Chinese family background. Lee has reached a balance between the traditional Eastern psychology—restraining from telling all the truths to protect the other from being hurt—and the Western value—celebrating free expression of individuality. The defiance of cultures and social sphere is a pervasive theme in Ang Lee’s films, and this spirit is what everyone can root for.

After becoming aware of what stories to tell, I felt confused about how to tell one. Finding one’s voice is crucial to a writer, which will establish one’s preferable writing style, tone, genres, and themes. Usually, writers are recommended to find one’s voice by knowing about what one cares about. Stephen King shared in his book *On Writing*, “[w]rite what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work” (King 161). When Bong Joon Ho was on his award-pocketing tour of *Parasite*, he was also a big supporter of this ideal, believing strongly in what Martin Scorsese once said, “the most personal is the most universal.” Staying true to yourself sounds easy, but for someone who develops her craft and experiences self-discovery simultaneously like me, finding my voice took me for quite a detour. Preoccupied with the iconography and tone, I used to strive to become only a serious drama writer who would insist on the artistic pursuit to deliver profound messages. Comedy, one of the most desired genres, with its approachable and amusing style, once impressed me merely as some tailored entertainment adorned with funny moments to tickle the audience to chuckle, lacking the potential to examine any theme deeper other than idealism. I had been refusing to write in this style before I realized that I would unconsciously create humorous moments on pages during the writing process of my

TV pilot *The Answer*. This observation altered my perception in terms of how I was “supposed” to define myself as a writer. “Dramedy” was the solution with which I first attempted to rationalize my situation. Fortunately, with her signature work—season one of *Killing Eve* and season two of *Fleabag*—Phoebe Waller-Bridge has illustrated to me how an outstanding comedy could utilize the genre’s advantages to form a compelling dramatic core. Furthermore, whatever the superficial facets are, an emotionally effective dramatic core is the basis of every story, which explains the Scorsese’s quote above. “When the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life and beliefs, he or she is apt to become more invested in the story” (King 160). The same is true for writing TV and films.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who is more prominent in the TV writing world, has thoroughly shifted my comprehension of comedy writing. One of her critically acclaimed shows, *Fleabag*, has enlightened me on how to fuse comedy and serious affairs into an enjoyable entity tunelessly. *Fleabag*, created, written by, and starring Waller-Bridge, follows a “greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist” (*Fleabag* S1 E1 20:32-20:42), as described by the protagonist herself. The show is sprinkled with vulgar jokes, framed by fast-paced cutting, and the signature breaking-the-fourth-wall internal monologues and commentary. *Fleabag* has not only inspired me to realize that the essence of an outstanding comedy is to explore and inspect human conflicts and conditions, but it has also helped me to discover my voice in writing.

Fleabag, the young female character Waller-Bridge plays in the show, aimlessly leads her mundane life, apathetically at times, thirsty for sexual companions to evade facing the harsh truth

—her past mistake and the consequential trauma. Through a facade of vulgarity and humor, the show closely studies the externalized human psychology of first avoiding the reality then facing it honestly after unwanted events. It is the kind of depression and pain that usually stays invisible behind smiles and a seemingly carefree lifestyle. The end of season one is an emotional rock bottom for Fleabag. Her sister Claire stops talking to her because she thinks Fleabag was trying to sleep with her brother-in-law. Her father backs off from taking her side when confronted by her stepmother-to-be. To her anguish, she is compelled to face her unbearable guilt of being responsible for her best friend Boo's death, after she irresponsibly slept with Boo's boyfriend. Season two picks up from a year after season one, starting with Fleabag trying to improve her life in multiple facets: working out, eating healthy, resisting superficial sex, and hanging out with friends. On the surface, she is finally able to attend to her life as a grownup. However, the external physical challenge of getting better proves to be easier than actual mental and spiritual progress—a topic that season two addresses. During the family dinner in episode one of the season, although Fleabag looks incredible and healthy, she still needs a smoke to release the suppressed pressure and hatred accumulated from her surroundings. At this moment, a new and critical character, the priest, is introduced into Fleabag's life. Smart enough, Waller-Bridge disguises the priest, who is apparently the humanized higher calling, to be Fleabag's love interest. Both the priest's celibacy and his consistently being chased by foxes signify abstinence, the aspect of the adulthood responsibility the show concentrates upon. Fleabag's relationship with the priest externalizes her spiritual and mental journey of getting healthier and better. When the priest has made the choice of God in the final sequence of the show, Fleabag finally becomes brave and

strong enough to wave goodbye to the camera and walk away from it, which remarkably embodies an inner world of her escapism. This is one of the most genius writing choices Waller-Bridge accomplished in the show.

Breaking-the-fourth-wall is commonly applied in films and TV. This device serves a primarily common and natural purpose in season one. Season two, however, shatters the commonality of breaking-the-fourth-wall in episode three, where the priest notes the action of Fleabag going to the fourth wall. Traditionally, it is only ever the protagonist who can acknowledge the camera. More shockingly, the priest advances a step further; he even looks into the camera in episode four when Fleabag escapes spiritually again. Thematically, the priest's recognition of Fleabag's breaking-the-fourth-wall denotes a higher observation and involvement of a person's spiritual interiority, forcing one to confront the reality. The message behind the metaphor is explicitly notified for the audience in the final episode, during the priest's improvised wedding speech on love. "It takes strength to know what's right... And love isn't something that weak people do. Being romantic takes a hell of a lot of hope. I think what they mean is, when you find somebody that you love, it feels like hope" (*Fleabag* S2 E618:42-18:58). Although Fleabag desperately asks for guidance on how to cope with her life from the therapist and the priest, she already knows the answer; she is simply not prepared to embark on getting better at the time. Waller-Bridge has established this delicate world to deliver such a powerful and urgent message on the psychological and emotional quest of modern people. Her writing—the pace, the control over dramatic tension, the balance of funny moments and seriousness, and the profoundness of thematic pursuit—has unclogged my confusion of how to create the positively impactful and

dramatically balanced comedy. Moreover, *Fleabag* would never impose upon the audience as preachy or condescending. Instead, it is empathetic. However spiritually strong, the priest is still a human being. He also vacillates between seduction and what is right for him, which offers solace to psychologically ordinary audience. *Fleabag* intellectually resonates with me on a personal level, making Waller-Bridge my torchlight in writing.

To achieve the ultimate goal of mine of being a cultural leader, I need first to hone my craft and challenge myself to gain a position where my voice can be heard. Starting off as a writer's assistant or a writer's room assistant is always immensely beneficial. Since cinematic art always fascinates me, on-set production experiences are crucial too, through which I would familiarize myself with how films and TV shows are practically made. Meanwhile, it would also be important for me to write everything and write every day. I would not limit myself to genres or types of writing in the early stages. I see different stories in different forms. Some are meant for TV shows while some are for the big screen. Admittedly, every story has a unique point of view and attitude toward its thematic delivery, because every storyteller was born and brought up with different sets of values and beliefs. But I desire to experience and explore a broader world, to improve myself, to be as open-minded and empathetic toward human beings and society as possible. I wish to test the lines of objectivity and sympathy in the stories I create, and improve this comprehensively complicated world with an attitude of understanding. I believe that to acknowledge the existence of difference, and the harsh reality that some discrepancies might never be reconciled, is the key to my aspiration to making this world a better place.

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THE ANSWER

Pilot "Ice Cream Addiction"

Written by

Brielle Yuke Li

COLD OPEN

ALESSIA'S THOUGHTS

Pure grey b.g.

CLOSE UP on ALESSIA WONG (27, Chinese-American), eyes unfocused, reminiscing.

Then she lifts her eyes to speak to the camera.

ALESSIA
You know that kind of feeling?

INT. RALPH'S - DAY

Alessia opens the door to aisles of ice cream. Freezing air liquefies on the glass door.

ALESSIA (V.O.)
That you go to a grocery store and
you want a very specific flavor of
ice cream? Like strawberry and
vanilla with chocolate chips?

After searching for a while, she picks up a cup from a stack. It's strawberry and vanilla with chocolate chips.

ALESSIA'S THOUGHTS

Alessia watches the ice cream cup in her hand.

ALESSIA
You want it so bad that it has to
be *it*, or you won't want any other
ice cream at all. But, it's out of
stock.

The ice cream cup vanishes out of thin air. She's not happy.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)
And it's been out for a long while.
Until one day, you get lucky.

INT. RALPH'S - DAY

Alessia holds a cup with a spoon. She opens the lid to scoop the ice cream out and eat it.

ALESSIA (V.O.)
But you ruined it.

She drops the ice cream by accident, half of it spilled out.

ALESSIA (V.O.)
So now the ice cream hates you.

ALESSIA'S THOUGHTS

The ice cream jumps out from the cup in Alessia's hands and splashes itself onto her face. She sighs, wipes it off.

ALESSIA
When I told Dave about this, he laughed really hard. It was not even a joke. There was no punchline. But he finds humor in everything. I didn't know there could be someone so firmly believing in the good in people and in love. Anyway, he laughed at me--

INT. RALPH'S - DAY

ALESSIA (V.O.)
--for being miserable--

Alessia squats and mourns the wasted ice cream.

DAVE MAJEWSKI (29, Jewish) emerges nearby. He points at the ice cream on the ground and laughs like a teenage boy.

ALESSIA (V.O.)
--but more for me being so deadly serious over some ice cream, which made me look funny.

ALESSIA'S THOUGHTS

Now her eyes look melancholic and hurt.

ALESSIA
He never knew it was not ice cream that I was talking about.

ACT 1**INT. ALESSIA'S APARTMENT - DAY**

Northern Californian's sunshine gently penetrates the curtains, illuminating a slightly untidy and packed studio apartment.

CLOSE UP on an open book partially pressed under a woman's forearm: *SEIZE THE LIGHT* by DAVE MAJEWSKI.

REVEAL Alessia Wong sleeping off her pillow on the bed in an ugly posture.

ALARM goes off. It's 6:00 AM.

Stirred, Alessia wrestles with her dreams for a short while before she opens her eyes wearily.

She takes a second to return to reality, gradually registers the fact she fell asleep while reading the book last night.

She groans, hurling herself off the bed. The book drops on the floor. She picks it up and gazes at the author's name.

DAVE MAJEWSKI.

She flips the book to where she left off and folds the corner of the page. It's right on the beginning of CHAPTER 8.

RADIO (V.O.)
Morning, San Francisco! This is
your beloved Louis waking you up!

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Alessia finishes up her shower behind the frosted glass door.

She turns off the water, slides open the door, and snatches over the towel to dry herself.

RADIO (V.O.)
Ready to welcome this bright June
3rd, 2017? Oh yeah, me too. And
congratulations, today's Thursday!
You're already half way through
another week of hard work!

Alessia steps out and turns off the bluetooth radio on the countertop. She wipes clear an area on the mirror and stares at herself.

She blows a heavy breath, bracing herself for something big.

EXT. FACEBOOK HQ - DAY

Multiple FACEBOOK logos decorate the walls.

Casually dressed EMPLOYEES bustle about offices as some of them hang around food trucks swallowing breakfasts or throwing shade at Google.

INT. OPEN OFFICE, FACEBOOK HQ - DAY

A spacious modern working area more akin to a lounge rather than an actual office. Think public area in WeWork. Piles of computers line up on desks as documents and personal stuff, cute or dumb, scatter about.

A dozen or so PROGRAMMERS already start burning their brains in assistance with coffee in front of computers or white boards. More workers amble in from the door.

At snack station, Alessia makes herself coffee.

FOUR MEN enter the office, chattering. One of them, YOON PARK (25, Korean), notes Alessia. He puts on a loving smile.

As Alessia tests the temperature of the coffee with a sip, Yoon emerges above her shoulder from behind. Startled, she almost spills her coffee.

YOON
You alright, babe?

ALESSIA
Oh I'm fine. Just uh you gave me a--
a surprise, which I said--

Yoon presses a quick kiss on her cheek.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)
--I don't like.

She forces a smile and glances about awkwardly.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)
Yoon, let's not do PDA--

YOON
I missed you last night. Were you
staying up late working again? You
didn't even pick up my call.

ALESSIA

I was uh--I was reading.

He beams at her so brightly that she almost forgets he wasn't listening to her. Again.

RAVI (O.S.)

Hey, love birds!

The couple turns around to spot RAVI (35, Indian, animated, all business) who strides forth to them.

RAVI (CONT'D)

How you doing, Alessia?

ALESSIA

Good. Thanks. Only - I kind of prefer not to be called as--

YOON

Love birds! Perfect name for us from now on. You're the boss for a reason, Ravi.

RAVI

Haha.

(to Alessia)

You got yourself a smooth talking man.

(to Yoon)

Just dropping by to say we need you up there right away, Romeo.

Ravi pats Yoon on the shoulder and clicks his tongue before leaving.

YOON

I'll be right up.

ALESSIA

So Yoon, back to earlier - PDA's kinda cringy to me, so can we not--

He checks his phone.

YOON

Sorry babe. Gotta roll. I'll pick you up tonight.

ALESSIA

Tonight? Do we--do we have plans?

YOON

Now we do. Clear your night. We got something big coming. Love you.

He kisses her on the lips, somehow very thrilled, then quickly backs out of the room.

ALESSIA

(sighs)

Please tell me the "something big" is something bad or I'm fucked--

JENNIFER (O.S.)

By whom? Andrew Garfield?

Recognizing the voice, Alessia rolls her eyes even before turning around. JENNIFER ROSS (30, white), upbeat and full of teasing energy, emerges with a half-eaten toast.

ALESSIA

Hello to you too, Jennifer. Don't you think 9 in the morning is a little bit too early for your "ovary joke"?

JENNIFER

Well, it's in my gene. Can't help. He's still on your list, right? Or now Ryan Gosling takes over?

ALESSIA

What a shame there's no famous and hot Asian actors out there?

(then)

And as if I could really talk dirty with either Garfield or Gosling on bed.

JENNIFER

Dreams make life easier.

ALESSIA

I wish.

JENNIFER

Ok, I see - you and Yoon had a fight.

ALESSIA

No! Actually it's been going great. Only - it's not.

(gives in)

I mean, superficially it's great. Or at least for him.

JENNIFER

I know you don't like surprises or PDA or grand gestures but, ugh, you're complaining doesn't make sense. All women love that shit.

ALESSIA

And you call yourself a feminist?

JENNIFER

I never really did that.

ALESSIA

(sighs)

He's the biggest romanticist I've ever met. Well, the second. But the point is, for almost a year he never listens. No matter how great he is at dating or caring for me, he's only doing it in his own romantic world he built for--for himself, I guess.

JENNIFER

And he's not hot enough to not listen. Don't tell him I said that.

ALESSIA

Hot guys need to listen too!

Jennifer shoots her a look. *Really?*

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

Well. Maybe...less, but eventually, still.

She hides her embarrassment in gulping down her coffee that's slightly too hot. Jennifer chuckles, but quickly turns serious.

JENNIFER

Hey, it's me. If you really wanna talk, let's do our old ritual.

Alessia gives her an appreciative look, nods.

Jennifer returns to smiling, handing over the half-eaten toast.

ALESSIA

Can I only have that part you haven't touched?

JENNIFER
Oh. Fuck off.

Jennifer spins around and storms off, showing her middle finger to Alessia.

JENNIFER (CONT'D)
Before lunch!

Alessia cracks up.

INT. RESTROOM - FACEBOOK HQ - DAY

JENNIFER
...and that was around Jupiter
bidding farewell on the beach,
right?

Alessia and Jennifer enter the bathroom. They each find a stall and close the door. SHUFFLING of taking off pants and URINATING.

ALESSIA (O.S.)
Yeah, that was where I stopped.
Think that's the end of Chapter 7?

JENNIFER (O.S.)
Sweet. Then you fell asleep right
before this controversially
mysterious woman comes into the
story. Some think it's genius and
some treat it as crap.

ALESSIA (O.S.)
Which side are you?

JENNIFER (O.S.)
Of course it's genius, it's totally
intentional. Also,
(clears throat)
I sorta feel like this woman is
based on you.

ALESSIA (O.S.)
Oh. Come on.

STALL

Alessia's voice sounds impatient, but her memory flies.

The CLANK from Jennifer's stall stirs Alessia back to reality. She unlocks the door.

JENNIFER (O.S.)
Oh fucking Christ!

BATHROOM

ALESSIA
What?

WALIDAH (21, Middle-Eastern), a sweet and pretty intern, was about to apply lipstick in front of the mirror. She gets startled by Jennifer's squeal too.

JENNIFER
Jeez. Thought you walked barefoot.
Scared the shit out of me. No sound
at all.

Jennifer takes the spot next to Walidah to wash her hands.

WALIDAH
(apprehensive)
I--I'm sorry. Are we supposed to
walk loudly here? This is my second
day. I'm not familiar with the
rules. I'm an intern. I'm sorry.

Alessia comes up to wash her hands on the other side of Walidah.

ALESSIA
No need for sorry. She has a weak
heart.

JENNIFER
Fuck off.

Alessia chuckles, which relaxes Walidah.

WALIDAH
I um--I didn't mean to eavesdrop
but are you guys talking about
Seize the Light and that mysterious
girl in Chapter 8 and 9?

Both Alessia and Jennifer are taken aback.

JENNIFER
We got a fan here. So the book's
even more popular than I thought,
huh?

WALIDAH

I guess it's one of those
bestsellers that get adapted by
Hollywood. So it got more coverage.

ALESSIA

It's going to be adapted?

WALIDAH

Yeah. I saw the interview earlier
that he's going to LA to discuss
the deal. But what I really want to
ask is uhm--I hope this doesn't
come off weird but--I heard that
mysterious girl from the book is
based on--on you?

ALESSIA

Uh--

Jennifer shakes water off her hands as she goes around
Walidah to Alessia.

JENNIFER

Name's Alessia and this gossip's
not your business.

ALESSIA

We were uhm...high school friends.

WALIDAH

Wow.

JENNIFER

What's your name, intern?

Jennifer's totally a badass boss when she's not best friends
with Alessia. Walidah's terrified.

WALIDAH

W-Walidah.

JENNIFER

Okay. Listen, intern, this is a
small town. Small but crowded. You
don't wanna big mouth other
people's privacy.

ALESSIA

Jen.

JENNIFER

Mind your own internship and if you want to stay here as an employee after graduating either Berkeley or Stanford--

WALIDAH

It's UIUC...

JENNIFER

Worse. You gotta be careful about what you listen, what you say, and remember never watch *The Social Network* on any Facebook public computer. Or you won't get your tax return because we have spies in IRS too. If no further question, the door is there.

Walidah apparently has regretted accepting the internship, her face distorted by holding back the tears. Alessia puts a hand on her shoulder for solace.

ALESSIA

Don't listen to her. Go grab lunch.

Walidah trots out, whimpering. Jennifer turns to the mirror and primps victoriously.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

You're always an asshole to interns.

JENNIFER

I wasn't being an asshole. I was abusing my administrative power. You know what they say? "HR is always the worst." They're damn right.

EXT. FACEBOOK HQ - DAY

Jennifer and Alessia exit the office building, sauntering toward the crowded canteen.

JENNIFER

Okay. Let's talk business now.
Question No.1: Does Yoon know about Dave?

ALESSIA

Jen, you're really good at your job, but I'm not an interviewee.

JENNIFER

Hurry up. I'm starving.

ALESSIA

Well. It doesn't matter, cos he's not interested. To be honest, we never had the "ex talk."

JENNIFER

Back up. Back up. Back up. How long have you two been dating? From January?

ALESSIA

'Bout right. Over half a year now. He just never asked about my past. What's worst is I don't care about his either. Wait, should I care about it? Is it feminist if I do?

JENNIFER

Give it a break. Not everything has to do with feminism. You don't care because you don't love him.

ALESSIA

Then I think I'm right. I shouldn't waste any more of his time.

JENNIFER

Hold up. You're deciding...the b word.

ALESSIA

I'll have to hurt him now or later. I wasn't emotionally strong enough when he entered my life.

(thinks)

Probably not now either.

JENNIFER

I gotta admit I was quite surprised at how you fell for someone who's so not your type so suddenly.

ALESSIA

Turns out I never really did.

INT. MEETING ROOM, VARIETY - DAY

Dave Majewski, from Alessia's Thoughts in the opening, low-key handsome with a pair of slightly prudish spectacles, unshaved, looks outside the broad ceiling-to-floor window on a chair, pensive. In his hands is his book, *Seize the Light*.

STUART (34, British, black), Dave's literary agent, cute and full of vigor, skims through a schedule list on iPad.

They are in a transformed makeshift interview room. A team of SHOOTING CREW bustle around to set up the camera, the light, and the sound.

STUART

Check. Check. Impossible. Maybe.
Check. Bloody hell no! Alright,
doesn't look too bad now. Dave, you
sure you don't want to take a look
at their questions? It's a live
talk.

DAVE

Do you think I made the right
choice of signing the deal?

Stuart groans as he smacks his forehead with his palm.

STUART

You are the most inconsistent
person I've ever met. Of course you
should sign the deal. Otherwise how
would you pay me back your rent?

DAVE

Very funny. But you should update
your joke, buddy. It's been years.

STUART

If you really didn't want to
cooperate, you would have refused
them in the first place. You did it
because you know something's
calling you back here.

DAVE

I guess. But I also suck at
interviews. How about me being like
Ricky Gervais on the Golden Globes?
Ripping them apart?

STUART

Nah-ah. I'll lose my visa.

Dave chuckles. Chuckles soon become coughs. Coughs bring a sudden strike of dizziness in the head. Stuart notices.

STUART (CONT'D)
You alright?

Dave recovers, shakes the weird feelings off.

DAVE
Yeah, I guess. It was a sudden pain
in the chest. Where was I?
(remembers, sighs)
I'm just afraid they would ask that
question again.

STUART
Come on, mate, how could you expect
me to help when you've never even
told me who that woman is either?

DAVE
Why can't they just focus on my
actual writing?

STUART
You know human beings crave
gossips.

HAILEY GARCÍA (31, multiracial), exuding confidence, a
Variety's Content Manager Coordinator as suggested by her
name tag pinned on her dress, approaches Dave.

HAILEY
We're set. How's my boy?

Dave lets go a long sigh before standing. Stuart pats on his
arm as encouragement.

Dave walks off to his interview seat as Hailey eyes him from
behind with thick interest.

HAILEY (CONT'D)
He's not gay, is he?

STUART
Oh, God, you're funny. He's not.

Stuart eyes Hailey and figures out what her deal is.

STUART (CONT'D)
But what if he already has a
girlfriend?

HAILEY

You think that's a problem to me?

Dave arrives at the other side of the room to the interviewer MALIK SIMMONS (40s, African-American). They share a smile.

MALIK

You ready?

An ASSISTANT OF BOOM OPERATOR appears and adjusts Dave's mic.

1ST AD gestures around the room to the Shooting Team members. Everything's ready. She claps her hands to note the room.

1ST AD

We're ready to go, people.

Malik steals a final look at his questions on the cards as he straightens his suit. Dave blows raspberries to relax himself.

Stuart gives an affirmative look to Dave, then a thumbs up to the Director and 1st AD. She slates in front of the camera that focuses on Dave.

ON CAMERA SCREEN AS MALIK AND DAVE SPEAK

MALIK

Mr.Dave Majewski! Welcome back to your hometown, Los Angeles!

DAVE

Thank you, Malik.

MALIK

First, congratulations on your bestseller historical romance novel *Seize the Light*. Really awesome work here. We heard the news that it's been picked up by A24 to be adapted into a feature film. In light of that, we have a few questions about your work, this film deal, and yourself.

DAVE

My philosophy is it'd be the best if the readers are more curious about my work instead of me.

MALIK

Well, we believe it's important to let our audiences know a little bit of the author as well.

Stuart waves fervently at Dave and mouths to him like a crazy person. Dave notices, resigns, and adjusts his behavior.

DAVE

Ah, yeah, for sure. Sorry. Not really accustomed to be in front of the camera. A bit nervous.

MALIK

No need to be. So we heard there was also a British production company pursuing the right to adapt the novel into a story based in post-WW2 Paris. So what made you decide to come back and do it here in Hollywood?

DAVE

Well it's quite complicated. Post-WW2 definitely sounds appealing. But I was born and raised here in LA. And the story is inspired by my parents' true experiences, mostly happened in this city. So I guess LA feels more home to the story.

MALIK

I'm curious about if you'd be the screenwriter or at least one of the screenwriting team of the adaptation? I've heard some rumors about it.

DAVE

This is going to be a big part of my trip this time to decide if I'm going to be on board for the screenwriting part.

MALIK

What's your prospect?

DAVE

As is every writer's - to do it by myself.

(then)

In case they turn my parents into bumblebees.

Malik laughs.

Stuart looks pretty content. Hailey, eyes locked on Dave, whispers.

HAILEY

What's his plan tonight?

BACK TO CAMERA SCREEN

DAVE

I was kidding. It's A24. Hope they don't tear apart the contract for that joke.

MALIK

So our next question, which is also the highlight, is - is there anything in the book that was inspired by your own experience? I believe one of the most widely spread fan theories is - the mysterious woman who only appeared in Chapter 8 and 9 and is portrayed in a very dreamy style, was a romantic interest from real life of yours. Is this fan theory true?

Dave's smile freezes for a second.

Hailey notices Dave's discomfort, pokes Stuart with her elbow.

HAILEY

(undertone)

Do you know the answer?

STUART

I wish.

BACK TO CAMERA SCREEN

DAVE

What I can tell you is, this woman was indeed inspired by a real person in my life, but it was some private experience, so I'm not ready to share it.

MALIK

Can't we even just have a sneak peek at it? Anything?

DAVE

Well... Okay. Um, so this. She once told me something that is always on my mind.

MALIK

Which is?

DAVE

There was this kind of ice cream
that could jump out of its cup and
splash itself onto a person's face.

MALIK

And?

DAVE

That's it. But what does it mean? I
could never figure it out.

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2**INT. CANTEEN, FACEBOOK HQ - DAY**

A HAND stirs in an ice cream freezer seeking something - REVEAL the hand belongs to Alessia, who finally extracts a small box of ice cream from the very bottom. It's strawberry and vanilla with chocolate chips.

