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On writing for screen and television

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A Thesis
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the Faculty of the Humanities and Teacher Education Division
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
David Espey
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This thesis, written by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ESSAY: On Writing for Screen and Television	1-17
SCRIPT 1: Playing Possum.....	1-105
SCRIPT 2: Tehoka.....	1-66
SCRIPT 3: The Group Chat.....	1-6

On Writing for Screen and Television

I. Introduction

Throughout my time at Pepperdine, I have developed my skills, voice, and values as a writer, aided by my professors and colleagues and inspired by the artists I've studied, in class and independently. This study and practice has culminated in the development of three core tenets that guide my personal writing philosophy: to explore our shared humanity; to speak to the world as it exists, rather than as we wish it to be; and to engage and entertain— without that, our work would have no meaning at all. Though the actual measurable and effective power of a writer to influence society is often overstated, we still undoubtedly bear a responsibility to uphold these basic principles in our capacity as cultural leaders, no matter how minimal that capacity is. In the following, I will expound on these three core tenets through the lens of the artists who have inspired me most, and who exemplify the implementation of these principles: Richard Linklater, Bong Joon-ho, and Mike White.

II. Richard Linklater: The Poetry of Day-to-Day Life

Heralded by *Texas Monthly* as the “Everyday Auteur,” Richard Linklater has carved out a singular career as a filmmaker (Heid). Spanning decades and including both box office successes and experimental projects, Linklater’s career has been one of bold, inventive filmmaking, allowing him to carve out a niche of successful independent work within the increasingly IP and franchise-focused entertainment industry. Mostly self-taught, Linklater’s career has been characterized by his “do it yourself” style. He has never relied on receiving opportunities from others—rather, he seizes them for himself. Shirking the traditional path of screenwriters and filmmakers, Linklater began his career far away from the nucleus of the industry, in Austin, Texas, where he began the Austin Film Society, screening films and using the proceeds to fund

his first 8mm film project. This proved to be the maiden voyage of a highly unique career, from being the vanguard of the American indie film bubble of the 1990s to using his success to craft a unique but sustainable model of independent filmmaking long after that bubble burst (San Fillipo 54-55). All the while, Linklater has served as an influential founding member and benefactor of a film outpost far away from the traditional hubs of the entertainment industry in Los Angeles and New York City. In doing so, Linklater has neither accepted nor rejected the conventional power centers and decision-makers —instead, he has transcended them. Linklater himself has lamented the current lack of the type of independent filmmaking on which he built his brand. In an era where entertainment is dominated by hyper-commodified, intellectual property-driven franchises, there is simply no space for the character-driven storytelling he built a career on (Hellerman). While we may never return to the indie filmmaking boom of the 1990s, in a post-strike world I believe there is still a place for Linklater's unique filmmaking style, and I look forward to being a part of it.

While there are countless aspects of Linklater's career and style that I admire, more than anything else, I hope to emulate his intimate yet exceedingly ambitious portrayals of everyday characters and the relationships and experiences that shape them. Throughout his work, he employs a number of techniques, themes, and choices that all serve to specifically portray humans as individual parts of the interconnected fabric of our society, and in doing so, he inspires the audience to recognize our shared humanity — the most meaningful directive you can give to an audience.

One of the aforementioned techniques, which he employs masterfully across all of his films, is to focus not on a singular main character, but instead on a meaningful relationship [*Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *After Midnight* (2013)], an ensemble cast of

characters linked by their membership in a group [*Everybody Wants Some* (2016)] or by a shared set of experiences [*Slacker* (1990) and *Dazed and Confused* (1993)]. In each of these films, Linklater challenges the traditional use of a main character, instead showing how the individual is deconstructed through shared experiences with other people. In so doing, Linklater's films remind us that we are all hopelessly intertwined with one another and that no experience belongs singularly to any individual. Interestingly, this approach—examining characters through the lens of their relationships—counterintuitively allows Linklater to make uniquely prescient observations and assertions about humans as individuals. He often does not present them as stable or even coherent—rather, they are presented as entirely human, always striving for advancement or transcendence, while still riddled with contradictions and bound to others by shared experience.

Linklater's signature style of intimate and deeply human storytelling is nowhere more evident than in his arthouse indie feature turned box office success, the *Before* trilogy: *Before Sunrise*, *After Sunset*, and *Before Midnight*. Instead of centering around a singular protagonist, the trilogy instead chronicles a relationship as it grows and changes across almost two decades. The central relationship between Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy) begins with the characters meeting and spending one romantic whirlwind of a day together in the first film, only to separate at the end and not see each other again for nine years. It is then, in the events of the second film, that they meet in Paris and attempt to rekindle what they had almost a decade ago. The trilogy culminates in a third film that finds the couple nine years into their marriage and estranged due to complications in their lives and careers. The events of each film take place over the course of a single day, with much of the film propelled by long, intimate conversations between these two characters. But in doing so, Linklater succeeds at portraying so much more

than just the lives of these two characters—in his exploration of their relationship, he is able to masterfully capture the experience of falling in love, the pain of separation, the rush of reconnecting and the complications of mundanity, masterfully capturing the living dialectical tensions that exist in every relationship. However, it is not the relationship itself that interests me, though there is much to be analyzed about the dynamics of these two characters. Rather, it is the act of choosing to focus on a relationship in the first place, instead of focusing the trilogy on the push and pull of a relationship itself (rather than one of the characters *in* the relationship)., Rather than inviting the audience to place themselves in the position of the protagonist, and see themselves through the lens of the protagonist, Linklater thus invites the audience to consider their own relationships and to think of themselves as a person in relation to someone else, rather than as an individual being related to by the world. It invites us to reframe the way we think about ourselves and the people in our lives and to begin to see our experiences as completely and utterly intertwined with how we relate to the people in our lives.

While the films are dominated by dialogue-heavy conversations, Linklater finds ways to depict this trilogy of films in a way that is both visually interesting and speaks to the theme of our shared humanity. The film's visual style is characterized by two distinct shot patterns, shot counter-shot conversations, and long naturalistic single shots that observe these characters in the natural habitat that is their relationship. Further, over the course of the films, this style bends and adapts to accommodate the gravity that is the character's relationships. The early conversations of *Before Sunset* are shot with a conventional shot, counter-shot pattern which allows the audience to see not only the reactions of the character speaking but also those of the opposing character in order to best portray their reactions to the viewer (Cutler 24). These static scenes are blended with long sequences of the characters walking and talking as they explore one of the

three European cities the films are set in (Cutler 24-25). It is also these observational, almost anthropological, long shots that center both of the characters together that come to dominate the third film, *After Midnight*. This is to reflect the reality that the lives of these two characters have forever been intertwined. They are simply no longer the individuals they were at the start of their story and are forever bound together by shared experiences.

This narrative language is carried even further when Linklater makes references or mirror scenes throughout the trilogy to represent the development of the characters and their relationship. One such example is a scene in *Before Sunrise* where, during a moment of vulnerability from Celine, Jesse goes to move her hair out of her face before he thinks better of it. All of this occurs without Celine ever seeing it. This moment is then mirrored in the second film, where, as Jesse is lamenting about his failing marriage, Celine goes to run her fingers through his hair, only to think better of it. This time, it's Jesse who doesn't see this happen. This moment serves to show how the intimate language the characters discovered and developed in the first film has yet to be reignited. This moment is finally paid off in the third film when the couple shares an unspoken, physical communication while driving their twins to a friend's villa in the Greek countryside. As they drive, Celine rests her arm on Jesse's shoulder, and in return, Jesse riles her up with pokes to her side. Interestingly, while the couple's physical boundaries have been cast asunder by nine years of marriage, their emotional connection has faltered, and the film deals with both characters' struggle to keep love and intimacy alive in the confines of their now-matured relationship.

Jesse expands on this later while explaining his experience as a novelist. Jesse has written three books—the first two are veiled memoirs of the events of the first two films. He reveals that his third novel has been the hardest. If the first two films are about sparking the flame of a

relationship and then rekindling it, the third is about something more difficult than both—sustaining it. Through these recurring moments, Linklater reminds us that a collective experience we all share transcends that of any individual and that we are all linked through an infinite web of our shared humanity.

III. Bong Joon-ho: Art as Mirror to Culture

In an interview with Senior Vice President of the Black List Kate Hagen, Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho was asked about the global success of his Academy Award-winning film *Parasite* (2019): “After Cannes, I was at the Sydney Film Festival, Munich, Telluride, Toronto—the reaction was all the same everywhere. I think maybe there is no borderline between countries now because we all live in the same country, it’s called capitalism” (Dawson et al.). In this answer, Joon-ho attempts to explain the unprecedented success of his film. After premiering at Cannes in 2019 and becoming the first Korean-language film to take home the festival’s top prize, the film was greeted with overwhelming critical and box office success, culminating in winning four Academy Awards. Most notably, *Parasite* was the first foreign language film to win Best Picture. Even in a time when Korean media has definitively crossed over into the West—most apparent in the success of K-pop—*Parasite*’s success was unprecedented. It resonated deeply with millions of people across languages, cultural contexts, and national origins, in a way only a film that speaks deeply to a global shared experience can do. Clearly, the film’s success was intimately tied to Joon-ho’s ability to speak to the broad socioeconomic forces that dictate our lives (and hold us prisoner) in this era of globalization—one of the main themes he explores in *Parasite*. Joon-ho’s background as a South Korean gives him a distinct perspective on these forces, but it is his understanding that these forces are ultimately *universal* that gives his films such resounding resonance, causing them to demand attention from a global

audience. In this way, Joon-ho exemplifies the second tenet of my writing philosophy: to speak to the world as it exists, rather than as we wish it to be. It is clear that, if work isn't rooted in a material reality, it becomes meaningless. Conversely, those films that expertly explore a material reality become the most culturally resonant and remain the most important and impactful.

To better understand Joon-ho, his films, and his assertion that specific socioeconomic issues in South Korea are a microcosm of the consequences of globalization felt by people around the world, it is important to understand at least some of the context in which Joon-ho is writing. Since the Korean War, South Korea has served as a testing ground for the United States' imperial efforts abroad. Following the war, South Korea, at the behest of the United States, was placed under a military dictatorship that ushered in a new era of industrialization and the implementation of a Western, market-based capitalist system (Klein 874-875). It is worth noting that this dictatorship included heavy censorship of media, including the burgeoning South Korean film and television industry (Klein 876). This industrialization was undertaken primarily through partnerships between the Korean state and emerging conglomerates known as chaebol. These companies and the families that owned them were the main beneficiaries of South Korean industrialization (Jeon 89). While this system has brought a degree of economic prosperity, it has concentrated wealth in the hands of an elite few Koreans, leaving millions locked in intractable, generational poverty with no hope of economic advancement. This is evident by the increase in economic inequality in South Korea since 1990 (Chi & Kwan 902). This has all occurred while South Korea has been held up to the rest of the world as an example of the prosperity that can be achieved with an unregulated capitalist economy. A prosperity that millions have been left out of by design.

This is the world all of Joon-ho's films exist within and speak to—one that is rife with class conflict and subject to the consequences of the American imperial project. His film *Memories of Murder* (2003), for example, tells the story of an investigation into South Korea's first serial killer, which is set in 1986 at the end of the military dictatorship and the birth of modern Korean capitalist society (Klein 878). Joon-ho expertly uses the framing device of a criminal investigation to assert that the birth of a capitalist society is inexorably intertwined with violence and death (Jeon 51)—something anyone who lives in a capitalist society can relate to. Other films like *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017) deal with themes of ecological collapse and the ways it exacerbates class conflict—a pressing theme for any country, especially one that houses the world's largest polluter, the US military. All of these films are done in Joon-ho's signature genre-building style that often mixes black comedy with surrealist and science fiction elements.

In *Parasite*, specifically, Joon-ho uses strong visual and thematic motifs to explore the Kims' material conditions and the ways in which they dictate every element of their lives. For example, the Kim family lives in a basement apartment in a densely populated, low-income area of Seoul. This immediately establishes a motif of stratification—both literal and economic—that persists throughout the film—each family's position on the economic ladder of Korean society is denoted by where they live, down to a terranean level of specificity. The wealthy Parks live in an above-ground, multi-level home with a garden, while their housekeeper Gwang and her husband live underneath the home in a secret bunker. The Kim family is positioned perfectly between them with their apartment just below ground level. Driven by their precarious financial situation, the Kim family infiltrates the Park home hoping to benefit from the obliviousness that often accompanies their level of wealth. In doing so, the Kims displace a family from a lower rung on

the economic ladder, so destitute they have been forced to squat underneath the home of their employer (Kim 251). The Kims are then pitted against Gwang and her husband, a conflict that comes to a head after a monsoon floods the Kims' apartment (which is vulnerable because of its existence below ground level). This all culminates in violence, which leaves the Kim family worse off than they were at the start of the film (Kim 255). In their quest to transcend their economic strata, the Kims morally compromise themselves by lying about the Parks' housekeeper Gwang to get her fired from her job. However, instead of ascending the economic and social ladder, the Kims are displaced and sent chaotically descending it. The Kims are punished for their striving, illustrating that their world is one governed by an inherently unequal system—one that demands that a subsection of the population live in intractable poverty, without any hope of advancement.

Another notable symbol in the film is the weapon Joon-ho has the Kim family use to try and kill Gwang and her husband: at the beginning of the film, the Kims' son Ki-woo is given a scholar's rock—a traditional Korean symbol of prosperity—by a friend from school. This is the same friend who tells him about the job with the Parks, thus setting the events of the film in motion. In the end, when Ki-woo needs a weapon to kill Gwang's husband, he chooses the rock. It is worth mentioning this attempt is thwarted and Gwang's husband uses the rock to knock Ki-woo unconscious. This is because, as mentioned, no scheme of personal advancement in the world of the film goes unpunished. The attempt by Ki-woo to kill Gwang's husband nevertheless becomes so much more than one person trying to murder another—Joon-ho meaningfully chooses a relic of Korea's pre-capitalist past as the murder weapon to symbolize the ultimate desecration of Korean society in the name of capitalist personal advancement.

Even though the events of the film are rooted in a specific cultural context—Joon-ho has even said aspects of the film were inspired by his personal experience as a tutor for a wealthy family in Seoul (Sims)—the film can capture the hearts and minds of viewers around the world because its themes are universal. In a time of economic uncertainty across the globe, inequality is on the rise. In every country, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow. This includes Western nations like the United States. *Parasite*, and Joon-ho's work more broadly, displays a unique ability to ground stories in the specific material realities of our historical moment. They introduce characters whose prospects are hopelessly limited by their material reality. It is with these deep material underpinnings that allegories or parables are most effective. Joon-ho's films also possess a unique understanding that all people, to one degree or another, are products of the environment they are born into. It is these harsh realities of our world that art must at least attempt to engage with—to hold up a mirror to the culture it is a product of, imperfections and all. Art must ask the questions that need to be asked. Joon-ho clearly understands that, before we can build a new or better world, we must first engage with the tensions and complexities of the one we exist in now.

IV. Mike White: Endless Engagement

In his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan delineates between hot and cool media. To McLuhan, the differentiating factor is the level of participation a medium requires from its audience. A hot medium like cinema overwhelms the senses and demands attention from the audience, while a cool medium like television is less abundant in sensory information and therefore requires more audience participation (McLuhan 31-34). It is worth mentioning that the television McLuhan is writing about is from the 1960s. In part, what makes television cool to McLuhan is the lower resolution picture and inferior quality

of sound TV at the time possessed compared to cinema. It can be challenging then to think about what McLuhan would think of high-definition television, surround sound, and internet streaming. Such developments have certainly injected an undeniable hotness into the medium of television. However, simultaneously, there has never been more to distract from the TV viewing experience. The ubiquity of streaming has cultivated a passive viewing habit by audiences that is undeniably cool in the McLuhanian sense.

Thus, despite these developments, television still requires a critical level of participation from its audience. A well of buy-in that must be consistently replenished. This buy-in simultaneously serves as a barrier to entry *and* provides the medium with a unique potential for expansive and inventive recurring storytelling. Television is a medium with a tantalizing maximalist impulse to push boundaries, with the only limiting factor being how long you can continue to engage and entertain the audience.

Following the writer's strike of 2023, the future of TV still feels uncertain. The golden age of television seems to have passed, and the ever-expanding streaming market we were promised seems poised to contract. In these times of great uncertainty, it is important to focus on the fundamentals and understand how to craft effective writing for television and create a product that is meaningful and engaging while harnessing the power television possesses as a cool medium. Furthermore, if you are unable to (or uninterested in) truly entertaining and engaging your audiences, you lose the power of your work—the importance of what you have to say. The insights to be gleaned from your work are rendered completely unimportant if you aren't entertaining and engaging your audience—it's the only way to actually create enough audience buy-in for viewers to ingest the meaning you want them to glean from your work.

There is, in my opinion, no current show better at navigating the central tension of television as a medium, and no better show to exemplify how to engage, entertain, and entice the audience successfully, than Mike White's *The White Lotus*. One of the reasons this series is so impactful is its successful deployment of the anthology series format, which allows him to balance audience investment in characters and storylines with the continual injection of new, fresh stories and characters.

For example, while each season introduces a new story and new characters (with some notable exceptions to be discussed later), thus far they have begun the same—with a death. Both seasons begin at the end. The audience sees that someone has died, but does not know who it is. The show then goes back in time to begin the story. This was a conscious choice by White to deploy a tried and true TV trope to hook the audience from the beginning. This choice gives the ensuing series a natural momentum, because the audience already knows where it is leading. The opening also haunts the show and its characters in a way that is very effective for the biting satire that White is creating. In interviews, White has even joked that he was surprised how such a simple, some might even say pedestrian, technique actually works to quickly and effectively draw the audience into each season's different story. In his interview with Terry Gross on NPR's *Fresh Air*, when asked about the use of the technique, White responded, "You know, I've been making stuff for a long time. And when that first season became such a kind of—I don't know—watercooler show where people were talking about it, I was like, actually, had I only known if I'd put a dead body at the beginning of *Enlightened*, maybe people would have watched *Enlightened*" (Gross). In this rather self-deprecating response, White displays an admirable level of humility in comparing *The White Lotus* to a less popular show of his—*Enlightened*. White admits that even he, a seasoned writer, has to remind himself that tropes exist for a

reason—because they work. The most inventive and boundary-pushing shows, like *The White Lotus*, achieve success not by neglecting these tropes but by using them effectively. Furthermore, by repeating this device in both seasons of the show, White creates an immediate connection between the beloved first season and the beginning of the second season, reminding the audience why they love the show and promising that the show is worth their time.

As mentioned, as part of the concept of the show, each season introduces a new location, new characters, and a new story. While this offers unique storytelling opportunities, it does require the audience to buy into new characters each season. White understands this, and mitigates it by carrying one fan-favorite character from season one to two—Tanya played by Jennifer Coolidge. According to White, this decision was made after season one and was due to how well the character was received by the show's audience (Andreeva & White). In fact, it is her death (unknownst to the audience) that begins and ends season two. White uses this character—the one the audience is most familiar with—to create some of the most climactic moments in the second season. His decision to give Tanya a multi-season arc gives the anthology series a welcomed connective tissue. It reminds the audience that all of these stories are part of the same world that they love to engage with. It has also been announced that the upcoming season will return another fan-favorite character from season one—Belinda, played by Natasha Rowell (Hailu). This announcement shows that the use of recurring characters is not a one-off, and is instead a conscious attempt to maintain and nurture audience investment from season to season.

The use of these techniques, simple as they might be, is foundational for the cool medium of television because they act to fulfill the fundamental promise of the medium—to endlessly engage and entertain the audience. They meet the audience where they are, enticing them to

participate (as McLuhan outlines) and drawing them into an entire world of potential stories. Further, it is the fulfillment of this promise of engagement that allows any work of art to have meaning or resonance at all. As White understands, before an audience can be fully immersed in a rich narrative universe of character and story they must first be engaged and entertained.

V. Conclusion

It is one thing to identify traits in the writing of your favorite filmmakers and screenwriters and assemble them into an aspirational artistic mosaic. It is entirely another to have a foolproof plan as to how I can leverage those tactics to carve my own place in the entertainment industry. This is not to say that I don't have a plan. I do. One that I hope will result in me being a professional writer for television and features. It is more that I understand even the best-laid plans often go awry. Or as Mike Tyson famously said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." I know that I will probably get punched in the mouth—metaphorically, I hope.

A successful entertainment career is an uncertainty, to say the least. When confronted with uncertainty, I defer to controlling things that I have the power to control. One of those things is my personal craft of writing. I have set out to transform myself into the best writer I am capable of being. Attending Pepperdine has been part of that journey. This will continue after Pepperdine as well. Writing is more than a potential career for me, it is the closest thing I have ever experienced to a calling in my life. It is worth mentioning that the more exposure I have to the entertainment industry, the more I learn that sheer writing ability does not necessarily correlate to Hollywood success. I have also learned that no one is successful on their own. For this, I plan to lean on the Pepperdine network and my personal network to find representation

and mentorship, and from there, move to establish a legitimate career. In return, I plan on always being an open and fruitful collaborator with others. In addition, in the vein of one of my thesis subjects, Richard Linklater, I want to carve my own path and subvert Hollywood conventions. This includes making things on my own whenever possible and forging opportunities for myself.