Holding two plates filled with lunch, Jennifer witnesses this with incredulity.

JENNIFER

I'm sure if you're not addicted to this ice cream, you'd be walking on Victoria's Secret T-stage now.

Alessia takes her plate over and gives Jennifer a look.

JENNIFER (CONT'D)

That was a compliment.

EXT. DINING PATIO - DAY

They exit the canteen to the patio looking for seats as Alessia's phone DINGS. She checks the text.

JENNIFER

Let me guess - it's Yoon.

Alessia shoves her phone back to a pocket.

ALESSIA

He texted me we're having dinner at this restaurant I really like.

JENNIFER

Which means?

ALESSIA

I'm fucked. He's--ugh, he's probably preparing some good surprise - to himself though - which is gonna make things worse. And I'm terrible at breakups.

JENNIFER

Practice. That's what you need.

ALESSIA
I've dated quite a lot of guys.

A COUPLE leave a table. Jennifer trots up to secure it.

JENNIFER
That's not what I meant, Ali. I just feel like, every time you're dating, you don't seem to know what you want. I mean, if you don't like what he does, just tell him. What's the big deal? But somehow...you're just too chill. Like, do you know what you want from a relationship?

The question gags Alessia.

ALESSIA
I never really thought of it.

JENNIFER
See where the problems come from?

Troubled, Alessia attempts to let go a long sigh by blowing raspberries, but she fails to do so. She tries again. Fails again. Jennifer chortles.

JENNIFER (CONT'D)
Did you just blow raspberries and fail?

ALESSIA
Heard it helps you relax.

JENNIFER
I never knew anybody who can't blow raspberries.

ALESSIA
I need practice, I get it.

CUT TO:

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

ON THE STAGE

The classic scene of Juliet confessing her feelings for Romeo after their love at first sight from *Romeo and Juliet* is playing on the stage by HIGH SCHOOL PERFORMERS who have huge name tags on their front.

UNDER THE STAGE

THREE JUDGES with remark forms watch with AUDIENCES.

INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Dave (17), not wearing spectacles, in the same Romeo costume with the actor on stage, releases the curtain he has been holding and turns around.

Behind him is an uneasy Alessia (15), shuddering in the Juliet costume, taking deep breaths. They have name tags on their front too.

Some other HIGH SCHOOL ROMEOS and JULIETS in the same costumes prepare themselves behind the two. Dave and Alessia are up next.

DAVE
Blow raspberries.

ALESSIA
What?

DAVE
It helps you relax.

ALESSIA
You don't want me to blow raspberries.

DAVE
I do. We're a team. Your performance impacts my remarks too.

So Alessia blows, but it's simply blowing a breath.

DAVE (CONT'D)
No. I said blow raspberries.

Alessia blows again, still just blowing a breath.

DAVE (CONT'D)
Wait.
(cracks up)
Jesus! You are the first person I know who can't blow raspberries!

ALESSIA
Shhhh. I told you.

Alessia is more deflated now. Dave notes it, stops laughing.

DAVE

You shouldn't be nervous. You're
much better than most of the
Juliets here.

The JULIET right behind Alessia, blonde Irish descent, chips
in.

IRISH JULIET

How is she better than most of us?
She's not even a blonde.

Dave wheels around and glares at her.

DAVE

Excuse me. Have you even read the
original play? There's no specific
description of her hair color. And
you're not Italian. Why are you
qualified?

Alessia pulls Dave's arm, indicating him to let it go. The
Irish Juliet rolls her eyes away.

ALESSIA

Come on. She's not even brave
enough to be a straight-up racist.

DAVE

You're right.

ALESSIA

Let's focus on fun stuff.

DAVE

Like?

Alessia comes up with something but debates within.

DAVE (CONT'D)

What?

ALESSIA

Do you--do you still remember the
bet we had?

DAVE

Oh, yeah. If we win, you are going
to confess to your crush.

(elbows Alessia)

Can't wait. But is it really not
Jordan?

ALESSIA
You're like the dumbest person I've
ever met.

DAVE
This is not what Juliet would say
to Romeo.
(chuckles)
We got this, okay? Don't be
nervous.

Alessia gets fascinated by his smile, her impulse increases.

ALESSIA
It's not Jordan. It's actually--

LIONA (O.S.)
Babe!

Dave turns to meet LIONA (16, Caucasian) and her passionate
kiss on the lips.

Winter befalls Alessia, her heart shattered.

Liona's arms wrap Dave's neck for a bit too tight and too
long. He has to kind of untangle her off himself.

DAVE
You can't be here. We're up soon.

LIONA
Just want to say good luck, babe.

DAVE
Thanks.

Alessia tries hard to pretend casual.

ALESSIA
When--when did this happen?

LIONA
Oh hey. Didn't see you here.

Liona's not excited to see Alessia. Dave finds this weird.

DAVE
Liona, she's my partner.

LIONA
I know. Good luck, partner.

This ongoing winter storm gets colder for Alessia.

DAVE

And friend. Why are you--

Liona kisses him again.

LIONA

Don't forget our date tonight!

She jogs off. Dave is bemused and turns to Alessia.

DAVE

Usually she's very sweet.

ALESSIA

It's fine. I'm sure she's cool.

Alessia can hear her heart breaking into pieces.

DAVE

We--we got together last Friday. I wanted to play it cool though. But it doesn't seem like what she wants.

ALESSIA

How much do you like her?

DAVE

Well, she's a nice girl. And she's been, you know, sending me things and everything for a while. Noah said I owe her a chance.

Alessia listens and nods, eyes downcast. When she lifts her head again, it's a smile. Pained, but compellingly beautiful.

ALESSIA

We'll break a leg.

DAVE

Of course we will.

Some vague CHEERS emanate from behind the curtains. Presumably the previous performance is over.

ALESSIA

It's our turn.

She turns toward the stage, giving him her back.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. DINING PATIO, FACEBOOK HQ - DAY

In the box in Alessia's hand, the melted ice cream is all gone. But she still scrapes hard to gather the residue, almost frantically.

She can't get anything up on the spoon. She's frustrated.

INT. RESTAURANT, LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Dave and Hailey sit at a table, their food served. Dave looks pretty laid-back while Hailey looks as if she's on a date, often distracted from eating by observing him.

HAILEY

I'm sure Mrs.Davis would be more than glad to help you out. She loves your book.

DAVE

I'm grateful. But books and movies are different media. Adaptation is like tiptoeing on a thin line. The muscle I've never trained.

HAILEY

I'm sure you'll tiptoe beautifully.

She puts down her fork to sip the wine, attempting to meet eyes with Dave. But he's pretty keen on chewing on his food.

DAVE

I can't say for sure.

HAILEY

So what happens after this job?
(British accent)
Going back to London?

DAVE

Ah, a good question. Sometimes I want to split myself so I get to live in different cities. It's so unfair you're only able to physically be in one place at a time. But I guess so,
(British accent)
going back to London.

Hailey slightly maneuvers forward.

HAILEY

Will you stay if you meet someone?

Dave's fork pauses for a beat before it is put down.

DAVE
Miss García--

Her voice softens when she corrects him.

HAILEY
Hailey.

DAVE
Hailey. I thought this is a dinner
of friendship.

HAILEY
(flirtatious)
What made you think it's not?

STUART (O.S.)
Like you've been completely
ignoring my existence for half an
hour?

REVEAL the full table. Stuart reclines on his seat at the
side, playing with his phone, his dish finished.

Hailey retreats a few inches. Damn, is he always there? Dave
throws an appreciative look at Stuart.

DAVE
Miss García, it's such a compliment
for me. But I'm not ready for any
new commitment yet.

HAILEY
Why not?

DAVE
Well...

STUART
Because his last girlfriend was a
crazy asshole.

DAVE
Stuart!

Stuart shakes his head, then waves for waiter.

WAITER
Yes, sir?

STUART

May I have a look at the dessert menu?

WAITER

Sure. One moment, sir.

Hailey alters her tactics.

HAILEY

How long will you stay here?

DAVE

Till the script is finished, I believe so.

HAILEY

Then you got a good handful of months.

(a beat)

I do have another question, if you don't mind me asking?

Stuart waits impatiently for this conversation to end. The Waiter brings more water and a dessert menu.

DAVE

We're already here. Ask away.

HAILEY

You said you don't want to begin a relationship right away. But what if it was with that woman in your novel?

Stuart hides himself behind the dessert menu.

STUART

(sotto)

Wrong question, lady.

Caught off guard, Dave remains silent for a moment as his eyes stare at Hailey with irritation hidden beneath.

DAVE

Miss García, I bet I have much less romantic experience than an attractive person like you, but I do have a real life, which means my life isn't tied to this one woman who's not even one hundred percent real.

(apologetic)

I'm just fed up with this question.

Hailey takes another sip of her wine, thinking fast.

Stuart waves for the Waiter again.

STUART
I'll have this tiramisu.

WAITER
You got it, sir.

The waiter is about to take away the menu, but it's tugged back by Stuart. He continues to hold up the menu as a shield.

HAILEY
All I'm saying is, I think I may
have an answer for that ice cream
story.

DAVE
And that is?

She smiles victoriously and slides forward, stroking his hand with her finger provocatively.

HAILEY
You have to earn your answer,
Mr.Majewski.

But Dave draws his hand back from her touch.

DAVE
Maybe I'll just figure it out
myself.

To his surprise, Hailey mounts her hand on his again, not giving up.

HAILEY
Don't reach a decision so fast.

Off Hailey's smiley face--

INT. RESTAURANT, SAN FRANCISCO - NIGHT

CLOSE UP on Alessia's agitated face. The restaurant is of the similar design and style with that in the previous scene.

Sitting across from her is Yoon, holding her hand from across the table, grinning.

Their plates are empty. A WAITRESS comes over with a dessert menu.

WAITRESS

Hi. Would you want to check out our dessert menu?

ALESSIA

I'm good. Thanks.

YOON

We'll have a look. What do you want?

ALESSIA

Uhm. I just said I'm good.

YOON

Come on. Pick one.

ALESSIA

I'm not really into sugar today. You can choose yours.

YOON

It'd be weird if it's just me. They have some good desserts.

ALESSIA

I really think I want to pass.

She tries hard to still put on a smile. Even the Waitress can sense she's not comfortable. But Yoon's persistent.

YOON

Babe, it's just a dessert.

WAITRESS

I'll check back on you guys.

The Waitress hurriedly escapes.

ALESSIA

Why do you have to make this hard?

YOON

How is it me making this hard? Ok, let's not do this right now. I have something more important to do.

ALESSIA

(frustrated)

See? You're doing this again. All the time actually. You can't just run away from problems.

YOON

We can save this talk for later.

Yoon stands and suddenly kneels down on one knee. Alessia can't believe what she's seeing.

ALESSIA

The fuck?

But before Alessia can even stop him, Yoon has already taken out a small box from his pocket.

A few CUSTOMERS and WAITERS notice what's going on. A public scenario starts to form.

Yoon opens the box. It's a ring.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

Stop this right now, Yoon. You're embarrassing both of us.

YOON

I have to stick to the plan.

More PEOPLE join the murmurs.

ALESSIA

But we were in a fight, goddamnit. And you never even consulted me on this one!

YOON

I know we've only been dating for seven months, but why would I keep wasting time if I already find the right one?

ALESSIA

(exasperated)

How can you think I'm the right one when we were just having a fight!?

YOON

Alessia Wong, will you marry me?

ALESSIA

(undertone)

I can't believe this...

Now, the onlooking restaurant doesn't really know how to react. Thrilled? Yes, but not quite, in the light of Alessia's reaction. The tension of suspense builds up in the air. Some even take out their phones to record videos.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)
I'm sorry but you don't listen.

The restaurant remains silent and awkward.

YOON
I know this might be too quick. You
can take time to think it over--

ALESSIA
I don't think so--

YOON
You don't have to decide now--

ALESSIA
But I really think we should break
up.

END OF ACT 2

ACT 3**INT. ALESSIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Yoon rummages over Alessia's closet for his belongings in a huff. Some of her clothes fall off and scatter around the floor, but he doesn't care.

A defeated Alessia stands behind him, supporting herself against the wall. Her mouth repeatedly opens and closes. Yoon finishes packing a tote bag, ready to leave.

ALESSIA

Yoon--

He almost rudely cuts her off by dumping all the things he just collected to the floor and flings away the empty bag. He approaches, towering over her.

YOON

I know you're gonna pretend you're sorry. But are you really?

ALESSIA

I am.

YOON

Then why did you have to pick that particular moment to embarrass me like that, hmm?

ALESSIA

I didn't pick it. Yoon, I can't say yes if I don't want to get married.

YOON

So this is my fault.

ALESSIA

That's not what I'm saying.

Yoon proceeds a step closer toward Alessia, threatening.

YOON

Is there a someone else?

Now it's Alessia's turn to get irritated and hurt.

ALESSIA

You think I'm that kind of person?
It's not always for somebody else's
meddling that a relationship
doesn't work.

YOON

Doesn't work? When I naively
thought you were the one for me,
you're whining about "this doesn't
work?"

Alessia closes her eyes, trying hard to contain her rage. But
no, after a second thought, she decides to stand up for
herself.

ALESSIA

Do you remember what I said last
month? You asked me to move in and
I said it was too quick for me.
Then you were like, all right, then
let's just keep the pace steady.
Pretty chill, which was awesome.
But now, one month later, you even
skipped the living together part
and knelt down on your knee and
expected me to say yes. Why do you
have to push everything?

YOON

I allowed you to say no, but I
didn't ask for that huge
embarrassment!

ALESSIA

Of course. Even eating your dessert
alone is an embarrassment. And you
weren't even alone! Can you please
look at what you've done? We've
only been together nine months.

YOON

Some couples get married in one.

This is so ridiculous that Alessia cracks up laughing.

ALESSIA

I don't even know why I dated you
for so long. All you ever care
about is hearing something good
about yourself.

(MORE)

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

Whenever I need you to listen to my doubts and fears, you'd only say those void words like "I'm sorry" and next second all you care about is if I'm on my birth control pills because you don't wanna wear condoms.

(a beat)

I should've broken up with you the first time you insisted without it.

Yoon is too astonished to respond. Alessia begins to clean up the mess on the floor and helps collect Yoon's stuff into the tote bag again.

As she's still working, Yoon snorts and turns away to leave, shutting the door.

Alessia tosses the bag on the floor. Things fly out again. She couldn't care less. She moves to the windows.

Outside her apartment, starry lights exuding from houses on the hills across the street decorate the dark night.

She lets out a long sigh, then draws the curtains close.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. DAVE'S HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

A hand draws the curtains open. Outside, bars and drunk people flank a West Hollywood street.

REVEAL Dave, who swigs from a beer and gazes at the street beneath.

After taking another swig, he puts the beer bottle down upon the table beside him. Picks up his book *Seize the Light* and flips it open to Chapter 8.

From behind Dave, a pair of a woman's hands extends forth and spoons him. It's Hailey in a bathrobe, hair wet. She rests her chin on Dave's back.

Dave flinches and escapes from her arms.

HAILEY

I haven't left the room and you already don't want to touch me?

DAVE

I don't want to give wrong hints. That's all.

Hailey chuckles lightly and forces him to bend his ear to her. Damn, she's sexy.

HAILEY
(sotto)
Not every woman wants something
serious.

INT. ALESSIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Alessia has almost tidied her room from earlier.

While she straightens the comforter, *Seize the Light* drops out from between the sheets. She picks it up from the floor, decides.

She searches around for her phone and finds it on the table. She dials a number.

ALESSIA
Hey, Jen. Do you have the number of
that intern we met in the restroom
today? Walidah. Right. Great. Thank
you.

She hangs up. A text soon comes through from Jennifer - Walidah's number.

Alessia dials this number as she stares at Dave's name on the cover. She opens the book to where she left off, Chapter 8.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)
Hey, Walidah.

INT. DAVE'S HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Next to the window, Dave finishes Chapter 8 and closes the book, eyes wandering about the street where the lights still glitter from the bars. Fainted laughter can be heard.

On the bed, Hailey stretches and then moves her laptop onto the nightstand.

HAILEY
So are you sleepy now?

DAVE
You go ahead.

HAILEY
What happened between you and that
woman?

DAVE

I thought you said you didn't
anything serious.

HAILEY

Can't I ask purely out of
curiosity?

DAVE

Then why don't you tell me what
that ice cream story means first?

HAILEY

'Cause you haven't earned it yet.

DAVE

That's my answer to your question
too.

INT. ALESSIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

A piece of paper scribbled with information is laid on the
desk--

Book signing at 10 AM, June 5th

9601 Wilshire Blvd, Beverly Hills

Alessia stares at it, tries to blow raspberries to calm down
yet keeps failing. She cracks up at herself.

She picks up her phone from the table and navigates on it
fast, finds "Dad" from the list of Recents in Contacts.

She dials it after a short moment of debate. Her face lights
up as the other side goes through.

ALESSIA

Hey Dad, how's it going?
Yeah, I'm good too. Sorry to call
you so late.
No! No emergency. I'm just thinking
about going back home for a few
days tomorrow--
Yeah, sure. Go ahead.

As Alessia listens, her expressions gradually shift from
delighted to upset. She chips in.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

Are you sure you want her to come
back?
No, Dad, Dad! Listen.
(MORE)

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

You don't have to. It was never
your fault.
I was young but I understood just
fine. She left *twice*.
But she had a choice! And she chose
that 13-hour flight across the
ocean, so what do you think?

Feeling the tears in her eyes, she wipes them off before they
become too heavy for her eyelids to bear.

EXT. SHANGHAI - NIGHT

AERIEL SHOT of the Bund and Yangtze River of Shanghai,
glamorous with lights and colors at night.

INT. BAR, SHANGHAI - NIGHT

In a fancy bar, CANDICE WONG (50, Chinese), visually younger
than her age, in a business suit with fine makeup, clearly
distraught, drinks alone at bar top.

In the sense that bar culture is mostly for young
generations, she is older than most of the patrons.

She turns on the screen of her phone to look at the lock
screen wallpaper. An old family photo - Alessia, 11, beams
brightly next to Candice herself, 35. A man's arm is clearly
on her shoulder. But his body's not in the photo.

The screen turns dark. She lights it up to stare at it again.

Two GUYS (30s, Italian) chat in their native language nearby.
GUY 1 notices Candice and gestures for GUY 2 to check her
out. They maneuver closer to Candice and change to English on
purpose.

GUY 1

Take a bet on what she comes here
for?

GUY 2

I vote for affair.

GUY 1

Her or her husband's?

GUY 2

Why not both?

They guffaw, jibber-jabbering in Italian again.

Hearing everything, Candice tucks away her cell to her purse and downs the drink, about to leave. But Guy 1 is one step ahead, blocking her way.

GUY 1
Or, she's here doing some high
class business for people who have
mama issue like my friend over
there.

Not paying him any look, Candice attempts to go around. But Guy 1 presses in uncomfortably close to stop her.

GUY 1 (CONT'D)
How much a night?

Candice raises her eyes to him. Her expression is ambiguous. She turns to the BARTENDER.

CANDICE
(in Mandarin)
Give me whatever you have at hand.

The Bartender gives her a weird look but pours her a glass of alcohol.

Guy 1 believes she's onboard, quite complacent, gestures for Guy 2 to come over. Guy 2 downs his drink and does.

GUY 1
How much for two together?

He touches her neck with his fingertip. She doesn't even flinch. The Bartender slides a drink over. She snatches it over and meets his eyes.

CANDICE
Having issue, huh, mama's boy?
Here's your lesson.

She takes a swig of the drink then splashes it right onto his face. She puts down the glass, strides off.

INT. CANDICE'S OFFICE, SHANGHAI - DAY

Ship HORNS.

Yangtze River and the Bund can be seen outside the ceiling-to-floor windows from a high above angle in a skyscraper. It's foggy.

Candice stands by the windows in her own office of a very streamlined and modern business style.

The company's logo, STUDIO HOMELIT, and a few interior design sketches hang on the walls of her office.

A male voice comes through from the INTERCOM.

NOTE: THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE IS IN MANDARIN WITH SUBTITLES

VOICE (V.O.)

Candice, I got Mrs. Harris through.

Opposite from last night's distraught, Candice looks so energetic that it seems like nothing bad can influence her.

CANDICE

*Finally. Thank God. No, thank you,
Craig.*

She briskly clutches the binder over with files inside on her desk and marches out of the office in high heels.

On her desk next to the computer is her job title, Branch Manager, and the same old photo of herself and Alessia from last night. Again, the man with the arm around her is folded behind.

INT. MEETING ROOM, STUDIO HOMELIT - DAY

Candice enters an empty small meeting room. On the big screen up on the wall is a video call from her New York boss, TIANA HARRIS (54, black).

Candice slumps into an armchair nearby the screen.

CANDICE

The goddamned connection. If I
spent all my wasted time swimming
instead, I would've already crossed
the Pacific. Every time I have
anything to do with New York HQ,
this shit happens.

CUT TO:

INT. TIANA'S HOME, NEW YORK - NIGHT

Tiana's b.g. suggests a cozily designed home. It's night in New York in contrast to morning in Shanghai.

INTERCUT BETWEEN TIANA AND CANDICE

TIANA
I *knew* I should've emailed you
instead of calling in to hear you
bullshitting this crap again.

CANDICE
How are you, Tiana?

TIANA
Better than Manhattan's traffic.
(then)
Have you made up your mind on the
promotion?

Candice swivels her chair to face the windows.

CANDICE
But what's the point if she still
hates me?

TIANA
Look, Candice--

KARAH (O.S.)
Mom, which one's better?

KARAH (21, black, gorgeous) interrupts the conversation as
she models in a red cocktail dress with a yellow one in hand
in front of a mirror.

TIANA
The yellow one. It makes you glow.

KARAH
So I only glow because of this
dress?

TIANA
You glow because you're my baby.

Candice doesn't hide her admiration while watching this.

CANDICE
Karah's a good girl.

Tiana whirls back to Candice.

TIANA
So's Alessia. Can, I understand why
you chose to leave to begin with,
but Alessia was only twelve back
then--

CANDICE

I know. But I've missed those moments forever. She's never going to forgive me.

Tiana pauses for a while before she resumes with a sigh.

TIANA

Karah ran away when she was eleven.

Tiana spins around to see Karah immersed in posing in front of the mirror. Tiana smiles.

Candice doesn't see Tiana's point yet.

TIANA (CONT'D)

I never told you, but Karah had her moment. I didn't take it seriously at first 'cause I thought, well, she was a teenager. That's what they do. But she disappeared three days straight. When we finally found her, she said she would never come home if I married that guy.

CANDICE

The guy before Chad?

TIANA

In fact, two guys before Chad.

CANDICE

You were a player.

TIANA

I still am.

They share a knowing smile.

TIANA (CONT'D)

Well, so I ask Karah why she says so. Guess what? She says she hates me. Says she's afraid I won't be happy with him. And if I'm not happy, I'd abandon her. So she hates me.

Candice starts to sense Tiana's point.

TIANA (CONT'D)

You're guilty about what you did 'cause you love her. Likewise, sometimes kids hate you 'cause they love you.

Candice digests the words.

TIANA (CONT'D)
As for William...I don't know,
girl. It's too complicated for me.
But it's not like you'll meet him
on the streets or something. It's
Los Angeles. Alhambra and Westwood
are like two cities.

Candice chuckles, takes another glimpse of the view outside.

EXT. SHANGHAI - CONTINUOUS

Thick fog on the river lifts.

INT. CANDICE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The door swings open. Candice steps inside and flickers on the light. She locks the door, takes off her heels.

The interior design of the apartment was obviously touched up by some professional hands. It's apparent she lives alone.

She opens the fridge, holds out some leftover noodles, and heats it up in the microwave.

INT. CANDICE'S APARTMENT - LATER

Lounging on the couch, Candice slides photos of her and Alessia back in the days on her phone. TV plays in the background.

She goes to Alessia's number in Contacts, her finger hovering above the name.

Right when she's about to hit "call," an incoming call from somebody else causes the phone to BUZZ - it's from William.

She frowns upon the name.

INT. WONG'S HOUSE, ALHAMBRA - SAME TIME

Contrary to the tidy and stylish interior design of Candice's apartment, this is a gloomily messy house lacking a woman's touch for quite a long time.

An alarm clock stands still upon the small and old-fashioned TV set. It's past 3:30 AM.

On the wall is a framed photo of Wong's family. It's the same photo with Candice's wallpaper on her phone. Only this time, the smiling face of the man who's next to Candice isn't blocked -

William.

On the couch next to the ground lamp is WILLIAM WONG (52, Chinese-American, jaded), whose trembling lips hold a cigarette between as he presses his phone to his ear.

INTER CUT BETWEEN WILLIAM AND CANDICE

Candice tentatively picks up the phone.

NOTE: THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE IS IN MANDARIN WITH SUBTITLES

WILLIAM
Got off work?

CANDICE
Mhmm.

WILLIAM
How are you doing these days?

CANDICE
Not bad.

WILLIAM
Good. That's good--

CANDICE
Let's cut it out. Is it for Ali's birthday?

WILLIAM
Yes. Actually, she just called. She's coming back home for a few days. But not back for visiting me, hehe.

CANDICE
(a beat)
Did she say anything about me?

WILLIAM
Uhm, yes. Yes.

Candice's eyes are downcast.

William can feel her dejection from the silence.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
It'll get better.

CANDICE
Not everything will.

Sorrow creeps up on William.

WILLIAM
It was all my fault--

CANDICE
Stop. We've played the blame game.
(then)
I was about to call her earlier.

Silence.

CANDICE (CONT'D)
What?

William glimpses at the clock on the TV. It reads 3:35 AM.

WILLIAM
Nothing. Just...it's over 3 in the morning here. She may be sleeping.

Candice flinches, takes away the phone from her ear and checks the world clock page--

SHANGHAI at 8:36 PM. SAN FRANCISCO at 3:36 AM.

She is shocked at herself.

CANDICE
We lost contact for long, I even forgot there was the time difference. Let's call it a day.

WILLIAM (V.O.)
Wait--

She hangs up.