One goal I had when starting my time at Pepperdine was to option a script before graduating, and I am proud that I have accomplished that. This could not have been done without the help of my professor Hans Rodionoff, to whom I am eternally grateful. I believe I have made serious strides as a writer, and I hope that my portfolio displays that. I wanted to showcase a full range of my writing, from a feature to a pilot down to a sketch. I hope this will demonstrate the well-roundedness of style and the range that I believe I am capable of.

More than anything, I will rely on sheer persistence, and what I hope is a unique ability to never give up. I vow to scavenge for any morsel of opportunity, like a New York subway rat fighting for a discarded slice of pizza. I came to Pepperdine understanding I was making a bet on myself. That if I worked hard enough, I could take the only thing I could see myself doing happily for the rest of my life and turn it into a career. To succeed where others have failed. I will do everything in my power to ensure that bet was the right one.

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PLAYING POSSUM

Written by

David Espey

EXT. CARNIVAL - NIGHT

A Ferris wheel -- the center of a modest county carnival. The spherical structure reaches into the night sky, turning slowly, stopping momentarily for each cart to have its time at the top.

On the ground below, smaller rides, games, and food stands constellate around it. PEOPLE move about.

INT. FERRIS WHEEL CART - NIGHT

The cart holds at the top of the wheel. YOUNGER ANDI (5) sits with her father, GREG (mid 30s). She fits perfectly underneath his arm.

Under her own arm, younger Andi clutches a stuffed giraffe tightly. Greg kisses her on the top of her head.

Her brother, YOUNGER JASON (9), presses his face against the metal cage, mesmerized by the view.

ANDI (V.O.)
When we're kids we can create our
own worlds.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Toy dinosaurs are dumped out of a bucket and onto the ground.

Playtime in kindergarten class. While most of the KIDS engage with one another, younger Andi opts to play alone.

She has a collection of dinosaurs meticulously arranged.

Across the room, Greg enters with younger Jason. Younger Andi's eyes light up as she runs into her father's arms.

ANDI (V.O.)
These worlds have heroes.

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - DAY

The desk is attended by a SECRETARY. Greg signs the kids out of school early.

ANDI (V.O.)
Who exist on a different
frequency...

EXT. CARNIVAL - DAY

Younger Andi sits perched atop Greg's shoulders. She can see the whole carnival.

ANDI (V.O.)
...whose broad shoulders hold the
world in perfect balance.

LATER:

Greg wins each of the kids a stuffed animal from a carnival game -- a small giraffe for Andi.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Greg drives with both of his kids asleep in the back seat. He looks over his shoulder for a moment and smiles.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A heated argument between Greg and his wife, LINDA (mid 30s).

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The arguing carries upstairs and keeps younger Andi awake. She pulls her giraffe tight to her chest.

Footsteps from the hallway. Andi rolls over just as Greg opens the door to check on her. He walks over and kisses her on the head.

ANDI (V.O.)
But then we find out they aren't
heroes at all.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

A photo of Greg sits in front of a closed casket. The church is full. TEENAGE JASON (17) and ADOLESCENT ANDI (13) sit with their mother. Jason holds his sister's hand.

Tears roll down Andi's face. Her mother remains composed.

ANDI (V.O.)
That they are born just to die.

LATER:

The church is now empty except for adolescent Andi, who stands in front of the casket.

From behind, ADULT ANDI (27) approaches. She is draped in a comforter which drags on the floor behind her.

ANDI (V.O.)
That it's all a joke, they are just
like everyone else.

Adolescent Andi looks across the church at adult Andi. Both have tears falling down their faces.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

A drop of water collects on the bathtub faucet before falling onto Andi's foot. She's wearing a zip-up hoodie but no pants, and lies curled up in the bathtub with a comforter.

Her eyes are swollen from crying, but now she lies motionless, staring at the ceiling. On the edge of the tub is an empty frozen yogurt cup.

BUZZ -- Her phone, perched on the corner of the tub, vibrates until it falls to the floor.

With all her might, Andi pulls herself up just enough to pick up the phone. She has four voicemails. She plays the first.

WOMAN (V.O.)
Hello, I am calling from Dr.
Wilson's office to let you know you
missed your intake session. I can
reschedule you for next week, but I
also see that this is the third
time we've--

Delete.

Andi looks around at her unforgiving surroundings and zeros in on the empty cup of frozen yogurt.

INT. YOGURT SHOP - DAY

An unbearably trendy suburban frozen yogurt place.

Behind the counter two FROZEN YOGURT GUYS (18) joke with one another. YOGURT GUY 1 taps YOGURT GUY 2 and points to--

AT THE REGISTER:

Andi waits nervously with a cup of yogurt. She now has pants on, but keeps her hood up.

YOGURT GUY 2
She looks like the Unabomber.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

The second yogurt cup, now empty, sits next to the first.

Andi is back in her natural habitat, but hair now covers the ground. She lies in the bathtub with clippers in her hand and her head freshly shaven.

BUZZ -- Her phone. A text message from her mother Linda:
"Call me." There is also a voicemail. Andi plays it.

LINDA (V.O.)
Andrea? I don't know why I do this.
I pay for these doctors and you
don't go, then I call and you don't
answer. Andi...do I need to come
down there? I'm gonna call Shane--

Delete. Andi looks around the room again, for anything.

INT. YOGURT SHOP - DAY

A stunned look from Yogurt Guy 1.

YOGURT GUY 1
What the...?

Across the store, a hairless Andi stands on the other side of the register from Yogurt Guy 2.

She waits nervously with an even larger cup of frozen yogurt.

YOGURT GUY 2
You know, we have a rewards
program...?

Andi can't even look at him. His voice trails off as he hands her back her debit card and she hurries out the door.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

The largest empty cup is now perched on the side of the tub with the other two inside, Russian nesting doll style.

BUZZ -- Her phone rings until it goes to voicemail. It is the second voicemail since the last time she checked. She grabs her phone and plays the first.

BANK REP (V.O.)

This call is from the fraud
department at Bank of America.
We've noticed three separate
charges from Passion Frozen Yogurt--

Delete. Andi slumps into the tub as her eyes fill with tears. She has one more voicemail, from Jason. She thinks for a minute and then plays it.

JASON (V.O.)

Hey Andi, it's me. I talked to Mom.
I just wanted to call. I've been
going to this group. It's like for
family members. The food really
sucks, but they were talking about
how when things get really bad, you
just need to do something. To get
you up. Anyways. I'm here.

The message finishes. Andi takes a deep breath.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

An open living room connected to the kitchen area. The home has not felt lived in for some time and shows signs that someone has recently moved out.

Bags of trash collect in the corner.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Andi opens the refrigerator to reveal one carton of milk.

INT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

The frozen food aisle, a consumerism gauntlet of one freezer door after another.

An ELDERLY WOMAN is the only other person in the aisle with Andi. Both reach for the freezer door but stop. The woman smiles and motions for Andi to go ahead.

As Andi grabs the handle, the sleeve of her sweatshirt rides up to reveal the start of a long cut scar on her forearm. Andi retrieves a box and closes the door, but it's too late.

The smile disappears from the woman's face.

ANDI

The blood swap with my coven got a little out of hand.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Coven?

ANDI

Like a community of witches?

The woman retreats, horrified, leaving Andi alone.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Andi enters and slumps to the floor. She didn't buy anything. She looks across the room at the bags of trash. It is as if they are staring back at her.

EXT. ANDI'S HOUSE - DAY

Andi is ready to hurry to the trash cans before anyone sees her, but she's startled by ROBBIE (late 20s, heavier, with Down syndrome, wearing his Home Depot vest) as he approaches the door holding a cake with a flier on top of it.

ROBBIE

Andi!

Bags drop in panic.

ANDI

Jesus, Robbie, you scared me.

ROBBIE

Sorry. What happened to your hair?

ANDI

I wanted to cut it.

ROBBIE

Okay. I wanted to drop this off for you before I went to work. It's a meringue pie but I used clementines instead of lemon. Chef Bobby says pies and pastries require boldness.

ANDI

Thank you, it looks great.

ROBBIE

I called about having a cake party.
Where's Shane? I haven't seen him.

ANDI

He doesn't live here...I'm sorry
I've just been really busy.

ROBBIE

Do you need a hug?

He doesn't wait for an answer and embraces Andi. She doesn't have a choice, but appreciates it.

ANDI

You give great hugs, Robbie. Has
anyone ever told you that?

ROBBIE

Do you want some help with these?

Robbie takes a bag from Andi.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)

We aren't supposed to have anything
in the cans until Tuesday but I
wont tell anyone. Also...
(hands her the flier)
Ms. Sanders from down the street
lost one of her cats. I told her
I'd pass them out.

The flier reads "Lost Cat" at the top and features a poorly-printed black and white photo of a black cat.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)

If you don't want to bake, we can
just watch Palace of Pies--

One of the trash cans shakes.

ANDI

What was that?

Another one, and this time a SQUEAL from inside. Robbie and Andi step towards the can slowly. Andi lifts the lid just enough for both to look inside.

They jump back. The lid slams back into place.

ANDI (CONT'D)

That's the biggest rat I've ever
seen.

ROBBIE
That's a possum.

ANDI
What do I do?

Buzz -- Robbie's phone rings. He drops the bag and hands the cake to Andi.

ROBBIE
Leave him there. The mom might come back for it.

ANDI
But it might die?

ROBBIE
It could have rabies. Just leave it.

He runs back to his car.

ANDI
How do you know so much about possums?

Andi looks at her collection of garbage bags and a cake, then back at the can, waiting for it to move. When it doesn't, she looks inside again.

The possum is still there, helpless.

INT. PET STORE - DAY

Various pet supplies -- a carrying cage, some toys, and a small feeder bottle. One by one, the items are scanned by an apathetic CASHIER (man, 30s).

ANDI
What do possums eat?

The cashier's interest is piqued. He looks around, before--

CASHIER
Who sent you?

EXT. ANDI'S HOUSE - DAY

The trap is set, trash can laid on its side. A stick is used to prop the lid open.

Right next to the can is the carrying cage. The cage is ready for an occupant, outfitted with bedding and a peeled banana.

Next to the can, Andi has been waiting long enough that she is dozing off, not paying attention to her trap.

RATTLE -- The possum runs into the cage.

Andi freezes in shock, before almost reflexively reaching over and closing the cage.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Her home hasn't changed. Andi enters and it is not welcoming. She looks down at the cage.

Now on the ground, she is at eye level with the cage. Slowly, her hand moves towards the handle. As she lifts the hatch a HISS from inside.

She continues but the HISS turns to a GROWL. Andi relents.

ANDI
Okay, fine dude.

Dejected, she sits back onto the floor. Next to her is a loose piece of paper -- the lost cat flier from Robbie.

INT. OFFICE STORE - DAY

A behemoth of an industrial printer. A large stack of photocopies collects in the tray on the side. Andi waits with the cage.

Behind her, a BUSINESS MAN is growing impatient.

The printer finishes. Andi collects her copies and hurries off. The man opens the printer and removes the original Andi left behind. He looks at it, perplexed.

Andi returns and takes the original from him and leaves.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A staple gun fastens a sign to a telephone poll, next to one of the lost cat signs.

Andi moves out of the way to reveal her own sign, which reads, "Cat Found." However, instead of a cat, the photo is of her possum.

Underneath the photo, the flier reads (in bullet points): responds to Woody Guthrie, mild temperament, not house broken. Likes: bananas, nice people. Dislikes: capitalism, specifically Michael Bay movies.

At the bottom is Andi's phone number and address.

EXT. PARK - DAY

A tent city enclave of homeless people.

TOPPER (late 20s, hippie type) prepares his clippers. On a bench, ROCKY (50s, black) sits ready for a haircut. A garbage bag with a hole in the top is used as a bib.

ROCKY

I don't know about this.

TOPPER

No one's gonna hire you looking like that.

ROCKY

Why don't you stay at the shelter?

TOPPER

I got a home.

ROCKY

Don't make you special.

Clippers fire up as DWAYNE (40s, black) takes a seat at the other end of the table, reading one of Andi's fliers.

DWAYNE

Man, you see this?

He hands the flier to Rocky.

ROCKY

That ain't no cat.

Topper looks up and the photo grabs his attention.

TOPPER

Who put this up? How do I find them?

DWAYNE

It's a white girl, I can tell you that. Letting possums in they house and what not.

Topper can't believe what he is seeing. He knows this possum.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

INSERT:

Phone screen open to the Instagram of SHANE (20s, nerdy type) in photo after photo with BIANCA (20s, frumpy) living their best lives. In every photo, Bianca's left arm is in a sling.

In bed, Andi is cocooned underneath the covers. She tosses her phone aside and begins to cry until--

WHIMPERS from the next room. Andi ignores them at first but they persist. She gets out of bed.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

WHIMPERS continue. The cage sits in the sparsely-decorated living room.

Andi walks first to the refrigerator, which now contains bananas and Pedialyte. She takes out a Pedialyte and pours half of it into the bottle, filling the rest with water.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

INSERT:

Phone, now opened to a webpage explaining how to bottle-feed a possum.

Andi sits on the floor -- she's still nervous.

She opens the cage and reaches her hand in tepidly.

ANDI
Please don't bite me...

Fear melts from Andi's face and is replaced with a smile. She removes the possum from the cage as it licks her hand.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Oh, you're nice aren't you?

As Andi picks up the bottle and positions the possum as shown in the photo, she notices a black spot right above the tail.

She runs her fingers over it, but it's just discolored hair.

ANDI (CONT'D)
 I like your spot dude. Don't let
 other possums give you grief for
 it. It makes you, you.

The possum takes the bottle and begins to drink.

ANDI (CONT'D)
 You're a pro.
 (then)
 You probably miss your mom, huh?
 Everything must seem so big.

The possum guzzles the Pedialyte. Andi laughs to herself.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Late morning. The sun is up and shining through the windows onto the carrying cage, which now has "This Machine Kills Fascists" written in sharpie on the side.

Andi is asleep on the floor next to the cage.

A muffled RING from the other room. It continues until it wakes Andi up. After a moment, her confusion dissipates and she goes to her bedroom.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Andi picks up the phone but doesn't recognize the number.

The call goes to voicemail, and she sees she has dozens of missed calls and messages. She plays the first, from an aggressive MAN.

MAN
 (through phone)
 You dumb bitch, that's a possum--

Delete. The next is a CONCERNED WOMAN.

CONCERNED WOMAN
 (through phone)
 Dear, I just wanted to let you
 know, that is not a cat. It is a
 raccoon. They are very aggressive.

Delete. Andi thinks before starting the next, then--

MAN 2
(through phone)
What do you think you are doing? Is
this some kind of joke?

Delete. Andi drops the phone. She is shaken and puts her face
in her hands to calm down. A KNOCK at the door.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

AT THE DOOR:

Front door opens to reveal Robbie. He is worked up and holds
up the flier of the possum.

ROBBIE
I told you to leave it alone. I saw
this and ran straight here. If he
bit you and you got rabies--

ANDI
Do you wanna meet him?

INSIDE HOUSE:

A bright smile from Robbie as the possum licks his hands
frantically while Andi holds him.

ANDI (CONT'D)
See, he's nice.

ROBBIE
What's his name?

Andi points to the words on the side of the cage.

ANDI
Woody Guthrie.

ROBBIE
I don't get it.

ANDI
That's okay.

ROBBIE
What are you going to do with him?

ANDI
I just couldn't leave him alone.

Another KNOCK at the door. Andi looks at Robbie, hoping it is someone with him. He is equally confused. She gives the possum to Robbie to hold.

AT THE DOOR:

The door opens to reveal Topper, also holding a flier. Behind Topper, parked at the curb, is a 1970s Tradesman van. Topper speaks as if his brain is already on his next sentence.

TOPPER

Excuse me, are you the legal guardian of this possum?

ANDI

What's your name?

TOPPER

What? Topper. I just need to know--

ANDI

I like your van.

TOPPER

This is a time-sensitive matter. Is the possum represented on this document here?

Andi doesn't want to answer.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

I don't want to alarm you, but that possum contains the karma of my dead mother.

(then)

How familiar are you with the Tibetan Book of the Dead? The book talks about the possibility that spirits can be trapped, so they can't get to enlightenment. A Tibetan monk has to free them. There's a monk at the Buddhist temple in New York. He is only there for a few more days.

ANDI

Do you listen to your words as you're saying them?

TOPPER

It's all here. I got these from the library.

He hands her a disorganized collection of papers.

ANDI

This is a recipe for homemade pound cake.

Topper takes the page and inspects it himself.

TOPPER

There was also a baking group-- the rest of it is there.

Andi riffles through the documents -- mostly printouts from websites that look like they were designed in the late 90s, as well as the Wikipedia for the Tibetan monk Nyima Rhokisda.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

I need to get this possum to New York before the monk--

ANDI

This looks like it's from a website about how aliens built The Pyramids. You should leave.

TOPPER

They're from the internet, they have to be true. Her karma is trapped in your possum.

The door begins to shut.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

I know about the black spot.

Andi stops.

ROBBIE

I told you to leave it alone.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Now inside, Andi and Robbie stand as far away from him while still in the same room. Robbie holds the possum tightly.

TOPPER

I can't stress how time-sensitive this is.

ANDI

Why do you need me?

TOPPER

It's not my call. The universe decided.

(MORE)

TOPPER (CONT'D)

It made you the holder of this
possum. I can't go against that.

ANDI

But the same universe put your
mom's spirit--?

TOPPER

Karma--

ANDI

Karma, in it? Like a Pringle in a
Pringles can?

TOPPER

What, no?

ROBBIE

Like chips in a bag of chips?

ANDI

He's a boy. Your mom was woman?

TOPPER

What? Yes.

ANDI

So the universe made a mistake?

TOPPER

The universe doesn't make mistakes.
I don't have time to explain this--

ROBBIE

How do you know about the spot?

TOPPER

A dream.

ROBBIE

Do you have dreams like that a lot?

ANDI

Always about possums, or--?

TOPPER

This is a waste of my time!
Everything is out of balance, can't
you feel it?

Looks between Robbie and Andi -- feel what?

TOPPER (CONT'D)

I'm the only one who can fix it!

Silence, followed by a knock at the door.

AT THE DOOR:

The door opens to reveal Shane. He's holding a flier and he's with Bianca, who stands behind him with her arm in a sling.

SHANE

What is this--?

(noticing her hair)

Where's the rest of your hair?

Shane peeks through the door and sees Robbie and Topper.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Shane positions himself in front of the door. Andi sits on the bed across from him.

SHANE

What is this? Your address is on here. There's psychos that could just see this. One of them is in your living room.

(then)

Do I need to call Jason? Your mom?

ANDI

Are you serious?

SHANE

You look like a French woman who collaborated with Nazis, and I'm the crazy one?

ANDI

Don't--

SHANE

Acting crazy. I should have said no. When she asked, I should have just said no.

ANDI

Who?

SHANE

Your mom.

ANDI

You're making house calls for my mom now? And don't act like this isn't fun for you.

SHANE

You wanted me to come, or you wouldn't have a reject version of the Scooby-Doo gang out there.

ANDI

This isn't about you. I don't have anyone here. We moved here for you, for your school. And now you're just gone. I don't even know what's going on with you. How is your thesis going?

Shane settles, he can't resist talking about himself.

SHANE

It's tough. There just isn't a wealth of academic writing to support my argument. Bianca's been amazing though. She helped me kick alcohol, just trying to be healthier. Has me drinking this kombucha tea everyday. She just has a great perspective--

ANDI

Screw you.

SHANE

She does, It's cause of her dis--

ANDI

Fibromyalgia is not a real disease.

SHANE

Tell that to the three million people diagnosed every year.

ANDI

I'm kind of struggling here. I don't need you to rub it in my face how amazing your life is right now.

SHANE

You want to be miserable, that way you can bring everyone down to your level. You're like a black hole and you need planets orbiting you in your solar system of misery.

ANDI

Even when you're insulting me you can't help but be an insufferable, literary douche canoe.

INT. ANDI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

The sound of the argument from the bedroom spills out into the rest of the house. Bianca sits on the couch with Robbie, who is still holding the possum.

Topper paces nervously in the kitchen. He checks his wrist, but he is not wearing a watch.

TOPPER

(to Bianca)

Excuse me, ma'am. How long do they usually do this for?

BIANCA

Four and a half years.

ROBBIE

What's wrong with your arm?

BIANCA

I have a pain disorder. It's the same one Lady Gaga has. You'd just never know because she handles it with such beauty and grace.

Another moment passes. Bianca can't take it anymore and gets up. She heads towards the bedroom until Shane flies out of the room followed by Andi.

ANDI

Don't leave.

SHANE

I let you pull me back in. I'm really done. You're toxic.

TOPPER

That's not cool, brother, don't talk to her like that.

SHANE

Who even are you?

TOPPER

Just here for the marsupial.

SHANE

(to Andi)

Squeaky Fromme, what is Charlie Manson talking about?

ANDI

Don't be a dick.

SHANE
You got the hair.

BIANCA
He thinks the possum is his mom.

ANDI & TOPPER
It's not her, it's her karma.

SHANE
Never mind. You guys have fun on
your traveling circus, banging
drums at airports or killing Sharon
Tate or whatever you guys are
doing. Bianca, let's go.

Bianca and Shane head for the door. Topper is tired of waiting and takes the possum from Robbie. He walks up to Andi and puts the possum's face uncomfortably close to hers.

TOPPER
The universe gave you this possum
for a reason. Don't reject its
call.

SHANE
Give it a rest--

ANDI
I'm coming with you.