INT. WONG'S HOUSE, ALHAMBRA - NIGHT

Hurt, William rises and starts toward the backyard.

INT. CANDICE'S APARTMENT, SHANGHAI - NIGHT

Candice buries her face into her palms, feeling stupid.

She fetches her laptop and begins writing an email to Tiana -

LAPTOP SCREEN

Hey Tia,

I'll consider taking Eric's spot. Thanks.

Candice

END OF ACT 3

ACT 4**EXT. SANTA MONICA BEACH - SUNRISE**

The sun, just up above the horizon, exudes bright beams, warming up the cold early morning.

Waves roll over on the edge of the beach. Foam intensifies, then fades in a blink.

Dave, sitting on the sand, watches the waves and the sun. Dangling in his hand is a notebook with a pen clipped on it.

Inspiration strikes. He scribbles in an insane speed, chasing the inspiration as if it's fireworks, there and then gone in a flash.

Then he suddenly halts, feeling something. He revolves.

A hill, moderate height, captures his attention. A flag pole without any flag stands tall on the hilltop.

Dave squints at the flag pole for a moment to identify it. Then he remembers. Nostalgia floods over him.

He shifts his sitting position, begins to sketch the hill and the flag pole on his notebook.

EXT. I-5, SOMEWHERE IN CALIFORNIA - MORNING

Sunlight shines across the land.

A white Toyota races down on the freeway, passing the sign:

LOS ANGELES 223 MILES.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - MORNING

The white Toyota parks in the gas station.

The convenience store's door opens - Alessia thrusts it with her back as she tries to pry open the ice cream box with a spoon in her mouth.

CLOSE UP on the cup - Strawberry and vanilla with chocolate chips.

She dumps the lid in the trash next to her car, jabs the spoon into the ice cream.

INT. WONG'S RESTAURANT - NIGHT

William works behind a counter in a Chinese restaurant. Most of the tables are vacant. Someone pushes open the front door.

WILLIAM

Welcome--

It's a grinning Alessia.

ALESSIA

Dad!

WILLIAM

(in Mandarin)

Aiyo, my baby girl. How was the drive? Are you tired?

ALESSIA

It was alright.

William leads Alessia to a table.

WILLIAM

We haven't seen each other in about a year, right? I've asked the kitchen to cook your favorite dishes. I'll check on them now.

ALESSIA

Thanks dad.

LATER

William and Alessia enjoy a delicious meal, the whole table occupied.

WILLIAM

So you can't stay any longer?

ALESSIA

Only the weekend. It was already super last minute when I woke my boss up to ask for a leave in the morning. Can't afford to not be there working my ass off on Monday. Oops. Language. I know.

WILLIAM

You always get one step ahead of me.

William chuckles and shakes his head. Alessia jerks her brow proudly, continues to enjoy her breakfast.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

You really take after your mother.

Alessia knows this moment is coming. She lays down her chopsticks on the plate.

ALESSIA

Right, here it comes. So why...
Okay, it's the problem between you
two. I don't want to be involved at
all. All I know is, she abandoned
me--

WILLIAM

She didn't abandon you.

ALESSIA

But I felt abandoned. And that
feeling doesn't go away. Yeah, it
feels...it feels so far away now,
but it's also just still there.

WILLIAM

Ali. You don't know us. I never
told you but--

ALESSIA

No. No, no, no, no, no. Don't tell
me. I don't want to know what
happened to you guys. It doesn't
matter.

WILLIAM

But it does.

ALESSIA

I don't know! Well let's assume,
you ask her to come back. So what?
You know her better than me. She's
not gonna go back. All she ever
cares about is herself.

WILLIAM

It's not like that--

ALESSIA

Okay. Let's stop there. If it's not
like that, then why didn't any of
you say anything before? Why now?
So suddenly? W--what's all this
even all about?

WILLIAM
It's complicated...

ALESSIA
Is something wrong?

WILLIAM
(a beat)
No! Nothing's wrong. I...I miss
her.

Alessia looks down for a moment, then picks up her chopsticks to swallow her breakfast. She has even bigger bites, obsessively filling her mouth too full to shove in anything else.

William quickly holds her hand from across the table.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
(in Mandarin, patient and
tender)
*Ali. Hey. Look at me. Spit the food
out. Here. Look at me. Slowly open
your mouth and let it go.*

Tears well up. Alessia's mouth looks as if it's about to explode. But William's words work.

Alessia spits all the food in her mouth out onto the plate. It's disgusting. She looks terrible.

She bursts into crying and shivers, food residue on her face. William hurries to her side of the booth, grabs some napkin and water to gently take care of her. He holds her in arms, speaking softly as if she's a little kid.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
It's okay. It's okay. Daddy's here.
I'm here.

Alessia's cell BUZZES. She startles, escapes William's arms. It's an alarm - "Time to leave."

ALESSIA
(recovering)
I gotta go.

WILLIAM
You can't drive.

ALESSIA
I'm alright. I'm alright.

She grabs more napkin to wipe herself clean and swigs the water. But she still looks terrible.

WILLIAM

No, you can't drive. I can take
your there. I'll call in sick.

ALESSIA

No! No. Okay, I'll take Uber. You
take my car.

Before William could say anything else, Alessia's already out of the door.

EXT. BOOKSTORE, BEVERLY HILLS - DAY

Alessia stops at the front door of a bookstore where there stands a sign - "*SEIZE THE LIGHT* BOOK SIGNING WITH THE AUTHOR DAVE MAJEWSKI"

She takes a deep breath, tries to blow raspberries. Of course, she fails. But she doesn't care, tries again.

And she succeeds - she can finally blow raspberries. She doesn't believe it herself.

INT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

Passing shelf after shelf, Alessia is stunned at how long and meandering the line is. As she proceeds to the end of it, she spots something across the room and her breath stops.

Dave, sitting behind a desk where his books pile up, greets every READER sweetly. He is damn enchanting.

DAVE

During the short gap of two Readers, Dave moves his neck and shoulders, and catches a glimpse of Alessia's fleeing profile. He halts for a beat, leans his neck to see more...

As another Reader comes forth and blocks his sight. He shakes the crazy thought off and puts on a smile instantaneously.

ALESSIA

She hides behind a shelf, panting, takes a second to regain composure. She stealthily maneuvers to the end of the line again, bringing up the rear.

Reader 1 comes up and lines up after her.

ALESSIA
Come on forward. I'm not in a
hurry.

READER 1
Oh, okay. Thanks.

Reader 1 moves up ahead of her.

LATER - DAVE

Dave is now visually exhausted. But he's professional, still has his manner - signing, beaming, and talking, until there are only very few Readers left in the line.

Stuart emerges, talks with Dave in low voice as a reader, Tessa, enters their sight.

STUART
Mate, we really need to hurry up.
The Hollywood Reporter called
again.

DAVE
I'm working on it.

TESSA
Hi, Dave! I'm a great fan! It's
awesome work!

DAVE
Thank you. Your name?

TESSA
Tessa. Uhm, say, when's your next
book coming out?

Stuart scurries away to communicate with Bookstore Coordinator as Dave signs for Tessa and hands it back to her.

DAVE
Well, it's in my plan, but we'll
have to see what life provides us,
right?

TESSA
Yeah. Well, great talking to you!
And good luck on your Hollywood
deal! I hope you'll get to land as
the screenwriter. I hate to think
them destroying the book.

DAVE

I don't want it to happen either.
Great talking to you too.

TESSA

Well then, have a nice day!

DAVE

You too.

Tessa trots away in muffled squeals.

Dave stretches himself briefly before he lifts his eyes to the last reader in line. He freezes.

It's Alessia. She seizes his book with all her strength.

From afar, still speaking on a call,

STUART

(doesn't see Alessia)
Dave! We really need to go!

But Dave can't hear him at all. She can't hear anything either. They just gaze at each other, as if this is forever.

EXT. HILLTOP - SUNSET

The flag-less flagpole towers over the forest on the hilltop, faces the setting sun, whose edge dips the glittering ocean. Breathtaking.

Alessia leans against the flagpole, eyes melancholic.

RUSTLING of leaves and bushes emanates from behind. She stirs, turns around.

Dave emerges. Their eyes meet.

They glow for each other in the sunset. In silence.

In fate. They just don't know it yet.

LATER

They sit atop the hill while facing the ocean.

ALESSIA

How was the interview with
Hollywood Reporter?

DAVE
Good news is, I survived.

ALESSIA
It's a great book.

DAVE
What do you like the most?

The sun sets lower, painting the sky to be a blended pink and orange touching indigo.

ALESSIA
How you blur the edge of history
and memories, reality and dreams.
Congrats.

DAVE
For what?

ALESSIA
For realizing your teenage dreams
of writing something like htis.

DAVE
(chuckles)
I didn't change, did I? Everything
I wrote is the same.
(then)
Do people change?

ALESSIA
Depends. I can blow raspberries
now.

DAVE
That's some achievement.

They both smile. Alessia's eyes shimmer in the reflection of the sun.

ALESSIA
How's Emma?

Dave looks down to the ground. Heavy topics always come.

DAVE
Not much contact recently.

ALESSIA
It was my fault.

DAVE
You weren't able to stay in London
anyway. What difference does it
make?

They both remain silent for a moment.

ALESSIA
Do you remember the ice cream story
I told you about?

DAVE
You know I remember everything.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. HILLTOP - DAWN

In the b.g. is the golden sunrise. Dave (17) stands under the
flagpole, facing the ocean, smiling. He's beautiful.

ALESSIA (V.O.)
It was never ice cream that I
talked about...

On the other side of the hilltop under a tree where it's much
darker, Alessia (15) is mesmerized. She falls in love.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. HILLTOP - SUNSET

ALESSIA
...It's always been you.

The ocean has eroded half of the sun. Dave turns to her,
stunned. Alessia in his eyes is melting into the orange of
the sky.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)
"And the pain hurts like
miniature drops
penetrating
a piece of delicate cloth
that embraces all over my skin
as if..."

DAVE
"as if the ocean seeps through the
seams and patterns of
my soul."

ALESSIA

You are really a talented writer.

She smiles in nostalgia. Dave debates over something, then decides.

DAVE

I wrote this...when you were with Jasper.

Now it's Alessia's turn to be stunned.

DAVE (CONT'D)

God doesn't seem to like us.
There's never a right time. But
Ali, you are always my best friend.
No matter what happens.

They both beam, both emotional. Her eyes grow damp. He touches her cheek. A sweet moment.

Then Alessia's stomach GROWLS. She groans in embarrassment. Dave laughs.

DAVE (CONT'D)

You might have learned how to blow raspberries but it doesn't seem like you've changed that much.

Alessia shakes her head, laughing lightly.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Hope my old favorite restaurant's still open.

He stands, extends his hand to pull her up. Just when she puts her hand in his palm--

His hand drops. Knees weaken. He falters, falls to the ground, eyes rolling up. SLOW MOTION.

DAVE'S POV - Panic writes over Alessia's face. She squats down to hold his neck. But he's going away. He's falling unconscious.

ALESSIA

Dave? Dave!?

The gentle breeze strokes the dead leaves.

END OF ACT 4

TAG**INT. EXAMINATION ROOM, HOSPITAL - DAY**

CLOSE UP on Alessia's hollow eyes. She looks like a ghost.

DR.TAYLOR (40s) in white coat, wearing a deadly serious look, stares at Alessia, concerned.

DR.TAYLOR

Ma'am?

ALESSIA

I heard you.

A long beat. As if it's taking centuries for her to even move any muscle in her body.

ALESSIA (CONT'D)

Is there any...ANY, possibility that this might be mistakenly diagnosed? He always has a healthy lifestyle, how could he--

DR.TAYLOR

I completely understand the shock you feel right now, but--

ALESSIA

Even at Stage 4, there are still a lot of people who live, right?

DR.TAYLOR

Miraculously, some do indeed, but we always need to prepare for the worst. We recommend taking on a positive attitude to accept different treatment as early as possible...

She can't hear anything anymore.

As Dr.Taylor still talks in the b.g., CLANG!

She springs up and storms out, flipping the chair over.

The chair stays there, off center, off focus.

CUT TO BLACK

END OF PILOT

TEN YEARS LATER

Written by

Brielle Yuke Li

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO STREETS - DAY

A CHRISTMAS CAROL plays in the background. Christmas decorations and the pre-holiday hustle and bustle prevail in the city.

EXT. GEORGE'S SOUVENIR SHOP - DAY

A humble souvenir shop resides quietly at a corner next to a festive neighbor.

A sign stands in front of the shop:

SPECIAL LETTER SERVICE--

WRITE A LETTER TO YOURSELF IN THE FUTURE!

Three months OR three YEARS,

We deliver IN PERSON!

"We deliver IN PERSON" on the sign is clearly newly added.

GEORGE (50s, Chinese-American), hair half grey with deep wrinkles on his forehead, appears older than his age.

He exits the shop with a shoulder bag, picks up the sign and puts it back in the shop, then returns outside with EMMA (18, Chinese-American). She looks cute and flamboyant in her coral floral dress.

George locks the shop.

I/E. GEORGE'S VEHICLE/MARVIN'S HOUSE - DAY

George parks along the curb next to a house, Emma sitting in shotgun, observing the house.

He checks the address on a sheet of paper, then heaves his shoulder bag from the back seat.

He smiles at Emma, nostalgic. She returns his smile, unbuckles and exits the car.

EXT. PORCH, MARVIN'S HOUSE - DAY

George slips out a letter from his shoulder bag as he KNOCKS on the door. Emma peeks inside curiously via a window nearby.

The door opens to MARVIN (50s, Chinese-American), who acts surprised.

MARVIN

George?

INT. MARVIN'S HOUSE - DAY

This is a spacious house emitting warmth and love.

Emma inspects around. George sits at the dining table with the letter lying nearby.

Marvin serves some water as he joins George.

MARVIN

I totally forgot I wrote this to myself three years ago.

GEORGE

(in Mandarin)

This happens to almost everyone when they get their letters.

NOTE: EVERY LINE BELOW IN ITALIC IS IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES.

MARVIN

Wow, it's been three years since Kerry and I moved away.
So you're still delivering these special letters in person, if the patrons live close?

Emma fiddles with a small decorative sculpture.

GEORGE

Now it's actually extended. If it's in the country, we do it in person.

MARVIN

No kidding? If a patron lives in New York, you'd fly over?

GEORGE

A lot of patrons are tourists.

MARVIN

But wouldn't this cost a fortune?

GEORGE

Guess not everything's done for money.

George's eyes track Emma's movements in the room for a moment.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

After Emma came up with this idea, it became a ritual of ours. At first, as you said, we only delivered in person if the patron lives not too far away. But then, I thought why not try the whole country. It's actually not as crazy as you thought--usually, one faraway letter per month.

MARVIN

Respect, man. Can't imagine how much hardship you had to go through for this. But the service is gold; it's fun and romantic. "A letter to yourself in the future." So how's--

KERRY (O.S.)

Hon? Have you seen Bonnie's scrunchies--

From the other side of the living room, KERRY (40s, black) shuffles out, pregnant. Kerry takes a second to register George. It's a good surprise.

KERRY (CONT'D)

George? Oh my, it's been so long. How you doin'?

George trots up to hug her. Emma follows.

GEORGE

Hey, Kerry. I'm good. I didn't know you two are expecting.

KERRY

Well, seems like we're keen on welcoming new things and people into our families.

Kerry and Marvin share a grin. George appreciates the bond between them, reminiscent.

KERRY (CONT'D)

How's Naomi and Emma?

EMMA

I'm awesome!

GEORGE

They're good too.

KERRY

Good.

Awkward silence hangs in the air for a beat.

GEORGE

Uhm, it's great to see you two again. But I guess I better get back to my shop. Merry Christmas.

As he speaks, Emma has already reached the door.

MARVIN

Sure. Let's meet up next time. Merry Christmas.

KERRY

Take care, George! Merry Christmas!

George smiles and waves at them as he exits the house.

EXT. GEORGE'S SOUVENIR SHOP - DAY

Having unlocked the door, George retrieves the standing sign and sets it back up outside. Emma helps.

INT. GEORGE'S SOUVENIR SHOP - DAY

Compact layout. Vintage design. Different sorts of souvenirs relating to San Francisco overflow the shelves.

George enters with Emma in tow.

As Emma fumbles with a souvenir toy on the shelf, George reaches the back of the shop where there is a desk serving as a makeshift cashier counter.

He unloads his shoulder bag, snatches out a thick binder, and flicks it open.

INSERT PAGE--Multiple entries of patrons' info, including Marvin's. Names, home addresses, and phone numbers. Only, other entries except Marvin's are all crossed off.

George picks up a green pen to blot out Marvin's entry, then checks a calendar hanging on the wall nearby. On the calendar, two days later, which is also Christmas Eve, has been circled with a note "Dylon."

He flips through the binder to find Dylon's entry--

MAX DYLAN

12.21.2009 ---> 12.24.2019

4813 8TH AVE NW, SEATTLE, WA 98107

EMMA (O.S.)
Ten years? Wow.

Emma has somehow managed to appear right next to George, peeking at the entries next to his shoulder.

GEORGE
*It's the very first letter I got
for the service. A decade has
passed in a flash.*

George fetches a ladder from a corner and places it against a shelf. He climbs to the top of it to retrieve a box.

EMMA
(proudly)
*All thanks to my smart and creative
mind, Max will receive a special
gift this Christmas Eve.*
(then)
*I just wish mom could be more
supportive of what we do. It's the
only time we get to hang out.*

Back down, George lays the box on the desk, removes the lid, and starts to search for...a yellowed letter, marked with "MAX DYLON" and its address on its cover.

GEORGE
Well, it's not exactly her fault.

EMMA
*Whatever. The service was started
by us, not her. Whether she likes
it or not, we'll have to go to
Seattle for our first patron,
right? Hope he's doing what he
wanted himself do ten years ago.*

George copies Max Dylan's info from his binder onto a slim sheet of paper and then carefully slides the letter into his shoulder bag.

GEORGE
I hope so too.

INT. LIVING ROOM, GEORGE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

George enters as the door closes behind him. The house exudes bleakness due to the lack of decoration.

He flings off the shoulder bag onto the couch, heads to the kitchen.

LATER

Wearing an old girly apron that doesn't match him at all, George pours two bowls of noodle soup from the wok. As he turns off the range hoods, he hears a loud CLAP of shutting a door.

Drenched in the dim light at the doorstep is an exhausted NAOMI (early 40s, Chinese-American), dressed formally in a suit. She kicks off her high heels and rubs her feet, throwing a bunch of mail onto the couch.

George carefully carries the noodle soups to the dining table, then hurries to serve the utensils.

Naomi enters the kitchen to pour some water for herself as George finishes preparing the dinner.

GEORGE

*How was your day? Today was the
last day of work, right?*

Naomi swallows some gulps of water, then shuffles to flop on a dining chair. As George is about to join her at the table--

NAOMI

We're behind on the mortgage.

Naomi picks up the chopsticks and begins eating. George stops in his tracks, then picks up the pace to walk around to the other side of the table. He slowly sits down opposite her.

GEORGE

*I'm aware of that. Don't worry.
We'll make it work.*

NAOMI

We could've just used some of those
dollars you spent on the flight
tickets for the last letter
delivery.

GEORGE

*Oh... Well, I couldn't drive to
Florida--*

NAOMI

You could just mail it.

Naomi's hand pauses in the midair for a beat. She then glances at George's untouched noodle soup and loses heart to pursue the issue.

NAOMI (CONT'D)
Your noodle's getting cold.

George picks up his chopsticks hesitantly but then lays them back down, determined.

GEORGE
I'm driving to Seattle tomorrow.

CLANK. Naomi places the chopsticks on the edge of her bowl.

NAOMI
Right before Christmas? It's not our holiday, but it's still Christmas.

GEORGE
The patron requested it to be--

NAOMI
I'm tired, George. I'm tired of working overtime.

GEORGE
I'll see to the mortgage as soon as I get back--

NAOMI
It still hurts me too!

Naomi's chopsticks are flicked off on the ground as she throws up her hands to cover her face. Her gasps grow louder, painted with a crying tone. George is taken aback.

NAOMI (CONT'D)
It doesn't help, George. Keeping old habits doesn't help. You're only sabotaging yourself.

George squats to pick up the chopsticks, looking up at Naomi.

GEORGE
I'll choose a cheap motel to crash at night.

Naomi scoffs, gazing at her noodle soup, eyes damp.

NAOMI
I think I may need to move out for a while before you face the reality.

She stands, taking the bowl toward the kitchen.

GEORGE
Hon', don't--

NAOMI
This was good. The noodles. I know
you mixed it with peanut butter,
just how I like it.

Sparing one last look at George, Naomi enters the kitchen and out of his sight.

ON THE KITCHEN DOOR--

MATCH CUT TO:

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. LIVING ROOM, GEORGE'S HOUSE - DAY

ON THE SAME KITCHEN DOOR BUT IN DAYLIGHT--

We're in the same house but it's much brighter and full of liveliness. Sunlight fills the room.

TV plays on one side of the living room. The other side suggests an upcoming teenage party. Letter balloons stick to the wall--*HAPPY 18TH BIRTHDAY EMMA!*

George, slightly younger and perkier, reclines on the couch as he rummages for something in a delicate birthday gift box. He pulls out a thick file of letters written in Chinese with photos in between.

Paired with the first letter is an old photo of a newborn baby. George murmurs the content of the letter as he reads--

GEORGE
*Dear Emma, you can't imagine how
happy we were when you finally
arrived in this beautiful world...*

EMMA (V.O.)
Aww. Is that a photo of me?

Startled, George whips around to see Emma giggle behind him. He agitatedly shoves the letters and photos back into the box and clumsily hurls the lid back on.

GEORGE
*You can't cheat like that. See?
This is why I miss a younger you.*

EMMA

You always prefer the past. But I'm growing up. It's irreversible.

(pretentious)

Whatever. I already know what's inside the box anyway.

GEORGE

I'm not taking your bait.

EMMA

Okay. Let's see. Uhm, there are photos and video clips of me when I was young, like super young. Also, there is this letter you guys wrote to me when I was born, and--

GEORGE

How did you...

(realizes)

Naomi, you told her about our letters?!

Naomi sticks her head out from a bedroom, shrugs.

NAOMI

She forced me.

EMMA

I can't believe you guys prepared this gift and waited for 18 years just for this moment...

GEORGE

Not for this moment. You gotta wait 'till night. Aren't you hanging out with some friends later?

EMMA

Dad!

NAOMI (O.S.)

Emma, I found the dress!

GEORGE

Your mom's calling you.

Emma pouts her lips and glares at George, then stomps away.

LATER

George ties the bow on the box, finally done preparing the birthday present. The letter is attached on the top, marked with "FROM MOM & DAD."

NAOMI (O.S.)

George.

Off Naomi's smiley voice, George turns around. Next to her is Emma, wearing a coral floral dress, radiating beauty, confidence, and pure happiness.

EMMA

What do you think?

GEORGE

It's nice. But--

GEORGE (CONT'D)

A little too short.

EMMA

A little too short.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Yep. I knew.

She stamps to the foyer to put on her shoes, a bit upset.

NAOMI

Hon'.

George sighs, stands to walk to Emma at the foyer.

GEORGE

All right, all right. It's your birthday. Do whatever you like.

Emma swings open the door.

EMMA

Well then... Can I bring that letter with me? I really can't wait to read it!

GEORGE

Isn't it lame to read your parents' letter when you're with friends?

Naomi joins them from behind George.

NAOMI

Your dad's being shy about expressing what he feels in front of you.

GEORGE

*Nonsense. She'll have all the
chances in the world to read it
anyway.*

The mother and daughter share a chuckle. Emma checks her phone.

EMMA

Alright. I gotta go. They're waiting for me. Bye.

NAOMI

Be careful on the road.

Emma wheels around and prances away. George watches her leave, eyes filled with love.

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO STREETS - DAY

Emma and FOUR TEENAGE FRIENDS of hers hang out, chatting loudly and laughing. Sunlight renders the scene to be surreal.

Emma checks her phone and quickly texts on it. Teenage Girl #1 flings her arm around Emma's neck to peek at her text.

TEENAGE GIRL #1

(gasps)

I told you not to text Tyler again!

EMMA

He was just wishing me happy birthday.

Teenage Girl #2 chimes in.

TEENAGE GIRL #2

No way! He still likes you?

EMMA

I don't know. I don't think so. We broke up for good this time.

TEENAGE BOY #1

Jeez. Forget him. We'll find you a better one.

EMMA

You guys are so dramatic. I replied because I was just being polite!

TEENAGE BOY #2
But was Tyler just being polite?

Friends crack up. Emma grunts and rolls her eyes.

EMMA
How much further is this karaoke
anyway?

Teenage Boy #1 checks GPS on his phone as the group rounds a corner.

TEENAGE BOY #1
We're almost there. Five more
minutes or so--

He notices the noisy commotion not far away in front of them;
as does Emma and the others.

TEENAGE GIRL #1
The heck?

MANY PEDESTRIANS scream and shout, fleeing away from
something, all toward the group's direction.

BANG! BANG-BANG!

Gunshots. SCREAMS and SHOUTS.

A shocked group starts to understand what's going on. Emma registers a few GANGSTERS with guns pointing at each other. Two of the Gangsters are backing toward them as they fire.

Teenage Boy #2 snatches Emma's wrist to pull her away as other friends pick up their paces to flee among other panicking Pedestrians.

But Emma is one step slower. BANG!

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. STREET - DAY

POLICE SIRENS wail. People MUTTER. A small pool of water on the ground reflects the flashing of red and blue.

Blood slowly streams out from the edge of a drenched dress; it's a coral floral dress.

END FLASHBACK

INT. GEORGE'S VEHICLE - NIGHT

The car SCREECHES to a halt.

George startles awake. His vehicle is only inches away from the truck in his front.

He gradually recovers from his thoughts, realizing it's snowing outside. Then, he hesitantly turns his head sideways to the passenger seat--it's vacant; no sign of Emma.

He exhales a long breath, leaning his weight against the steering wheel, crouching on it.