Shane stops. He can't believe what he heard. Topper is already halfway out the door.

SHANE
Andi, come on, stop messing around.

Andi collects a few things and heads out the door.

EXT. ANDI'S HOUSE - DAY

The group pours out of the house and into the front yard. Andi walks towards the van with her possum. Shane is in pursuit. Topper loads the cage into the back.

SHANE
Andi, stop.

ANDI
I'm just doing what crazy people
do.

BIANCA
Shane, just leave it.

SHANE
I'm telling your mom.

ANDI
How old are you?

Robbie comes running out of the house.

ROBBIE
I want to come.

SHANE
Robbie, this is a bad idea.

ROBBIE
Shane, I don't like you cause
you're not a nice person.

ANDI
He's right.

SHANE
The hair that was on your head is
gone! How does no one else see this
is crazy?

Andi pulls the passenger door, but it's stuck--

SHANE (CONT'D)
This is ridiculous.

ANDI
I'm not your problem anymore--

The door finally swings open and SMACKS Andi in the face.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Son of a bitch.

SHANE
You need to ice that.

ROBBIE
He's right, it's gonna swell.

TOPPER
Everyone get in the van.

As Andi steps into the van, Shane grabs her forearm.

ANDI
Let go of me.

SHANE
No. I'm not letting you do this.

BIANCA
She's not worth it.

TOPPER
Back up.

Topper positions himself between Andi and Shane. With one hand he pulls Shane's hand from Andi's wrist. The other hand goes behind his back.

From behind, Andi watches Topper's hand lift the back of his shirt to reveal a knife. His hand hovers over it but does not remove it.

Topper's grip is strong and his eyes let Shane know he means business. No force is needed.

TOPPER (CONT'D)
Leave her alone.

Topper's hand moves away from the knife and the shirt falls harmlessly to cover it again.

As he does this, Shane pulls his hand away so hard he loses his balance and knocks over Bianca. She falls to the ground.

BIANCA
Ah! My arm!

Shane follows her down and tends to her.

ANDI
It's not a real disease!

TOPPER
Get in the van.

Andi and Robbie file into the van almost as if they are complying with an order.

The ignition fires up as Shane tends to Bianca. The van begins to back out as the window rolls down.

ANDI
Kombucha has alcohol in it, dick.

The window doesn't come up when Andi pushes the button.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Is it broken?

TOPPER
Sometimes you have to hit it.

She smacks the control board on her arm rest. The window raises, slowly, as the van continues to back out.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Shane and Bianca follow the van out and watch it drive away. Once it is far enough away, Bianca directs a frustrated look towards Shane.

SHANE
What?

BIANCA
I didn't say anything.

SHANE
I can tell you're mad.

BIANCA
I don't get mad! I get disappointed. Anger is not a constructive emotion.

INT. VAN - DAY

Outside the window, Shane and Bianca get smaller and smaller as Andi looks away and takes in her surroundings for the first time.

The reality of situation is sinking in. She looks at Topper, who stares straight ahead.

ANDI
Why do you have a knife?

TOPPER
You don't?

ANDI
No.

TOPPER
What if you have to kill something?

ANDI
I never have to do that.

ROBBIE

Me neither.

Andi looks at Robbie in the back seat. What did she get herself into?

LATER:

Silence in the van. Topper and Robbie seem content with this, but Andi is more on edge. Her eye is already swelling up.

Robbie has the possum in his hands. Periodically, Topper looks at them both in the rear view mirror. Something is bothering him.

ANDI

Do you know him, this monk?

(off head shake)

So you're just going to ask him to--

TOPPER

(to Robbie)

Can you stop that? Put him back.

Robbie returns the possum to his cage. The van returns to silence, until Andi can't take it any more.

ANDI

That was my boy-- ex-boyfriend. And his new girlfriend, that you wanted to stab.

TOPPER

I didn't-- it was defensive--

ANDI

I don't need people caring about me if they are just going to leave.

TOPPER

Then why are you talking about him?

ROBBIE

Do you live in here?

TOPPER

Yes.

ROBBIE

Why don't you have a home?

ANDI

Robbie--

TOPPER

People think having a home is gonna protect them. Fetishized comfortability will kill you just as fast as anything else.

ANDI

I don't hate him. I just don't want him to be happy right now.

TOPPER

Do you always talk this much?

ANDI

Not usually.

TOPPER

Then why are you?

ANDI

Cause I know you aren't listening.

ROBBIE

Will we be back by Monday? I have a interview at Lowe's.

ANDI

I thought you worked at Home Depot?

ROBBIE

Not after yesterday.

ANDI

Cause you were late for helping me? Robbie, I'm so sorry.

ROBBIE

No. I gave this woman a hug and she didn't like it and told my boss. She seemed so nice. Can someone seem nice but not be?

ANDI

Yes.

TOPPER

No.

ANDI (CONT'D)

You know that had nothing to do with you right?

ROBBIE

It's okay. Some people don't like hugs. Other people love my hugs.

ANDI
I still think--

TOPPER
Not everyone wants hugs.

ROBBIE
While we are in New York, can we go
to New Jersey to see Chef Bobby's
bakery from the show?

ANDI
Sure.

ROBBIE
It's in Hoboken, according to TLC
it's only a short 30 minute train--

TOPPER
No! We have one mission.

ANDI
You're not very chill for a
Buddhist.

A dismissive scoff from Topper.

ANDI (CONT'D)
What?

TOPPER
You don't understand Buddhism.

ANDI
You don't know what I know, dude.

TOPPER
It's obvious. The West has
completely bastardized it. Buddhism
is about chaos, there is no pattern
to suffering, that's what makes it
impossible to rationalize. There's
no deus ex machina bullshit--
(too agitated to continue)
No more talking.

ANDI
Why? It was going so well.

DING from the dashboard.

TOPPER
Dammnit!

Andi matches his intensity.

ANDI
What is it?

TOPPER
We need gas.

All Andi can manage is a look of shock.

EXT./INT. VAN - DAY

The van rumbles into the parking lot of an empty gas station.

INSIDE:

Andi is on edge as Topper cuts the ignition.

ANDI
I can put in some money.

Topper isn't listening as he checks his pockets.

ANDI (CONT'D)
(realizing)
My wallet is sitting on my kitchen
counter. Somehow, I have my phone
though, I have \$15.

TOPPER
There's a 50 in there.

Glove compartment opens and an assortment of papers, coins,
and trinkets fall to the ground.

The \$50 bill remains in the compartment, tucked into the
side. Andi grabs it and hands it to Topper.

ANDI
Here. I'll pick all this up.

TOPPER
Do-- if you need to-- we aren't
stopping. I mean we are stopped now
but not after. I mean again.

Topper leaves in a huff. That didn't go well.

On the floor, an expired driver's license sticks out from a
pile of other papers.

Andi picks up the license. The photo is clearly Topper, but
the information is for a Douglas McKenna from Virginia.

Outside the window, Topper walks into the gas station. Andi looks at him and then back at the license.

ROBBIE
What's wrong with him?

Andi looks at her phone. It only has half of the battery life left, she turns it off in case she needs it later

ANDI
Stay close to me, okay? Just in case.

ROBBIE
I have \$20.

Robbie pulls a bill from his wallet.

ANDI
No, I don't want your money.

ROBBIE
I have a credit card too.

The door opens for Andi to leave.

ANDI
What's your credit score?

ROBBIE
740

ANDI
Unbeliev-- I mean congratulations that's great.

ROBBIE
What's your score?

ANDI
I don't want to play this game.

Andi gets out of the van. Robbie folds the bill and puts it in the front pocket of his shirt. He smiles at the possum.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

As Andi approaches the door, she already has eyes on Topper through the window.

Back at the pump, Robbie's in the van with the door open. He plays with Woody while the gas pumps.

A gaudy sports car pulls in and two KIDS get out laughing. Both have cans of beer in their hands. They're acting older, but their peach fuzz betrays their true age.

Kid 1 tosses the empty can in the trash as Kid 2 checks his pockets for his wallet, only to realize he forgot it.

KID 1
Are you kidding me?
(then)
What now?

They look around the empty parking lot until Kid 1 zeros in on Robbie, and the bill poking out of his shirt pocket.

KID 1 (CONT'D)
Hey! Hey, retard.

INT. GAS STATION - DAY

The candy aisle of a lonely interstate gas station. Andi pretends to peruse but keeps eyes on Topper at the register.

AT REGISTER:

A bottle of water and a tin of Altoids. Behind the register is a SLACKER TYPE (late 20s). Topper leans closer to the slacker and motions to the Altoids box.

TOPPER
I need a box of the Marlboro Reds
and put them in here?

SLACKER TYPE
Just buy the--?

The look from Topper shows he's serious, and the slacker complies. Topper looks back and catches Andi staring.

IN AISLE:

Andi ducks into the aisle. He is onto her. She grabs a box of candy as if that will throw him off. She doesn't see the deception going on at the register.

AT REGISTER:

As he collects his things, something catches Topper's eye outside. He springs into action and runs out the door.

Andi follows without realizing she is holding a box of Mike and Ikes. The slacker from behind the register notices.

SLACKER TYPE (CONT'D)
Yo, you gotta pay for that.

The door shuts behind Andi. After a second it reopens and Andi tosses the box inside without looking. The box explodes as it hits the ground sending candy all over the floor.

SLACKER TYPE (CONT'D)
Come on, dude.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

At the van, the kids are now harassing Robbie.

KID 1
What are you gonna even do with
that money?

A look of terror on Robbie's face. Kid 2 grabs the possum.

ROBBIE
Don't hurt him.

KID 2
Just give it over. This is gonna be
a lot easier for you.

Both kids laugh as they make noises to imitate a mentally handicapped person.

Across the parking lot, Topper marches towards the van. As he walks, he clenches his fist. Andi exits the store and for the first time sees the kids harassing Robbie.

ANDI
Robbie!

Topper has closed the distance and Kid 1 turns around just as Topper grabs his head and slams it against the van with ease.

The kid collapses to the floor and lies motionless. With one threat neutralized, Topper turns his attention to Kid 2, who is rightfully terrified.

Without speaking, Topper motions for him to hand the possum to Robbie. The kid complies.

A look of relief from the kid, who thinks he has been spared, until Topper swings back around and clocks him right on the chin. He falls to the ground and writhes in pain.

Topper and Robbie are already loading the van when Andi walks by the kids. She hurries to Robbie.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Are you okay?

TOPPER
Get in.

Anger consumes Andi and she runs over to Kid 2 to give him one more kick to the ribs.

Kid 2 continues to writhe in pain as Andi climbs into the van and Topper speeds off.

INT. VAN - DAY

Topper is still heated. Andi is amazed.

ANDI
That was really brave.

TOPPER
I shouldn't have let--

ANDI
They were going to hurt Robbie.

TOPPER
Not the first one, that was the only response to their aesthetic. The second one--

ANDI
Both were asking for it. They were walking, talking Biff Tannens. I didn't know people like that actually existed in the wild.

TOPPER
(earnestly)
In high school, I wasn't the coolest kid--

ANDI
You don't have to explain yourself.

TOPPER
It all matters. At some point hitting someone else is just hitting yourself. Nothing occurs in a vacuum. You can't just break one rung on a ladder and think nothing will happen. I just couldn't let--

ANDI
Dude, what are you talking about?

Words are not working for Topper. He throws the steering wheel to the right.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A sudden swerve as the van veers onto the shoulder.

INT. VAN - DAY

In the aftermath of the sudden turn, Andi and Robbie regather themselves.

Topper turns his torso around and extends himself so that he is as close to Robbie as possible.

TOPPER
Listen to me.

Topper tries to move closer but can't because of his seat belt.

ANDI
You're still--

ROBBIE
The seat belt.

The belt unclips and Topper convulses until he is free of it, and can reach into the back seat to be face to face with Robbie. The tips of their noses are almost touching.

TOPPER
Don't let anyone tell you there is something wrong with you. You're a perfect manifestation of the universe.
(then)
Anyone tells you different, I'll kill them.

Silence as Topper turns around. Robbie is too stunned to move. Andi stares as Topper pulls back onto the highway.

INT. VAN - DAY

Silence. Robbie is in the back holding the possum. As Andi's eyes move around the van, a look of familiar panic overtakes her face. She knows what's coming.

Her breaths get tighter and she starts to move around in her seat. Topper looks over, then back to the road. Now she is on the verge of tears -- she has to get out of the van. She tries to lower the window.

TOPPER
It's broken.

ANDI
We need to stop.

TOPPER
No.

ROBBIE
Are you okay?

ANDI
I have to get out of here. Pull over.

TOPPER
We just stopped.

ANDI
You don't understand--

TOPPER
No stopping.

ANDI
Pull over!

ROBBIE
Let her out!

ANDI
Pull over this van!

The screams are too much and Topper relents, pulling off into the shoulder.

EXT. VAN - DAY

Dirt kicks up behind the van as it slows to a stop. Cars pass by on the highway.

The passenger door swings open. Andi gasps for fresh air. She looks around but there is nowhere to go, so she sits down in front of the back passenger wheel well so passing cars can't see her.

She is still fighting back tears as Robbie gets out of the van.

ANDI
It's okay, Robbie, just stay in the van.

ROBBIE
Are you okay?

ANDI
I'm fine. Just please watch Woody.

INT. VAN - DAY

The back door slides shut as Robbie gets back into the van. Topper stays in the driver's seat.

The passenger side rear view mirror shows Andi, her face buried into her knees as she cries. Topper sees this and unbuckles his seat belt.

EXT. VAN - DAY

Still crying, Andi lets her head fall against the van.

SLAM of the driver side door. Topper's steps can be heard until he is next to Andi and sits down.

ANDI
You can go back in the van.

TOPPER
I'm just gonna sit out here.

ANDI
I don't need you to do that. It's fine, I'll pull myself together.

TOPPER
I'm gonna stay!

ANDI
Why?

TOPPER
So you aren't alone.

The two sit. Andi continues to cry and then lets it intensify. Topper settles in, almost instinctively. He doesn't do anything, but he's there.

INT. VAN - DAY

The passenger door shuts as Andi gets back into the van, her eyes are still red from crying.

Topper and Robbie are both ready to leave. Topper fires up the ignition and puts it into gear but stops when Andi speaks.

ANDI

I'm sorry. That just happens.

TOPPER

Don't apologize for something like that. Ever.

ANDI

You don't have to say that--

TOPPER

(getting agitated)

Why would I say something I don't mean?

ANDI

I don't know. Sometimes people do.

TOPPER

What a complete waste of energy.

Topper drives off.

INT. VAN - DAY

Andi still can't take the silence.

In the backseat, Robbie is bottle feeding the possum.

ANDI

Can I turn on the radio?

(off his look)

It'll keep me from talking.

Nod from Topper. Andi turns on the radio. A Carl Sagan audiobook plays.

ANDI (CONT'D)

What is this?

TOPPER

Pale Blue Dot.

ANDI

That doesn't mean anything to me.
Sometimes it's like you've never
spoken to a human.

TOPPER

It's a book by Carl Sagan.

Andi ejects the cassette from the player and inspects it.

ANDI

What year is it in this van?

TOPPER

Then you play something.

ANDI

I totally would but all of my Noam
Chomsky cassettes are with the
hostages in Iran.

TOPPER

I like Chomsky.

ANDI

That was a joke.
(to Robbie)
Make sure he doesn't have too much.

TOPPER

How's your eye?

ANDI

It's fine. I just bruise easily.

TOPPER

You should have iced it--

Andi turns on the radio. A pop station playing a catchy song.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

No.

Station changes to another pop song.

ROBBIE

I like that song.

TOPPER

No pop music.

ANDI

That's what the radio is.

Station change again, this time to hard rock.

TOPPER

No.

ANDI

Come on.

TOPPER

Contrived rock music presented as
the antidote to bad pop music.

One more station change, "Dancing Queen" by ABBA is just starting. Nothing from Topper.

ANDI

No complaint?

(then)

Really? Going soft on me.

No response. The lyrics begin and Andi sings to herself.

LATER:

The chorus, Andi and Robbie are both singing.

ANDI & ROBBIE

"You can dance, you can jive..."

Instead of measured and reserved, Andi now seems free of inhibition. Her melancholiness is lifted. Topper notices the change in her demeanor and he can't stop looking.

The enthusiasm from Andi and Robbie only grows with the song.

ANDI

Pull over.

Topper looks over at Andi's smile. He is intrigued and willingly complies.

EXT. VAN - DAY

The van pulls off onto the shoulder and Andi and Robbie pour out of the van.

With space they now sing and dance. Topper doesn't dance, but he turns up the radio as loud as it can go. Still not loud, but they make it work.

Andi's energy is intoxicating -- she moves as if all of her energy has been suppressed for too long and is now being released. Topper recognizes and is entranced by this.

INT. VAN - DAY

The van darts down the highway.

Inside, the mood has completely changed, much more of a road trip vibe. Andi and Robbie continue to jam out to the radio.

Topper doesn't seem to hate it. He is still taken by Andi. "Rainy Days Monday" by The Carpenters plays on the radio.

ANDI

"Nothing to do but frown, rainy days, Mondays always get me down."

(then)

Contralto shouldn't sound that easy. And just in case that wasn't enough, she played the drums too, like really played. You beautifully talented, screwed up woman.

Topper can't take his eyes off Andi. Robbie's attention is grabbed by sign outside the window for a local carnival.

ROBBIE

Can we stop?

TOPPER

No.

ROBBIE

Andi, you want to stop, right?

Andi's smile disappears again.

ANDI

I don't know, Robbie.

TOPPER

We don't have time.

ROBBIE

What about another street? Like a shortcut or something?

Robbie picks up a map from the ground.

TOPPER

There isn't another street--

ROBBIE

What about this one? It goes the same way but isn't as long.

TOPPER
What?

ANDI
I-78.

ROBBIE
Yeah, how did you know that?

ANDI
I just did.

ROBBIE
So we can stop?

Topper looks at Andi.

ANDI
What?

TOPPER
Should we--?

ANDI
Why are you asking me?

TOPPER
(stops himself)
I was just...

Silence.

ROBBIE
Please.

Without speaking, Topper pulls the van off the highway. Robbie erupts with cheers in the back. Andi slumps into her seat, Topper notices.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

An open field used for parking.

Topper has set up camp and sits outside the van, shirtless, brushing his teeth. A MOTHER (35) and DAUGHTER (7) pass by. The mother pulls her daughter in close.

Topper doesn't seem to notice or care.

No one else is around. Topper peeks around before pulling a cigarette out of his stash.

INT./EXT. VAN - DAY

In the front seat of the van with the door open, Andi sits feeding the possum, who lies on his back on top of her legs, guzzling Pedialyte.

Andi scratches his stomach -- he enjoys this. Her eyes catch the rear view mirror, where she sees Topper smoking.

In the center console of the van sits Andi's phone. She picks it up and thinks for a moment before turning it on.

INSERT:

The phone screen. Once on, the phone is inundated with missed calls and texts. Mostly from her mother, Linda.

Two messages: "Shane called me, what the hell is going on?" and "Call me back, now."

Andi drops the phone. Her eyes well up with tears.

OUTSIDE THE VAN:

Robbie returns from cleaning out the possum's cage.

ROBBIE

There's gonna be a cake contest tonight-- what's wrong?

ANDI

Nothing.

Topper rounds the corner.

TOPPER

What is it?

ROBBIE

Andi is crying.

ANDI

I'm not crying. You guys go.

TOPPER

No. You wanted to stop so we stopped, I can't--

ANDI

I didn't want to stop. How many times do I have to say that?

TOPPER

What is it then?

ANDI
I checked my phone. I shouldn't
have done that. I was doing fine--

The phone still sits in the console. From outside the van, Topper zeros in on it. He climbs into the passenger's seat and reaches over Andi.

ANDI (CONT'D)
What are you--? Watch Woody.

He grabs the phone and gets out of the van. Andi gives the possum to Robbie and they both follow.

EXT. VAN - DAY

The trunk door swings open. Topper looks around in the back for something before pulling out a container of gasoline.

ANDI
Topper?

The door shuts and Topper walks off. Andi and Robbie follow.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

A section of the field with no cars. Topper walks with eyes to the ground looking for something.

ANDI
Dude...

His eyes stay locked on the ground until he finds a large rock. He places the phone on the rock. From his pocket, a lighter. He offers the lighter and gasoline to Andi.

ANDI (CONT'D)
What am I supposed to do with that?

TOPPER
Light it.

ANDI
My phone? Are you crazy?

TOPPER
You don't need it. I don't have a
phone.

ANDI
Not the best example.

TOPPER

It's a consumerist eyesore that makes you miserable.

ANDI

I don't need a phone to make me miserable.

TOPPER

Light it.

ANDI

Why?

TOPPER

It will make you feel better.

ANDI

For like two seconds.

TOPPER

I don't care. Light it.

Andi looks at the gasoline and lighter. She takes them, hesitant at first. Topper gives her a nod. She pours out a small amount of gasoline.

SPARK of the lighter and the flame ignites. Andi lowers the flame, slowly. It catches. A small fire consumes the phone.

As Andi watches, a feeling of catharsis floods her face. She can't help but laugh. Topper smiles. Robbie looks confused.

The warm moment is abruptly interrupted by a SECURITY GUARD who approaches without anyone noticing.

SECURITY GUARD

Hey!

They begin to leave, but the fire is still going. Andi notices, and kicks it out before they all run away.

INT. CARNIVAL - DAY

A Ferris wheel holds the carnival together. The sun is setting behind it.