EMMA (O.S.)
*I really wish I could've read the
letter--*

George whips up to his side--Emma suddenly emerges, staring outside the window. He stares at her; pain grows in his eyes.

GEORGE
*The letters. We wrote you one
letter on your birthday every
single year. We wrote eighteen in
total. You never got to read any
one of them.*

Emma doesn't look at George, simply keeps gazing outside.

EMMA
A snowstorm is coming.

EXT. FREEWAY - NIGHT

George's vehicle speeds on the freeway.

EXT. FREEWAY - NIGHT

George's vehicle gets trapped in the traffic from the growing snowstorm.

INT. GEORGE'S VEHICLE - NIGHT

George presses the heat button repeatedly, then fiddles with the outlets. Nothing works. He strikes the steering wheel in frustration.

He now looks to the passenger side--Emma is in the same coral floral dress as always.

GEORGE
Are you cold?

EMMA
Are you cold?

George is slightly taken aback for a beat, then tugs the winter jacket over from the back seats to throw on himself.

EXT. SEATTLE STREETS - DAY

The snowstorm rages. Wind HOWLS. The day looks so bleak that it feels like night.

George's vehicle maneuvers forward slowly. No other moving cars can be seen.

INT. GEORGE'S VEHICLE - DAY

Pale and exhausted, George tries hard to hold the steering wheel fast as he checks the GPS.

EXT. DRIVEWAY, DYLAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

George's vehicle finally pulls in the driveway of a house.

INT. GEORGE'S VEHICLE - NIGHT

George leans his head forward to check the number on the house, exits the car.

EXT. DRIVEWAY, DYLAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

He wobbles in the storm, forcing his steps forward, reaching the porch.

EXT. PORCH, DYLAN'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

George drags off his hood and KNOCKS on the door, quavering heavily; he looks like a ghost.

A moment later, the door opens. MRS.DYLAN (early 60s) welcomes him.

MRS.DYLAN
Hello. What can I do for you?

George pulls out the letter from his pocket, shuddering.

GEORGE

Hi. I am...I am here for...for Max
Dylon...

He faints.

INT. LIVING ROOM, DYLON'S HOUSE - NIGHT

George rests on the couch close to the fireplace. Everything
in the living room screams Christmas and love.

George startles awake.

MR.DYLON (early 60s), on a chair next to the couch, smiles
amiably to him.

MR.DYLON

It's alright. You feeling better?

George takes a moment to update himself on what's going on.

GEORGE

Yeah.

Mrs.Dylon offers George a bowl of steaming hot soup, before
taking a seat on a stool next to her husband.

MRS.DYLON

Here. Warm yourself up.

George cups the bowl.

GEORGE

Thank you for helping me out. I'm
sorry to interrupt your Christmas
dinner. I couldn't arrive earlier.

MR.DYLON

Never mind. We only have three
people here. We're just about to
start. Do you live around the area?

GEORGE

No. I drove from San Francisco.

MR.DYLON

San Francisco. Wow. Your letter
service sounds like something
remarkable.

GEORGE

Thanks. So how is Max doing?

INT. HALL, DYLON'S HOUSE - LATER

The Dylons introduce George to a wall by the hallway.

MRS.DYLON

He was such a brilliant young man.

MR.DYLON

Architecture and engineering.
Always his favorite since
kindergarten.

Up on the wall, George sees many honor rolls and awards, all in MAX DYLON's name. Photos too, all featuring a grinning young man.

INT. DINING ROOM, DYLON'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The Dylons lead George to the dining room.

MAX DYLON (33) swallows the Christmas meal from his plate. Something is off with him.

MRS.DYLON

Max. Someone's come to visit.

Mrs.Dylon's tone sounds like she's talking to a kid. Max lifts his head and beams, face smeared with gravy. He sucks his fingers and bounces off the chair, rushing into his mother's arms. She cuddles him sweetly.

MAX

(childishly)

Who comes to visit, mommy?

George's eyes gape open, astonished.

INT. LIVING ROOM/DINING ROOM - LATER

George is back on the couch, his eyes still on Mrs.Dylon and Max in the dining area who are enjoying the Christmas dinner.

Mr.Dylon also watches them from the couch, his smile full of joy and love.

GEORGE

I'm sorry.

MR.DYLON

What for?

GEORGE

Uhm...

MR.DYLON

Oh, you mean Max?

GEORGE

Sorry, I didn't mean to offend.

MR.DYLON

No. Not at all. Of course it was hard in the beginning. You have children yourself?

GEORGE

Uhm, y-yeah. I do... I mean I did.

Mr.Dylon can sense the story behind, gently pats on George's shoulder. George smiles in appreciation.

MR.DYLON

It was some accident at work. Got his head hit. Made him eight all over again, and stay there forever.

GEORGE

I'm really sorry.

MR.DYLON

(chuckles)

Man, you need to change that habit of yours. There's nothing to feel sorry about.

GEORGE

I mean, things change. Don't they? Things happen. Nothing stays the same.

MR.DYLON

What I can tell you is, it wasn't easy. But...

(turns to the dining room)

Look at them.

Mrs.Dylon tickles Max in the warm light, their laughter innocent and cheerful.

MR.DYLON (CONT'D)

Things happen. A lot of times not in the way we want. But things pass too. You can't always live in old days. New realities will always overtake your past life.

(MORE)

MR.DYLON (CONT'D)

Their laughing together is my favorite moment of the day. Every day with them is the favorite day of my life. So what else should I ask for when I get this in front of me?

George gazes at this family. Touched. Wondering. Then,

GEORGE

Can I read the letter to him?

LATER

George approaches the dining table with Max's letter. Mr.Dylon joins his wife, kisses her.

GEORGE

I usually just deliver the letter and leave the patrons be. But...this letter feels different.

As George nears, Max gulps down some juice and waves.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Hi, Max. I'm here to read you a letter.

MAX

From whom?

GEORGE

From-from an excellent young man.

George unfolds the yellowed letter.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Dear Max, I am writing this letter as I am appreciating the most glorious days of my life. They are not glorious because tremendous joy fills my chest...

The Dylons hold hands.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

...but because I just realized how to get through the bleakest time of all, which is to always remember you live in the moment.

EMMA'S VOICE GRADUALLY JOINS GEORGE'S.

GEORGE&EMMA (O.S.)
All the pain is in the past. It
doesn't exist for you to wallow in,
but for you to cherish the present.

George hears Emma's voice and wheels around to--

EXT. DOORSTEP, GEORGE'S HOUSE - DAY

On the outside of the doorstep, Emma, in her beautiful coral floral dress, stands in front of George. He's on the other side of the doorstep. Emma is reading the letter out loud.

George holds the doorframe, tearful.

EMMA
I am writing this letter to remind
you of what I am feeling right now,
in case you have forgotten in the
past ten years. Cherish every
present moment in your grip. And
love everyone in your life who
loves you back. If there is no one
out there for you anymore, remember
I will always love you.

Emma puts down the letter and beams at George.

EMMA (CONT'D)
Alright. I gotta go. They're
waiting for me. Bye.

She prances away, HUMMING a lighthearted song.

EXT. DYLAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

George steps off the porch. The snowstorm has stopped.
Snowflakes float down, lit by the lovely wall lantern.

He reaches the driveway and looks sideways.

Emma's HUMMING dies away. Her figure grows ambiguous under
the road lamps as she proceeds on the sidewalk, reeling
around to wave farewell to him at times.

He smiles.

EXT. GEORGE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Naomi heaves a suitcase and a bag from the house down the porch. She slips her phone out from a pocket and checks as she rests to take a breath.

Indistinct CHRISTMAS CAROL emanates from somewhere far away.

Disappointed and heartbroken, she shakes her head and shoves the phone back, brings her luggage toward her car, but stops dead in her tracks.

George stands there, resembling a ghost even more this time.

NAOMI

How are you back so soon?

Without replying, he wobbles up and drags her into his arms.

GEORGE

I miss you. Merry Christmas.

Naomi's grip of her bag loosens. It drops. She returns his hug.

NAOMI

Merry Christmas.

THE END

THE LAST TRAIN TO DEATH VALLEY

Written by

Brielle Yuke Li

EXT. MANHATTAN STREET - DAY

Hot summer dominates the hustle and bustle of Manhattan. T-shirts. Skirts. Shorts. Sweat. Among the crowd, a FEMALE FIGURE (20s to 30s) catches some attention from the people around her.

Her long black hair rustles behind the back of her dark scarlet blazer. Below is her matching pants and low heels of the same color. A huge art portfolio bag is strapped on her shoulder, a duffle bag in her left hand;

Her right hand swings by her side. Its wrist fully wrapped by a bandage. It's clean.

It's ZELDA LIN--now we see her face. 29, Chinese-American, full makeup.

She lumbers toward the entrance to Penn Station in the b.g.

INT. WAITING ROOM, PENN STATION - LATER

What Zelda grips in hand is a ticket from New York to Chicago.

She searches for her gate without looking in front of her.

CLASH--She bumps into a PASSENGER. Her duffle bag knocked to the ground, her ticket torn apart, as the umbrella in the passenger's grip slashes across her hand. He walks away glaring "the fuck" at her.

She squats to pick up her ticket in two pieces, and spots her right wrist--the bandage is now stained by fresh blood streaming out from it.

With her eyes on her wrist, Zelda stands and sees--

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

A naked Zelda in the bathtub filled with water. Misty-eyed.

On either side of the tub sits a bottle of pills and a knife. She takes the bottle first, but pauses for a beat to reconsider. Then she drops the bottle, snatches the knife, and slits her wrist.

Blood gushes out.

END FLASHBACK

INT. WAITING ROOM, PENN STATION - DAY

Zelda stands in the busy waiting room, hypnotized. Blood drips down from the drenched bandage on her right wrist, splattering on the torn ticket of hers.

A COUPLE pauses on their tracks.

HUSBAND

Are you okay?

Snapped back to reality,

ZELDA

I'm fine.

She hurries off.

TITLE CARD: THE LAST TRAIN TO DEATH VALLEY

INT. PLATFORM - DAY

Stopping outside her car, Zelda lights up a cigarette. Eyes closed, she drops her shoulders and lets go a long breath as she savors the smoke.

When she opens her eyes, CONDUCTOR #1 stares at her sternly from a distance.

Caught guilty, Zelda quickly nips off the smoke, dumps it in a trash can nearby, and carries on toward the car with her luggage.

INT. ROOMETTE, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

THUD. The door shuts. Zelda observes about.

It's a roomette with bunk-beds--the upper drop-down bed fixated obliquely to the side, the lower one folded as seats.

Zelda puts down her duffle bag and places the art portfolio bag against the wall.

Sweat heavy on her forehead, she hurls her blazer and top off, finds the AC outlet and feels the cool flow. The blood stain on the bandage and her right forearm has dried out, but she doesn't seem to care.

The train starts slowly. She observes the reversing scenery through the window.

CLACK. The door opens. Startled, Zelda spins around.

ELLEN JIANG, 23, Chinese, enters--in an NYU T-shirt, with a suitcase, a backpack, and a film camera dangling from her neck. She stops dead in her tracks when her eyes fall on Zelda's presence, and the bloodiness around her wrist... Secretly shocked.

They stare at each other for a moment before Zelda realizes her wounded wrist is exposed and withdraws it to behind her back, putting up a hostile demeanor.

ZELDA

You're in the wrong room.

Taken aback, Ellen swiftly peeks at Zelda's wound as she considers.

ELLEN

Well, I'm pretty sure this is Car
5, Room 29.

ZELDA

I bought the whole room for myself.
Shouldn't be anyone else here. Why
don't you read it again?

Zelda jerks her chin to indicate Ellen's ticket in her hand. Ellen has no way but to take a casual glance at it.

ELLEN

Sorry, but my ticket says I stay
here. I'll need a bed to spend the
night. I'm going to Chicago.

Zelda's eyebrow moves as she hears "Chicago". Ellen catches this.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

You going there too?

ZELDA

Transfer there.

Ellen tries to act cool, but is discreetly charged with intention.

ELLEN

What's the final destination?

Zelda's irritated, but decides to shrug this one off.

ZELDA
Death Valley.

Zelda brushes past Ellen and drags open the door to exit.
Ellen frowns upon this, concerned.

INT. HALLWAY, COACH CAR - DAY

Zelda strides past seats and PASSENGERS, chasing the figure
of a CONDUCTOR.

The conductor, JAMAL, per his name tag, (40s, black) is
checking tickets.

ZELDA
'Scuse me?

JAMAL
Yes, Ma'am?

INT. ROOMETTE - DAY

Ellen and Zelda stand on each side of Jamal, who holds both
of their tickets in hands and compares carefully--

Zelda's ticket is in two pieces while Ellen's intact, both of
them boarding at New York, arriving at Chicago.

JAMAL
Yeah... This is strange.

ZELDA
I just want to be alone. I paid for
that.

JAMAL
I'm sure it's our fault, , ma'am.
But I'm afraid all our roomettes
are sold out. I could probably
manage to find a seat for ya, but I
don't think that's what you want.

Zelda sighs in disappointment, then leans her head toward
Ellen without looking straight at her.

ZELDA
I already paid for the entire room.

ELLEN

Well, I paid for my bed too. Isn't it less lonely to have someone to talk to along the trip?

Zelda scoffs, now levels her eyes with Ellen.

ZELDA

Everyone knows loneliness up close, isn't it? But my little friend, talking doesn't help.

ELLEN

What does then?

Slightly taken aback, Zelda tries to hold Ellen's gaze; she looks relentless. Zelda has to break the gaze first.

ZELDA

You don't understand.

ELLEN

Of course I don't. You didn't even tell me.

ZELDA

Understanding means you just get it without being told.

(to Jamal)

Could you still keep an eye for me if there's anything turns up available?

JAMAL

Of course, ma'am. I'll try to figure out how to refund you the money too--

ZELDA

No need for that.

JAMAL

Are you sure, ma'am?

ZELDA

Doesn't make any different to me now.

JAMAL

Well then... Have a great trip, ladies.

ELLEN

Thank you.

Jamal exits and closes the door. Zelda's frustration simmers within. She slumps onto her seat on the left.

Ellen sits back down to her seat on the right, debating over saying something or not as she watches Zelda's bloody wrist. A table stands between them.

Ellen decides.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Do you need someone to look at your
hand? I have something that might
help.

Zelda withdraws her hand to under the table and turns her eyes away to the view outside the window.

ZELDA

Why do you care?

Ellen feels caught, but has managed to play cool; she leans back against the wall. Awkward and defensive silence charged in the air.

Zelda sits on the chair, staring ahead, as her mind wanders off--

MATCH CUT TO:

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. PARK - DAY

A preoccupied Zelda in all black sits straight up on a bench in a quiet park, gazing at her front.

Some idea makes her eyes more focused. She pulls out a notebook from her purse and starts drawing a sketch--

A human figure lies flat at the center of a clock face.

The sketch--

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. ZELDA'S APARTMENT - DAY

--an impressionistic painting on an easel, a more elaborate version of the sketch.

A woman lies at the center of a clock face on the off-white salt flats. Faceless, naked, her long black hair spreading to all directions. Twelve numbers in scarlet on the clock face surround the woman.

Zelda, in earbuds and a cozy T-shirt with paints smeared all over, carefully touches up on the painting before backing up a few steps to size up her work.

Hesitantly gazing at the naked body of the woman, Zelda decides to dip the painting brush into the scarlet color on the palette, and paints a scarlet suit and heels for the naked woman.

Finally, she tosses the paintbrush into a bucket beside the easel, fumbles out a charcoal pencil from her pocket. She rubs its tip to smoothen it, then motions to scribble at the upper right corner of the painting--

THE DEATH OF DEATH VALLEY.

ZELDA LIN.

She takes off the earbuds, noises from neighbors instantly flood into her ears. Fierce fights, glass breaking, loud moans, and squeaky beds.

Zelda totters to the kitchen. This is a compact studio apartment with tiny windows and second-hand furniture, supplies and stuff sprinkled about.

Paintings and photos of her work are up on the wall in order.

ZZ-ZZ. Her phone buzzes somewhere on the ground. She reels around to search for it, and finds it from under sheets of sketches on the couch.

INSERT SCREEN--a call from "BRANDO."

Her phone is covered in scratches. Zelda frowns but picks the call up anyway.

ZELDA

I'm not free tonight. Ask other girls.

BRANDO (V.O.)

I did not call for that. How about the new project?

ZELDA

Brando, I just came back from Flushing--

BRANDO (V.O.)
I know. But you said you've got a sketch? What about it?

ZELDA
I told you about it not because I mean it as a work piece for public eyes.

BRANDO (V.O.)
But I run a gallery.

His innocent tone indicates indifference, which stings Zelda. She scoffs, mostly at herself.

ZELDA
I just wanted to talk to someone.

BRANDO (V.O.)
I know you're going through a hard time, but--

ZELDA
The idea's only for myself. Yes, I have this idea, but just take it as a personal project. You always know I insist art is personal anyway.

BRANDO (V.O.)
Again, do not make the decision so fast. Let me see the sketch first.

As Zelda reels around to look at her painting and considers, a 10-year-old boy JOHNNY exits the bathroom and joins her in the kitchen.

JOHNNY
Can I watch Toy Story now? I think my painting looks pretty good now.

Zelda grins at the sight of him, leans over to ruffle his hair.

ZELDA
Go on.

Johnny bounces off to set up the TV.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
(to her phone)
I'll get back to you later.

She hangs up.

LATER

Zelda and Johnny enjoy delivered Chinese food sitting together on the floor at the tea table.

A part of the living room is messy with easels and tools. A few childish paintings scattered on the carpet.

Johnny struggles with chopsticks as he fights with some stir fried eggplants. The food ruthlessly falls before reaching his mouth.

Zelda helps him clean the mess.

ZELDA

Just use your spoon. It's not a big deal.

JOHNNY

No! I have to master it. I can't get laughed at.

ZELDA

No one's laughing at you.

JOHNNY

I know you are in your mind.

ZELDA

Hmm. Was I that loud?

Zelda chuckles in his whiny stare. She's genuinely happy.

The DOOR BELL RINGS. Zelda gets up to answer it.

It's Mrs.Bennet, still politely smiling but with some unannounced concerns. Slightly surprised, Zelda snaps a glance at her watch.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Oh hi, Mrs.Bennet. I thought you said you'd be coming over later.

MRS.BENNET

Yeah. Well, I'm not entirely sure I want to leave him outside for too long. But again, thank you for taking care of him, Zel.

ZELDA

I like hanging out with him.

MRS.BENNET

Johnny. Let's go.

JOHNNY

Mom. You're too early! It's *Toy Story*!

MRS.BENNET

I know, honey. But we really have to go.

ZELDA

Come on. Listen to your mom.

Zelda returns to help Johnny pack his stuff. The little boy pouts his lips, reluctantly hurling himself up from the floor.

MRS.BENNET

Can I come in?

ZELDA

Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry.

Mrs.Bennet enters the living room and surveys the interior. It's nothing unbearable, but it is mildly messy and outdated which makes her delicate dress and heels not suitable here at all. She spots a photo up on the wall, approaches to inspect more closely.

INSERT PHOTO--a naked woman sits on a counter with her face distorted and her legs wide open, a shoe with ridiculous high heel and a broken stocking covering her groin.

Astonished, Mrs.Bennet spins around to hide the painting behind with discomfort. Zelda notices this.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

That's a pretty famous art performance De Luca did on sex and feminism last year. She's one of my favorites of current times.

MRS.BENNET

Well, I recognized it's her, but I thought she's a painter.

ZELDA

She kind of does everything. A lot of artists work like that. Performance art, painting, photography, installation art, etc. And I think she's spreading her wings to interactive media as well. A smash hit recently.

MRS.BENNET

Oh lord, that is quite informative.
I thought that painting in our
living room speaks more true to her
style. We purchased it from her
gallery in Paris.

ZELDA

Yeah, I remember that one. It was
actually one of her most reserved
pieces.

Zelda assists Johnny with his backpack, but Mrs.Bennet scoots
over to take him herself. A book drops out from the backpack
before it's zipped up, and it accidentally hits Zelda on the
right wrist. She gasps.

MRS.BENNET

What's wrong?

ZELDA

Nothing.

She hurriedly pulls down her sleeve. The action doesn't
escape from Mrs.Bennet's eyes. She squats down to her son.

MRS.BENNET

Honey, would you please wait for me
outside? Mom has something to talk
about with Zelda.

JOHNNY

Okay.

The little boy leaves the room. Zelda can smell Mrs.Bennet's
intention behind this.

ZELDA

I never brought up anything to him
unsuitable for his age. You don't
have to worry about it.

MRS.BENNET

Oh, I'm sure you have never.

(then)

Well, I'm actually curious. What do
performance artists do? Every time
when I come to think of it, I
couldn't really understand. What is
the point of this "art"?

ZELDA

Um, performance art mostly stands out from other art forms for its attribute of being performed by the artist in flesh with physical spectatorship in real time--

MRS.BENNET

Yeah yeah, but some of those presumed artwork looks pretty...you know, hippie. And some even look witchy and creepy. Don't you think so?

ZELDA

Um, I don't, really. And to be honest, I'm a performance artist myself. It's the most realistic as well as the most symbolic art form to my knowledge. And I love this form of art.

MRS.BENNET

Oh. Well... So, what kind of performances do you usually do? Can I...can I search for them online?

ZELDA

I guess so. I did a few that had some coverage.

Awkward silence hangs in the air. In attempt to break it, Zelda bends down to collect the paintings on the carpet.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

He's really talented.

As she hands the paintings over to Mrs.Bennet, Zelda accidentally reveals the bandage on her wrist--it's smeared by blood.

Zelda pulls back her hand in an instant, but Mrs.Bennet has already seen it. They're both astonished.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

It's just a wound.

Mrs.Bennet constrains her mood shift and manages a smile.

MRS.BENNET

I guess that's our cue to leave.

She exits the apartment to join Johnny and they leave.

Zelda watches them at the doorstep for a moment then shuts the door. Fatigued.

INT. BRANDO'S GALLERY - EVENING

With her art portfolio bag strapped across her shoulder, Zelda pushes open the door to a gallery where the few VISITORS left are heading out.

She scans about the gallery, stops and continues on her tracks hesitantly. An amiable security guard, COBB, emerges without her notice.

COBB

Zelda? Hey, haven't seen you in a while. What have you been doing?

ZELDA

Hey, Cobb. I was dealing with some personal issues.

COBB

How was the class with Bennet today?

ZELDA

Well, not as how I expected, but guess that's life.

COBB

Sorry to hear it. Brando's in his office.

ZELDA

Thanks.

Zelda picks up her paces toward the back of the gallery.

OUTSIDE BRANDO'S OFFICE

The label on the office door reads "GALLERY MANAGER."

Right before Zelda knocks on the door, she spots the bandage covering her wrist is revealed. She carefully tucks it further into her sleeve.

Having made sure there's no sign of it anymore, she finally lets go of a sigh and knocks on the door.

END FLASHBACK

INT. ROOMETTE, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

An unlit cigarette dangles from Zelda's lips. She fakes smoking it.

Ellen lounges on her seat with her laptop out. On the screen, the mouse tentatively approaches a corner--a folder named in Chinese (with English subtitles), "Mengmeng."

She hesitates for a moment as she glances at Zelda, then finally decides to click on it.

The folder opens to a bunch of photos, screenshots, and a few files. The mouse chooses one to open.

It's a photo taken of Ellen and MENG MENG, a Chinese girl of the same age as Ellen. They are on the top of the stairs of some tourist attraction site, laughing out loud together.

Ellen beams in nostalgia. A few more similar photos like this slide off. It is apparent they are the best of friends.

What come next are the screenshots of chat history between Ellen and Mengmeng.

Sadness and pain begins to gradually take over joy on Ellen's face as the screenshots go further, and a copy of a police report pops out. Words like "death" and "suicide" can be spotted on the document.

Almost on the verge of tears, Ellen exerts to control her emotions.

Ellen's hand trembles as she clicks to the next photo--a forensic photo of Mengmeng's body lying on her stomach. Her wrist is cruelly slit, smudgy in blood. In the grip of the other hand of hers is a knife.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, Ellen flips shut her laptop, quivering in recovery.

Zelda inspects Ellen for a second, then alters her focus to the scenery outside.

Mostly calmed down, Ellen peeks at Zelda's wound on her wrist--it's very much resembling Mengmeng's slit cut. When Ellen withdraws her gaze from the wound, she realizes that Zelda has caught her doings.

They lock eyes with each other for a moment before Zelda's defense gets the better of Ellen. She retreats.

Zelda tugs out the cigarette dangling from her lips, and snaps it in half, dumping them onto the table.

They roll on until the edge and drop, but Zelda catches them just in time. Her eyes shout that an idea came to her.

Zelda extracts a crushed cigarette box and a lighter from her pocket. She mocks lighting a cigarette clipped between her lips, mocks sucking a mouthful of smoke, and then carefully erects the unlit cigarette on the table.

She repeats doing this for all the five cigarettes left in the box. They keep falling over as the train continues bumping, and she keeps picking them back up.

Ellen watches this, very intrigued. She adjusts the setting of her film camera and holds it up.

ELLEN

Would you pose for me?

Zelda is taken aback. Slightly suspicious, she poses behind the five standing cigarettes as one hand turning on the lighter while the other tapping an invisible cigarette to the fire.

Ellen aims her camera at this and presses the shutter. The flash goes off.

Zelda glances at Ellen and ponders. She bounces up from her seat, takes off her blazer, and wears it in reverse. Buttons up from behind; the back of the blazer on her front.

She takes off her low heels, bends down to stand on her hands with feet up against the wall, and finishes off her performative acts with both of her hands tapping into the heels. She freezes as if a sculpture.

Ellen is fascinated. She lifts her camera to aim at Zelda. The flash goes off again.

Zelda returns to stand on her feet and wear her blazer in the common way, flops onto her chair and coughs. Ellen offers a bottle of water.

ZELDA

It's rare you weren't weirded out.

ELLEN

Weirdness means fun in my lens. Are you an artist?

Zelda glimpses at Ellen, surprised. Tentatively, Zelda takes the offered water and sips it.

ZELDA

A performance artist,
stereotypically an euphemism for
being bizarre.

ELLEN

Performance art is indeed esoteric.
Most people need extra explanations
to it.

ZELDA

Art itself is misinterpretation. No
explanation needed; it's useless.

ELLEN

I remember Abramović said in an
interview that she believes the
interaction with the audience is
part of the performance. Or it
won't have meaning.

ZELDA

It's not rules what the
"grandmother of performance art"
said. And even given this esteem,
she's still regarded as a witch for
those self-righteous snobs. No
point of explaining art to those.

(then)

It's unexpected you've seen that
interview, by the way.

Ellen purses her mouth as accepting the praise, although she
doesn't seem to agree with Zelda's opinion quite much.

ELLEN

Sometimes, caring too much about
what the spectators think could be
exhausting. But...anyway, why are
you visiting Death Valley, if I may
ask?

Zelda pauses for a beat, then continues.

ZELDA

For an art performance, of course.
My life doesn't really have any
other values.

ELLEN

I'm sure it does. You just need to
explore it.

Zelda's not convinced, and appears tired of the speech.

ELLEN (CONT'D)
Any spoiler for the performance?

Zelda studies Ellen from head to toe, then lowers her guard. She rises to reach her art portfolio bag and unzips it. Her water paintings revealed.

ZELDA
I sketched all the performances I want to do as these paintings. This is the one for this trip.

The front work is *The Death of Death Valley*, of her lying on salt flats wearing the scarlet suit at the center of a clock face where numbers of hours are in scarlet. Ellen puts down her camera on the table and approaches the painting, appreciating.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Which will be my last too.

Ellen frowns upon the vocabulary. But Zelda looks very calm and peaceful, even happy.

ELLEN
So you're going to lie down there and...?

ZELDA
And time fades away. Just that. Isn't it boring?

ELLEN
It's not boring. It's... It's strangely romantic. It's like watching yourself from a third eye without being able to change anything. That powerlessness and desperation toward the fading of time somehow make me feel romantic. It's my interpretation.

Zelda's very impressed, even moved.

ZELDA
Time is our measurement of life. The fading of time is the fading of life. An inevitable process.

ELLEN
Which is why I believe we should fully live every moment.

They look at each other for a second, before Ellen breaks the tension.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Well, is there going to be any audience? Media? Even if you didn't seem to like them--

ZELDA

You thought people or media would care about a nameless artist boringly dehydrating in the sun?

(shakes her head)

It's personal. It was actually first conducted in another scenario, but...something interrupted it. Now I'm picking it up in a more proper way.

Ellen notices Zelda's fingers are unconsciously stroking her slit wound; she forms a guess, presses the issue.

ELLEN

Interrupted by what?

Zelda pulls back and hides her wrist once again. To ease the tension, Ellen breaks away from the gaze, and redirects the topic back to the painting.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Um, would you mind if I take a photo of the painting? I really like this.

ZELDA

Are you a professional?

Ellen retrieves her camera and adjusts its settings.

ELLEN

I wish. Or maybe someday I could be one. But now, just an amateur.

She tests the view via aiming at the painting as she backs her steps. Zelda considers for a second, then grabs out a twin lens reflex camera from her bag, very vintage looking.

ZELDA

I usually use this Rolleiflex for the film copy of all my art performances.

The sight of the camera enlightens Ellen's face. She instantly flings off the strap of her own camera and lays it down back on the table.

ELLEN
I've been wanting to have one like this. What's the f-ratio? 4.0?

ZELDA
EmHmm.

ELLEN
ISO of the film?

ZELDA
400.

Ellen's passionate eyes are fixated on the camera, which Zelda appreciates. She extends her hand to offer the camera.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
It's wide-angle, but it may still be too tight around here for the shot. But just do what you can.

Ellen takes the Rolleiflex with both of her hands and studies it scrupulously. She adjusts the settings, puts her eye to the viewfinder and moves around to find a better angle. She also modifies the position of the painting according to the sunlight, and finally secures a shot.

She hands the camera back to Zelda, pretty satisfied.

ELLEN
I hope it was good.

As the girls share a smile, the BUZZING of Zelda's phone cuts in. She tugs it out. It's a text from "BRANDO"--"WHERE ARE YOU!?" Three missed calls from him line up below this text.

Then a new text comes in--"WHAT DOES YOUR MESSAGE MEAN!?"

And another--"DO NOT DO ANYTHING STUPID AGAIN!"

Zelda shoves the phone back to her pocket, quite upset. Ellen notes this.

BRANDO (O.S.)
Not for the general public.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. OFFICE, BRANDO'S GALLERY - DAY

BRANDO (30s, French), with sleek hair in a business suit, steps away from Zelda's painting *The Death of Death Valley* leaning against the wall. He returns to his seat at the desk, fiddling with an unlit cigar. His office is meticulously clean and tidy.

BRANDO

We target at a niche market. Most people refuse to even accept the profoundness of performance art, let alone to comprehend. Why bother even explaining it to them? Maybe next time when you go teaching that rich kid, ask his mother which side she is on.

ZELDA

His name is Johny, not rich kid.

BRANDO

My point is, there definitely are people with taste good enough who can understand and appreciate your art. And for them, you do not need to explain anything. So just focus on creating art that can impress those folks. It is all for exposure and attention, or else art does not have meaning.

Zelda shares her head in disagreement, retrieves her artwork and fits it back into her portfolio bag.

ZELDA

You misunderstood me. I told you, I didn't want this to be for anyone. I never did with any of my art. And how are you even sure those people who claim to understand really do?

BRANDO

Now you are being naive again. If you do not do so, how would you make your art known? Then what is the point? Let us not make the conclusion so fast, shall we? Put the painting back.

Zelda finds it mildly frustrating, but still conforms to what he says. Brando brings himself back on his feet and scrutinizes the painting.

BRANDO (CONT'D)

The fading of life in the fading of time--

ZELDA

With. The fading of life with the fading of time. Time and life merge into one in our dimension.

But Brando doesn't care much about her opinion.

BRANDO

A beautiful flowing movement of physical space and spirit. A linear and irreversible relation... I like it. We could mock this sketch with a camera drone. And maybe a helicopter if you are still keen on using that film camera of yours.

Zelda sighs in exhaustion and disappointment, taking a moment to prepare her words.

ZELDA

Brando, I never really thought of commercializing any of my work.

BRANDO

What are you talking about? This idea could be worth quite a lot.

ZELDA

Everyone has her own coping mechanisms. Smoking, sex, alcohol, drugs, or whatever, you name it. But these substantial things are essentially lame evasions. I have problems but I'm not stupid. I just have no control over it. I'm just powerless, and a coward. But I know smoking and sex are only making me take shit in. They're not cures.

BRANDO

Zelda, you're not fully recovered. You still need to take pills. Are you still taking pills?

ZELDA

Art is the only straw I can grasp in my life where I'm letting myself flow out of me, where I feel that peace.

(MORE)

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Which is why I never wanted any substance to interfere with that, including money.

BRANDO

I know when life hits rock bottom, one needs a method for catharsis.

Brando takes Zelda's right hand and gently strokes the sleeve up along her forearm, revealing her bandaged wrist.

BRANDO (CONT'D)

I understand your pursuit and your trouble. You are very talented and sensitive, and you feel everything delicate in this world. That is very precious for an artist.

His gentleness gradually withers Zelda's aggressiveness.

BRANDO (CONT'D)

This idea of you lying there on the salt flats in Death Valley could really be something. It is worthwhile to spread the message. But it is obviously not practical for a live performance, so we better resort to a photographic collection.

Brando's finger directs Zelda's attention to her own painting. She falls mesmerized.

A content smile creeps up onto his lips as he eyes her profile. Brando softly scoops her into the arms, begins to kiss her neck.

Zelda jumps a little, but not too surprised.

ZELDA

I'm not here for sex.

BRANDO

I know. But you're here.

His voice grows husky and low. She's clearly intrigued, but also fighting against the urge. Constrained pain streams out from her eyes.

ZELDA

Do you like me? Like for real?

BRANDO

Of course I like you. You're my
best artist and my favorite in bed.

He sounds all flirty and hot, only not so emotional. He
kisses her ears and she doesn't avoid, but she doesn't smile
either. He turns her around and holds her face.

BRANDO (CONT'D)

I know that is a special piece for
you, and you are going through
something difficult. Believe me, it
is worth telling to those who
understand. Only making it personal
is wasting your talent.

He smooshes some kisses on her cheeks and lips as he speaks,
almost like a real partner.

BRANDO (CONT'D)

And imagine if the only thing you
love in your life does not reward
you what your talent's worth, how
would your mom make of that?

Without Brando's knowing, Zelda's buttons are pushed. She
wriggles out of his arms and glares at him in the eyes.

ZELDA

What does that mean?

BRANDO

Nothing specific.

Zelda scoffs and backs away from him to retrieve her
portfolio bag to put the painting back inside.

ZELDA

You said you understand me but how
could you? No one understands me.
No one understands anybody. I'm not
a business man at the end of the
day. And you know nothing about my
mom.

BRANDO

Zel, calm down.

ZELDA

But you were right about one thing.
I'm not fully recovered. Actually,

She drops the portfolio bag onto the ground and tears off the
bandage wrapping around her wrist, exposing her slit wound.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

I'm not recovered at all. Tell you what? This Death Valley shit is not only gonna be exclusively personal, but will also be the last performance in my life.

BRANDO

You are not thinking clearly now.

ZELDA

My mom's call didn't drag me back; it was just an interruption. And now I'm going to carry this on.

She picks up her art portfolio bag from the floor and spins around to leave.

BRANDO

Zelda, stop!

Brando strides up to stop her in her tracks, but she marches around and exits the office before he could catch her again.

END FLASHBACK

INT. ROOMETTE - DAY

Zelda absent, Ellen scrolls on her phone. The title could be caught as "How to Talk to People Who Are Suicidal?"

Concern creeps up on Ellen as her eyes lay on the bathroom door.

The sound of the running water is muffled but still audible. Yet no other sound could be heard.

She stands to knock on the door.

ELLEN

Hey. You alright?

INT. BATHROOM, ROOMETTE - SAME TIME

Zelda supports herself against the sink, lost in a trance. Water keeps FLOWING out from the tap.

DUNG-DUNG. Another knock at the door finally snaps Zelda back to reality.

ELLEN (O.S.)
Are you alright? You've been in
there for a while.

ZELDA
Yeah.

INT. ROOMETTE - LATER

SQUEAK. Zelda swings the door open, almost knocking into a concerned Ellen who waits by the door.

Ellen spots Zelda's wrist as her hand still stays against the door--the blood is dry, blotched, and dirty. Her eyes speak her serious concern over this.

Zelda flinches, subconsciously draws her hand to behind her back, but stops doing so halfway.

As Zelda's hand awkwardly hangs in the air, Ellen unzips her bag and takes out a first-aid kit, slips into the bathroom to wash her hands.

ELLEN
At least let me help. Please.

Ellen shows her palm. Zelda resists for a short moment, then relents, warily walks to the sink, and extends her wrist.

Ellen collects a chunk of cotton from the first-aid kit and damps it, carefully cleans the blood stains. Zelda winces, but soon stretches the furrows between her brows as she notes Ellen's attentiveness.

The slit wound appears even more brutal after being cleansed. Shaken by the sight, Ellen buttresses herself by gripping Zelda's arm even tighter. Zelda senses her mood change.

ZELDA
What's wrong? Reminds you of
something?

Ellen shakes her head a little bit too soon and the smile she forces is slightly too wide. Zelda takes this all in.

Ellen continues to attend the wound with a bandage.

ELLEN
I'll help you change it tonight
before bed.

DUNG-DUNG. A knock at the roomette door breaks the tension. Ellen hurries to tie the bandage before answering.

It's the conductor from earlier. He nods to Ellen as a greeting, then turn to Zelda.

JAMAL

Good news, ma'am. We found a vacant room. Would you want to check it out?

This issue has slipped out from both women's minds. Ellen awaits the response anxiously as Zelda hesitates.

JAMAL (CONT'D)

Ma'am?

Zelda feels the fabric of the bandage around her wrist, makes the choice.

ZELDA

I'm good with staying here.

A good surprise and relief to Ellen.

JAMAL

If you're sure--

ZELDA

I'm sure.

JAMAL

Understood. That's settled then.
Have a great trip.

He exits.

Zelda finds her way back to her seat. Ellen joins.

ELLEN

Now I won't wake up from bad dreams to a creepy vacant room all to myself.

ZELDA

I could be a serial killer.

They both crack up chuckling. But Zelda's smile soon cools down.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Or a masochistic pervert. Most people would've escaped for life once they see my bloody arm. It's good to know not everyone's like that.

They meet eyes.

Right then, the train WHIZZES into a tunnel. Darkness.

OVER BLACK

The train keeps RUMBLING, until it rushes back to light.

BACK TO SCENE

Their gaze doesn't break.

ZELDA
I'm Zelda, by the way.

ELLEN
Ellen.

SCREEEECH. The train slowly reaches at a stop.

ZELDA
Fancy some fresh air?

EXT. PLATFORM - SUNSET

Fire whooshes from a lighter. A cigarette taps its head into the fire. Smoke rises.

Zelda deeply breathes in and exhales the smoke slowly, savors the moment. She offers a cigarette to Ellen, who hesitates for a beat before accepting it. Zelda leans forward to light it up.

Ellen tentatively takes a small drag, feels it, then almost coughs her lungs out. Zelda chuckles softly.

ZELDA
Your first time?

ELLEN
Second time.

ZELDA
Let me guess. Alcohol?

ELLEN
Socially.

ZELDA
Weed? Drugs?

ELLEN

No.

ZELDA

Guess yours is healthy then.
Workout. Meditation. What else?
Photography?

ELLEN

I'd say so.

ZELDA

Good. That's healthy.

Ellen frowns. Something sorrowful comes to her.

ELLEN

Food, too.

ZELDA

(chuckles)

That's everybody.

But the weight of her furrows are even heavier. She takes a long drag of her smoke.

Zelda registers the mood swing, yet chooses to keep smoking instead of pursuing the issue.

The sunset-rendered clouds glow pink and orange. Beautiful but poignant.

PASSENGERS board and get off the train. Among them, a GUY (mid 30s) steps off in a hurry to light up his smoke for a release. He notices Zelda.

Zelda registers his suggestive attention. They eye each other through the dancing smoke as something intangible gets exchanged in between. Zelda names the guy DICKIE.

Dickie nears Zelda, remaining enough yards away to not look suspicious but close enough to maintain eye contact.

Ellen smokes slowly, still trying to get used to it. Out of the corner of her eyes, she senses Dickie's intense interest in Zelda. Not liking this, she maneuvers her way to block Zelda from his sight.

Zelda notes what she's doing, impressed. She ashes her smoke, rubs it out on the ground.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Sex to me is the same as
cigarettes.

Zelda nips the cigarette out from Ellen's grip and smokes it herself.

ELLEN

Sorry?

ZELDA

If you worry 'bout that guy Dickie, don't. Just a tool to get my mind off things.

ELLEN

How do you know his name?

ZELDA

I don't. I just call them that. Guys like him probably have their groins and heads swapped. So to me, they're just cigarettes in human flesh.

She stamps the smoke out.

ELLEN

But if you know it's not healthy and want to get out of it--

ZELDA

The problem is, sometimes we don't want to get out of it.

(then)

We better head back before the train starts. I'm hungry.

ELLEN

You go ahead. I got a call to make.

Zelda returns to the train first, Dickie at her heels.

The sunset at skyline is about to be overthrown by night.

Ellen whips out her phone, dials a number with trembling hands.

A few cars away, CONDUCTOR 1 gestures for Ellen's to board.

CONDUCTOR 1

(shouts)

Miss. We are about to get moving!

Ellen shows her palm to show she knows. On her way back to the train, the call comes through.

ELLEN

Hi. Hi, Samantha. I'm Ellen.
Um. Ok. I think my friend might
also be suicidal.
I'm with her on a train, but we're
heading to different destinations.
No, we kind of just met.
(takes mental notes)
Ok. Friends or family. I'll-I'll
try.

INT. KITCHEN CAR - DUSK/NIGHT

The GRUMBLING train powers forward.

Zelda sits with one of her legs curled up on the bench and her fingers tapping her knee. A menu sits in front of her on the table but her eyes are fixated on the end of the hallway.

Ellen emerges. Zelda lets out a sigh of relief as Ellen joins her.

ZELDA

Thought you missed the train.

Zelda slides the menu on the table to Ellen as her stomach growls. She chuckles.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Lost most of my appetite last year
after some Prozac. Quite weird that
I'm hungry now.

ELLEN

What's that?

ZELDA

Prozac? Antidepressants.

Before Ellen could inquire,

GLORIA (V.O.)

Verónica...

GLORIA, a Hispanic lady in her late 60s, shuffles toward their table, head bobbing up and down, murmuring something indistinctive, until her eyes land on Zelda from steps away.

GLORIA

Verónica, mi bebé! Here you are!

Gloria walks up from behind Ellen's bench, directly toward Zelda; she even forces her way to slip into the same seat.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
You hungry, baby? That's a good sign. Ahh, and look at your hair. I miss your beautiful hair.

As Gloria strokes Zelda's hair with love, both Zelda and Ellen are completely dumbfounded.

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| ZELDA | ELLEN |
| What the hell is happening? | Do you know her? |

ZELDA (CONT'D)
No. I have no idea-- Ma'am, you
mistook me for someone else.

GLORIA
What nonsense are you talking
about? You're my baby Verónica.

Out of the blue, Gloria grips Zelda by the shoulders, kisses her hard on the cheek. Zelda jumps as if having an electric shock.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Have you heard from your brothers?
Iván said he's coming to visit you
after that meeting.

ZELDA
Ma'am, if you're talking to me, I'm
not Verónica. I'm Zelda.

But Gloria seems to be wholly immersed in her own world, shutting down her ears to anything said elsewhere.

GLORIA
The meeting? Some hi-tech stuff.
Promising business.

Drowning in nonsense, Zelda forces herself into Gloria's world, her hands on the shoulders and eyes on the same level.

ZELDA
No. Ma'am. Look at me. I'm not your
daughter.

Gloria looks at her.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
And I'm Asian.

They stare at each other for a short moment, then--

GLORIA

How could you forget that? Aunt
Lóla died of the same cancer.

Zelda throws up her hands, shaking her head to Ellen. She
tugs out a cigarette from her pocket, ready to put it into
her mouth. But Gloria pats it out from her grip.

ZELDA

The fuck?

GLORIA

How could you harm yourself like
this? Did you forget what the
doctors said?

Gloria breaks the smoke into two, cruelly squashes each part
in her palm.

ZELDA

Great. You wanna talk some sense
into her?

Hugely intrigued, Ellen leans forward.

ELLEN

Hi. Ma'am, I'm Ellen. Me and, um,
Verónica travel together. What's
your name?

ZELDA

(whispers)

Why are you feeding into her
delusions?

GLORIA

Ah, Verónica's friend? Then you're
my daughter too. Call me Gloria.

(gasps)

Oh my, look at this adorable ring!

Gloria reaches Ellen's right hand and gently touches a golden
turtle ring on her forefinger.

ELLEN

Thank you. It's a gift from my best
friend.

GLORIA

What a blessing this ring is. Your
friend has good taste.

ELLEN

Yeah, her taste was always good.

GLORIA
Was? What happened?

ELLEN
It was complicated.

GLORIA
Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Ellen puts up a very mild smile. The same sort of sorrow creeps up on her face again.

Zelda appears absent-minded as she tears apart the broken cigarette into smaller pieces, but she's aware of Ellen's sudden change in mood.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Where are you going, love?

ELLEN
I'm heading to Chicago. You? Do you travel alone?

GLORIA
Ha! I'm going to Los Angeles to pick up her heartless brother Rafael who's finally willing to come back from Spain to visit her.

ELLEN
Oh, then I guess we all transfer at Chicago. Maybe you two will even take the same next train.

ZELDA
I don't think so.
(mutters)
Or hope so.

GLORIA
Of course we take the same next train.

She plucks out two tickets from her back pocket, unfolds them, and places the second one on top.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
See? This is our train for tomorrow. 3:45 PM. Chicago to Los Angeles.

Zelda takes a glance, jerks her brow in surprise.

ZELDA
You're right. We're really going to
take the same train--

GLORIA
Aah!

Something occurs to Gloria, who scoops up Zelda's face and
stares at her deeply.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Have you had your pills, baby?

Zelda is caught off guard.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. KITCHEN, LIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

JINGWEN (V.O.)
Have you had your pills, baby?

CLOSE UP on Zelda. Preoccupied, facing an open fridge.

JINGWEN ZHU, Zelda's mother, (50s, elegant, tender), next to
the stove with a spatula in hand, questions Zelda with worry.

JINGWEN
Zel?

Her calling snaps Zelda out from her pensiveness.

JINGWEN (CONT'D)
Have you had your pills?

Avoiding her mother's investigative stare, Zelda lightly
jerks her head as a nod, then quickly starts fishing out a
soda from the fridge.

ZELDA
Yeah.

JINGWEN
Did you really? Are you on a new
bottle now? I remember you're
supposed to get a new prescription
this month--

Jingwen stops halfway as she notices Zelda's not listening.

She absent-mindedly slides her right sleeve up her wrist--
intact, no slit wound yet.

She watches the movement of her vessels as she clenches her fist with the ice cube gripped in hand. Water streams along her vessel, drips down from her wrist, reminiscent blood.

Jingwen looks at her daughter, worried, and also worn-out. Zelda sniffs the air.

ZELDA

Mom. The dish's going to burn.

JINGWEN

Ai-yo.

Jingwen whips around to stir fry the dish in the wok, then turns off the fire and puts down the spatula. She walks up to Zelda to take her hand.

Zelda hastily throws the ice cube to the sink and wipes her hand on her pants. Jingwen clutches her hand tightly to her heart.

JINGWEN (CONT'D)

Don't do this anymore. Don't punish yourself for other people.

ZELDA

Mom, it was just an ice cube.

JINGWEN

You know how anti-depressants are not like other medicine. You can't just pick up whenever you want. It'd be hundreds of times less effective.

ZELDA

Mom, I'm taking it--

JINGWEN

How are you doing? Really?

Jingwen stares hard at her daughter, slightly shivering, trying her best to hold the emotions back.

ZELDA

I'm good. Really. You know, as usual. Art performances and painting classes. What else can I do?

JINGWEN

No. I mean the depression. The pills. What's going on with that?

ZELDA

Mom, please, there's nothing to worry about--

JINGWEN

How can I not worry? You're my baby.

(grows bitter)

You didn't even reply to my text.

ZELDA

Which text?

Jingwen pulls out the chat window on her phone and shows it to Zelda. After a long conversation exchanged in between them, Jingwen's last text reads, "Mom love you, baby."

ZELDA (CONT'D)

I probably just forgot to reply.
You know I love you.

JINGWEN

How can I know if you don't say it?
You never say anything. How can I not worry?

Emotions breach Jingwen, her tears flow out. Zelda hugs her.

ZELDA

Mom, I'm sorry that I'm not an engineer or doctor, that I have to put this burden on you.

JINGWEN

It's not what I meant. I don't care about those things. I just want you to live happy and secure. But...

She suddenly starts to pant and has to press her heart as her body falls weak against the fridge. Zelda almost panics, hurries to hold Jingwen up.

ZELDA

It hit again? You wanna sit down?

Jingwen gently shakes her head. Her breaths gradually recover.

JINGWEN

It's better now.

ZELDA

Are you really? Do we need to call Dr.Sung?

JINGWEN

No. Really. I'm okay now.

(then)

Now you know how I felt earlier.

Jingwen whines in a bitter little kid's manner. Zelda smiles.

ZELDA

You're right. Now I know. Mom, I am happy. Okay? I'm really happy whenever I hang out with you. Don't you remember how I told you my friend literally thought we were best friends? Those pills made my head hurt but I'll try to take them as prescribed and not let you worry. But you gotta promise me too, don't let me worry either.

Jingwen nods in appreciation. Zelda hugs her mom again and gently pats her on the back.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Life will get better, I promise.

END FLASHBACK

INT. KITCHEN CAR - NIGHT

Zelda mixes the salad in front of her with a fork absent-mindedly. Whenever Gloria nudges her while telling anecdotes, Zelda responds with a forced smile.

GLORIA (V.O.)

...and then she fell over into the mud pond with the dress still tangled up around her feet! Oh my poor little Verónica. She climbed up from the pond before we could reach her, and dared us not to laugh at her. It was the funniest!

Ellen laughs heartily at the anecdote with a half-eaten burger in her hands as Gloria enjoys her soup. She pats Zelda on the shoulder, nostalgic and with love.

GLORIA

You always made me laugh, baby.

Gazing at Gloria's tenderness, Zelda's eyes grow red.

ZELDA

Are you feeling alright?

Ellen detects Zelda's shift in attitude. Her light-hearted mood dissipates.

GLORIA

I'm feeling amazing. Why do you
ask, baby?
(gasps)
Did the doctor tell you anything I
need to be concerned?

ZELDA

No. Nothing to worry about.
(then, breaking)
It was all my fault...

GLORIA

What are you talking about, baby?
The doctor said it was nobody's
fault. Things happen.

Gloria drags Zelda over and kisses on her cheek again. Zelda cracks up chuckling with tears in eyes.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

(to Ellen)
Oh, love, would you take a photo of
us? She never liked to be in front
of a camera. But now look at her.
Isn't she beautiful?
(to Zelda)
Now you don't mind, do you?

ZELDA

I didn't know why I minded before,
but, no, I don't mind it now.

ELLEN

I'm glad to help.

During the preparation of her camera, Ellen thinks of something. She takes a quick moment to ponder.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Um, Zelda, can I use your phone to
take the photo too? I think Gloria
would want to see it right away,
yeah?

GLORIA

Oh, I want to see it right away.
Yes. Then she'll get to keep this
photo.

ZELDA
I'll keep the photo.

Zelda hands her phone over to Ellen. Gloria almost drags her into a hug from the side, grinning widely.

ELLEN
Um. And can I have the password? Or
you'd like to type it yourself?