Below, mostly families with small children.

The exceptions are Andi, Topper, and Robbie, who walk together while Andi carries the possum in its cage.

LATER:

At a set of small slides, Andi stands at the top with the possum in hand. She lowers him to the slide and lets go.

He slides down and Robbie catches him before lifting him into the air, the way one might lift a child.

Andi's face lights up. She is more at ease and begins to let loose. Topper seems more comfortable too.

Families look on, confused. The same kid from the parking lot pets the possum as Andi holds him. He is friendly and licks the child's hand.

CAKE CONTEST:

All three try a bite of every cake in the competition.

ROBBIE
Too much vanilla.

The CAKE CONTESTANT looks less than pleased.

CARNIVAL GAMES:

Robbie plays a game where he throws a softball at a stack of blocks. The first throw topples the blocks.

Andi cheers as Robbie beams with pride.

FOOD STAND:

Andi and Robbie get caramel apples. Robbie takes a third and hands it to Topper. He inspects it.

ANDI
We didn't poison it.

Topper smiles and bites into the apple awkwardly, caramel covers his face. Andi and Robbie laugh.

EXT. CARNIVAL - NIGHT

It's later, but the carnival is still in full swing.

Robbie loads the possum into his cage.

ANDI
Don't give him the whole bottle,
and see if he'll eat the rest of
the banana.

Robbie nods and walks off. Now left alone, Andi and Topper walk through the carnival, going nowhere in particular.

ANDI (CONT'D)

Why'd you stop?

TOPPER

He wanted to. He's a good person.

ANDI

You guys are good together, in a weird way.

TOPPER

I'm better on my own.

ANDI

What about your family? I mean, the rest of your family?

(then)

We don't have to talk about it.

TOPPER

No. They're not good people.

ANDI

My dad used to take me and my brother to these when we were kids. Every year, no excuses. I remember everything seeming really big and bright. Then we stopped going. After he died.

(then)

Was your mom like you?

TOPPER

She liked music.

(then)

One time when I was in fourth grade, I had this pen that looked like a feather, like the one people used to write with. My mom got it for me when we were in DC. These kids at school held me down at recess and they burned it. I didn't want everyone to see me cry so I told the nurse I was sick.

ANDI

Kids are mean.

TOPPER

It made me feel small. My mom came to get me and took me to get ice cream. Then we drove to the beach. It was like three hours and she just sat there with me. I don't know why she took me there.

ANDI

Maybe she wanted you to see feeling small is okay.

TOPPER

You're alive in a different way.

A smile shines through Andi's attempts to hide it.

ANDI

I want to show you something.

EXT. FERRIS WHEEL - NIGHT

Andi and Topper wait in line at the base of the wheel. Andi fidgets nervously as they wait -- she is getting anxious. Topper grabs her hand, which puts her at ease.

INT. FERRIS WHEEL CART - NIGHT

Both get into their cart and close the door.

The cart moves around the wheel slowly.

ANDI

I wish I could be like you. Know everything was going to be okay.

TOPPER

You came to help me. Most people would've said no, cause it didn't concern them.

ANDI

I just got in your van. Besides, you said I was chosen.

TOPPER

The universe can call you, It can't make you do anything. (then) You're a light.

ANDI

I didn't do anything.

TOPPER

You did. You're someone who keeps
the cosmos in place.

ANDI

You said you weren't good at
talking.

TOPPER

Why did you cut your hair?

ANDI

I didn't want it to keep growing. I
can't shake this feeling that all
of this doesn't end well for me.

TOPPER

Everyone has chaos, you have to
choose to order it.

(then)

I made my decision a long time ago.

ANDI

What was that?

TOPPER

To be there for people close to me.

The cart continues to circle the wheel slowly. Andi and
Topper sit silently and watch the wheel turn.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

Thank you for showing this to me.

At the top for a moment, they get a view of it all. Andi
rests her head on Topper's shoulder. He doesn't reject it, so
she reaches for his hand. He lets her take it.

EXT. CARNIVAL - NIGHT

It's late and the carnival is dying down. Topper and Andi
walk alone as the families leave with their young children.

Andi takes Topper's hand. He lets her.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

A now empty parking lot. Andi and Topper sit with each other.
Neither has to speak.

After a moment, Topper looks down at her. They stare at one
another and then kiss.

The kiss is timid at first, then intensifies.

They fall to the ground with one another. Topper is on top, Andi unbuttons his pants.

EXT. VAN - NIGHT

The van is now the only car parked in the field. Andi and Topper approach hand in hand.

A SCREAM from Robbie startles them.

ROBBIE

Andi!

Robbie rushes towards them from the other side of the van. He is distraught and struggles to catch his breath.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry.

ANDI

What happened?

ROBBIE

He was freaking out in his cage. I just wanted to let him out for a few minutes. I thought maybe--

ANDI

Robbie, what happened?

ROBBIE

Woody. He's gone. He ran away.

That's all Topper needed to hear -- he's gone. Andi tries to console Robbie and help Topper at the same time. She hugs Robbie as he cries.

ANDI

Topper! Wait. You can't see anything.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

Without the light from the carnival the field is pitch black. The headlights of the van pierce through the darkness.

Andi drives with Robbie in the front seat. The van is in neutral and barely slides forward.

ROBBIE

Why would he run away? Does he not like me? Was I not feeding him right?

ANDI

I'm sure he was just scared.

ROBBIE

What if we can't find him? What if we can't find Topper?

Andi doesn't respond, her eyes are peeled outside, looking for anything to give her a clue as to where to go.

She turns the van and it responds slowly.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

ANDI

I don't know.

ROBBIE

It's too dark--

ANDI

Robbie...

She is at a loss for words. Not knowing, what else to do she stops the car but keeps the headlights on so she can see.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Driver door swings open. Andi spills out into the darkness.

She calls out--

ANDI

Topper?

(then)

Woody!

As she moves away from the van's light, it gets darker and harder to see. She loses her footing and falls to the ground.

Another shout as she regathers her footing--

ANDI (CONT'D)

Topper?

A flash from nearby. First, all Andi sees is a dark moving object. Then--

ANDI (CONT'D)

There he is.

The baby possum is on the run. He is not fast but he is shifty, and uses the darkness to his advantage. Following closely behind is Topper.

ANDI (CONT'D)

Woody, it's us, dude.

Andi and Robbie join the hunt. Topper dives onto the ground, but the animal veers away and into the street.

ROBBIE

No!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The possum is in the middle of the street, when--

Lights, they are closing fast, and then a HONK. The horn sounds but the car doesn't try to avoid the animal.

It flies over him. Andi screams in horror. The car continues on. Everyone is stopped, stunned, until--

Another car. It is gone just as fast as it came.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Andi breaks down in tears.

ANDI

No!!

Topper is unsure what to do, but then comforts her. From where they are they can see the shadow of the possum's body.

Robbie walks into the street. Topper fights back tears.

ANDI (CONT'D)

(to Topper)

I'm so sorry.

TOPPER

No, it can't-- it wouldn't happen like this.

ANDI

He's gone. He's really gone.

ROBBIE (O.S)
Guys. Come here.
(then)
Guys!

Andi and Topper look over, and their faces light up.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

In the middle of the street, Robbie is holding the possum, scratching his stomach. He is alive and well.

ROBBIE
He's okay.

Andi runs to the road, elated. Topper follows.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)
He was playing dead.

ANDI
He's alive.

Andi and Topper hug. No one knows how to respond, so they all start laughing -- a welcomed injection of catharsis.

The laughing continues, except from Robbie, who is so overcome with emotion that he begins to cry.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Robbie, everything is okay.

ROBBIE
I know. I'm just really happy.

Andi consoles Robbie while Topper holds the possum. The beleaguered travelers head back to the van.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

The carrying cage sits in the front passenger's seat with its occupant safely asleep inside.

In the back seat, Robbie sleeps soundly, exhausted from the long day. Topper usually sleeps alone behind the seat in the extended trunk, but tonight he is with Andi.

He has a small sleeping area surrounded by his other few belongings, clothes, a backpack, tools, etc.

The walls are covered in writing, with the largest script on the ceiling above the bed reading:

"Peace to those who wander, tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote," and on the side,

"For if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me."

They speak softly, as not to wake up Robbie.

ANDI

I can't tell if you're running
towards something or away from it.

TOPPER

I know the person I don't want to
be. Every person has to be defined
by the mountains they climb.
Struggle is poetic, but it has to
mean something.

ANDI

What if mine doesn't?

TOPPER

It will.

Topper notices the scar on her forearm. He runs his fingers over it.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

What's this?

ANDI

Sometimes I just get down. My dad
didn't die. I mean he did die, but
it was cause he killed himself.

(then)

I know he was sick, but he said he
loved me. And then he left.

TOPPER

Do you wanna die?

ANDI

I just wanted to die that day.

(then)

I can't do that to my family again.
But knowing that doesn't make
anything better.

TOPPER

How do you feel now?

ANDI
I feel safe with you. I'm not sure
why.

Topper kisses her on the forehead.

LATER:

Topper and Andi lay with one another. Neither wants to sleep.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Why do you do all of this?

TOPPER
It feels honest. Everything else
doesn't. But you do.

Topper sits up and goes through a bag near the bed. After a moment, he pulls out an old-school Walkman.

A pair of headphones that slide over the ear are plugged into the CD player. Topper takes the headset and snaps them in half to separate the earphones.

He hands one to Andi and keeps the other for himself.

TOPPER (CONT'D)
My mom would play this for me.

The song begins, something older, maybe George Harrison's "What is Life," but familiar and earnest.

Andi loves it. It makes her feel safe and she settles in. They lie down again, looking at one another. Topper takes her arm and begins to run his fingers over her scar again.

LATER:

Both are now asleep next to each other. They fit nicely with one another.

INT. VAN - DAY

The next morning, the sun pokes through the windows.

Andi opens her eyes to see Topper sitting on the other end of the bed, meditating. She looks at him for a moment before deciding not to disturb him. She goes back to sleep.

LATER:

Andi is now the only one in the van.

EXT. VAN - DAY

The field is empty except for Topper, who sits outside the van, cooking eggs over a hot plate.

Andi exits the van and sits next to him. Topper pushes a bowl of scrambled eggs in front of her.

ANDI

Thank you.

Andi begins to eat, until a call from the van--

ROBBIE (O.S)

Whose cigarettes are these?

Topper perks up -- his stash has been discovered. Without a second thought, Andi responds--

ANDI

Mine.

ROBBIE (O.S)

I didn't know you smoked.

ANDI

Sometimes.

ROBBIE (O.S)

You shouldn't. It leads to lung cancer and turns your teeth yellow.

ANDI

Thank you, Robbie.

INT. VAN - DAY

A completely different mood from the day before. Everything is lighter and happier. The same music from Topper's CD now plays over the car radio.

Andi smiles as she rests her feet on the dashboard. Topper even smiles and laughs.

The mood in the van continues until they hear RUMBLES from outside. The lightness in the van evaporates.

Music cuts out. Topper turns off the radio to hear what is going on.

EXT. VAN - DAY

Smoke pours out from underneath the hood as the van exits the highway onto the shoulder.

Topper flies out of the van and runs to the front of the car.

Andi follows, but can only watch helplessly as he opens the hood and smoke spills out. Topper coughs uncontrollably.

TOPPER

No!

He inspects the van, not looking for anything in particular.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

It can't--

ANDI

Maybe it's nothing--

RUMBLE -- More smoke pours out and smacks Topper in the face.

INT. MECHANIC GARAGE - OFFICE - DAY

A lonely fan moves back and forth behind the desk circulating the air throughout the small and cluttered office.

Behind the desk is a MECHANIC (50s, apathetic). Andi and Topper wait across the desk for the fate of the van.

MECHANIC

We can probably have it ready...by
noon tomorrow?

ANDI

That's amazing.

(to Topper)

We'll be back on the road in the
morning, we can make up time and
still make it before he leaves.

Topper only manages a skeptical look. He is barely holding it all together.

The mechanic finishes an invoice and rips the paper from his notepad and hands it to Andi.

ANDI (CONT'D)

\$3,575? You said it was an easy
fix.

MECHANIC
Gotta pay for labor.

That's it for Topper, he can't hold it in anymore and storms out of the office.

After a beat he returns.

TOPPER
You are a charlatan. How dare
you...

He's too irritated to speak and just leaves again.

EXT. MECHANIC GARAGE - PARKING LOT - DAY

Topper is the middle of an outburst, mostly indeterminable noises, when Andi leaves the office.

TOPPER
The way people like him can make a
profit off other people's dreams.
Why \$3,500? Why not pukka shells?

ANDI
Do you have 3,500 pukka shells?

TOPPER
That's not the point.

ANDI
I understand why you're upset.

TOPPER
No--

ANDI
Will you listen to me? We'll get it
fixed. You can pay me back. We'll
leave tomorrow and won't stop until
we get there.

TOPPER
I'm going to pay you back.

ANDI
You better.
(then)
I need you to trust me.

TOPPER
What do we do until tomorrow?

ANDI
I actually know a place.
(then)
Do you know how to use a payphone?

EXT. MECHANIC'S GARAGE - DAY

A forgotten payphone on the side of the garage. Andi approaches it nervously. She picks up the receiver then stops. She places it back.

As she goes to walk away she sees Topper and Robbie in the parking lot. Topper looks anxious, Robbie just looks tired.

Andi returns to payphone and places her call. She holds her breath while it rings.

ANDI
Hey, it's...me.

EXT. MECHANIC GARAGE - PARKING LOT - DAY

The shop is now closed and the lot empty as the group waits. The possum cage sits next to Andi's foot.

Andi makes sure Robbie is not close enough to hear before--

ANDI
What's with hiding the cigarettes?

TOPPER
My mom hates the smell.

ANDI
They will kill you. But I like the
smell. Can't wash it off.

Andi removes the tin and takes out a cigarette for her and offers another to Topper.

TOPPER
I don't--

ANDI
That's fine, I'll just smoke by
myself then.

After a beat of Andi smoking alone, Topper joins her.

The smell grabs Robbie's attention.

ROBBIE
You guys, both of you?

A four-door sedan pulls into the lot and parks next to the group. The window lowers to reveal JASON (30s, boring appearance, slacks and button down).

JASON
Andi.

ANDI
Jason.

JASON
Fellas.
(then)
What's in the cage?

ANDI
Woody Guthrie.

JASON
The folk singer?

ANDI
The possum.

TOPPER
It also contains my mother's karma.

JASON
Cool beans. Hop in.

INT. JASON'S CAR - DAY

Jason drives with Andi in the passenger's seat and Topper and Robbie sit with the possum in the back.

ANDI
How's Lindsay?

JASON
She's six so she's a complete megalomaniac. Our sitter fell through so she's at the house.

ANDI
We can wait. Come to the house later. I forgot it was Marisa's birthday, feel like such an idiot.

JASON

Just a few of her friends are there, it's fine. Mom put it together, I didn't even know.

(to Robbie and Topper)

You guys like parties?

ROBBIE

Yeah.

TOPPER

Not particularly, no.

JASON

Cool, cool.

(to Andi)

Just a heads up. Lindsay has decided she wants to do beauty pageants, throws a fit every time we tell her no. Marisa feels like she's failed as a feminist.

(then)

The whole thing gives me the creeps, too "Jon Bennet Ramsey."

ANDI

It's JonBennét, like French.

JASON

Well, it was...she's dead.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DAY

The car parks in front of a modest suburban home that looks very similar to all the surrounding houses.

Andi and the crew get out of the car. As Andi turns towards the house she sees her mother, LINDA (50s), looking out the window. She has a solemn look on her face.

Before Andi can do anything, she disappears from the window.

Jason pulls Andi aside, away from the rest of the group.

JASON

You're good, right?

ANDI

Yeah. I'm fine.

JASON

Okay, cause you look like a political prisoner. What about that shiner? He do that?

ANDI

What? No. I hit it on a door. It was an accident.

JASON

You realize that is something a battered wife would say? If he is holding you against your will just blink twice or something.

ANDI

Jason, stop.

Andi pulls away and walks towards the house.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Inside, a modest dinner party is just beginning. Jason's wife, MARISA (30s), is mingling with her friends CHRISTINE and RUBY (30s, soccer mom types).

The door opens and the room goes silent as the wayward travelers enter the house.

No one knows what to look at -- Topper, the possum in his carrying cage, or Andi's shaved head and black eye.

Jason's daughter, LINDSAY (6), dressed as a princess, comes running towards the cage.

LINDSAY

Is that a puppy? Can I play--?

Jason scoops her up.

JASON

Probably not a good idea. He's just really tired.

(under his breath)

And potentially has rabies.

Marisa comes to assist with Lindsay, who is agitated that she is not getting her way.

LINDSAY

I wanna play with him.

MARISA
Come on sweetie.

ANDI
Hi, Marisa. Happy Birthday.

MARISA
Oh, thank you, Andi. I'm...glad you
are here.

LINDSAY
I wanna play with the puppy!

Marisa takes Lindsay back to where her friends are drinking wine and conversing.

Jason directs Andi towards the kitchen. The group follows until Topper stops and turns to the room.

TOPPER
He doesn't have rabies...just so
you know.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Linda is hard at work preparing dinner.

The group enters but no one speaks.

ANDI
Hi, Mom.

Linda is stunned by the hair.

LINDA
Oh, Andi, you're here. I was
waiting to hear from you after I
talked to Shane.

ANDI
Yeah, I just needed a break from my
phone for awhile. So I burned it.

LINDA
And the hair?

ANDI
I didn't burn that. Shaved it.

LINDA
Glad you still have your humor.

Linda eyes her companions.

ANDI
This is my neighbor, Robbie, and
this is Topper.

TOPPER
How do you do ma'am?

ROBBIE
Hello.

LINDA
And where are you all going?

ANDI
New York.

LINDA
I see.

TOPPER
Ma'am, this poss--

ANDI
We just need to sleep here tonight
and then we'll be gone.

LINDA
You both can have the guest room.

JASON
You guys fans of porcelain dolls?
The type that might murder you in
your sleep?

ANDI
Thank you.

LINDA
We'll get through tonight.

Andi begins to lead Topper and Robbie away.

LINDA (CONT'D)
I laid out a dress in your room.

ANDI
I don't think--

LINDA
It's the least you could do. I want
you to look presentable.

Instead of putting up a fight, Andi leaves.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY**CLOSE ON:**

The face of an antique porcelain doll. The type of doll that would look unsettling in the dark. Dolls like this fill the room, on cabinets and desks. Two twin beds sit in the middle of the room.

Topper and Robbie and are clearly uncomfortable.

TOPPER

I'm going to sleep in the truck.

ANDI

No. You're acting normal tonight.

(then)

I have to go change. Go downstairs
and try not to talk to anyone.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - ANDI'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - DAY

It hasn't changed much, but is pristinely kept. Her stuffed giraffe sits on the perfectly-made bed. Andi picks up the animal and looks at it.

Across the room is a mirror. Andi's reflection shows she has changed into a sun dress. The dress is visibly tight and Andi's face reflects this discomfort.

She watches herself in the mirror as she runs her hands across her stomach where the dress is the tightest.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - STAIRCASE - DAY

Uncomfortably dressed for the party, Andi begins down a staircase until voices stop her.

At the bottom of the staircase, Jason tries to console an upset Marisa. They don't know Andi can hear them, and she doesn't move as to not give away her position.

MARISA

Just one day, that's all I wanted.

Jason tries to console her but she pulls away.

JASON

Everything is fine, just makes
things more interesting is all.

MARISA

I hate how normal you treat this.

JASON

Just not gonna let it ruin our day.

MARISA

That's not fair, this can't be on me, she's the one who always--

JASON

I know, I know, it's okay.

Jason tries to console Marisa again, and this time she lets him. He leads her back into the living room.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Topper sits on the couch with the possum still in his carrying cage.

The rest of the guests are mingling. Marisa introduces Andi to her friends.

MARISA

This is Jason's sister, Andrea.

RUBY

So you're Jason's other sister.

ANDI

No, just one.

Ruby regrets her question, so does the rest of the room.

Marisa and her friends are trying to go about the party as usual but the new guest is making this difficult. They speak quietly with one another, but their eyes keep going in Topper's direction.

A brave guest, Christine, speaks up.

CHRISTINE

Topper, so what do you do?

TOPPER

I don't understand the question.

CHRISTINE

Like for work?

TOPPER

I don't.

RUBY
So then what do you do?

TOPPER
I sustain an existence in balance
with the axiom of the universe.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Linda is still hard at work in the kitchen, but she is joined by Robbie, who is in his element.

As Andi enters, Linda is testing a dish of Robbie's.

LINDA
That's incredible. So much better
than 10 minutes ago. All you added
was paprika?

ROBBIE
Paprika is like glitter, a little
goes a long way.

Robbie is beaming with pride. Also in the kitchen is Lindsay, playing with her doll. Andi approaches her.

ANDI
Hi Lindsay, do you remember me?

A confused Lindsay can only shake her head.

ANDI (CONT'D)
That's okay, it's been awhile. I
like your doll.

LINDSAY
She's a princess.

ANDI
She's beautiful. You know who she
kind of looks like?

LINDSAY
Who?

ANDI
You.

Lindsay's face lights up.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Do you want to be a princess?

LINDSAY
My mom says I can't be.

ANDI
You know, sometimes moms are wrong.
Hey, there are some things I have
to do, but later can I come play
with you?

Lindsay nods enthusiastically.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY

An immaculately-kept dining room, the type that's more for decoration than for eating.

Andi begins setting the table. After a few moments, Linda enters and without speaking goes over to the cabinet and gets out her nicer china. She begins setting the table.

Andi begins collecting her plates and putting them aside.

ANDI
We only use those on Christmas?

LINDA
Trying to use them more. No sense
having them collect dust.

ANDI
I can do that.

LINDA
I'm just going to do it.

ANDI
Why won't you let me help you?

LINDA
Stop.

Tension is mounting. Andi reaches for a plate and Linda goes to stop her, knocking the plate out of her hands.

The plate shatters as it hits the floor.

Topper enters.

TOPPER
Andi--

ANDI
Not now, okay?

Dejected, Topper leaves the dining room. Andi goes to clean up the plate.

LINDA
Please, just leave it.

ANDI
I can't just leave it--

LINDA
Please! For Christ's sake, you've done enough.

Linda musters all of her strength to recompose herself.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Just go into the living room. I can take care of all of this.

Andi takes a moment, then relents and walks out of the dining room and into the party. She is completely dejected.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Later in the evening. The guests sit laughing around the dinner table. The mood is an odd mixture of light and tense.

Marisa's friends chat back and forth, while Andi and her family are more on edge.

RUBY
If I don't get them up by 8:30, might as well not start my day.

CHRISTINE
What I live for now are those rare days when I can get the kids up, fed, and to school in time to sit in my car and drink my chai tea before yoga.

RUBY
I love chai tea. I used to have this crick in my neck, started drinking that stuff, gone.

Topper can't contain his irritation and lets out a GRUNT that halts the conversation.

Andi shoots him a dirty look. The women regather themselves.

Lindsay is playing with her food more than she is eating it. She turns to Topper--

LINDSAY

Why do you smell so bad?

JASON

Honey, that's not nice.

TOPPER

Antiperspirant conforms to
oppressive beauty standards. And
leads to cancer.

CHRISTINE

So, Andrea, What do you do?

ANDI

Well, I was in school, but now...
(then)
You said you teach yoga?

CHRISTINE

Yoga burn.

MARISA

She's amazing.

CHRISTINE

It's like yoga but better, we use
weights and it's great cardio.

RUBY

Such an amazing workout, but so
spiritual at the same time.

TOPPER

That's not yoga.

CHRISTINE

I know, it's yoga burn.

TOPPER

That's still-- yoga is a very
specific thing.

CHRISTINE

This is updated.

TOPPER

Right, cause they've been doing the
same thing for thousands of years
but now it needs to be updated.

CHRISTINE

And you're an expert?

TOPPER
Have you ever been to Tibet?

CHRISTINE
I took a six week online
certification.

ROBBIE
I'm going to grab--

ANDI
I'll grab it.
(to Topper)
Will you help me?

Topper is resistant but Andi gives him a look. He follows.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Andi leads Topper into the kitchen. She checks behind them before she speaks.

ANDI
What are you doing?

TOPPER
It's them. They're a bunch
of...posers.

ANDI
Posers? How old are you?

TOPPER
That woman called it chai tea, chai
means tea, she said tea, tea.

ANDI
I'm not talking about them, I'm
talking about you.

TOPPER
Why?

ANDI
Because you're embarrassing me.

Andi leaves Topper alone and disoriented in the kitchen.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Topper reenters. Everyone at the table helps themselves to Robbie's main dish for the night.

MARISA
It's all been amazing.

ANDI
You should try his desserts.

ROBBIE
In New York, I'm going to my
favorite bakery in the whole world.

CHRISTINE
Why are you all going to New York?

TOPPER
My moth--

ANDI
A retreat...like a meditation
thing. You know, mindfulness and
all that stuff.

RUBY
What about the possum?

ANDI
We found him and couldn't leave him
cause he is just a baby. Gonna drop
him off at a humane society.

Topper is floored. He looks at Andi but she won't look at him.

The mood in the room is lightening. Everyone is blown away by Robbie's food.

CHRISTINE
Okay, this is incredible. What is
this?

ROBBIE
Just risotto with some peppers and
spices. It's really easy, I can
give you the recipe.

CHRISTINE
There is something else though?

MARISA
Something sweet?

ROBBIE
Just some ground-up corn.

Everyone at the table nods except for Jason and Marisa, who both drop their forks instinctively.

They rush towards Lindsay, who is enjoying her food.

Jason grabs the plate and pulls it away from Lindsay as Marisa tries to pull her out of her chair.

MARISA

She can't eat corn--

Lindsay's face says she is on the verge of vomiting. Marisa grabs her by the hand and rushes her out of the room.

The room sits in silence until the faint sound of vomiting can be heard from the bathroom. Silence. Then again.

After a beat, Marisa returns. She is trying to remain composed with every fiber of her being.

MARISA (CONT'D)

Just a gag reflex. She's fine.

JASON

Do you want me to--

MARISA

I said she is fine.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is empty, except for the possum's cage on the floor.

Noise from the dining room bleeds in. Then, the sound of a toilet flushing in the next room.

Lindsay enters the room alone. She's on her way back to the dining room when her interest is piqued by the cage.

She walks over and lowers herself until her face is level with the cage. The possum is asleep.

LINDSAY

Wake up, puppy.

Nothing. Lindsay grows impatient and shakes the cage. Then again, harder.

A SQUEAL from the cage. Lindsay then opens the cage and reaches her hands in.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner conversation continues amongst Marisa and her friends. Andi and Topper sit silently.

SCREAMS--

Jason and Marisa shoot up from the table first.

JASON

Lindsay--

The whole table hurries into the next room.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jason and Marisa enter first. Lindsay is lying on the ground, crying. The door to the cage is open. Marisa scoops her up.

MARISA

What happened?

LINDSAY

It bit me!

Topper hurries to the cage. The possum is curled up in the back, terrified. Topper slowly pulls him out to comfort him.

MARISA

That animal should not be inside.

RUBY

Or around children.

TOPPER

He wouldn't hurt anyone.

MARISA

He bit my daughter.

TOPPER

He was scared. She--

ANDI

Topper, stop.

A look of disappointment from Topper.

JASON

(to Lindsay)

Where did he bite you?

Lindsay shows one of her hands. There is no discernible mark.

JASON (CONT'D)

It looks like you're okay sweetie.

MARISA

(to Jason)

A wild animal bit your daughter.

JASON

I don't see anything.

MARISA

Unbelievable.

(to Andi)

You got what you wanted.

(then)

We're leaving.

Everyone else is still silent. Linda looks on, mortified. Marisa storms out, walking right past a silent Andi.

The rest of the room follows, leaving just Topper and Andi.

TOPPER

He didn't hurt her. He wouldn't...

Andi walks out before Topper can finish his sentence, leaving him alone.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jason kisses Lindsay on the forehead. Marisa doesn't speak to her husband before walking away.

ON PORCH:

Andi sits. It's quiet except for the sound of cicadas. After a moment, Jason exits the house and joins her.

ANDI

We don't have cicadas in the city.
I miss hearing them. Where I live
is barely even a city, you'd think
you could still hear them. But at
night it's just quiet.

(then)

Lindsay seems good.

JASON

That's not funny. She's a tyrant.

ANDI

She'll grow out of it.

JASON

Maybe. Or she won't rest until a nation worships her as their supreme ruler.

(then)

Somehow at the same time I don't really like her and love her more than I've ever loved anything.

ANDI

Tell Marisa I'm sorry I ruined--

JASON

You don't ruin things. I walked in and I was like "You know what this party needs? A drifter who can tell all these moms they are misusing the art of yoga, maybe a feral marsupial. Shot of adrenaline, right to the heart."

(then)

You could have at least named him Lead Belly, be less derivative.

ANDI

I hate you.

JASON

When I said you just needed to do something, this isn't exactly what I had in mind. You okay?

ANDI

Yeah. I mean no.

JASON

What do you even know about this guy?

ANDI

He isn't trying to change me.

(then)

You remember after Dad died and Mom took us to the Outer Banks for the summer, just like this desperate attempt to show we were okay, even if we had to pretend? Feel like I've been doing that for 13 years. I can't anymore, but I'm afraid there's nothing else for me.

JASON
I'm worried this won't be what you
need it to be.
(then)
I can't lose you too.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Linda and Robbie finish cleaning the kitchen as Andi and Jason enter. Jason walks over to his mother to say goodbye but Andi keeps her distance.

He kisses her on the cheek.

JASON
I'll call you tomorrow.

LINDA
Tell Marisa I'm sorry--

JASON
Don't. She's fine.

Linda returns to cleaning as Jason heads for the door. As he passes Andi.

JASON (CONT'D)
I'll see you tomorrow.
(then)
Keep your head up, kid.

With Jason gone, Linda continues cleaning for a moment and then stops.

LINDA
I think that's good for tonight. We
can finish in the morning.

ROBBIE
Are you sure?

LINDA
You're off the clock. Thank you.

Robbie gives Linda a big hug and then leaves her and Andi in the room together.

ANDI
We'll be out of here tomorrow
morning.
(off her silence)
Will you please just say something?

LINDA

I think we're past having anything to say.

ANDI

I'm sorry.

LINDA

Don't pick a fight.

ANDI

How am I? I'm apologizing.

LINDA

No you're not.

ANDI

I am, I'm sorry that I can't be the daughter you want me to be.

LINDA

You think that's what this is about?

ANDI

It's what it has always been about. Nothing I've done has ever been enough for you. Even when Dad--

LINDA

Don't bring him into this.

ANDI

You don't have to see yourself becoming more like him everyday. I'm sorry if that is hard for you, but you don't have to deal with knowing that.

LINDA

He's not here. I am.

ANDI

Tomorrow, I'll be gone and you won't have to worry about me.

Linda's face is overcome with pain. She walks across the kitchen to a small breakfast area, opens a drawer and removes a small journal. She places it in front of Andi.

LINDA

Open it.

Andi opens the journal and looks through the pages.

ANDI
I didn't know you--

LINDA
Started when you were kids, just for me. Now, every one of those pages is about you. I have boxes of old ones upstairs, every time we fought, when you left school. Getting a call from the hospital, having some stranger tell me my daughter tried to kill herself.

ANDI
I'm sorry.

LINDA
All the times I tried to think of ways to help you. All I do is sit in this house, alone, and worry about you.

Andi pours over page after page of entries, all about her.

LINDA (CONT'D)
I'm running out of things to write.

Linda leaves Andi alone in the kitchen with the journal.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - STUDY - NIGHT

Middle of the night. An empty study with an old, neglected desktop computer.

Andi enters and shuts the door quietly behind her. She turns on the computer. A loud DING as it starts up. She jumps, then turns off the volume.

She opens a web browser and searches Douglas McKenna -- too many results. She refines the search and adds Virginia, and finds something that floors her.

Local news stories of a family looking for their brother after the death of their mother.

This leads her to a website, set up by the family. It states that their brother has been missing and they are looking for him. The photo is of a cleanly-shaven man, but there is no question -- it's Topper.

The website includes a contact page with an email.

Andi begins to type.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - ANDI'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - NIGHT

Andi lies in bed, finally asleep. A CREAK as the door opens and Linda slips inside. She walks to Andi's bed.

Linda runs her hands across her daughter's shaved head as tears fill her eyes. After a moment, she kisses her hand and places it on Andi's forehead.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - MORNING

An exhausted Andi approaches the bathroom door.

It opens and Topper exits. Andi tries to greet him but he isn't having it.

ANDI
Good morning.

He pushes past her without saying anything. Andi stands motionless. Robbie pokes his head into the hallway.

ROBBIE
Anyone want breakfast?

TOPPER
We're leaving in 15 minutes.

ROBBIE
(to Andi)
What's wrong with him?

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Andi leads her group down the stairs, possum in hand. They walk quietly, thinking everyone is still asleep. Linda, Jason, and Marisa are waiting for them in the living room.

ANDI
(to Jason)
What's going on?

JASON
I didn't know.

MARISA
We all love you, Andi.

ANDI
(to Jason)
What is she talking about?

LINDA
We can't let you leave.

MARISA
We're here to help. We're all here
for you.

A weird pause as Marisa directs the room's attention towards
the kitchen.

Shane emerges, confidently. Bianca waddles behind him.

MARISA (CONT'D)
This is about helping you--

ANDI
What is he doing here?

SHANE
This is gonna help you. Tell her.

MARISA
I'm getting there. We have a script
we need to follow.

ANDI
Tell me what?

ROBBIE
Are we having another party?

ANDI
Hold my hand, Robbie.

ROBBIE
(taking her hand)
You got it.

LINDA
The least you can do is not bring
him into all this, Andi.

ROBBIE
Me?

ANDI
I'm not making him do anything.

ROBBIE
I want to be here. I want to help
Topper and his mom.

LINDA
What is he talking about?

ROBBIE

Topper's mom is a possum. We're taking him to a man to get her out.

LINDA

Oh. It's worse than I--

ANDI

It's not like that, Mom.

BIANCA

Andi, I know we don't know each other, but I know your pain--

JASON

No, stop. It's nothing personal, we just don't know you. Let her--

MARISA

I know someone at Brookview. They have a spot for you.

ANDI

I'm not going to some place for crazy people.

LINDA

It's an outpatient psychiatric clinic.

MARISA

The waiting list is over a year.

ROBBIE

That's a pretty good deal.

ANDI

Robbie, this is a time where people are sounding nice but they're not.

(to Linda)

Is this why you wouldn't talk to me? You were planning?

(to Jason)

And what about you?

JASON

I told you, I didn't know.

ANDI

But now you do.

JASON

What you want me to say?

SHANE

She's not well, I tried to tell--

ANDI

What are you even doing here?

LINDA

I called him. I wanted everyone who cared about you here.

ANDI

(to Shane)

Well aren't you just our knight in shining corduroy?

(then)

You guys can't keep me. What about my friends? What about Topper?

TOPPER

I just need the possum.

Andi's face says it all. She tries to look at Topper but he won't engage.

Topper goes to grab the cage but Andi moves towards the door. Linda blocks it.

ANDI

Get out of my way.

Jason grabs the cage from her. Topper leaps into action.

JASON

Stay out of this.

Shane joins the fray. Bianca tries to stop him.

SHANE

Careful, he'll go crazy on you.

BIANCA

We talked about not escalating.

TOPPER

All I want is the possum.

A struggle for the cage.

ROBBIE

You're scaring him.

Everyone pulls in different directions and the cage slips out of all their hands and falls, crashing to the floor.

Robbie runs to the cage.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)

Woody!

The group crowds around the cage. The possum isn't moving. Robbie pushes his way to the cage.

JASON

Is he dead?

MARISA

He's not moving.

ANDI

No it's just what they do, they pretend to be dead.

JASON

As like a joke?

ANDI

Yeah, they have an acute sense of humor. It's a defense mechanism.

Topper has heard enough, he grabs the cage and breaks for the door. Andi follows him.

JASON

Andi, wait.

She's getting away. Jason looks to his mother who just shakes her head. She's given up.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DAY

Topper exits the house first, followed by Andi and then everyone else.

Shane tries to maneuver around Topper and cut him off.

TOPPER

You don't wanna mess with me again.

He quickly brushes Shane aside, who doesn't resist.

JASON

(to Andi)

You can't leave.

Andi isn't listening. She's more concerned with Topper.

ANDI
Topper. Wait for us.

MARISA
(to Jason)
Call the police.

Jason takes out his phone.

ANDI
Are you kidding me?

TOPPER
Don't get the fuzz involved.

JASON
Who even are you? How many drifters
have you killed, man?

ANDI
Don't talk to him like that.

The situation devolves into yelling as Linda walks onto the porch. She shouts over everyone--

LINDA
Andi! If you leave, you're not
welcome in this house.

Andi can't even respond. She looks at her family and then at Topper and Robbie.

ANDI
I'm sorry.

She walks to the van.

INT. VAN - DAY

The group gets into the van. Topper pulls away. Andi begins to cry.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DAY

Everyone else watches as the van rumbles away. Linda's eyes are filling with tears.

SHANE
I told you.

JASON
Shut up.

SHANE

This is exactly what happened to me.

JASON

You brought your girlfriend to your ex's intervention. Who does that?

Marisa tries to corral her husband, until--

SHANE

She's lost it, I don't know what--

WHACK -- A punch to the face.

Shane didn't even see it coming. He collapses to the ground in pain. Jason stands over him, but isn't in much better shape. The punch hurt more than he expected and he shakes his fist in pain.

INT. VAN - DAY

The van darts down the highway. Topper is a man on a mission.

ANDI

Slow down.
(off his silence)
Dude, chill.

TOPPER

You aren't stopping me anymore. No more talking.

ROBBIE

Andi, maybe--

ANDI

So we're just going to do the rest of the trip in silence?

TOPPER

Yes.

ANDI

I didn't know my mom was going to do that.

TOPPER

You don't always have to talk.

Silence again, until DING. The gas light. With all his might Topper suppresses his desire to explode.

EXT. REST STOP - DAY

An interstate truck stop with a small diner inside.

The van sputters to a stop. Topper and Andi exit. Andi shuts her door inoffensively but Topper slams his.

ANDI

What's your problem?

Topper walks towards the diner as Robbie gets out of the van. Robbie stands silently.

ANDI (CONT'D)

Hey.

(after he turns around)

You're just gonna be mad at me and not say anything?

TOPPER

I can't do it anymore.

ANDI

Do what?

TOPPER

Watch you...dim yourself around other people. You said you wanted things to be better.

ANDI

What about you? All this accepting chaos, disorder is beautiful bullshit. You really think you're going to right some cosmic wrong?

Topper tries to walk off again, anything to avoid speaking.

ANDI (CONT'D)

You can't get mad at me for how I am. I hurt people.

TOPPER

When I'm around you I want more, I want you underneath my finger nails, so I can't wash you off. I can be mad that you don't see that.

ANDI

This won't fix me. It doesn't ever change. It might play dead but those feelings never go away.

TOPPER

Why do it then? Why even put up the signs in the first place?

ANDI

To see if anyone felt like me. And I thought I found someone.

TOPPER

Once I'm done in New York I'm gonna keep going north. You can find your way home from there.

He turns around and walks inside.

INT. REST STOP - DINER - DAY

Andi is seated at a diner booth. She sits on the outside with the possum in his cage against the wall. Robbie sits across from her.

The door swings open and Topper enters.

TOPPER

Gas is done let's go.

ANDI

Robbie, Woody and I were actually pretty hungry. Thinking about getting something to eat.

Topper looks at Robbie, who doesn't have a menu.

ROBBIE

Don't look at me.

TOPPER

Get something to go.

ANDI

They have award-winning pancakes and french toast.

Topper's agitation is showing. He looks at the cage but Andi's body blocks his access.

He makes a half-hearted lunge for the cage. Without looking up, Andi grabs the cage with her free hand and pulls it closer.

With no other choice, Topper takes a seat at the next booth. Andi still doesn't look up. Topper continues to stew.

A WAITRESS (40s, friendly) approaches.

WAITRESS
What can I get going for you?

ANDI
I'm just having the toughest time
choosing between the pancakes and
the waffles. What do you think?

WAITRESS
Well that's just about as tough as
making me pick between my kids.

ANDI
Does the french toast come with
powdered sugar?

WAITRESS
Sure does. But I could have the
kitchen throw some powdered sugar
on the pancakes for you too.

ANDI
Now that could be a game changer.
What are you thinking, Robbie?

The agitation boils over, and Topper makes an audible GRUNT.

WAITRESS
I'll be right with you sir.

Topper shoots up and runs to the bathroom. Andi's demeanor
changes. The game she was playing is no longer fun.

ANDI
I'll just take the pancakes.

WAITRESS
Can I bring something for your pup?

ANDI
It's a possum.

The waitress is confused. She leaves.

EXT. REST STOP - DAY

A luxury Suburban pulls up in front of the diner.

INT. REST STOP - DINER - DAY

From inside the window, Andi watches as a WOMAN (blonde, late 30s) exits the car.

The woman immediately looks at Topper's van and then around the parking lot. She doesn't see what she is looking for.

Andi follows her as she enters, but is careful not to get caught staring. Once inside, the woman again scans the room, looking for someone. She locks eyes with Andi and approaches.

WOMAN

Are you Andi?

ANDI

How did you know that?

WOMAN

You're the only girl here. I started driving last night when I saw your email, I just thought if I followed your route-- then I saw the van from the road. Just like the one you--

ANDI

Who are you?

WOMAN

I'm Amber, Doug's sister. I just can't tell you how thankful we are you reached out. This is the first lead we've had in a year.

ANDI

We?

AMBER

There's four of us. We've been looking for him since our mom died. Doug has always been a little different, but that really sent him over the edge. He just gets an idea in his head and he can't let it go, you know? Obviously, we can talk about the reward.

ANDI

Reward?

AMBER

My mom's estate? He hasn't claimed his.

(MORE)

AMBER (CONT'D)

Figured it was just sitting there,
we should use some of it to find
him.

ANDI

I don't want any money.

AMBER

Please, it is the least we can do.
It's good money, my mom's family--

Andi's eyes catches something behind Amber. Amber notices,
and follows Andi's stare to find Topper standing behind her.

Topper is floored -- he can't speak. Amber slowly stands up.

AMBER (CONT'D)

Hi.

TOPPER

What are you doing here?

AMBER

I'm here to take you home. It's
what Mom would've wanted.