Ellen says so, but still holds onto the phone. Zelda doesn't suspect anything.

ZELDA
It's 2-2-0-7.

As Zelda hunches her back to stay on the same level with Gloria to stay ready for the photo, Ellen secretly repeats the password under the breath as she types it in. The phone unlocks, as she wished. She taps on the camera icon.

ELLEN
Alright. Ready? One, two, three.
One more. One, two, three. Great!

Gloria extends her hand to the phone eagerly to have a look. Ellen shows the photo.

GLORIA
You look pretty good, baby.

ZELDA
You too...mama.

As they taste this moment, Dickie, the man from earlier, enters the kitchen car, who apparently has been searching for Zelda.

He secures a seat where he can easily communicate with her with his eyes. Zelda acknowledges his presence and intention.

A WAITER walks up to him with a cup of water and a menu.

WAITER
You can call me when you're ready
to order, sir.

Dickie nods as a thank you. The Waiter rotates to serve other PASSENGERS.

Dickie gulps down the water with his eyes not leaving Zelda by an inch. She spares some meaningful looks to him as well.

Their exchange is sensed by Ellen, who doesn't like this message.

Dickie puts down the water with a thud, pretentiously rises and beckons to Zelda. He exits the kitchen car.

Zelda debates for one moment before reaching a decision.

ZELDA
Gloria, I need to get out.

GLORIA
You haven't finished your meal.

ELLEN
Zelda, don't.

Defense up, Zelda frowns upon Ellen's intrusion.

ZELDA
I don't think you should tell me
what to do or not.

She shoots up, ready to leave, but Gloria refuses to move. An anxious Ellen slips out from her seat in attempt to block her path.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Gloria, please.

GLORIA
No. I don't permit you from going
anywhere. The doctor said it's
harmful.

ZELDA
There's no doctor here.

Gloria whips away from Zelda and whines, reminiscent a child.

GLORIA
I'm not making the mistake of
letting my baby leave me again.

Zelda resigns, steps up onto the bench, raises herself to the top of it, maneuvers along its edge and then jumps off at the outside of the bench.

A few Passengers at other tables share looks, silently addressing the weirdness.

But she doesn't give a damn, strides off like a boss.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Verónica!

Concern writes on Gloria's face. She supports herself up on her feet, following after.

Ellen springs up at Gloria's heels, but her momentum is cut off when she notes Zelda's phone left on the table. She picks it up.

The screen automatically lights up. Multiples missed calls and texts from "Brando" list down on the screen as notifications.

Ellen scans around. Nobody notices her.

So she slides up on the screen to the keypad page, types down the password. 2-2-0-7. It unlocks. A sigh of relief.

INT. AMTRAK HALLWAY - NIGHT

Zelda takes a deep breath before taking a step toward Dickie who waits at the end of the hallway and simpers at her.

GLORIA (O.S.)
Verónica!

Gloria emerges at the other end of the hallway, flustered, exerting herself to catch up with Zelda.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
What are you doing? How could you
abandon your mama like that, huh?
How could you do that to me again?

ZELDA
I'll come back to you later.

GLORIA
No! Baby, please, stay with mama.
Just stay this time. I can't lose
you again.

Gloria speeds up toward Zelda, but Zelda turns around and resumes her pace. Gloria's losing her.

One of the doors swings open, a TEENAGE BOY enters the hallway out of the blue, almost knocking Gloria over. Gloria gasps.

Zelda hears it and spins around to see Gloria on the ground, fumbling to rise. Zelda dashes back to check upon Gloria.

ZELDA
Are you alright?
(to Teenage Boy)
Did you knock into her?

Her tone kind of frightens the Boy.

GLORIA
I'm alright, baby. Don't blame him.
He didn't see me.

ZELDA
You hurt anywhere?

GLORIA
I feel fine, baby. Don't worry.

ZELDA
Let's help you up.

She and the Teenage Boy assist Gloria to be back on her feet.

TEENAGE BOY
I'm sorry. Can I go now?

GLORIA
It's okay. Poor kid. Go do your
thing.

He scurries off.

Zelda whirls a look at Dickie. The loss of interest distances him from her. He leaves.

She lets this disappointment sink. But Gloria interrupts her thoughts, turning Zelda's face to her.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
You find yourself a better man than
that *escoria*. My baby deserves
better.

Zelda's touched, but also finds Gloria's childish tone cute.

ZELDA
Okay. Let's get you back to rest.

INT. ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Ellen carefully pushes the door open. It CREAKS. No one inside. She rapidly shuts it close and makes sure to put the door on the latch. But wait, she considers for a beat. Then unlatches it.

She hurries out both of Zelda's phone and hers, lays them on the table, starts to copy Brando's number onto hers, then dials this number with her own phone afterward.

While waiting on the line, she approaches Zelda's duffle bag, wanting to zip it open but hesitates for a second, then resumes.

She unzips Zelda's bag with determination and begins seeking something as she stays vigilant to any motion exterior, with her phone still pressed to her ear.

INT. BRANDO'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Brando flops into the couch with a towel around his waist, his hair wet. Before he flips open his laptop, his phone BUZZES. He snatches it over and picks up.

BRANDO

Hello?

INT. ROOMETTE - SAME TIME

ELLEN

Hi. Is this Brando? My name's Ellen.

INT. GLORIA'S ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Gloria has fallen asleep, safe and sound with Zelda's hand in hers.

Zelda gazes at her, nostalgic. She gently draws her hand out from Gloria's grip, then holds Gloria's for a brief moment.

She turns to MARY (40s, composed), on the chair reading a book, who shares the roomette with Gloria.

ZELDA

What did Verónica do to her?

MARY

(in skepticism)

The hell should I know. I don't even know a Verónica.

ZELDA

You're not traveling with her?

MARY

Am I supposed to?

Zelda finds the vibe she gives off rather irritating, but she holds off her grudges.

ZELDA

Did you notice anyone who might be her company? She shouldn't be traveling on her own at her age.

Mary lifts her eyebrow in impatient indifference.

MARY

She got you now.

She goes straight back to reading without sparing another look.

ZELDA

Why are you being rude to me?

Mary puts down her book and locks eyes with Zelda.

MARY

I'm not. It's either you thinking too highly of yourself or you don't have self-respect. But you're saying it like it's my fault you're being over-sensitive.

ZELDA

(scoffs)

Fucker.

Zelda storms out.

Frustrated, Mary flips the book close and throws it on the table.

INSERT BOOK COVER--HOW TO SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE?

INT. ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Ellen squashes the phone between her chin and her shoulder as she keeps fishing for something in Zelda's bag.

ELLEN

So that wound on her wrist does come from an earlier suicide attempt?

INTERCUT BETWEEN ELLEN AND BRANDO

BRANDO

I thought she was already recovering. No wonder she insisted that Death Valley performance to be personal. Them artists are always self-righteous. But I will not let her be stupid this time.

JANE, early 30s, lounges on the other side of the couch with a T-shirt and underwear, hair dripping water, eats an apple while flipping through a magazine. She doesn't care about Brando's call at all.

ELLEN

I don't think she's being self-righteous, but... Anyway, how about the plan I told earlier? Wait, I think I found it.

Ellen extracts two pieces of paper from an inner pocket of Zelda's bag, fumbling to unfold them.

They are Zelda's train tickets. The one from New York to Chicago torn in pieces with blood stains, the other from Chicago to Las Vegas stays intact.

She briskly pockets the ticket to Vegas and zips the bag.

BRANDO (V.O.)

Your plan sounds ambitious, but what if the tickets are all sold out? Have you checked?

Brando retrieves his laptop from the coffee table and turns it open.

ELLEN

I'm going to. I know it sounds unreliable, but now I got her phone. Let's just hope she keeps everything autosaved.

BRANDO

What if I just call her and get her back when she gets to Vegas?

ELLEN

She could be too resistant that way. And I'm supposed to only go to Chicago. She'd be alone from there to Vegas, and you don't want to leave someone suicidal alone to themselves.

(MORE)

ELLEN (CONT'D)

(then)

You'll regret later.

Ellen's tone falls somber; she massages her forehead sitting on the seat.

Brando doesn't notice this at all, only scrolling down on a webpage of flight tickets from New York to Chicago.

BRANDO

I think I can make it work. The day
after tomorrow?

ELLEN

Yes. I'll see to it if I can hold
her back for a day--

The door abruptly swings open. It's Zelda.

Like a bat out of hell, Ellen shoots up sitting straight, striving to remain calm and casual as she crafts a delightful tone.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

So yeah, if anything comes up I'll
update you! Bye!

She hangs up at once with guilt.

INT. BRANDO'S APARTMENT - SAME TIME

Brando hangs up, deep furrows between his brows appear, while Jane enjoys herself humming a light-hearted song.

BRANDO

I think you should go.

JANE

Women need to rest after sex too. I
got ten blocks to walk in heels.

INT. ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Ellen observes Zelda closely, exerting herself to pretend everything's normal.

Luckily, Zelda looks rather concerned and indulgent in her own world, not sensitive to Ellen's anxiety at all.

ZELDA

How could Gloria travel alone?
Especially at her age?

(MORE)

ZELDA (CONT'D)

I doubt if her children know how to take care of an Alzheimer parent.

ELLEN

Really? Hmm, I guess now it makes sense why she always wanders around on herself. Uhm, what about-what about that guy? Dickie?

ZELDA

(cracks)

I'd forget about him if you didn't remind me. I was crazing for a smoke. But nothing happened. Men lost interest so fast, it's pathetic.

(then)

And what happened to Verónica?

She slumps onto her seat, pulls out a cigarette and bites it between her lips, lets go a long sigh.

ELLEN

Uhm, would you mind taking care of my stuff while I deal with something out there?

Zelda nods.

ZELDA

You have quite some business to take care of.

ELLEN

Oh, uhm.

Agitation traps Ellen. She thinks fast. Bingo.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Because this is embarrassing. Uhm, I--I don't want our toilet to...to smell. My stomach doesn't feel so well...

Zelda cracks up laughing. Ellen likes what she sees.

ZELDA

I was just teasing you.

INT. PUBLIC RESTROOM - NIGHT

Ellen locks the door and instantly calls Brando back. It goes to voicemail.

BRANDO (V.O.)
Hey, this is Brando. Leave your
name and number. I will call you
back as soon as possible.

She hangs up impatiently, tugs out a piece of paper from her pocket. It's Zelda's train ticket from Chicago to Las Vegas with her name written on it.

Ellen first takes a photo of the ticket with her phone. Then, after inhaling deeply, she tears it apart and flushes the shreds down the toilet. She stares at the swirling flow, suddenly realizing she forgot something.

She whips out Zelda's iPhone 6 from her pocket, unlocks it, and opens--

The Internet window for Amtrak website. Her finger taps at "Log in" option and the portal pops out.

Her finger gently dips the blank account bar... It's autosaved. She logs in successfully. A smile of relief.

After a few more steps of the process, she reaches another webpage. Her finger hangs above "Cancel." She taps it.

More relaxed now, Ellen comes over to flip the toilet lid down as a seat. She tugs out her own phone as well, starting to operate the two together. She takes her time, carefully checking and comparing.

BANG-BANG. The knock on the door startles her.

ANGRY MAN (O.S.)
Ya drownin' in there or somethin'?
Heard nothin' for a while.

ELLEN
(shouts)
A few more minutes!
(to herself, ew)
Why would someone drown in a public
restroom?

She hurries up with the operation on the phones.

INT. OUTSIDE PUBLIC RESTROOM - LATER

The ANGRY MAN is a huge guy who wears a McDonald T-shirt. Intimidating but also kind of cute.

ELLEN

Sorry. I wasn't drowning by the way. But thanks for asking.

The Angry Man, shaking his head, enters the restroom. Ellen's phone RINGS. She answers it immediately.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Hey, Brando.

INT. AMTRAK HALLWAY - LATER

Having approached her roomette, Ellen stops her paces while still talking with Brando.

ELLEN

Yeah I took care of her tickets too. Both.
You got the train info I just sent you, right?
Yeah 'cause I guess you better start buying it now. There were only a few left. I can't help her if you aren't on board.
Nice. I'll keep you updated.
Thanks.
Yeah, see you soon.

She hangs up. Anxiety builds up. She rests her palm on her heart and takes a deep breath.

INT. ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Ellen opens the door to reveal Zelda gazing at her own painting while sitting on the floor.

Zelda takes a glimpse at her.

ZELDA

Bad news?

Mildly frightened though, Ellen manages to control her thumping heart.

ELLEN

No. Uhm, well, kind of. My, my friend isn't able to pick me up tomorrow. At Chicago. Yeah.

ZELDA

(chuckles)

Thought you were goin' to say you got food poison or something.

ELLEN

Oh, that. No. Luckily.

(a beat)

Uhm, so I guess, we get to hang out more. I mean, you have to wait for a few hours before you board the next train, right?

ZELDA

Yeah. The layover's like three hours or something.

Zelda takes another look at Ellen. Nothing much. Just another look. Which reminds Ellen to return Zelda's phone.

ELLEN

Oh. You forgot this in the kitchen car. I kept it for you.

ZELDA

I was wondering. Thanks.

Zelda receives it without much suspicion, back to pondering over her painting right after. Ellen quietly releases a few jittery breathes she's been holding up.

Zelda gently strokes the painting, feeling it.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Did you have anorexia?

ELLEN

No. Why do you ask?

ZELDA

When we were talking about coping mechanisms, you mentioned food, and it seemed like you have more stories to tell.

ELLEN

Oh...Uhm, yeah. I mean, more stories, yes; but not anexia--

ZELDA

Anorexia.

ELLEN

Anorexia.

They share a chuckle.

ZELDA
It's a complex word.

ELLEN
It is.

Ellen takes a second, sits down on her seat.

ELLEN (CONT'D)
It was not anorexia, it was
bulimia.

ZELDA
How did it start?

ELLEN
It was my best friend actually. Her
name is Mengmeng. She, uhm, she
said she felt lonely and nobody
cared about her... And I've never
got to know why so. I couldn't
understand why then, because I
thought we were always hanging out
and how could she feel so. I didn't
validate her feelings to be
legitimate and then...

ZELDA
Then what?

Ellen shrugs, feeling hard to continue the story.

ELLEN
You know. Life stepped in and...we
drifted. Yeah, we drifted apart.

A beat of silence.

ZELDA
I used to be obsessed with wanting
people to understand my art...and
me. I had the ambition to make
people more empathetic and
understand each other better
through my work. But my, uhm...I
don't know what we are, to tell the
truth.

(MORE)

ZELDA (CONT'D)

But this person, this gallery manager who has been helping me arrange my art performances and some sales of my other random pieces, once told me there are only a small group of people in the world who really vibe with you. All you need to do is to find the group and join them. So I believed him before... I believed him.

Zelda swallows something she finds hard to tell.

ELLEN

Now?

ZELDA

Now...maybe we can never understand each other. Empathy is just another romanticized bubble, destined to break someday.

ELLEN

But don't you think, we should make the effort? To help other people understand us? If we want to be empathized.

ZELDA

If you can, you just can. You don't need to explain art to somebody who understands. Every person is a piece of artwork, in whatever the form you want.

ELLEN

But it's unfair... Because there are people who care. And if a box is opaque and refuses to open itself up, how could the person outside get to know what's hidden within?

ZELDA

Because every box is an isolated world, surrounded by unbreachable water. And there's no bridge in between.

ELLEN

But bridges can be built. And they're built by people.

Zelda lifts her eyes to Ellen; they hold gaze for a while.

ELLEN (CONT'D)
Mengmeng would love your painting.

ZELDA
Thanks.

They share a smile, which is the moment when Ellen notices that pretty golden turtle ring is not on her index finger.

ELLEN
Oh no.

ZELDA
What's wrong?

ELLEN
(in Mandarin)
The ring Mengmeng gave me disappeared.

ZELDA
The ring?

ELLEN
Yeah.

ZELDA
Maybe you lost it in the kitchen car? Or on the platform?

Ellen crouches on the floor and scans about fervently.

ELLEN
No, I still had it on the platform.
Gloria complimented the ring when we were having dinner. It must be after that.
(then)
I don't think it's here.

She dashes to the door.

ZELDA
Do you need a hand?

ELLEN
No, I'll do it myself.

She leaves. Zelda finds her fierce reaction a bit weird.

INT. AMTRAK HALLWAY - LATER

Ellen scurries along the hallway, brushing past a FAMILY OF FOUR, almost busting the Younger Kid over.

ELLEN

I'm sorry! Ah, have you seen a
golden turtle ring somewhere? It's
really important to me.

They shrug and leave as the Mother holds the younger kid closer. Ellen's shoulders drop in frustration.

INT. OUTSIDE PUBLIC RESTROOM - NIGHT

Ellen rushes over to turn the handle. The door's locked. But she refuses to resign, rattling the handle a few more times.

ANGRY MAN (O.S.)

Someone's inside!

So she has to step back and starts searching around the area. Still nothing.

CLIK-CLAK. The door unlocks. It's the same Angry Man from earlier.

ELLEN

Hey. Did you see a ring in there? A
golden turtle ring?

He shakes his head, wobbling away.

Ellen darts in.

INT. PUBLIC RESTROOM - CONTINUOUS

She frantically searches every corner. By the door. Under the sink. Around the trash can and the toilet. But nothing.

She closes her eyes, exerting herself to recall when she lost it. Then, she stares at the toilet. This might be it.

ELLEN

No... No! Fuck!

Her knees weaken. She kneels to the ground.

INT. ROOMETTE - NIGHT

In the dim light, a frustrated Ellen returns to the roomette where Zelda observes the night sky outside the window.

ZELDA
Still no luck?

Ellen shakes her head, dispirited, collapses onto her seat.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
I thought you guys drifted apart.

Ellen lifts her head, not seeing Zelda's point.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
That ring seems quite important to you.

ELLEN
It is.

Zelda's not convinced, but Ellen's vexation holds her back from asking what she wants. Instead, she puts on a smile.

ZELDA
If it could make you feel better,
the night sky is rather amazing
with all the stars right now.

Not really in the mood, Ellen still turns her head toward the window; her face lights up a bit.

EXT. NIGHT SKY

Depressing clouds steadily float away, revealing the soothing and bright moon. More and more glinting stars emerge.

It's breathtaking.

INT. ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Sadness floods over Ellen as moonlight illuminates her face.

ZELDA
What happened between you two?

Ellen just shrugs, clearly uncomfortable to elaborate on this. Then, she wheels around to retrieve her laptop from her bag, finds a video clip after a short while.

ELLEN

This showcase of time lapse
photography was her favorite. She
said she wanted to see a starry
night like this with her own eyes.

(a beat)

I heard Death Valley is somewhere
you can witness equal beauty.

Ellen turns the laptop around, Zelda taps the play button.

SOFT MUSIC streams out as time lapse photography of night
skies play on the screen with stars marking long trails.

Zelda gets entranced, a flash of inspiration occurs to her.

ZELDA

Could you help me get some water?

ELLEN

For what?

INT. ROOMETTE - LATER

The door swings open as Ellen pushes it with her back,
holding a deserted plastic cup filled with water.

Using her art portfolio bag as a makeshift board while
sitting on the floor, Zelda has prepared some tools of a few
brushes, a painting paper on the newly made lower bed, and a
watercolor painter bundle.

ELLEN

Did you plan to paint anything
along the way?

ZELDA

Not really. I didn't plan to spend
the night with somebody, did I?

(then)

I didn't mean it in a bad way.

ELLEN

I didn't plan to meet a real artist
either.

They share a smile.

ZELDA

You wanna climb up there and rest
first? This will take a while.

ELLEN

Hmm, maybe a few more minutes
before I wash myself up.

ZELDA

Fair enough.

Ellen enters the bathroom with a small bag as Zelda begins to damp the dried out paints in the bundle, and mixes some of the colors up.

LATER

On the upper bed, Ellen yawns while texting on her phone.

INSERT SCREEN--The texts between Ellen and Brando are in huge chunks.

She sends out a message, then pokes her head out to below the bed.

A preoccupied Zelda has roughly finished a sketch--

The lower section is a faceless crowd;

The middle is a stage, as high as the crowd, on whose center stands a woman, faceless and naked, a red line on her wrist;

Above the woman floats a swirling universe, blended by both light blue and navy, denoting a mixture of day and night; the golden trails of the gleaming stars marked within the blue, resembling Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*.

ELLEN

Almost there?

ZELDA

Almost. Only I don't have a name.

ELLEN

Yet.

Zelda stands and stretches, releasing a long sigh, scans about the tiny room for a moment, the painting pinches in her hands right where Ellen has a good view. She stealthily takes a photo and sends it off to Brando.

Zelda carefully lays her painting flat on her portfolio bag on the floor, places the painting bundle at one side of the paper near the edge, then puts her phone on the other.

Brando's new text comes through. Ellen takes a swift glimpse of it.

ELLEN (CONT'D)
Are you going to do a performance
based on this sketch?

ZELDA
I've got a last performance.

ELLEN
Well, but kind of like what we said
before, plans could change.

Zelda ponders over her painting.

INT. ROOMETTE - DAY

Zelda's eyes closed. Dazzling sunlight inches toward her eyes on her face. The train rides through a bump on the track and rattles hard. Her eyes flutter open.

Zelda wakes up on the lower bed, her sense slowly getting back to her. Her makeup from yesterday is smeared. She sits up.

The upper bed has been made and put back. Nobody around.

As she wonders, Ellen enters with a takeout box and a set of utensils.

ZELDA
Morning.

ELLEN
Oh hey. Got some breakfast for you.
Well, technically, they're brunch
because we are at noon. But they're
breakfast.

Zelda climbs down the bed, sniffs. It smells good.

ZELDA
Thank you.

She enters the bathroom, leaving the door open.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Zelda washes her hands and splashes some water onto her face. She looks to the mirror. Shit. She forgot to remove the makeup last night. She snatches over some toilet paper to scrub her face.

From outside,

ELLEN

We're almost there. At Chicago.

ZELDA

I'm so done with this nutshell.

ELLEN

Have you...decided? On not making
the Death Valley performance your
last one?

Distracted by removing her leftover makeup, Zelda struggles with the smudgy eyeliner in assistance with a piece of moist toilet paper.

ZELDA

I didn't really think about it.
I'll have to go and see.

ELLEN

Well, but don't you think--

GLORIA (O.S.)

Verónica! Verónica?

They both hear Gloria's exclaim from outside their roomette. Zelda chuckles at it, exits the bathroom with some makeup residue still around her eyes, and opens the door to the hallway.

ZELDA

Yes?

EXT. PLATFORM - DAY

"UNION STATION CHICAGO" stands tall on a direction pole. An Amtrak train waits along the platform.

PASSENGERS file out the train. Ellen exits, burdened with her suitcase and bags. Zelda helps Gloria step off carefully as she herself struggles with her own luggage.

Ellen takes the initiative to serve as the guide, swirls her head around for information and directions, as Zelda unscrews a bottle water for Gloria.

ELLEN

This way.

She starts off, Zelda and Gloria in tow.

As if out of nowhere, Dickie, the guy Zelda almost had random sex with, emerges within Zelda's periphery. He gives her an ominous stare while passing. She is flustered.

But next second, he is nowhere to be found. Zelda shakes it off.

INT. CHICAGO UNION STATION - DAY

In the hollow and towering hall of Chicago Union Station, Gloria excitedly snaps photos of the interior with her phone designated for seniors.

Zelda rests on a bench nearby, looking at Gloria, quite appreciating this moment.

CORNER - SAME TIME

In a corner across the hall, Ellen talks on a call, warily watching Zelda almost as if she's a fugitive.

BENCH - LATER

Having finished her call, Ellen approaches Zelda and Gloria who are in conversation.

ELLEN

Sorry to keep you guys waiting.

GLORIA

No worries, dear.

ZELDA

Something wrong?

ELLEN

No. Just uhm, the friend I was supposed to meet today hasn't come back in town.

ZELDA

You already told me that yesterday.

ELLEN

Oh, yeah, right. I meant she's not coming back tomorrow either. Like, she's not only "not picking me up." Anyway, it's complicated.

Zelda feels a bit confused for Ellen somehow coming off as acting unnatural now, but she doesn't wallow in it.

ZELDA

Okay. So Gloria just said she's hungry. Are you good with some Mexican food?

ELLEN

Sure.

GLORIA

No, baby. Let's have Italian. You always love pasta.

ZELDA

Are you sure?

GLORIA

How can I not be sure? It's one of your favorites. Especially with burrata on the top. Ha! You can pour a whole pan of it into your tiny belly. So of course I'm sure. Let's go eat some Italian pasta!

It almost sounds like a mini prep talk. Zelda finds this adorable.

ZELDA

Let's go eat some Italian pasta.

INT. PASTA RESTAURANT - DAY

GLORIA

How could you not have burrata!?

At the cashier counter, Gloria is pissed, glaring at CASHIER 1, a baby-face 18 year old boy, who looks very awkward and pretty terrified.

CASHIER 1

I'm sorry, ma'am. But we just don't have it.

GLORIA

This is nonsense! You are an Italian place and you tell me you don't have burrata? Burrata is my daughter's favorite.

PATRONS waiting behind them start to get impatient.

ZELDA

Mama, it's fine. I don't want burrata today.

GLORIA
You always want burrata!

ZELDA
I-I had too much last week. So I
want to keep away from it for a
bit. Let's not hold the line.

GLORIA
You sure you don't want burrata?

ZELDA
I'm sure, mama.

Gloria finally concedes, but still throws one last glare at the poor boy Cashier 1 who's about to cry. Zelda gently guides Gloria aside, plucks out some cash from her purse.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
We'll just have two regular middle
size. Keep the change for yourself.
Sorry 'bout that.

She wheels around to apologize to the Patrons behind them.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Sorry.

She then leads Gloria back to their table by the glass wall.

AT THE TABLE

Ellen is enticed in texting on her phone as she holds their seats. Gloria and Zelda join her. She quickly finishes her text and slips the phone to her pocket. Zelda notices.

ZELDA
You don't want anything?

ELLEN
I'm fine. I had a really big
brunch.

ZELDA
'Kay.