EXT. REST STOP - DAY

Topper flies out of the door. Shortly after, Andi follows
with the possum cage.

ANDI

Topper.

She tries to approach but Topper doesn't let her get close.

ANDI (CONT'D)

I was just trying to help.

TOPPER

I told you everything. I thought
you were a good person.

Robbie and Amber are now outside, watching the scene.

ANDI

You can't bring her back.

TOPPER

Give him to me. I'm taking him.

ANDI

No, you're not.

TOPPER
(tearing up)
Just give him to me.

Andi keeps her distance and tightens her hold on the cage.

ANDI
You can't change it, it doesn't
matter what you do. She isn't--

Topper has heard enough. He walks over to Amber's Suburban and punches a hole straight through the window.

Glass shatters.

An ALARM sounds as Topper pulls his hand out of the window. It is cut badly and begins to bleed.

ROBBIE
Stop!

ANDI
What was that?

He isn't listening, and picks up a rock from the ground.

SMASH -- Topper sends the rock through another window.

Amber rushes towards her car as the other PATRONS look on.

Robbie is crying. Topper is now hitting and kicking the car in frustration.

Andi gives Robbie the cage and hurries towards Topper. She tries to grab him.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Stop! Topper.

Topper frees himself and continues hitting the car.

Everything slows down. Topper continues hitting the car. Andi screams for him to stop.

LIGHTS FLASH -- A police cruiser pulls up to the scene. Two OFFICERS barrel out of the car and make their way towards Topper. They restrain him and wrestle him to the ground.

Andi rushes to help him until one officer restrains her.

INT. POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY

Andi sits alone at a large table. After a moment, the door opens to reveal one of the officers, who moves to reveal Jason first, and then Linda.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Linda leads Andi and Jason down a long hallway. As they pass one window, Andi sees Topper sitting inside.

His hands are bandaged up. Andi stops, but the glass is one way -- he can't see her.

INT. BROOKVIEW INPATIENT - BEDROOM - DAY

A windowless room with only the bare essentials.

Andi enters followed by an ATTENDANT (20s).

ATTENDANT

This is your room.

ANDI

Do you have any pets here?

ATTENDANT

No. Sorry. I'm going to need to check your bag. It's procedure.

INT. BUS STATION - DAY

Robbie waits alone for his bus.

INT. JAIL - DAY

The door to the detention part of the jail opens and a GUARD leads Topper out.

EXT. JAIL - DAY

Topper exits the jail. He shields his face from the sun as he reacclimates. There is no one there to meet him.

INT. ANIMAL CONTROL - NIGHT

An empty storage room. It is silent until BANG.

Silence again, until another BANG as the air vent flies off the wall. Topper squeezes his way out of the vent.

DOWN THE HALLWAY:

Topper shines his flashlight into each cage until he finds his possum. The light illuminates the spot on his tail.

INT. BROOKVIEW INPATIENT - THERAPY ROOM - NIGHT

Group therapy session.

The chairs are arranged in a circle. Many of the PATIENTS are so waxed on their medication they are barely lucid.

Andi sits in silence. She isn't listening to anything the group LEADER (man, 30s) is saying.

His voice cuts through Andi's daydream.

LEADER

Andi? What makes you sad?

ANDI

The spelling of milquetoast. Like it sounds like it would be "milk" then "toast." But it is not. How am I supposed to trust anyone?

LEADER

You have to try and get better.

INT. LOWES - DAY

CLOSE ON:

Robbie's face.

ROBBIE

I helped my friend and a new friend try and take a possum to New York to free someone's mom's karma.

His interview with the STORE MANAGER (40s), who looks thoroughly confused.

MANAGER

The question was, "Customer service is of the utmost importance, how have you helped someone recently?" So you helped a possum?

ROBBIE
My friend.

MANAGER
(reading question)
"How was that situation resolved?"

ROBBIE
One of my friends was taken by the police. The other was taken home by her family.

MANAGER
Like taken? Never mind.
(reading again)
"Why did you do it?"

ROBBIE
They needed my help.

MANAGER
(reading)
"Would you do it again?"

ROBBIE
Yes. She still needs my help.

Robbie's mind starts going. He begins to look around the room. Suddenly this is not where he wants to be.

The manager continues.

MANAGER
(reading)
"That's great, that's exactly the kind of service we want to provide to our customers. Did I say customers? I meant, friends--"

Robbie gets out of his chair and flies out the door.

MANAGER (CONT'D)
Where are you going?

INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

A banana.

Topper stands in the aisle of a gas station that is always busy. TRUCKERS walk the aisles.

With the banana in hand, he checks to make sure no one is watching, and then slips it underneath his shirt.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

Topper holds the possum as he feeds him the banana.

INT. BROOKVIEW OUTPATIENT - GAME ROOM - DAY

Robbie waits alone in the game room.

After a moment, the door opens and Andi is led in by her attendant. Andi's face lights up when she sees Robbie.

ANDI

Robbie! What are you doing here?

ROBBIE

I wanted to see you.

ANDI

I'm so happy to see you. Most of my interactions are with my new roommate who thinks the moon landing was faked and the government is keeping him here cause he knows the truth. How did you get--?

Andi notices someone in the doorway near the attendant.

Jason, his hand in a cast. The light from her face disappears. She looks at Robbie--

ROBBIE

I'm sorry.

Then she looks to the attendant.

ANDI

I want to leave.

JASON

(to attendant)

Just give us a minute.

The attendant complies and begins to leave.

ANDI

We're going to do intravenous drugs. This is my old dealer. Todd, are you kidding me? My overdose will be on your cons--

(door closes)

Come on.

ROBBIE
He just wants to talk.

ANDI
He's the reason I am here.

JASON
I'm sorry.

ROBBIE
Topper is gone.

JASON
He jumped bail yesterday.

ANDI
Where is he going?

JASON
You know where he is going.

ROBBIE
You have to go too.

ANDI
No. He hates me.

JASON
I thought I was doing the right
thing, I was wrong. I am sorry.
(then)
Let me help you.

ROBBIE
He has a plan though.

ANDI
What happened to your hand?

JASON
Broke it punching your ex-
boyfriend. He has a hard head. I
mean, literally, messed up my hand.

Andi can't help but smile.

INT. BROOKVIEW OUTPATIENT - LOBBY - NIGHT

Andi and Jason approach the front desk, where ATTENDANT 2
(20s) is finishing a phone call.

ANDI
Please be cool.

JASON
Just thinking about the fact I am
committing a felony.

ANDI
This was your idea.

JASON
It sounded better in theory. Less
Ocean's Eleven--

He has to stop as they reach the desk. Attendant 2 looks up
without speaking. Jason freezes.

ANDI
He's signing me out for an outing.
Attendant 2 looks suspiciously back at Jason.

ATTENDANT 2
I'm sorry, new patients don't get
outings without doctor's approval.

JASON
(panicking)
We just--

ANDI
That's okay. Can I just walk him to
his car and grab a sweater?

ATTENDANT 2
(to Jason)
Can I see some ID?

Jason clumsily pulls out his driver's license.

DOWN THE HALL:

Andi and Jason pick up their pace as they approach the door.

From around the corner, Andi's THERAPIST (woman, 50s) enters
the hallway. She sees Andi and calls out to her.

THERAPIST
Andi? Where are you going?

JASON
(under his breath)
What do we do?

ANDI
Run.

Andi takes off. Jason takes a minute to realize what is going on. He runs off after her.

THERAPIST
(to Attendant 2)
Call security.

EXT. BROOKVIEW OUTPATIENT - NIGHT

The glass doors slide open and Andi and Jason fly out. Simultaneously, a car pulls up to the curb.

The door opens to reveal Robbie behind the wheel.

Andi and Jason throw themselves inside.

ANDI
Get us out of here.

The car peels out.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

The mood in the car is elation. Robbie is laughing, Jason is catching his breath.

JASON
That was amazing. It was better
than the birth of my child.

Andi lets a smile take over her face. The first in awhile.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

Inside, Topper is having difficulty falling asleep. He anxiously readjusts and tries to get comfortable.

Just as he closes his eyes, a KNOCK on the window.

A TRAFFIC COP stands outside the van. He gives Topper a hand motion to move his car. He can't park there for the night.

ANDI (V.O.)
I just have always felt like there
wasn't a place for me. I don't even
remember when exactly I started
feeling that way.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Andi drives with her eyes straight ahead. Robbie and Jason are asleep in the back.

ANDI (V.O.)
I still don't know, but I want to
look for people who feel like me.
That feels good, or maybe not good,
but it at least doesn't feel bad.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

Topper's found a place to park but he still can't sleep.

He looks to the empty passenger's seat.

A soft WHIMPER from the backseat. Topper reaches back and lifts the possum's cage and places it in the front seat.

ANDI (V.O.)
I know you're worried about me.

This doesn't stop the whimpering. Topper opens the cage. He reaches in and picks up the possum to comfort him.

ANDI (V.O.)
I just want you to know I am really
trying. It's kind of all starting
to feel like a wave. I know I'm not
better, but I feel like I can see
it from here.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - DAY

Early morning, the first light of the day gently reflects off the city skyline.

ANDI (V.O.)
I really miss Dad, Mom. All the
time. I know that you do too.

EXT. STREET - DAY

The van looks like a behemoth trying to maneuver in the narrow and crowded city streets.

FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD:

Traffic honks relentlessly as Topper tries to parallel park.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Early morning.

Linda sits at her breakfast table with her coffee and her journal open. She is ready to write.

Next to her journal is her phone, which is playing Andi's voicemail on speaker.

ANDI (V.O.)
I know you miss him too. We should
really talk about that sometime. I
love you, and I am sorry.

Linda fights back tears.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Andi sits inside a crowded coffee shop with a cell phone to her ear.

After a night of driving, she looks tired and in desperate need of a shower.

ANDI
I can't think of anything else to
say. Just wanted you to know I am
alive, and I'm okay. Alright, I
love you.
(then)
Jason wants to talk too.

She hands the phone to Jason who is seated next to her.

JASON
Hey, so...I'm sorry. Yeah.

He hands the phone back to Andi. She ends the call and takes a moment to compose herself.

Across the table is an unsuspecting NEW YORKER (woman, 40s) who let Andi borrow her cell phone charger to make the call. She is too shocked to speak.

Andi unplugs the phone and hands it to Jason, then gives the charger back to the woman.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Andi hugs Robbie.

ANDI
Say hi to Chef Bobby.

ROBBIE
I will. You're gonna bring Topper
back, right?

ANDI
I'm going to try.

She releases Robbie and turns to Jason. They embrace.

ANDI (CONT'D)
Thank you.

JASON
(whispering to her)
I hope this is what you need it to
be.

They both let go and Jason turns to Robbie.

JASON (CONT'D)
Alright, let's leave her to it. And
we gotta get to Hoboken. These
better be some good cannolis.

INT. VAN - DAY

Topper sits in the driver's seat with the possum cage still
next to him in the passenger's seat.

OUTSIDE:

Topper focusses on the Buddhist temple at the end of the
block, where a group of MONKS (50s, dressed in traditional
robes and sandals) congregate.

After a moment, the group moves inside. Once they are gone,
Topper grabs the cage and exits the vehicle.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Topper maneuvers through the crowded street and disappears
into the temple, not far behind the monks.

ACROSS THE STREET:

Andi fights her way through the crowd. When she sees the
temple she shoots out of the stream of pedestrians and into
the street.

A car slams on its breaks and HONKS. She disregards this and continues on.

INT. TEMPLE - FOYER - DAY

The foyer of the temple feels more like the lobby of a swanky day spa, open floor plan and wood paneling.

Behind the welcome desk are two RECEPTIONISTS (women, 20s). Andi approaches in a huff.

ANDI

Has a man come in here today?

RECEPTIONIST 1

Good morning. Is this your first time at Rising Sun?

ANDI

What? I mean, yes-- That's not why I'm here. I'm looking for a man, he has a possum with him. His name is Woody Guthrie, like the singer. That's the possum's name, the man's name is Topper.

RECEPTIONIST 1

Call Larry.

Receptionist 2 picks up the desk phone.

ANDI

What? Who is Larry?

From the main hallway, a burly security guard, LARRY (40s), enters. He takes one look at Andi and begins ushering her towards the door.

LARRY

There is a soup kitchen on the other end of the block.

ANDI

Dude, I'm not homeless. I just haven't slept in like 72 hours.

Larry has heard this all before. He grabs Andi's arm and keeps moving her towards the door. Andi tries to pull away.

RECEPTIONIST 1

Can we get you a blanket?

ANDI

What part of I'm not homeless do
you not understand?

Andi tries one more time to break away, this time with all
her might. She frees herself and runs through the lobby.

As Andi runs towards the hallway she loses her balance and
barrels into a table with an antique vase on it.

The vase falls to the floor, but Andi doesn't have time to
stop and continues down the hallway. Larry follows.

ANDI (CONT'D)

Sorry, that was a beautiful vase.

INT. TEMPLE - HALLWAY - DAY

A long, nondescript hallway. Andi runs as fast as she can,
but she has no idea where she is going. From behind her--

LARRY

Stop!

Andi looks back and sees Larry gaining on her. As she
approaches a corner, she can hear the faint sound of voices.

ANDI

Topper?

The voices are getting louder -- it is an argument.

Andi rounds the corner to find that the monks have surrounded
NYIMA RHOKISDA (40s), forming a protective barrier.

Across from them is Topper, with the cage at his feet. He is
holding the possum, trying to get close to Rhokisda.

TOPPER

You have to help her.

All of the monks are confused and try to reason with Topper
in broken English.

MONK

Stop, don't come any closer.

TOPPER

She needs your help.

All he gets are blank stares. He zeros in on Rhokisda, who
doesn't even respond.

Now Larry rounds the corner. When he sees Topper he hurries past Andi and towards the commotion.

TOPPER (CONT'D)

No! Stop!

The monks shepherd Rhokisda towards the elevator. Topper tries to close the distance but is stopped by Larry.

A struggle ensues. With all his might, Topper struggles towards the elevator. Larry holds him back. The possum is now caught in the middle.

From the other side of the hallway, Andi sees this and tries to insert herself into the struggle.

ANDI

Let him go.

The monks continue to wait, positioning themselves between the physical altercation and Rhokisda.

Finally, a DING. The elevator opens and the group pours in. Topper is losing his one chance and he knows it.

TOPPER

Don't do this!

His eyes never leave Rhokisda. In an attempt to make one more push towards the elevator, he lets go of the possum, who drops to the floor.

Andi follows the possum to the ground.

ANDI

Woody!

She tends to him, though he seems to be unharmed.

Meanwhile, Topper continues his struggle with Larry. In his final push towards the monks, Topper loses his balance and falls to the floor. Larry follows him.

Now on the floor, Topper can only look up hopelessly as the elevator door begins to close.

Topper makes eye contact with Rhokisda one more time. The door closes. Topper loses it.

With the monks gone, Larry turns his attention to the troublemakers. He tries to pull Topper to his feet.

LARRY

Come on.

Topper pushes Larry off of him and runs down the hallway.

ANDI

Topper!

He's already halfway down the hall. Andi quickly collects the cage and the possum and runs after him.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Andi exits onto the street. She's in the middle of a stream of PEDESTRIANS, bouncing off New Yorkers like a pinball. Her head is on a swivel looking for Topper.

ANDI

Topper?

Unconcerned pedestrians push back against her. She stops.

Just when it seems as if Andi is going to be swallowed by the sea of people, she looks back towards the temple and sees something in the alleyway.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - DAY

A dumpster sits outside the temple. On the ground next to the dumpster, Topper lies curled up, sobbing.

A disgruntled TRASH MAN is yelling at him to move, with an idling dump truck waiting outside the alley.

At the opening of the alley, Andi approaches Topper.

TRASH MAN

You can't be here!

Topper's hysteria is only compounding. He places his head against the wall and wails, until--

The knife. Topper unsheathes it from its hiding place, but this time, he turns it on himself.

TRASH MAN (CONT'D)

What the--

He presses the blade to his forearm.

ANDI

Topper, no!

Andi rushes to his aid. She grabs his knife hand first and a struggle ensues. For a brief moment, Topper resists, intent on ending his misery.

Then he makes eye contact with Andi.

ANDI (CONT'D)

Please.

He relents and drops the knife, instead opting to recoil into Andi's embrace.

TOPPER

I couldn't save her. She's really gone. She's gone...

His words just trail off into sobs. A HONK--

ANDI

I'm here.
(then)
I'm here, Topper.

A HONK, followed by another. Andi doesn't care.

INT. SUBWAY CAR - NIGHT

The car is mostly empty. In the corner, Topper and Andi sit next to one another with the possum cage at their feet.

Topper rests his head on Andi's shoulders. He's a shell of himself, on the verge of tears at any moment.

TOPPER

What do I do now? If I can't-- all these things that haunt me? What do I do with them?

ANDI

I think you have to let them.

Topper begins to cry again. This time on Andi's shoulder as she rubs the back of his head.

EXT. CONEY ISLAND - NIGHT

The GUESTS from the day are beginning to head home. The theme park and the Ferris wheel loom large behind Andi and Topper.

EXT. CONEY ISLAND - BEACH - NIGHT

With the sun down, the beach is empty.

Andi and Topper walk alone, with Andi carrying the cage. After a moment, she settles on a spot and places the cage down. She sits and Topper joins her.

They sit in silence for a moment before Andi opens the cage and removes the possum. He quickly curls up in her arms.

With her other arm, Andi reaches across the sand and places her hand on top of Topper's. They hold hands.

Andi offers the possum to Topper, who accepts him. He takes to Topper as warmly as Andi. Topper smiles and pets the possum, then looks at Andi.

TEHOKA

"Pilot"

Written by

David Espey

TEASER

EXT. ROAD - TEHOKA, TEXAS - NIGHT

A desolate country road, no street lights. In the middle of the darkness lies a wounded buck.

EXT. INTERSECTION - NIGHT

Four dirt roads meet at the center of Tehoka, TX. A one horse town that lost its horse. The middle of the night - the town is empty and silent.

On one side of the intersection, the local market: "Ray's Stuff." The marquee flickers and the light in the second "S" goes out. The sign now says "Ray's uff."

At each corner sits a lawn sign that reads "Depend on Douglas: Vote Douglas for Sheriff" with a photo of DEPUTY JAMES DOUGLAS (30s white, wiry in an almost unsettling way), a hunting riffle in one hand and a bible in the other.

The parking lot is empty except for a sheriff's cruiser.

INT. POLICE CAR - NIGHT

The back of the cruiser is filled with "Douglas for Sheriff" signs that have been pulled after being defaced. The top sign features penises of all shapes and sizes drawn by local youths.

In the front seat is the real-life Deputy Douglas, scribbling in a logbook. The book is broken down into 15 minute intervals. Each entry reads: "nothing to report."

INT. WEBSTER'S HOME - BATHROOM - NIGHT

An unusually tall sink sits beneath a bathroom vanity, where WEBSTER (8) brushes his teeth. He needs a stool to reach the faucet. Sitting on the sink is a small policeman's hat.

INT. POLICE CAR - NIGHT

Despite the resounding lack of activity, Douglas is wired. He's waiting for something. Anything. His radio buzzes.

DEPUTY WILSON (O.S.)
Deputy Duncie, call at Ms.
Thompkins'. Too many dogs. Again.

Douglas picks up his radio to respond--

DOUGLAS

This is unit 782, please follow department regulations regarding radio communications or I will be forced to escalate this to your supervisor. Over.

DEPUTY ANDERSON (O.S.)

Hey, numbnuts, this is his supervisor. Shut up and go take care of the dogs.

DOUGLAS

(under his breath)

This kind of nonsense is not gonna fly when I'm sheriff.

The voices on the other end return to their conversation. They don't know the radio is still on and clearly aren't listening to Douglas.

DEPUTY ANDERSON (O.S.)

So anyways, I still have no idea she's 16. Other guys were buying her drinks all night. But I'm the bad guy 'cause I brought her back to my Aunt Nicky's?

Douglas tries to radio in and tell them they're still transmitting, to no avail.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The buck hasn't moved. Headlights pierce through the darkness from up the road. They approach and then stop.

Feet walk methodically towards the buck. Pan away to reveal Deputy Douglas, who now stands over the animal. He pulls out his gun and points it at the buck. As if it knows what's coming, the buck tries to get up, but his hind legs fail him.

BANG-- one shot. BANG-- another one, for good measure.

INT. WEBSTER'S HOME - WEBSTER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

A child's bedroom. The theme of the decor is "law enforcement and authority."

Webster, now ready for bed, places his police hat on the nightstand and climbs into bed. He turns off the light.

INT. THOMPKINS HOME - HALLWAY - NIGHT

The home of an elderly hoarder. Every room is overflowing with useless items. In the doorway, MS. THOMPKINS (70s) stands in her nightgown with her three dogs.

Douglas completes his sweep of the house. When he finally gets to Ms. Thompsons, he looks down at her dogs. One of the larger ones growls at him. Ms. Thompsons tightens her grip.

MS. THOMPKINS
Down, Dixie.
(to Douglas)
I told you.

Another look around the hallway. Ms. Thompsons seems pleased as Douglas heads for the door, until suddenly he hears a RUFF RUFF coming from down the hall.

Douglas runs toward the noise, with Ms. Thompsons in close pursuit.

MS. THOMPKINS (CONT'D)
That's nothing, just Dixie again.

OTHER END OF THE HALLWAY

Douglas arrives at a small closet. Before Ms. Thompsons can stop him, he opens the door to reveal 8 STRAY DOGS of various sizes and breeds, all scruffy and dirty, sitting in the small alcove looking up at him.

RUFF RUFF! Douglas turns to Ms. Thompsons.

MS. THOMPKINS (CONT'D)
What am I supposed to do? Leave them outside to die? You can't even figure out what's killing all them.

DOUGLAS
I don't make the laws, ma'am.

MS. THOMPKINS
And how many dogs is too many?

DOUGLAS
This many!

He picks up the smallest dog – a tiny chihuahua – to Ms. Thompsons' objection – but before anyone can move, a bright flash from outside. The light blasts through every window.

Ms. Thompsons and Douglas – still holding the chihuahua – hurry outside.

EXT. WEBSTER'S HOME - ROOF - NIGHT

Webster climbs onto the roof. He sits and enjoys the show. It's like a West Texas aurora borealis, but something about the vividness of the colors makes it look wholly unnatural.

INT. POLICE CAR - NIGHT

Douglas races towards the light. The country roads are poorly maintained and the car rattles back and forth.

The dispatch radio is still going – the two guys on the other end are now doing their best Schwarzeneggers.

DEPUTY WILSON (O.S.)
(Schwarzenegger voice)
It's not a tumor, it's a testicle
bump.

DOUGLAS
Unit 782, responding to a 215, does
the Navy have any exercises--

DEPUTY ANDERSON (O.S.)
(Schwarzenegger voice)
That sounds like a tumor.

Douglas looks up just in time to see a buck in the middle of the street in front of him, illuminated by his headlights.

EXT./INT. CAR - NIGHT

The car swerves and misses the buck, who doesn't move.

INSIDE

Douglas tries to straighten out but overcorrects, and the car goes off the road. The front of the car slams into a ditch. Douglas forces the door open and runs out to the road. Helplessly, Douglas takes out his gun and unloads indiscriminately towards the light.

After a few rounds, he gives up and returns to the car. He falls back into the driver's seat, leaving the door open, and slams his hands against the dashboard.

He waits a beat before reaching over and grabbing his logbook – at least he finally has something to report – until the airbag deploys suddenly into his face.

END OF TEASER

INT. BRA OFFICE - WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

A glass faced door with innocuous white text that reads "Bureau of Rural Appeasement"

A maze of cubicles wraps around the open floor plan of an unassuming office. In the back of the room sits AGENT MYRL MEURSAULT (30s, black) with her headphones in.

ON THE COMPUTER

Tabs flip back and forth between a YouTube video of a tactical drone strike and a rap video. The kind of nihilistic music characterized by young men toting guns and talking about people they've murdered.

The rapper onscreen is heavily tattooed – numerous on his face alone – including "zzz" under his eye. With an unfolded paper clip, Meursault mechanically carves a "z" into her wrist. Blood pools on her skin, but Meursault doesn't flinch.

A tap on her shoulder--

MEURSAULT

Wallace, I told you I'm not coming
to some stupid goodbye party.

She turns. It's not Wallace.

INT. BRA OFFICE - CRYSTAL'S OFFICE - DAY

Corner office of Meursault's supervisor, CRYSTAL (30s).

MEURSAULT

This is a horrible assignment.

CRYSTAL

Worst I have. And somehow I'm still
doing you a favor.

MEURSAULT

A favor?

CRYSTAL

That's right. After what you pulled
in Cheyenne. And by the way, most
people when they get put on
administrative leave pending
investigation. They don't show up.
Everyday. And you know who that
causes a problem for? Me. I'm sick
of looking at you sulking around
here.

(MORE)

CRYSTAL (CONT'D)

(then)

You hate it here anyway.

MEURSAULT

The only thing I hate more than
being here is being in the field.

CRYSTAL

Then what the hell am I supposed to
do with you?

MEURSAULT

I don't have to take this.

CRYSTAL

I know.

(then)

But I suspect you don't care enough
not to take it.

Her words fade out. Meursault is there physically, but
mentally she is gone.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

An awful D.C. bar plays host to an even worse date. The other
PATRONS would pick up on this if they weren't too busy being
the worst people from your college.

Meursault sits at a small cocktail table across from BETHANY
(late 20s, black, young professional). Bethany is talking,
but Meursault is still in her trance.

BETHANY

...Meursault? Myrl Meursault?

Hearing her name brings her out of it.

BETHANY (CONT'D)

That is such an interesting name?
Any story behind it?

MEURSAULT

It's French.

BETHANY

So your family is French?

MEURSAULT

No. You do these a lot? Dating
apps?

BETHANY

I'm on all of them. I like Kweens though 'cause it's just for us.

MEURSAULT

Yeah, black women deserve to be just as miserable as everyone else.

This kills the momentum of the conversation, but Bethany bounces back. She's already out of the house, after all.

BETHANY

I work for a dating app, actually.

MEURSAULT

Why don't you use that one?

BETHANY

It's not for American women. It's called Upgrade. We match young women with men based on income, so they can filter – five figures, six, whatever. We match girls here with men in other countries like Saudi Arabia, Ukraine...

No response from Meursault. So Bethany continues--

BETHANY (CONT'D)

Your profile said you work for the government--

But Meursault interrupts.

MEURSAULT

Your app sounds like trafficking.

BETHANY

No, it's an app. Like Uber for dating.

MEURSAULT

Sure. You're just doing a job.

BETHANY

Excuse me? My boss is one of Nancy Pelosi's top campaign contributors. What do you even do?

MEURSAULT

Nothing. I sit at a desk, read reports about stupid people and their insignificant fears, which are all just a distraction from the fact that the universe doesn't give a hell about them. Or me. Or you.

INT. BAR - BATHROOM - NIGHT

A needed break. Meursault splashes water on her face, then stares at her reflection in the mirror for a little too long.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

When she emerges from the bathroom, she realizes that Bethany is no longer seated at their table.

Meursault watches through the restaurant's front window as Bethany jumps into an Uber and gets the hell out of there.

She then turns her attention back to their table, where a bartender has just arrived, holding their check.

Meursault immediately pulls out her phone and calls Crystal.

MEURSAULT

I'm in.

INT. PLANE - DAY

The airplane of a small regional airline. Meursault is crammed into a seat with very little leg room.

ON HER COMPUTER

A YouTube video of Douglas, in uniform, using large cooking knives to cut different objects. A large swing of a meat cleaver slices a watermelon in two. The video is titled "Knives are Cool." 77 views.

Meursault uncaps a bottle of Xanax and takes two. She's gonna need it.

INT. VAN - TEHOKA, TEXAS - DAY

Classic serial killer van. The back is loaded with a full inventory of top-of-the-line kitchen knives.

Douglas is the front seat with CANDY (50s), in the midst of an awkward make out.

After a moment, Candy slides her hands down towards Douglas' belt until he stops her, indignant.

DOUGLAS

No ma'am. You know the rules. No access to that area until you receive verbal permission.

Candy rolls her eyes.

CANDY

Forgive me for tryin' to speed up the process.

Douglas still can't turn off the radio, so the dispatchers' conversation about the Rocky movies plays loudly in the van.

DEPUTY WILSON (O.S.)

Yes, he fights Mr. T and then the Russian Ivan Drago in four.

CANDY

If you can't that's okay. I just can't be doin' this like we're some teenagers. Kissin' is supposed to be extra but I make an exception--

DOUGLAS

Stop talking.

Douglas kisses Candy again. She lets him.

CANDY

I got five more minutes, James. Tops.

DOUGLAS

Call me Sheriff Douglas.

CANDY

That's extra.

After another awkward moment of making out, Douglas gives up. In a huff he pulls away and disappointed with himself he clenches his fists and grits his teeth as if to hold in a scream. All Candy can do is pretend not to watch.

Then a stiff second of silence, before --

DOUGLAS

I have to pick up Webster--

CANDY

35.

She holds out her hand.

DOUGLAS

Last week it was 30.

CANDY

Inflation.

DOUGLAS

I could have you arrested.

A look from Candy and Douglas pays up. Candy exits the car as Douglas puts his hat back on.

EXT. AIRPORT - DAY

More like a regional airstrip. Meursault exits the lonely terminal and looks around.

Across the strip, she sees Douglas standing with Webster outside the van, which is parked on the tarmac. On top of the van is a detachable police light.

Meursault considers turning around and getting back on the plane, but instead she walks towards the van. Douglas, on the other hand, is completely oblivious, clearly expecting a man.

The other PASSENGERS (mostly elderly) filter out. None of them approach Douglas.

Meursault waits one more moment to see if he notices her. When he doesn't, she decides to approach.

DOUGLAS

(to Webster)

We sure this was his flight?

MEURSAULT

Sheriff Douglas?

Douglas responds to his name but gives Meursault a look like she's an alien.

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)

Myrl Meursault. Bureau of Rural
Appeasement.

A wave of emotions washes across Douglas' face. First confusion, then realization. He rips off his hat and tries to recover some semblance of a warm, Southern welcome.

DOUGLAS
My apologies, ma'am. Deputy
Douglas, Stonewall County Sheriff's
Department.

Douglas tries to take her bags, but she grabs them herself.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, I thought they were
sending... someone from the
Department of Defense?

MEURSAULT
We are DOD. Just not the kind
people talk about.

She looks down and notices Webster for the first time. He's
dressed to match Douglas. He tips his cap to Meursault.

DOUGLAS
That's Webster. He don't talk much.
(gesturing toward the van)
Sorry about the transportation.
Budget cuts.

INT. VAN - DAY

Meursault sits in the front seat. Webster sits alone in the
back with all the knives.

They pass an old factory that catches Meursault's eye.

DOUGLAS
Old Hooded Warriors plant. That
condom factory damn near employed
the whole town until it closed.
(then)
So, three abnormal light displays
over the last 14 days. On top of
that, we got six dead canines...

Webster holds up seven fingers so that Douglas can see them
through the rearview mirror.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
...seven, now that we have Mrs.
Baker's. All the dogs turn up with
a blue discoloration in their
mouths. Sent out for tests but
state labs are backed up. Needless
to say, the whole town is on edge.

OUTSIDE

The van passes by the sign "Welcome to Tehoka." Next to the sign is statue of a buffalo defecating.

MEURSAULT

Tehoka?

DOUGLAS

They say it's from an old Apache word.

MEURSAULT

For buffalo?

DOUGLAS

Defecating buffalo. The old tribes saw it as a mark of good fortune. Replenishes the ground. They would even leave big piles of the dung for the settlers as gifts.

Meursault narrows her eyes.

MEURSAULT

That... doesn't sound historically accurate.

But Douglas has already moved on--

DOUGLAS

Hoping we can get to the bottom of all this. Put everyone at ease.

(then)

That's why I thought it was time to run this up the chain of command. Get a federal investigation.

MEURSAULT

Not an investigation.

DOUGLAS

I'm sorry?

MEURSAULT

My office does not investigate. We file one report, based on one visit to the crash site.

DOUGLAS

That was not communicated to my office. I've already done leg work on this. I have witnesses for us to talk to--

MEURSAULT

I'm sorry you wasted you and your office's time.

DOUGLAS

Ain't no waste. Ma'am that is not how we investigate down here.

MEURSAULT

Well it is how we do it up here.

A look of confusion from Douglas.

IN REARVIEW MIRROR

DOUGLAS

Look out. We've got a 547 up ahead.

Douglas points to the car in front of them and then reaches up and out the window to turn on the light.

MEURSAULT

What's a 547?

DOUGLAS

Busted tail light. Webster, assume the position.

In the backseat, Webster jumps into action. He pulls out a megaphone, holds it out the window, and turns on the bullhorn to serve as the van's siren.

The car pulls over, the van follows.

INT. SHERIFF'S ANNEX - DAY

Douglas' deputy office and de facto campaign headquarters. The group enters--

DOUGLAS

I do everything by the book. Don't matter, you accidentally shoot yourself in the foot one time and they take away your side arm. Lock it away at the station in Stonewall.

He glances at Meursault.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Gonna be different workin' this case with you. I've never had a partner before.

Webster looks at Douglas sideways. *"Never had a partner"?*

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

You know what I mean.

MEURSAULT

We're not partners. How many people work here?

DOUGLAS

Dispatch is out in Big Lake, so just me. And Webster after school until about six. Except Thursdays, when he's got Bible classes.

On Douglas' desk, Meursault notices a photo of Douglas as a child with a man in a police officer's uniform.

MEURSAULT

I would like to go straight to the crash site.

DOUGLAS

Mayor told me he wanted to meet you when you got into town.

MEURSAULT

The mayor? No that's not--

DOUGLAS

He insisted.

(then)

It's not up to me. Someone in your position should appreciate that. Cheer up. You're big news around these parts.

EXT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Downtown Tehoka. A modest crowd of around 25 CULT MEMBERS have gathered outside the mayor's office. They are all dressed in yellow shirts with smiley faces on them.

Many have religious-themed signs about the impending return of Jesus Christ. Above them is large parade balloon of a crucifix with an alien on it.

Individual members carry singular, smaller alien balloons that surround the larger crucifixion balloon.

Douglas parks his van on the other side of the street and the group gets out. Before Meursault can ask--

DOUGLAS

The Dippers. Never heard of them? They're a religious community, apparently. Set up shop about 20 miles outside of town. Leader John Dipper was an actor for all three of those Xeron movies in the 80s. Believes that the show actually proves Jesus was an alien or something like that.

MEURSAULT

What are they doing here?

DOUGLAS

They've been waiting for Jesus to come back and now think all these lights mean it's time. Our mayor, Buckshot, can barely leave his office.

The group makes their way towards the office. Douglas pushes the crowd back as they walk through.

INT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Outside the office of Mayor Buckshot Jenkins. The waiting room has a large taxidermied bear in the middle of it.

Behind reception, a TV plays a political ad on a loop.

ON TV

MAYOR BUCKSHOT JENKINS (50s Colonel Sanders-ish, wearing an eye patch) sits in his office, wearing a cowboy hat and holding a rifle.

BUCKSHOT

I'm not your typical swamp monster politician. I'm just a humble, country entrepreneur. You ask anyone around these parts they'll tell you I say what I think. 'Cause I don't think, I know. I know freedom tastes best with an ice cold beer. That every child deserves one mother and one father. It's called free speech. So when you think of Ole Buckshot, just remember one thing...

He lifts the rifle to his good eye and points the barrel at the camera.

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)
I'll shoot you straight.

BACK IN THE WAITING ROOM

Meursault sits with Douglas and Webster. Douglas catches her staring at the bear.

DOUGLAS
Wait until you see inside.

The door opens and JESSIE (30s, secretary) leaves looking disheveled. She adjusts her blouse.

JESSIE
He's ready for you.

INT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - DAY

The waiting room was just a preview. The office is covered wall-to-wall with taxidermied animals from around the globe.

Behind the desk, the real Buckshot, who is much shorter than expected, looks out the window at the crowd below. As the office door opens, he quickly takes an eye patch out of his pocket and slips it over one of his seemingly good eyes.

BUCKSHOT
Come on in fellas.
(noticing Meursault)
Oh, I apologize little miss lady.
We still waiting on agent--

Douglas goes to speak but Meursault cuts him off.

MEURSAULTT
Agent Myrl Meursault, Mayor--

BUCKSHOT
Please, call me Buckshot. You
F.B.I.?

MEURSAULT
Bureau of Rural Appeasement.

BUCKSHOT
So.. Bra?

MEURSAULT
We specialize in these cases.

Everyone takes a seat. Webster has a smaller chair.

BUCKSHOT

I told you Douglas, I don't like those loons outside my office. Only a matter of time until they kill someone.

DOUGLAS

Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll just kill each other.

BUCKSHOT

Ain't no way we get that lucky. And you not doing nothing is sure feeding their nonsense. Can we at least get some more officers down here for crowd control?

DOUGLAS

Only sheriffs can order auxiliary units.

MEURSAULT

I thought you were Sheriff?

BUCKSHOT

Sheriff is an elected position.

As the conversation continues, Meursault attention is out the
The Dipper large balloon enters frame. No one else notices.

DOUGLAS

I feel good about this election. We've really committed to canvassing. And I'm running unopposed.

BUCKSHOT

Well that didn't help you the other seven times...

DOUGLAS

Six times, sir.

BUCKSHOT

...and it don't matter, you still need 51% of the vote tomorrow.

(then)

You take her to the site yet?

DOUGLAS

No sir, gonna stop by the high school first.

This for a moment grabs Meursault's attention. This is the first she is hearing of this. Douglas avoids eye contact.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Got a tip that two students were out there the other night. Maybe they saw something.

MEURSAULT

I'm not--

She is stopped by what is transpiring outside the window. We see a fight begin between the Dippers and the townspeople. Meursault watches as the large balloon is cut from its line and floats away. She rejoins the conversation.

The rest of the conversation moves on without her.

BUCKSHOT

Doubtful. Kids only go out that far for one reason. Agent, is this something you see regularly?

MEURSAULT

Reports of unnatural activity in rural areas are on the rise. Everyone wants to be the next Roswell. People want where their from to matter.

BUCKSHOT

That right? So there might be some money to make after all this craziness?

DOUGLAS

I think what Agent Meursault is saying is, best thing we can do is figure out what's at the bottom of all this. Get to the truth.

BUCKSHOT

(to Meursault)

And what do you think that is?

MEURSAULT

In my experience, it's usually nothing. An airplane. An old satellite. Just someone wanting to see something.

BUCKSHOT

And what about you, agent? Where are you from?

MEURSAULT
Northern Virginia.

BUCKSHOT
Ah, yankee country?

MEURSAULT
Virginia?

DOUGLAS
It's all yankee country now. Or at
least that's what my mother says.

BUCKSHOT
Son do you open your mouth and not
know what you're about to say?
(into an intercom)
Jessie, get me the number for the
mayor of Roswell...

MEURSAULT
New Mexico.

BUCKSHOT
(into intercom)
You heard her. Thank you, darling.

Buckshot gets up and the rest follow.

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)
Do me a favor? Get the nut bags off
my street.

DOUGLAS
Will do, Buckshot.

BUCKSHOT
Deputy - it's Mr. Mayor.
(to Meursault)
Agent, can my assistant get you
reservations at one of our three
restaurants--?

CRASH as brick smashes through the large glass window.
Everyone takes cover. Douglas draws his side arm. Webster
draws a toy gun.

Buckshot pulls a shotgun out from underneath his desk and
cocks it.

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)
Son of a--

EXT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Outside tensions have boiled over. Pushing and shoving ensues as Douglas enters the fray.

DOUGLAS

I'm gonna need everyone to back up.

No one listens. A rock flies out of the group of townspeople and strikes one of the Dippers in the face. This is all it takes - to turn things into an all out maylay.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Stop! Everyone stop!

(then)

You must submit to the law!

A Dipper and a townspeople wrestle into Douglas' line of sight. He tries to insert himself but as he pulls the two apart the Dipper swings on him. The punch misses but is enough to send Douglas over the edge.

Douglas removes his gun and points it at the Dipper.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Get on the ground.

At first the Dipper goes to run away, until BANG-- BANG-- Douglas fires two shots into the air as a warning. This stops the Dipper who holds up his hands and complies with Douglas' instruction.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Hands in the air. Get on the ground. You're under arrest.

The Dipper turns around and flashes a bright smile that unsettles Douglas. He takes one hand off the gun and reaches for his cuffs until he is TRAMPLED BY A PACK OF DIPPERS.

Douglas tries to fight but the collection of people easily overrun Douglas and easily disarm him.

INT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Back in Buckshot's office, a disgraced Douglas places four pistols and a taser on Buckshot's desk.

Meursault and Webster look on.

DOUGLAS

My two auxiliary side arms, my personal firearm, and my taser.

BUCKSHOT

We don't issue tasers.

DOUGLAS

The Murkinson department sold some of their old equipment. Trying to raise money for softball uniforms.

A look from Buckshot. He knows there's more. Douglas relents and removes a pistol from his sock, and then reaches into his pants, where he removes a shotgun from one of the legs.

MEURSAULT

You really shouldn't put a gun in your pants.

With his arsenal now on the table, Douglas gets up to leave. Before he's out the door, he turns back.

DOUGLAS

Sir, if I may--

BUCKSHOT

I don't want to hear it. You're lucky I'm letting you keep the knives in your van.

DOUGLAS

Well, sir, technically those are still the property of the Any Way You Slice It Utensil Company as I am still completing my 36-month financing payment plan. Sir, how am I supposed to do my job unarmed?

BUCKSHOT

Well you weren't exactly doing it while you were armed. Were you? You had a small armory in your britches and still got overrun by the Dollar Store Branch Davidians. Now get out of here. I can't even look at you.

Douglas nods, turning on his heels and walking out the door. Before Meursault and Webster can follow, Buckshot stops them.

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)

He's lucky I didn't take his badge. Town needs a lawman they can respect.

As Buckshot talks, Meursault and Webster watch Douglas through the window as he walks towards the van before disappearing into an alley..

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)

Someone who looks the part. 6'2,
broad shoulders. Instead I got me
one that looks like a baby giraffe
after chemotherapy.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - DAY

Just off the town square, but removed enough for Douglas to think he has privacy and can unleash a tirade of anger and frustration. He paces back and forth like a caged animal.

DOUGLAS

So stupid, Deputy. How can you be
so stupid? Embarrassing yourself in
front of the mayor and a federal
agent.