INT. WAITING ROOM, CHICAGO UNION STATION - DAY

The three weave through the flowing crowd in the waiting room. Zelda grips a ticket as Gloria follows behind, holding her arm tightly like a koala. Flustered, Ellen shuffles in tow.

Zelda lands them at the end of a line, double-checks the info on the screen above-- "Chicago to Los Angeles." A few CONDUCTORS and GUARDS with POLICE DOGS hang around the gate.

ZELDA
(to Gloria)
This is us. Do you wanna take a seat?

GLORIA
I feel fine, baby.

Zelda notices Ellen stop a few feet out of line.

ZELDA
(to Gloria)
You stay in line.

She walks toward Ellen.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
You alright? You've been tense since we got off the train.

ELLEN
I'm alright. Maybe the brunch upsets my stomach.

ZELDA
'Kay. Well. Thank you. For this.

She shows Ellen her bandaged wound.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Shit. I forgot to change the bandage.

They both crack up a little bit.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
But... Just thanks. I don't know what else to say.

Ellen just nods. Smiles.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Just, next time, don't skim through other people's things without consent.

ELLEN
No. I won't. Uhm, the line's moving. Maybe you should get back.

Ellen acts somewhat eccentric.

ZELDA
You sure you okay?

Ellen nods more affirmatively.

Zelda shrugs, slings her art portfolio bag over her shoulder. "Bye" is already on the tip of her tongue. But eventually there's only a mild smile. She walks back into the line as it starts moving.

Ellen POV. Gloria asks Zelda something inaudibly, then turns to wave goodbye and throws a kiss at her. But Ellen seems more worried than happy.

TICKET CHECK - LATER

Later, Zelda fervently rummages through her duffle bag as her and Gloria approach the gate.

GLORIA
Still can't find it?

ZELDA
No... I remember I put it here. I don't know. Forget it. I got it on my phone.

She struggles to tug her phone out as they reach CONDUCTOR 2 and GUARD 1. The police dog begins sniffing aggressively around their bags.

Gloria extends her ticket to Conductor 1 first as Zelda scrambles to pull out the digital ticket on her phone. Luckily, she finds it just in time.

Conductor 2 takes a glimpse at the screen and nods. Just as they are about to proceed--

CONDUCTOR 2
Wait, let me look at your ticket again.

He comes up to Zelda. She has to show it again.

CONDUCTOR 2 (CONT'D)
Sorry, ma'am. You've got the wrong ticket. That one's for tomorrow.

ZELDA
What do you mean?

She reads her ticket.

CONDUCTOR 2

The train's the same. Same time.
Same stops. But today's June 25th
and yours is 26th. You may have to
come back tomorrow. This is summer.
The train's usually very full. You
may be taking other people's seat.

Zelda stares at him: "Are you fucking kidding me?"

ZELDA

But I bought one ticket from New
York to Vegas and this is what the
website gave me.

CONDUCTOR 2

Sorry, ma'am. I don't know how it
happened. Maybe talk to the ticket
windows and see what they can do.

Zelda is too bewildered to say anything.

GLORIA

We're together. She can come with
me. The price is the same.

Conductor 2 shakes his head.

ZELDA

This is ridiculous.

Passengers behind her grow impatient as the line begins to
swell. Zelda backs away from the line.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

(to Gloria)

I have no idea how the f--

(stops herself)

--how this happened. But you go on
first. You've been good to me...
Mama. Take care of yourself.

GLORIA

What are you talking about, baby?
We're going together.

ZELDA

But I can't.

GLORIA

Then I'll go with you.

ZELDA
No. You go on.

GLORIA
I'm not leaving my Verónica baby
this time!

LATINO PASSENGER BEHIND THEM
Your name's Verónica?

Zelda senses this argument won't settle down so easily as other Passengers are shouting "move your ass" with their eyes. She takes Gloria to the side. The line finally resumes.

ZELDA
You bought the correct ticket. You
should go on. Mama, listen to me.
You go on. Okay? I'll be fine.

GLORIA
No way I'm leaving you!

Both of Gloria's hands climb up Zelda's arm like a koala again. Zelda resigns. She holds Gloria's hand on her arms.

CORNER

Ellen watches this in a corner afar.

Zelda and Gloria head out the waiting room after leaving the line. Ellen briefly texts on her phone and then pockets it.

She lifts her camera, adjusts the setting, takes a shot.

INT. TICKET WINDOW - DAY

Zelda and Gloria bring up the rear of the line at the ticket window. Ellen approaches from behind.

ZELDA
You're still here?

GLORIA
Oh hey, dear. You still around?

ELLEN
Y-yeah. I was, uhm, seeing you off.
So... Something wrong with your
ticket?

GLORIA

That conductor was not a good person. He didn't let Verónica come with me.

ZELDA

He was just doing his job. It's just absurd. Absolutely absurd.

ELLEN

I'm sorry.

ZELDA

Why do you have to apologize?

ELLEN

Oh, I-I'm just--

ZELDA

And mama refused to go without me. So we're here getting her a ticket on the same train tomorrow.

The line moves forward.

ELLEN

Oh okay. Uhm. I can pay for it.

Zelda frowns upon this, feeling strange.

GLORIA

No way! Why would you pay for it?

ELLEN

I mean, if you guys need money for the ticket, I can help. I want to. I, I just guess... I want to help.

ZELDA

You're a college student.

ELLEN

I mean, I make extra money. On campus, you know, taking photos of some events.

(ref her camera)

With this guy.

ZELDA

Thanks but I think we're fine.

Ellen smiles lightly and nods "okay." Not entirely happy.

GLORIA
I have my babies here. I think
they're enough.

Gloria pats the breast pocket of her blouse.

ZELDA
No. I'll take care of it; and next
time don't tell others where you
keep your babies. Everybody has an
agenda you cannot know of.

The PASSENGER in front of them takes her ticket and leaves.
Zelda walks up to CASHIER 2 with the ticket on her phone.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Hi, can we get another ticket in
the same car with this one?

Cashier 2 types on the computer.

CASHIER 2
(from behind the window)
Sorry, the entire car's sold out.

ZELDA
What's the closest then?

CASHIER 2
Three cars away. Do you want it?

Zelda sighs deeply. Hands out the cash.

GLORIA
Where should we go next, baby?

ZELDA
We find a place for you to rest.

EXT. HOLIDAY INN, CHICAGO STREETS - DUSK/NIGHT

The three exit an Uber. The DRIVER helps them unload their
bags.

As the Uber drives off, they shuffle around the Holiday Inn
toward the gate.

At the corner to the gate, a HOMELESS ARTIST (late 20s to
early 30s) crouches against the building wall, playing the
guitar. An open notebook and pen lay beside him. He plays a
bit, then pauses to scribble on the notebook.

He murmurs some lyrics as he plays, then pauses to scribble on the notebook.

Ellen lets go of her suitcase, raises her camera to snap the moment.

Zelda also appreciates this. When she passes him, they lock eyes for a second. He returns to continue his work.

INT. GLORIA'S HOTEL ROOM/HALLWAY - NIGHT

Light flickers on. A compact single room.

Zelda enters and places Gloria's bag on the TV stand. In the BG on the hallway, Ellen waits with their baggages.

Gloria feels the sheets. Content, she splays out onto the bed.

GLORIA

This feels just like the last time
when you had that fever. Terrible!

Zelda draws the curtains and checks around in the room, lights, TV and bathroom.

ZELDA

Don't you need to call anyone?
About arriving one day later?

GLORIA

No need to worry. Your aunt Mariá
will pick us up at the station.

ZELDA

You already called her?

GLORIA

She knows. She knows.

Zelda tests the bathroom light. It works. She turns it off.

ZELDA

Did you call her or not? Do you
have her number? I can help.

No reply from Gloria.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Gloria? Mama?

Zelda returns to the room, only to realize Gloria already snoring. She chuckles, attentively peels off the comforter off the bed and covers Gloria with it.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

(softly)

Hey, let's sleep with the covers on, 'kay? We don't want you to get cold.

Gloria stirs, murmuring something. She gets up sheepishly to rearrange herself between the sheets. Zelda tugs her under the covers, watches her dozing off again.

INT. ZELDA'S HOTEL ROOM - LATER

The girls settle down in their standard room. Ellen unpacks as Zelda slumps into the bed, eyes closed, worn out.

Ellen's phone lights up. She checks it and spares a glance at Zelda, texts a brisk reply, then continues unpacking.

ZELDA

You remember that homeless guy playing the guitar?

ELLEN

Yeah?

ZELDA

When I saw him writing music like that, I felt...envious. This probably sounds like bullshit but I felt happiness when I walked past him. The kind of happiness you could only get when you're at liberty doing something only for yourself, not caring about if someone would get you or not.

Zelda opens her eyes, staring at the ceiling.

ELLEN

Maybe try not to care too much, at least not about people who don't matter.

ZELDA

But sometimes life makes fun of you by telling you that even people who matter can never get it.

(MORE)

ZELDA (CONT'D)

What's funnier is you always believed they were the only ones in the world who do. Have they at least tried? I don't even know.

ELLEN

If I shout in a valley, you would hear my voice, and so you would know my existence. But if you don't do so, the only voice I could hear is my own echoing.

(then)

I think they tried, but it's hard without help from the other side.

They hold gaze for a second, each contemplative, until Zelda whips her head back down on the bed, eyes up at the ceiling.

ZELDA

Maybe it's already a blessing a free spirit like that homeless artist is walking on this world.

(then)

You hungry?

ELLEN

Kind of.

ZELDA

I've been wanting to try Chicago style pizza. You wanna join?

INT. PIZZARIA - NIGHT

A local place, packed and lively. The girls guzzle their super cheesy Chicago-style pizza.

ZELDA

This is gross, but also fun, and good.

Ellen chuckles while mumbling with a mouthful of cheese.

ELLEN

(sounds like gibberish)

Cheese in this one pizza could likely equal the amount I eat in an entire year.

Zelda cracks up laughing, almost choking herself.

ZELDA

Come on, use your camera. Don't waste the chance.

Ellen puts down her unfinished slice, wipes her fingers, and lifts her camera while adjusting the settings.

MONTAGE of Zelda freezing up for different ridiculous but funny poses with the pizza while Ellen recording all of these moments with her camera.

They look just like any other girl friends hanging out together, so purely happy that nothing can bother them, except for a few seconds, guilt and poignance can be spotted on Ellen's face.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY - DAY

Next morning, Ellen and Gloria sit with their luggage as Zelda finishes checking out with a RECEPTIONIST.

RECEPTIONIST

Have a great day!

Zelda heads to Ellen and Gloria. Ellen helps Gloria up.

ELLEN

Zelda, I-I guess I need to find my friend now.

ZELDA

I thought you said she's not gonna be back until tonight?

ELLEN

Yeah. Yeah, I did say that. He just texted me--she just texted me she's on her way.

ZELDA

Okay. So are you coming with us to the station or are you gonna go find her now?

ELLEN

Uh, probably now.

ZELDA

'Kay. Well, I guess, now we really have to say farewell.

ELLEN

I-I guess so.

GLORIA
Have fun with your friend, love.

ELLEN
I will.

Zelda's phone BUZZES. She checks it.

ZELDA
(to Gloria)
Our Uber's here.
(to Ellen)
It's great meeting you, Ellen.

Ellen nods in fluster, acting quite suspicious. Zelda smells this, but has no idea where to go with this.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
I'm sorry you lost the ring your
friend you gave you.

ELLEN
It's great meeting you too.

ZELDA
Well we have to go. Bye.

Just as Zelda and Gloria each start to heave their luggage, POLICE SIRENS wail from afar, until they come to a halt in front of the hotel.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Hope that's not our ride.

EXT. HOLIDAY INN/CHICAGO STREETS - DAY

The three exit the lobby, encounter two police cars and a few POLICE OFFICERS setting up a scene right around the corner.

Zelda and Gloria's Uber arrives, directed by an Officer to pull over further along the street. Uber's trunk pops open.

Ellen helps loading Gloria's luggage as Zelda nears the scene, intrigued to see what happened. Something doesn't feel right.

When she's almost there, the same Officer gestures her to step back and leave.

OFFICER
(intimidating)
Ma'am. Please.

ELLEN

Zelda!

Ellen's voice drags Zelda back. She has to give up and boards the Uber.

INT/EXT. UBER/HOLIDAY INN - CONTINUOUS

Ellen shuts the door for Zelda. They wave goodbye as the Uber pulls out and makes a U-turn.

When they pull onto the main road, Zelda turns her head to the police scene where other Officers disseminate a few ONLOOKERS, and then she sees--

It's that Homeless Artist, whose body is covered by a piece of cloth. Two Officers carry it into a forensic bag. His guitar and notebook lay bare on the ground.

Zelda's stupefied. The fire of hope starts to die down in her eyes.

EXT. HOLIDAY INN/CHICAGO STREETS - SAME TIME

Ellen's POV--Zelda's Uber blends into traffic.

She texts Brando--"They're on their way."

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. BENNET'S APARTMENT/HALLWAY - DAY

Mrs.Bennet opens the door to a smiling Zelda with her art portfolio bag at doorstep.

ZELDA

Hi, Mrs.Bennet. How are you doing?

MRS.BENNET

Good.

She makes the way for Zelda, not looking very welcoming or glad. Zelda finds it unusual.

ZELDA

Is anything wrong?

MRS.BENNET

No.

Mrs.Bennet puts on a weak smile, relentless. Zelda has no way but to give up and enter.

INT. JOHNNY'S ROOM - LATER

In front of an easel, Zelda guides Johnny by holding his hand maneuvering his brush on paper. She points at where the brush lands.

ZELDA

So when we reach the dividing line of layers, our hands have to be careful. First you nudge your brush gently like this. Remember to dip the tip of it into water. Then smear more paint on. See? This is how we get a lighter tone.

Johnny digests as Zelda hands him the brush.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Here. Practice it a bit. I'll check on you later.

She exits the room with her water glass.

INT. LIVING ROOM, BENNETS' APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Zelda closes the door, walks across to the kitchen.

This is a spacious living room, embellished by extravagant artwork and sculptures. Ceiling to floor windows embrace the sunlight and Manhattan street view. Mrs.Bennet flips through a magazine while waiting nearby the baking oven.

Zelda suddenly stops in her tracks for a beat as she passes a painting, then resumes her paces.

ZELDA

You guys changed De Luca's painting?

Though smiling and nodding, Mrs.Bennet backs a step when Zelda comes around for some tap water.

MRS.BENNET

As you can see.

ZELDA

May I ask why?

MRS.BENNET

Uhm...

But in the end she chooses not to say it out loud. Instead, she leaves Zelda waiting in confusion as she retreats to an inner bedroom and fetches a thick envelope. She places it in her hands.

MRS.BENNET (CONT'D)

I believe what's in the envelope
can cover a few months of your
rent.

Zelda feels the envelope; now she understands.

ZELDA

Mrs.Bennet, I admit some art
performances could be somewhat too
avant-garde to be admired by some.
But it's unfair for this form of
artistic expression to be
demonized. Our world doesn't have
only one set of values--

MRS.BENNET

I didn't demonize it. I just don't
think that's the part of world I
would want my kid to be exposed to.
(then)
Good luck, honey.

EXT. MANHATTAN STREET - DAY

Her phone against her ear, Zelda sits on the stairs leading to a bakery, smoking. A PASSERBY descending behind her gets tripped, knocking into her elbow.

ZELDA

Open your eyes, fucker!

PASSERBY

Move your ass, sucker!

Zelda scoffs. Indistinct voice emanates from the phone, irritating her.

ZELDA

Shit. I'm always speaking to your
voicemail, Brando!
(then)

(MORE)

ZELDA (CONT'D)

I was thinking...maybe I could try doing *The Death in Death Valley* in your way. You were right, a lot of them don't understand. Talk to you in person. I'm coming over.

She hangs up and stands.

INT. BRANDO'S GALLERY - DAY

Zelda pushes open the gallery door strenuously. The security guard Cobb spots her.

COBB

How you doin', Zel?

But Zelda brushes past him without much of a smile.

When she reaches Brando's office about to knock, the door opens, yet the person who steps out is Jane. She's massaging her slightly messy hair as she spots Zelda, whose eyes fall upon Jane's blouse.

Jane looks down--oops, one of the buttons was done wrong. She fixes it.

JANE

He's in there.

She walks off, her high heels CLANKING on the floor.

Zelda watches her leave; her hand in the air which was to knock on the door slowly withdraws.

END FLASHBACK

INT. HALLWAY, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

Boarded, Zelda guides Gloria to her roomette. Other PASSENGERS brush past them in the hallway.

INT. ROOMETTE - CONTINUOUS

Zelda opens the door to MALVIN (40s), who just settled down.

ZELDA

Hi.

Malvin glances at her, indifferent.

She shrugs as she holds the door for Gloria.

GLORIA

Can you stay here too, baby?

Malvin has taken out his laptop to work at the table, giving the impression he doesn't like to be bothered. Yet Zelda knows she has no choice but to ask.

ZELDA

'Scuse me, sir. Would you mind transferring your seat with me? We travel together and I don't think it's a good idea for me to leave her alone. My seat is three cars away. The same sort of roomette as this one. We would greatly appreciate your help.

Not even sparing a single glance, Malvin plugs his laptop charger into the socket.

MALVIN

You should've bought the tickets in the same unit.

Quite upset but not surprised, Zelda puts on a smile to Gloria.

ZELDA

Don't worry. I'll check up on you.

She lifts her bags about to leave, but Gloria grabs her arm.

GLORIA

Please, sir. I can't leave my baby alone.

MALVIN

Can't help.

GLORIA

Or can she just stay here?

MALVIN

That's not what I paid for.

His tone sounds icy. Zelda pats Gloria as solace.

ZELDA

I'll come back after I find my roomette so we can get some food together, okay?

Gloria's grip on her arm doesn't lose any strength though, Zelda has to pry her hands open.

The train jerks to a start and produces a shrieking SCREECH. Meanwhile, Gloria refuses to let go, very much reminiscent a whiny kid, getting more and more emotional. This combination begins to wear off Zelda's patience.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
I said I'll be back. Let go.

GLORIA
I can't lose you again!

ZELDA
You won't!

GLORIA
No! I'm not letting go. You will abandon me just like the last time... No. You lost your beautiful hair too. Don't you remember that, baby?

Malvin spares a few random glances at them, slightly turns away from them. Zelda spots this out of the corner of her eyes, scoffs. Her exasperation builds.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Verónica, baby. Look at me. Look at me.

JINGWEN (V.O.)
Baby, look at me.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. YARD, LIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Zelda lights up the cigarette between her lips. Smoke rises in the dim moonlight and street lamps. She's exhausted, face obscured.

JINGWEN
Didn't you hear me? I told you to look at me.

Jingwen approaches from behind, snatches off the cigarette between Zelda's fingers.

ZELDA
Mom, come on.

But Jingwen stomps hard on it, very determined.

JINGWEN

How many times do I have to tell
you not to smoke so heavily? Do you
have to cough blood to death like
your dad fifteen years ago?

Zelda defiantly lights up another one. Jingwen acts quickly
enough to almost grasp it over again, but Zelda rejects to
loosen her grip.

ZELDA

Mom, please!

JINGWEN

You please!

They break the wrestle after a while. The cigarette is
snapped in half.

JINGWEN (CONT'D)

You literally just promised me
before dinner life will get better.

Zelda pockets a half of the cigarette, and actions fast
enough to have put the other half into her mouth before
Jingwen could slap it out of her grip.

ZELDA

I'll just put it there. I won't
light it up. It's not too late,
only 9.

Jingwen sighs, concedes. Zelda giggles naughtily, flings her
arm around Jingwen, and hugs her mom close like a bro.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

You're the best, mom!

Jingwen shakes her head as she cracks up smiling with her
daughter. Then,

JINGWEN

How's life?

ZELDA

You know. Gallery, the Bennets,
home. Which kind of reminds me I
probably need to go back tomorrow
morning to deal with something in
the gallery.

JINGWEN

For the performance thing?

ZELDA

Yeah.

A frown forms on Jingwen's forehead. She debates for a second before she slips a folded piece of paper from her pocket and stuffs it into Zelda's hand.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

What's this? A magic trick?

When Zelda unfolds it, her smile freezes.

It's a check. A few thousand dollars addressed to her name. She shoves it back to Jingwen's hand.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

You know I would say no.

JINGWEN

I don't like you smoking, but at least I understand it's nicotine that makes it addictive. But what do those performances have?

ZELDA

Wait, what is happening?

JINGWEN

I don't want to see you struggling in that anymore. Those performances are not helping you.

Zelda's jaw drops.

ZELDA

I can't believe you just said that... Don't you get it all along? Don't you always know why I love it? And what does help me anyway? I don't even know what helps me.

JINGWEN

Then just tell me, are you really still taking anti-depressants?

Zelda can't answer.

JINGWEN (CONT'D)

See? If you're not following what the doctor said, how can I be convinced those performances help you in any way?

ZELDA

I always thought you understand...
I actually thought you are the only
one who really understands what I'm
saying in my work. Do you?

Zelda's eyes are investigative. Jingwen makes a hard
decision.

JINGWEN

No, I have never understood any of
your work. I did it like I do
because I love you! But I never
can.

Zelda's faith shatters; her eyes grow red.

ZELDA

If you can't, there's no one in the
world who can. Then now what's the
point?

ZELDA (CONT'D)

If everything I did was
pointless like you said, then
why did I even care? Why did
I hold on to everything for
so long?

JINGWEN

Baby, calm down, let's go
visit the doctor, huh? I've
scheduled it for tomorrow,
first thing in the morning.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

You don't understand nothing!
Why did I even convince
myself so? I'm a stupid piece
of shit!

JINGWEN (CONT'D)

No, I don't! Because you
never opened up and told me
anything! You're too trapped
in your own world and self-
righteous all the time.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Oh yeah? I hated myself for God's
sake. I still do! If it wasn't for
you not to get heartbroken, I
would've already killed myself
months earlier! But you know
nothing!

Jingwen is astonished and furious, no less heartbroken.

JINGWEN

You are so right and I have done
you so wrong, isn't that what you
were trying to say? Well, maybe I
should never spend so much time and
energy on you because maybe you're
not worth it.

Her words cut deep.

ZELDA

Or maybe it's not because you
don't, it's because you can't.

Neither of them backs down. Zelda tears off the check.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

Thankfully there's still metro
running now.

She spins around and leaves.

With her daughter's figure fading away, Jingwen lets go her
constrained panting. She holds on to her heart, bending down,
grasping the railing as if catching the last straw.

INT. ZELDA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

In darkness, an emotional Zelda tosses her bags away and
slams the door shut, charging directly toward the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM, ZELDA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

She flicks on the light, glaring at herself in the mirror.
She pulls the mirror cabinet but it won't budge. Frustration
gets the better of her.

CRACK! She smacks the mirror with her fist, splitting her
reflection into pieces. Blood appears around her knuckles.

SQUEAK. The cabinet slowly swings open itself.

Zelda cracks up laughing. She can't stop, until tears flood
over.

She picks out a prescription bottle of Zolofit from the
cabinet. "Anti-depressant" can be seen among instructions on
the label. She dumps all the pills into the toilet and
flushes it off.

She leaves the bathroom for a while, returns with a knife and
a bottle of Lunesta, with key words like "treating insomnia"
on its label.

She places them on each side of the bathtub, turns on the
water, takes off her clothes. Her phone drops on the floor
from a pocket of her pants, its screen lights up--1AM.

But she just leaves the phone there, steps into the bathtub naked. The water keeps running, until turned off when reaching the brim.

She sits between a knife and a bottle of pills. The same picture with that in the beginning.

Her trembling hand takes the bottle first, then chooses the knife, ruthlessly slits her wrist.

As blood gushes out and spills into the water, Zelda's phone on the floor BUZZES.

Moaning and twitching in pain, she looks at her phone at an arm's length, debating--it's a call from "Mom."

END FLASHBACK

INT. PUBLIC RESTROOM - DAY

Zelda RETCHES into the sink. Nothing comes out. She fumbles to turn on the water to splash her face...

But it is blood that drips down her face.

She whips herself up to the mirror, frantically rubbing her cheeks as blood flows down her face.

But suddenly, there's no blood at all.

Puffing sharply, she rummages throughout all of her pockets, finally finding a cigarette box--but only one last cigarette left.

She shoves the cigarette between her trembling lips, spots the smoke detector glaring down from the ceiling.

In the deadlock against the detector, Zelda switches on the lighter, taps the smoke toward the fire...but stops right before they touch.

INT. HALLWAY, AMTRAK TRAIN - LATER

Zelda finds her roomette, her luggage heaved behind.

INT. ZELDA'S ROOMETTE - CONTINUOUS

Zelda bumps open the door with her shoulder. She meets eyes with a guy in early 30s. He smiles as he rapidly eyes Zelda up and down. She calls him DICKIE 2.

When Zelda tackles with her stuff, Dickie 2 discreetly slips off his wedding ring and pockets it.

DICKIE 2
You need help?

ZELDA
I'm good. Thanks.

She flops onto her seat and moves her neck to relax.

DICKIE 2
Where are you heading?

ZELDA
Vegas.

DICKIE 2
Are you kidding? Same here!
What for? Traveling? Business?

ZELDA
Kind of both.

DICKIE 2
Nice, nice. Uhm, so I assume you
travel alone? Not with a friend or
boyfriend? Sorry, I didn't mean to
make you feel uncomfortable. I'm
not a serial killer.
(laughs)
Just curious.

Not much invested, Zelda still gives him a glance--well,
looks fine enough.

ZELDA
I travel with--my friend's grandma.
(then)
It'd be awesome if you'd like to
help and transfer the seat with
her. Don't feel like leaving her
alone. She's just three cars away.
The same roomette.

DICKIE 2
Oh. Well... It might be a little--
I mean I'd like to help, that's for
sure. I just...I feel like talking
to you too.

She hears his intention loud and clear, considering, then
puts on a mask of seduction when raising her eyes again,
reminiscent a predator.

ZELDA
We can do that too.

Zelda puts the door on the latch and turns around.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
You wanna fuck me?

Dickie 2's eyes shoot open, both astounded and thrilled.

DICKIE 2
W-what?

ZELDA
You wanna fuck me or not?

DICKIE 2
Uh... Y-yeah?

She grasps his collar and drags him up. They make out. He doesn't know what's going on but he enjoys it. Her hand reaches down to unbuckle his belt.

But she pauses just when he's turned on.

DICKIE 2 (CONT'D)
What?

She feels something in one of his pants pockets, jabs her hand in, and tugs something out. It's his wedding ring.

He raises his hand to reclaim it in fluster, but she's quicker--a slap on his face.

DICKIE 2 (CONT'D)
The fuck?

ZELDA
At least be more creative about
where to hide it, you assholes.

She darts out...

BEGIN FANTASY SCENE:

INT. BRANDO'S BEDROOM

...and stumbles into Brando's being intimate with Jane.

Zelda hangs at the bedside, unable to move. She can only stare at them.

CRACK. A delicate glass ornament on the night stand next to her hand shatters.

Brando suddenly elbows himself up and smiles at her.

BRANDO

Hey, love.

END FANTASY SCENE

INT. HALLWAY, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

A desperate Zelda bangs her way out, scaring a MOTHER and DAUGHTER who enjoy the view by the window.

She then rudely brushes past an OLD MAN who mumbles some indistinctive swears words and shakes his head.

INT. COACH CLASS CAR - LATER

SAMUEL (30s), a uniformed conductor, assists an old lady looking for her seat.

From across the hallway, a very uptight Zelda dashes toward him. She grasps his shoulder and compels him to wheel around.

SAMUEL

(baffled)

Sorry, ma'am, I'm helping someone here.

ZELDA

How much longer until the next stop?

SAMUEL

(checks his watch)

I'd say at least half an hour.

ZELDA

Fuck.

Samuel catches sight of the cigarette box in her grip.

SAMUEL

Ma'am. We don't allow smoking anywhere on the train.

ZELDA

(losing her temper)

I know the fucking rules.

She realizes her intimidating manner has drawn some unwanted attention. Some survey her as if she's a maniac.

Samuel takes a mental note of Zelda as she flees away.

BEGIN FANTASY SCENE:

EXT. SALT FLATS - DAY

Zelda suddenly registers herself bolting into the salt flats.

She swivels about. It's endless in every direction. No living creature can be seen.

She picks up her paces. The sun up high exudes killing heat. Sweat strokes down her forehead. She's pale as hell.

END FANTASY SCENE

INT. JUNCTION BETWEEN TWO CARS - DAY

Zelda rushes to a junction part connecting two cars, feels like passing out.

ELLEN (O.S.)

You okay?

A shocked Zelda jerks up to see Ellen's concerned face.

But in the next moment, it's just another ASIAN GIRL with the same haircut.

The train rattles. The Asian Girl holds Zelda arm just in time as she almost stumbles over.

But she flings her helping hand off, staggers away, and drops on her bottom in a corner to rest.

INT. ROOMETTE - DAY

Dickie 2 almost leaps from his seat when the door opens.

But it's Gloria, rather anxious with tears circling in her eyes.

GLORIA

Have you seen Verónica? She stays
in this room. She said she'd check
on me but she never came.

Dickie 2 matches the dots in his head, shrugs.

DICKIE 2
Because she's not sane.

Gloria glares at him, grunts and leaves.

GLORIA
Bastardo tonto!

DICKIE 2
Excuse me?

INT. HALLWAY, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

The train's slowing down.

As Gloria exits the roomette and takes left, Zelda emerges from the left.

She thrusts her forehead against the window as hard as if she's trying to break it. She fakes smoking an unlit cigarette, hand shuddering. She's losing it.

Samuel, the conductor from earlier, emerges in her proximity.

SAMUEL
Ma'am, I'll have to ask you to stop it.

Zelda nips the smoke out from her mouth.

SAMUEL (CONT'D)
The train's stopping. You can smoke outside.

She tucks the smoke back into her mouth and sucks at it, fake smoking in his face.

SAMUEL (CONT'D)
Ma'am, if you keep doing it, I'll have to ask you to hand it over. All of it.

He dips his head, referring to the cigarette box clenched in her hand.

She loosens and raises her palm to present him the box. The moment he's about to reach it, she flips her hand over, dropping the box, and returns to her roomette.

Samuel shakes his head, bends to pick it up.

INT. ZELDA'S ROOMETTE - CONTINUOUS

The door pushed open, Dickie 2 flinches at the sight of her.

Treating him as invisible, Zelda yanks her duffle bag over from the ground and rummages for a new cigarette box, but then she sees something, stops dead.

From a corner in the bag, she picks up a ring, decorated with a golden turtle--it's the one Ellen claimed lost.

Zelda connects dots in her head. Bewilderment and disbelief creep up on her face. She slips her phone out, hands shivering, and pulls up Amtrak's website, logs in.

The newest order on the top marks June 26th from Chicago to Las Vegas. She scroll down a bit. The second one marks June 25th, also from Chicago to Vegas..."Canceled."

The train SCREECHES to a stop. Zelda lifts her eyes. They are void.

INT. HALLWAY, AMTRAK TRAIN - LATER

Zelda exits her room to the tiny hallway, flooded by PASSENGERS piling in and out.

She tears open the new cigarette box and bites a smoke between lips as she totters forward.

INT. JUNCTION BETWEEN TWO CARS - LATER

When approaching the gate at the end of the hallway around the junction area, Zelda staggers into someone who doesn't budge to make way for her. She goes around to proceed, but the person abruptly clutches her at the wrist.

ZELDA
(wrestles)
What the fuck is wrong with you--

She stops short as if she sees a ghost. It's Brando.

BRANDO
Hey. Hey, it's me.

She shakes her head and begins to wrestle like crazy, exerting to pry his fingers open.

BRANDO (CONT'D)
Stop. Zelda, stop. Look at me.

ZELDA
What the fuck is going on...

BRANDO
You cannot waste your talent like
this. Let's go home.

ZELDA
I don't fucking have a home. My
home is dead.

Zelda flings off Brando's grip.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Why would you even care? I'm just
one of your fuck buddies who
happens to help you make money.
(then)
And how the hell did you even find
me?

BRANDO
That is not important.

ZELDA
Always the best at dodgeball.

She scoffs, tries to bypass him, but stops dead in her
tracks.

There she sees, from behind Brando, Ellen emerges,
apologetically.

The last dot is connected with the web in Zelda's mind now.
From her pocket, she slowly takes out the golden turtle ring.

Ellen first gasps in relief and delight, then realizes what
this testifies.

Zelda approaches Ellen, who backs a few steps until a corner.

ELLEN
I can't afford to lose anyone
anymore.

Zelda extends her hand with the ring on her palm. On her
face, there is only peaceful indifference after betrayal.

ZELDA
Aren't you a saint?

BRANDO
Zel, your performance is worth
telling to those who understand.
(MORE)

BRANDO (CONT'D)

We can make it happen together. And that unnamed impromptu you just did last night, I already got an idea to blend it with interactive media. We have so much more to explore--

Zelda whips to Ellen.

ZELDA

What else haven't you told him?

ELLEN

Zelda--

ZELDA

(to Brando)

But what if they can't? I always believed my mom could see me through, but no, she couldn't. No one could. SO what's the difference between me being dead or alive?

After the eruption, her knees weaken, she has to grasp the handicapped handle on the wall, until she can't hold it any longer, so she collapses into Brando's arms.

BRANDO

What you need right now is catharsis, you need an exit to vent. After that, everything will be fine.

Yet Ellen shakes her head in disagreement.

ELLEN

No, no, you're not helping her now. It's not that simple. She needs legitimate validation and help for recovery. It's not just going to be gone all of a sudden. Zelda, listen, you need help.

BRANDO

You do not even know her.

ELLEN

Now you think you do? How many times did you answer me "I don't know" when I asked something about her?

BRANDO

Do not forget the fact: you only met her yesterday.

ELLEN

Well then, maybe answer this question: are you doing all of this for Zelda as herself or for her artwork from which you can make something out.

BRANDO

If you know her so well, then how did she come up with the Death Valley idea? Do you have any idea of that?

Finding this funny, Zelda tussles out from Brando's arms as Brando and Ellen get into a dead end, and glares into Ellen's eyes.

ZELDA

You think I'm that stupid who can't tell what story about your friend you're hiding? You don't really care about me, you're just desperate to redeem yourself.

Silence hangs between them for a moment, until the doors of the train start to close. Zelda's face drops.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

No.

She dashes off toward the door, Brando hurries up in tow, leaving Ellen there alone, hurt and shaken.

INT. AT THE GATE, AMTRAK TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

The door is closing... Zelda rushes over...

But she doesn't make it.

She bangs the door with her fist and taps her forehead against the window with all her might.

ZELDA

Open the door!

She slides down along the door in despair.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. BATHROOM, ZELDA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

As blood spurts out from Zelda's wrist and splashes into the water, Zelda's phone on the floor BUZZES--it's a call from "Mom."

She groans and twitches in pain, strenuously reaches her phone and hesitates for a beat before picking it up.

ZELDA

It's no use now. I'm just doing
what's been playing in my mind all
the time--

But a male voice comes through ambiguously, bringing news that makes her eyes wide and mouth agape.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. CEMETERY PARK - DAY

Wearing the same black suit as before, Zelda sits straight up on a bench, gazing spiritlessly at her front.

REVEAL a dozen people who all wear black stand in the foreground, mourning. A photo of Jingwen leans against the small tombstone.

An idea makes Zelda's eyes more focused. She pulls out a notebook from her purse and starts drawing a sketch--

The sketch for the painting of *The Death of Death Valley*.

END FLASHBACK

INT. GATE, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

As if a shell without a ghost, Zelda stares at the scenery flying back via the windows on the door. The train speeds up, rattling like a storm.

Ellen nears Zelda with apology, remaining a certain distance from her. Brando, on the other hand, approaches with a complimenting smile.

BRANDO

Let us make both of your sketches
real performances, what do you say?
Doesn't that sound appealing? Your
talent has told you why you should
return with me to those who can
truly get the delivery.

ELLEN

But I think art is more about experiences. I agree with Zelda that sometimes none of us can understand each other, but we can communicate through sharing our experiences. That is why art is important.

BRANDO

How many creatives do you even know in your life?

ELLEN

If you care more about the number other than quality, then you know nothing about it.

Their argument keeps going on. But Zelda acts like she's deaf to her surroundings. She slowly picks a smoke from the box, taking her time, then lights the lighter, nudges the smoke to the fire.

Both Brando and Ellen don't break from their fight, assuming Zelda would only fake smoking.

However, not this time--Zelda really lights up the cigarette. Smoke rises and dances.

BRANDO

Zelda, put it out. It will trigger the alarm.

ELLEN

Zelda, please. People will panic.

Zelda simply can't hear. Brando fidgets; he's anxious to cut the smoke out, but he doesn't dare to get any closer to her either.

Ellen searches for the smoke detector around them. It's in a corner behind Ellen's back.

Smoke detector's POV: Smoke rises from between Zelda's fingers. Higher. Closer. When Ellen finally wheels around to the right direction and strides up to wave the smoke off, it reaches the detector.

A beat of silence. Then--

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The most deafening smoke alarm you could imagine SHRIEKS in the entire train.

In both cars connected by the junction where they stand, Passengers recoil. Children start to SHRILL and CRY. Adults spring about in PUFFS and questions.

PASSENGERS

What the hell is going on? / What
the hell happened? / Did something
go wrong? / Did we catch fire?...

Then there goes the panic.

Brando fervently swings the letter under the detector to dissipate the smoke as Ellen darts up to Zelda, who has maneuvered to a corner.

ELLEN

We'll be arriving at the next stop
very soon. We can smoke there.
(scans around)
People are panicking. Please.

Still, Zelda seems like she can't hear or even see Ellen.

PASSENGER 1 notices Zelda as he dashes through the junction.

PASSENGER 1

Is this you?

Again, Zelda's deaf to it.

ELLEN

No, it's not her.

PASSENGER 1

It is her. She's smoking.
(to Zelda)
Hey, I'm talking to you!

Passenger 1 charges toward Zelda threateningly. Ellen cuts in his path to fend Zelda off.

ELLEN

Brando!

Brando retreats from waving off the smoke, joins Ellen to pull Passenger 1 away.

BRANDO

Calm down, man.

Samuel, the conductor, emerges from one of the cars connected to the junction.

SAMUEL

What the hell's going on?

Passenger 1 struggles away from Brando and Ellen, jerks his chin at Zelda.

SAMUEL (CONT'D)

I knew it's you. Ma'am, put it out right now!

ELLEN

Let us talk to her. Just give us some time.

BRANDO

(to Samuel)

She's not stable. Please understand.

SAMUEL

There's no time to give! This is against our regulation and people are freaking out.

At this moment, Gloria turns up, weaves through the ONLOOKERS to snatch Ellen at the arm and gasps at Zelda.

GLORIA

Verónica! What are you doing? Put it out!

Zelda doesn't react to Gloria either. Horrified, Gloria covers her mouth.

ELLEN

Gloria, stay over there.

Ellen attempts to impose Gloria out of the mess, but Gloria stands her ground, not moving an inch.

SAMUEL

You have to put it out right now.
Or I'm going to do that for you.

Samuel charges forward. Ellen and Brando both hurry up to interfere his raid. More Passengers congregate around the corner, joining the denouncement of Zelda.

But she isn't disturbed by the ongoing commotion at all. She rests her weight against the corner, lights up the second cigarette. Inhales...

...and things go SLOW MOTION. The chaos is beautiful. Flowing JAZZ embraces her. She lights up another smoke. And another. Until she lights up the entire cigarette box. Fire shoots up.

Brando and Ellen's protective umbrella gets breached. Samuel charges in and strikes the burning box out of Zelda's hand.

CUT TO BLACK

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

OVER BLACK

CLICK. Light turns on to

INT. BRANDO'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Brando's asleep on bed, SNORING lightly. Zelda adjusts the lamp on the nightstand to have only very weak light. She buttons her shirt up and picks up her jacket from among the strewn clothes on the floor.

She watches him sleep for a second, gently touches his nose and hair. Mild smile climbs up at the tip of her lips.

She slips out a key and a folded letter from her purse, open a nightstand drawer, and places them inside.

Hanging on the edge of the drawer, she pinches up a strand of red hair. She holds the hair at one end, two fingers slowly stroke it straight along the strand until the other. She compares the length of the red hair to her own. Hers longer.

She stands, expressionless, lets loose her fingers.

The red hair floats down, devoured by the crescendoing darkness.

INT. ZELDA'S APARTMENT - LATER

Laid tidily on the bed is the dark scarlet suit Zelda wears on the train.

The scarlet heels stand above the blazer where the head should be. In the background is the SHUFFLING noise of fishing through things.

LATER

Zelda, now dressed up in the scarlet suit and heels, operates on her laptop. A lit cigarette dangling from her lips. She calls a number.

ZELDA
(on the phone)
Just sent an email. One copy for
each.

MONTAGE

- Zelda extracts a duffle bag from under the bed.
- She clears a case filled with cigarette boxes next to the couch and pours them all into the duffle bag.
- She rummages through the closet.
- She puts on make-ups in front of the bathroom mirror.
- She collects a few of her photos and paintings hanged on the wall.
- She skims through her painting portfolio, selects a few.
- She unzips her art portfolio bag and puts the chosen paintings in.
- She removes *The Death in Death Valley* from the easel, takes a good look at it before slipping it into the bag.

END MONTAGE

Zelda carries her bags to the doorway, leaves a letter on the kitchen counter, and takes out her phone.

On the screen is the chat window between her and "Mom." The last text was, "Mom love you, baby." It's not replied.

Zelda taps the message bar. Her thumb hovers over the keyboard. But eventually, nothing happens.

She pockets the phone, takes a deep breath, swivels to face the apartment, surveys it throughout as a farewell.

INT. HALLWAY, APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Zelda exits the apartment with her bags. Door shuts.

She walks to a neighboring door, knocks on it, slides a one-dollar bill inside under the door through the gap.

A moment later, two pieces of paper slide out. Her train tickets.

EXT. NEW YORK STREETS - BEFORE DAWN

It's still dark. Streets that are supposed to be crowded and full of traffic look deserted now.

Shouldering her bags, Zelda strolls on the sidewalk. A car zooms by.

She drops her bags on the sidewalk, saunters to the middle of the street, lies down, and stares up at the night sky.

It's dark, quiet, clear of clouds, free of stars.

Dawn is approaching, already at the edge of the sky. But still too far away from her to be tangible.

END FLASHBACK

INT. SECURITY ROOM, AMTRAK TRAIN - NIGHT

Zelda's eyes are hollow. One of her hands handcuffed to a handle on the wall. MUFFLED TALKING can be heard.

Out of the corner of her eyes, the door opens. Samuel enters, unlocks the handcuffs, gives her a warning look.

Before Zelda exits the room,

SAMUEL
You got somebody who cared about
you.

Zelda pauses for a beat as she digests this.

INT. OUTSIDE SECURITY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Zelda steps out, spots Ellen and Brando waiting outside.

Ellen springs up at once and has worry written all over her face while Brando is fixated on flipping through Zelda's paintings squatting toward the opposite direction.

Zelda shuffles away. Ellen follows.

INT. ZELDA'S ROOMETTE - NIGHT

Zelda opens the door. Dickie and all his belongings are gone.

A tearful Gloria shoots up from the seat.

GLORIA

Oh baby.

But Zelda doesn't spare any look to Gloria as she notices the overhead bed is made. She climbs up.

Zelda turns to face the wall, leaving Gloria nothing but her back. Ellen enters, gestures and escorts a heartbroken Gloria out. She takes a long look at Zelda's back.

The door shuts in the background.

LATER

The night grows quieter.

Moonlight is cast down on Zelda and maneuvers slowly. Its tender brightness reaches the bandage around her wrist, the bandage that was applied by Ellen.

Zelda peels it off, exposing the wound--it looks miraculously much better and is healing.

BEGIN FANTASY SEQUENCE:

EXT. BADWATER BASIN, DEATH VALLEY - DAY

Sunlight is blinding.

In the scarlet suit and heels, Zelda approaches a sea level sign by the boardwalk that reads:

BADWATER BASIN

282 FEET/855 METERS

BELOW SEA LEVEL

She takes off her heels, grips them with a hand, steps off the boardwalk and into the snowy white salt flats.

It's expansive. The end meets the sky.

SALT FLATS

CRUNCH. CRUNCH. Her bare feet tread forward steadily one step after another.

Heat waves shiver around her.

LATER

Lips dehydrated. Steps heavier. She has reached where there's no end can be seen. Only sky. Clouds. Salt. And the unyielding sun.

She puts down her heels, descends, lies flat on the ground, spreads her limbs in the same manner as in her painting. Sweat dominates her forehead.

The tip of her heels start to melt. It looks like blood...

...It is blood. Her scarlet suit starts to melt too. They all melt into blood.

And blood melts the salt. A pod forms, and grows. Her body gets swamped, sinking inch by inch.

Then she hears the sound of the WAVES... Louder and louder... Until blood floods over her face and she sinks into--

OCEAN

Everything turns underwater-muffled. No blood. Just clear ocean.

Zelda keeps sinking. But she looks happy. Purely happy. She sees Brando swimming toward her, so she stretches out her hand.

Just when Brando is about to reach her, a HAND from overhead sticks in and clutches Zelda's wrist, covering the slit scar, and yanks her out of the ocean back to--

SALT FLATS - NIGHT

Day has transformed to night. Ocean is gone. Zelda is wet all over. The hand belongs to Ellen. She sits next her.

Zelda crouches on the ground, gasps for air.

ELLEN

I didn't lie to you, this is the
most beautiful night sky.

Zelda lifts her head, the night sky begins to brighten up and she forgets to breathe.

The deep blue night sky is strewn with brilliantly gleaming stars. And they're moving, sliding across the sky as in the time-lapse photography. As in Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. As in her own painting *SCAR-RY*.

Zelda begins to cry. All the held up emotions flood out with tears. Ellen embraces Zelda into her arms. Zelda hugs her back. Two girls hold each other with their knees on the ground, below the most breathtaking night sky.

Ellen pulls away, dries Zelda's tears with her palm, and leads her to turn sideways. Somehow, both of Zelda's paintings, *SCAR-RY* and *The Death of Death Valley*, are presented on the salt flats.

Zelda stands, walks over to between the two, studies them again.

END FANTASY SEQUENCE

INT. ZELDA'S ROOMETTE - DAY

Zelda wakes up. RUFFLING emanates from beneath her bed. She supports herself up and leans in to check.

Gloria reclines on the lower bed, snores lightly. Sitting next to Gloria, Ellen naps on her knees, back hunched.

Zelda maneuvers down, taps Ellen gently on the shoulder. Ellen stirs awake.

ZELDA

(undertone)

Use my bed.

Ellen takes a moment to register the fact that Zelda looks quite calm and relaxed. Nothing threatening. She dips her head as a nod. Zelda descends on the bed beside Ellen.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

You guys were here the whole night?

Ellen nods and yawns. Finally wakes up. Adopts cautious tactics.

ELLEN
How do you feel?

ZELDA
Better.

Zelda can tell Ellen's concern lingers.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
For real.

ELLEN
(more convinced)
Okay.

They sit abreast. Words brew in each of their chests. Yet it's so hard to speak. Finally,

ZELDA
You didn't strike me as someone
who'd invade other people's
privacy.

ELLEN
I know all of this is crazy...

ZELDA
It definitely is--

Ellen's shoulders drop.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
--so I still can't believe you did
all this for me.

Wait. Ellen lifts her head to Zelda to make sure she hears right what she means.

ZELDA (CONT'D)
Your friend would be glad.

It hits home. Off Ellen's reaction,

GLORIA (O.S.)
Dios mío.

Gloria sits up from the pillow, fully awake now, grabs Zelda's shoulders, forces Zelda to face herself. She fiddles with Zelda's cheeks, repeatedly and desperately checking if she's intact.

Zelda chuckles, grasps Gloria's hands to confirm it to her,

ZELDA
I'm alright, mama.

Gloria grunts. Hits Zelda on the shoulder. Bursts into tears.

GLORIA
I thought you were gone again! I
was scared to death the first time.
Why do you always scare me like
this? Don't ever do this to me
again, do you hear? I can't take it
no more.

ZELDA
I'm here. I'm back now.
(then)
I'll take you to Los Angeles, I'll
take you to your family. Okay?

GLORIA
You are my family, baby.

Zelda hugs Gloria, her eyes turning red.

LATER

Zelda sorts through her paintings in her portfolio bag, slips
out both *Death Valley* and the unnamed impromptu.

Gloria enjoys an energy bar while watching Zelda proudly.

GLORIA
Look at how gifted my baby is.

Ellen grins.

KNOCK KNOCK. Ellen opens the door. It's Brando. Not liking
this, Ellen stands her ground without conceding, yet Brando
forces his way in.

ELLEN
Brando, I really appreciate your
help but I don't think you were
doing her fair.

BRANDO
I did not travel all the way here
to hear you nagging.
(to Zelda)
I already booked flights from Vegas
back to New York tomorrow. We will
talk things through when we get
back.

Zelda rises and stares straight at him, her eyes exuding rebellion. Gloria holds Zelda's arm, grows defensive too.

ZELDA

I'm not going back with you.

BRANDO

You cannot play naive all the time.
I am not your babysitter.

ZELDA

You never really cared about me.
I'm just a sum of all my work.

BRANDO

This is something you told me
before.

ZELDA

I used to believe so, but then I
realize it was me who caused all
this, including my mom's death. And
that's not because my artworks
failed her, it was all on me.

BRANDO

You are doing it again, putting
those burden on yourself--

ZELDA

--"Instead, I should channel it
into creation." Yeah, I know. So
I'm keeping both my performances
independent. Not all art
performances need a gallery
coordinator, you know that.

BRANDO

But then who is your audience? The
nature? Yourself? Do not listen to
those self-righteous words.
Performance has no point if there
is no spectatorship.

Gloria pulls Zelda's arm, muttering.

GLORIA

I don't like him, baby.

Zelda holds Gloria's hand on her arm.

ZELDA

For some other topics, yes. But these two are mine, they are personal.

Zelda dips her head at Ellen.

ZELDA (CONT'D)

And she is my audience. Both her and my camera. So I think you should probably cancel your extra flight ticket.

INT. HALLWAY, AMTRAK TRAIN - DAY

Zelda stares at her phone's screen--

The chat window between her and Jingwen again. The last text from "Mom" still reads, "Mommy loves you, baby." And it's still not replied.

Zelda taps the message bar, and types down "I love you too." Her thumb over the button for a second.

This time, she hits Send.

She lifts her head. Something in her eyes reminds one of a new beginning.

BEGIN FANTASY SEQUENCE:

EXT. SALT FLATS - DAY

Zelda walks on the extensive salt flats in her scarlet suit again.

But this time afar from her, she can see not only the shivering heat waves, but also human figures bustling around.

She approaches the scene. It's a grand outdoor exhibition.

A performance stage established in the center, surrounded by twelve tents in a circle, resembling twelve hours on a clock surface. Audiences mingle about the tents and a makeshift gallery on the other side where her paintings are exhibited.

As she keeps walking toward the stage, Brando exuberantly hustles around among ARTISTS and SPONSORS.

Ellen and a bunch of MEDIA photographers prepare cameras and other equipments in the planned section.

Zelda has reached next to the stage. She steps on the stairs. Noises die down. The world focuses its attention on her.

She remains at the center of the stage, surveys this setup and the whole surroundings. It looks perfect.

She takes off her heels. Her blazer. Her pants. All very slowly. Until she's completely naked, exposing her scars on every part of her body underneath the dazzling sunlight.

Ellen holds up her camera and aims at Zelda. Whose eyes land in her lens.

END FANTASY SEQUENCE

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. ZELDA'S ROOMETTE - DAY

CLOSE UP on Zelda's eyes. Sunlight paints her face to be dreamily beautiful.

The train BUMPS and RATTLES.

When her lips are about to curve into a gentle smile, we whoosh into a tunnel.

CUT TO BLACK

THE END