In a wave of emotion, Douglas unleashes a kick to a collection of trash that disperses the metal bins with an ECHOING CLANK. Then movement from behind one of the cans.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Who's there? Damn, Dipper freaks.
Get the hell out of here and go
back to compound.

Douglas' hand goes to his belt where a gun used to be and is dismayed when he is reminded he is unarmed.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Show yourself. It is illegal in
this state to observe a law
enforcement officer without their
consent. I do not consent!

Just as he is about to speak again the can shakes again before Ms. Thompkins' dog Dixie crawls out.

Douglas' anxiety lessens but his agitation remains.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Go on get!

Dixie looks at Douglas but doesn't move. As Douglas picks up a lid to one of the cans.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Damn these dogs. Damn all these
dogs!

Douglas tosses lid like a discus. It swirls through the air and hits the dog square on the head.

However instead of yelping or even moving, once the dog is hit its face snaps into a snarl. Lips retract to sharp canines.

The animals eyes are beast like. Douglas again tenses and stands ready for confrontation. Until the dog hears something that pulls its intention away. The snarl recedes. Douglas listens but doesn't hear anything.

INT. VAN - DAY

As they wait for Douglas, Meursault and Webster wait in silence. Until, Meursault snaps her head towards the young boy and spits out--

MEURSAULT

Blink twice or something if this man is in anyway holding you against your will.

Webster just stares blankly at her.

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)

Is he dangerous? Or just weird?

More blank stares.

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)

What about you?

This time even Meursault doesn't seem to expect and answer. At that moment, Douglas reaches the van looking disheveled.

When he gets back in the car he's all business--

DOUGLAS

Next stop the local high school.

MEURSAULT

The next stop is the crash site.

DOUGLAS

Agent. I don't mean this to be disrespectful but that is not how we investigate down here.

MEURSAULT

Perfect. Because we aren't investigating.

Douglas rethinks his strategy, now more amenable.

DOUGLAS

Just a quick stop, agent. Not more than 10 minutes. Besides, just between a couple of lawmen -- well... you know what I mean. Agents of the law. Law people -- Ms. Chambers is enough of a reason to stop by.

(then)

Try to get over there as much as I can. If you catch my drift.

Without waiting for an answer Douglas fires up the car--

MEURSAULT

Do you have a problem with women being in charge of you?

DOUGLAS

No ma'am, my mother's a woman.

LATER

As Douglas drives--

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

If Buckshot wanted to disarm me, he failed. I still have my night stick.

He taps the night stick attached to his belt.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

I don't need a gun to be dangerous.

DEPUTY ANDERSON

Attention Deputy Dunce, we've got another dog.

Douglas is seething. He grabs the radio to yell at Anderson, but looks over at Meursault and thinks better of it. He takes a deep breath.

DOUGLAS

Unit 782 responding.

(to Meursault)

Gotta make a quick stop before the school.

Familiar voices come over the radio.

DEPUTY WILSON (O.S.)

Ah hell, it's John McClane!

DEPUTY ANDERSON (O.S.)
Yippee-ki-yay.

EXT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - DAY

The van peels out of Tehoka's downtown. Douglas' hand pokes out of the driver's window to turn on the police light. Webster assumes his position with the bull horn.

EXT. TRAILER - MOBILE HOME PARK - DAY

The outskirts of town.

Meursault stands near a dead dog. Webster combs the scene as any trained law enforcement professional would.

A few feet away, Douglas stands at the door of the trailer speaking to the residents - a WOMAN (20s) and a MAN (30s, not wearing pants).

MAN
My parole officer found it this morning when he showed up.

DOUGLAS
Had you noticed anything different about the dog? Had he been more aggressive recently?

WOMAN
He tried to bite our boy. He ain't never done that before.

CRIES from inside. The woman leaves.

DOUGLAS
Thank you for your time.

NEAR THE DOG

Douglas approaches as Webster kneels down next to the dog.

DOUGLAS
Just like the others?

Webster doesn't respond, but somehow Douglas knows exactly what he means.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
No defensive wounds? No signs of trauma?

Webster leans over and uses a gloved hand to pull the dog's lips down to expose its gums, which have a blue tint to them.

Meursault moves close enough to see as well.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

One they found behind the Quincy's barn looked like he had just eaten a smurf, but that's it for sure. Dog is acting more aggressive, then it drops dead and its mouth turns blue.

(to Meursault)

You ever see anything like this?

MEURSAULT

No.

DOUGLAS

Guess that makes us different.

MEURSAULT

They all start different. Then they end up the same.

EXT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Establishing shot of George Wallace — yes, that George Wallace — Regional High School. It's outdated and neglected.

INT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Classes are done and the hallways are empty.

DOUGLAS

Our persons of interest are being held in a classroom. Couple of local troublemakers. English teacher, Ms. Chambers, is close with the boys. Got them to meet with us.

MEURSAULT

How do you know they were there?

DOUGLAS

Call it an intuition. These boys are into some witchy stuff. Darkness, that sort. They like to do it outside of town, and I've seen them at the site before.

MEURSAULT

Do it?

DOUGLAS

Yeah. Magic.

(then)

Occult activity has really picked up since we canceled the drama program.

(then)

Never had a wing woman before but I think I'm gonna like it. No sense having two cocks in the hen house. If you catch my drift?

Meursault doesn't. She has also stopped listening. Her eyes wander around the hallway. Above the lockers, she notices script that reads "The South Will Rise Again..."

The words lead to the end of the hallway, which fades into a large mural of a soldier on horseback carrying a confederate flag.

The mural stops Meursault in her tracks. Douglas and Webster keep moving.

INT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

JULIETTE CHAMBERS (30s) waits in her empty classroom. The door is open but Douglas knocks anyway.

JULIETTE

Deputy, please, come in.

Douglas enters, with Meursault and Webster behind him.

JULIETTE (CONT'D)

And who is this?

DOUGLAS

Agent Meursault is with the Department of Defense. She's here looking into everything.

MEURSAULT

Myrl Meursault.

JULIETTE

Meursault, that's a good name for a stranger. I hope you're finding our little corner of the world to your liking. Wish it was under different circumstances.

(MORE)

JULIETTE (CONT'D)

(to Webster)

You look as handsome as ever,
Webster.

A tip of the cap from Webster.

DOUGLAS

The boys ready?

JULIETTE

In the next room. I promised them
you only wanted to talk--

DOUGLAS

If they didn't do nothing, they got
nothing to worry about.

JULIETTE

Last time I checked, deputy, two
boys spending time together was not
a crime.

DOUGLAS

Those two? Not three weeks ago I
found them spray painting
pentagrams and 666 on the Domino's
that serves as First Methodist on
Sundays. Let's just say I have a
feeling. I'm gonna need their bags
as well.

JULIETTE

I think I'll hold onto those.

DOUGLAS

Ma'am, this department has the
right to a search and seizure on
these premises if I determine
probable cause pursuant to Texas
Criminal Code article 18.02. We can
always come back with a warrant as
well. But I know you don't want any
of this being... official.

Webster pulls out a handbook and flips to the page with the
code Douglas is referring to.

Juliette walks behind her desk and pulls out two backpacks,
which she hands to Douglas.

Meursault's eye catches two of the books on Juliette's desk.
The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner and *The Color
Purple* by Alice Walker.

JULIETTE
You read much, agent?

MEURSAULT
Life is a tale, told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury, signifying
nothing.

JULIETTE
Well, I'm impressed.

MEURSAULT
Not particularly. I'm not one for
stories.

JULIETTE
Well then, agent, you're in the
wrong classroom.

Meursault's eyes come up to see Juliette stands on the other side of the desk. For the first time, Meursault reads the words on the chalkboard behind her that perfectly frame her head.

"Ms. Chambers' class. Your story matters here."

JULIETTE (CONT'D)
I use these for a class I teach on
perspectives of the South.

Meursault looks at the next book in the stack. *The Color Purple*.

MEURSAULT
I thought they were banning books
like these down in Texas these
days.

JULIETTE
Well, the class only has two
students so we just don't tell
anybody. Don't get me in trouble
now?

Even someone as oblivious as Douglas can pick up on their chemistry. He tries to insert himself.

DOUGLAS
Better hope I don't arrest you!

The joke doesn't land. Douglas tries to save it.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

You have the right to remain
silent... reading! Get it? It's an
English teacher joke.

Juliette musters a smile, then turns and heads toward the
next classroom, where the boys are waiting. Meursault starts
to follow, but she's stopped by Douglas, who whispers to her--

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

I think we should play this good
cop, bad cop. Test out the partner
dynamic.

MEURSAULT

We aren't partners.

This sends Douglas for a loop. Their partnership is not going
how he was hoping.

INT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

The classroom is empty except for ODIN and RADNOR (16, goths)
who sit at separate desks, pushed together to resemble a
table.

Radnor fidgets - he's so nervous. He also sports a healing
black eye. Odin is more composed.

The door swings open and Douglas enters, carrying both
backpacks. The rest of the group follows.

Douglas walks towards the desk and drops them on the table.

DOUGLAS

Gentlemen.

JULIETTE

Just answer the officer's--

DOUGLAS

I know where you boys were on
Saturday night, so there's no point
in denying it. My only interest is
in what you saw. We can make this
nice and easy.

ODIN

Nothing.

DOUGLAS

Is that right, Thomas?

ODIN

It's Odin.

DOUGLAS

We'll use government names, Thomas.
And what about you, Raymond? Your
father know where you were this
weekend?

(then)

Let me tell you what I think you
boys were doing. There sure is a
lot of darkness out there. Privacy.
Lots of stray critters too.
Wouldn't shock me if you took one--

ODIN

Slander. There has never been a
documented case of animal sacrifice
by any--

DOUGLAS

Then just tell me what ya'll were
doing and we can be done.

RADNOR

We like being out in nature.

A scoff from Douglas - he's not buying it.

From the other side of the room, Meursault can see Odin place
his hand on Radnor's knee to comfort him. Juliette sees it
too, and turns to Meursault.

JULIETTE

(under her breath)

This town is a difficult place to
be different.

Back at the table, Douglas paces. He is growing impatient.

DOUGLAS

You know me, boys. Your friends
know me.

ODIN

Some of them say you aren't a real
person, you're just a collection of
stray cats in an officer's uniform.

Radnor can't help but laugh. He regathers himself quickly,
but it's enough to set Douglas off.

DOUGLAS

Do I look like a bunch of felines
to you? How would that even work?

The boys still aren't talking. Douglas audibles — he picks up
Odin's bag, who doesn't flinch. Douglas exchanges it for
Radnor's. The panic shows on his face. Just as Douglas begins
to unzip it--

ODIN

We were smoking!

DOUGLAS

Marijuana or pot?

ODIN

(playing along)
Seaweed. That's what the kids are
calling it now.

A nod from Douglas. He buys it.

DOUGLAS

Where'd you get it?

ODIN

No way. We're not snitches.

Douglas goes to open the bag again--

ODIN (CONT'D)

There were lights in the sky. Then
it seemed like they started
swirling right above us. Then there
was just a flash of light... like
all of it.

RADNOR

We couldn't see anything.

ODIN

Could feel it though. I just don't
know what. Then the flash was gone,
and that hole was there.

A nod from Douglas. He has gotten what he came for. But he's
not done. He opens Radnor's bag and removes a small bag of
marijuana.

DOUGLAS

We got ourselves some seaweed.
Thank you boys, you've been very
helpful. I'll be in touch.

Douglas turns to leave. Radnor drops his head on the table.

EXT. WALLACE REGIONAL SCHOOL - DAY

The group is almost to the van when Juliette comes running out.

JULIETTE
Deputy! That was out of line--

DOUGLAS
They're lucky I didn't arrest them.
Tell the boys an officer from the
department will be following up. At
their homes.

Douglas and Webster hurry to the van, leaving Meursault and Juliette alone.

JULIETTE
Can you talk to him?

MEURSAULT
I don't think--

JULIETTE
Please. Surely you can understand
what it's like to be different?

This lands with Meursault. What exactly is Juliette picking up on?

INT. VAN - DAY

Douglas is behind the wheel with Meursault in the front seat.

DOUGLAS
Crash site is an old Civil War
Battlefield. A group of brave
Confederate militia members were
attacked in their own camp. Turns
out the attack came from another
Confederate militia who mistook
them for the enemy. Our boys put up
a hell of a fight though. On both
sides. Well, I guess just on the
one side.

MEURSAULT
What's gonna happen to those boys?

DOUGLAS
Oh, they all died.

MEURSAULT
I mean the kids. From the school.

DOUGLAS
We'll make an arrest once the investigation is concluded. With their records? Juvenile hall.

They return to silence as Meursault looks out the window.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
Am I ever gonna get a peek at what's going in your brain?

MEURSAULT
I think you'd be disappointed.

DOUGLAS
Why is that?

MEURSAULT
It's not what you want it to be.

DOUGLAS
What makes you think you know what I want?

MEURSAULT
Experience.

DOUGLAS
Alright, then why don't you tell me what's going in my brain then?

MEURSAULT
I think you want this all to matter. I don't think you're scared of what this could be caused by or what it could mean. I think what really scares you is the idea that it's all nothing. That it's just as meaningless as everything else.

DOUGLAS
That ain't even close to what I was thinking.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Nothing as far as the eye can see. Douglas and Meursault exit the car.

DOUGLAS

This way.

Meursault looks down and her eyes catch on Douglas' belt.

MEURSAULT

Hey, where's your nightstick?

Douglas' hands shoot to his waist. It's gone. Pure panic.

EXT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - PARKING LOT - DAY

Odin and Radnor take turns using Douglas' night stick on a sedan. In front of the car is a sign: Reserved for Principal.

EXT. CRASH SITE - DAY

A historical plaque marks this place as "The Battle of Tehoka: The Third Most Western Battle of the Civil War."

The area looks identical to the rest of the open landscape, except for the large, deep hole in the ground.

Douglas and Webster treat the area like a crime scene. Meursault jots down notes.

DOUGLAS

If ain't none of this important,
what you writing down?

MEURSAULT

I have to complete a report.

As Douglas talks Webster does the **leg** work of measuring the hole and photographing the scene.

DOUGLAS

Well you just keep on writing,
agent and you tell me when in that
paper of yours you arrive at a
place where you have something that
explains the lights in that sky,
the dogs dying, and what made...

MEURSAULT

Done.

With only a word Meursault closes her folder and walks back towards the van.

DOUGLAS

What? You can't just be done. We haven't been here damn 10 minutes and you are ready to close the book on it?

MEURSAULT

I'm not ready to close the book on it. I just did. I am going to need a ride back to my hotel so I can start working on getting a flight out of here.

DOUGLAS

You can't leave.

(then)

There is something I haven't told you.

MEURSAULT

You? No. You can't be serious.

DOUGLAS

I scheduled a meeting about everything that has been going on. Just to give people a chance to speak. Hopefully diffuse tension. Put people at ease.

MEURSAULT

I see.

(then)

Does this have anything to do with your campaign for sheriff?

Douglas looks indignant.

DOUGLAS

I reject the accusation.

(then)

The election is tonight but I can guarantee it played no role in my decision.

MEURSAULT

Looks I need to get out of this forsaken town sooner than I thought.

DOUGLAS

So that's what it is? You come down here from Washington and think you're better than us.

MEURSAULT

I'm ready to go, deputy.

Douglas goes to stop her until--

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)

Give up agent. Everyone else has.

Meursault walks towards the van, leaving Douglas to stew in his boiling anger. After another second it all boils over and he sprints towards Meursault, grabs her and pulls her close.

DOUGLAS

I will never give up!

Meursault rips away to free herself sending the two tumbling to the ground so violently it riles even Webster who goes to pull Douglas off of her. As he does Douglas seems to realize his mistake and gets off Meursault while also helping her to her feet.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

I apologize. I don't know what came over me.

MEURSAULT

Get off me.

Webster separates Douglas from Meursault and then--

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)

I am leaving.

INT. VAN - DAY

Douglas sits in the driver's seat with Meursault in the front passenger and Webster in the back seat. The mood is still tense. After a moment, Douglas presses his luck.

DOUGLAS

I should apologize for what happened earlier.

(then)

I just don't think you understand the opportunity this is.

MEURSAULT
I do. And it isn't.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

The van pulls to a stop out front.

INT. VAN - DAY

Douglas knows Meursault is itching to get out of the van and is ready to speak before she can with one last pitch.

DOUGLAS
Quid pro quo.

MEURSAULT
Excuse me?

DOUGLAS
Webster, ears.

Webster complies and places his hands over his ears.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
You come to the meeting and name
your price.

MEURSAULT
Are you bribing a federal agent?
(off his look)
There is not a thing you can do to
keep me in this town one more
second than I have to.

As Meursault goes to leave something catches her eyes

OUTSIDE

Across the street from the motel where there is a rundown house with a confederate flag flying from the front porch.

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)
Let those goth kids off and I'll go
to your meeting.

DOUGLAS
Absolutely not.

MEURSAULT
Fine.

She goes to leave again.

DOUGLAS
Wait. You show up tonight and I'll
consider it.

Meursault goes to leave again.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
Fine.
(then)
Gymnasium. 7:30. Or whenever the
basketball game is over.

Meursault smiles in spite of herself. She gets out and heads
to the motel.

INT. MOTEL - MEURSAULT'S ROOM - DAY

She closes the door behind her and pushes her back against it
as she thinks.

EXT. WEBSTER'S HOME - DAY

The van slows to a stop in front of Webster's home. Douglas
cuts the ignition but Webster isn't moving.

Waiting is Webster's mother SHARON (40s), dressed in scrubs,
stands outside waving enthusiastically. Douglas lowers the
window and Sharon immediately tries to pay Douglas in cash as
Webster gets out of the van.

After some protesting, Douglas takes the money. Sharon
smiles, then shuffles off, completely unaware of how
emasculated she has made Douglas feel.

EXT. DOWNTOWN - DAY

An empty corner of Tehoka's downtown. Candy stands alone,
smoking a cigarette.

A van pulls up beside her. The window lowers to reveal
Douglas.

DOUGLAS
Get in.

CANDY
Can't. I got an appointment.

DOUGLAS
I'll pay double.

CANDY
Still won't come close. I got me a
whale tonight. Now go on and get.
You're making my job harder.

Candy ashes her cigarette and starts to cross the street but Douglas doesn't like to be slighted.

He slams on the gas and speeds ahead to block Candy's path, startling Candy.

CANDY (CONT'D)
What are you--

DOUGLAS
I said. Get. In.

CANDY
Listen babe it's nothin' personal I
just don't have the time right now.
I gotta work.

DOUGLAS
That's why I pay you.

CANDY
Hon, by the time we finish our
whole song and dance I ain't barely
makin' minimum wage--

Douglas slams his hand on top of the van to turn on the police light before swinging the door open. Once out of the van, he grabs Candy, pushing her against the van as he cuffs her. She thinks it's a joke.

CANDY (CONT'D)
Oh, Officer, if you wanted it like
that you should have just said so.

Douglas tightens the cuffs.

DOUGLAS
I'm in charge. You got that?

Candy looks back at him, confused.

INT. SHERIFF'S ANNEX - DAY

The door swings open as Douglas leads Candy, still in handcuffs, inside.

With no cell to detain prisoners, Douglas takes Webster's small chair from his small desk and puts it in an unoccupied corner of the office.

CANDY

This is going to cost you extra.

DOUGLAS

Shut up.

CANDY

This is unlawful imprisonment!

DOUGLAS

I can break the law. I'm a cop!

INT. WEBSTER'S HOME - WEBSTER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Webster sits in bed reading a hard copy of the Texas Legal Code and Statutes. He checks the clock - 7:30pm.

He removes his hat from the nightstand.

INT. WEBSTER'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Sharon is passed out on the couch after another long day at work. Webster walks past her and out the door.

INT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The town meeting. LOCALS fill rows of chairs and spill onto the bleachers.

At the front of the gym is a long table where Buckshot, Douglas are seated. Each has a name plate in front of them denoting their title. There is also a name plate for Meursault that reads "Mr. Myrl Meursault - Fed." However Meursault is not there.

Everyone is on their feet, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, hands on their hearts, facing the flag at the front of the room. As the pledge goes on, Douglas looks at the spot where Meursault is supposed to be.

He makes eye contact with Buckshot who mouths to Douglas--

BUCKSHOT

Where is she?

ALL
...with liberty and justice for
all.

While the pledge ends the room stays standing. Instead, they all turn to the left, so they are facing the state flag of Texas.

ALL (CONT'D)
Honor the Texas flag; I pledge
allegiance to thee, Texas,...

After a beat, the still standing crowd turns completely around to the back of the room where the Christian flag hangs in the public school gymnasium.

All, still with hands over their hearts, begin--

ALL (CONT'D)
I pledge allegiance to the
Christian flag, and to the Savior
for whose kingdom it stands...

EXT. WALLACE REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL - NIGHT

Webster approaches the entrance to the school, trying to remain unseen. As he gets to the doors, he sees an elderly SECURITY GUARD walking toward him. He panics and runs back into the parking lot.

He sees Douglas' van, which is unlocked, and hops in the back.

INT. WALLACE REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

All pledges now concluded, Douglas walks to the podium.

DOUGLAS
Just like to remind everyone the
special election for sheriff is
tonight. The polling station will
be open right after the meeting.

He gestures to the single polling station in the back corner of the room.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
Now, I'd like to begin by asking
any member of the press if they
have any questions.

Douglas looks to the only empty row of seats, right in the front. Each unoccupied seat is marked as "reserved" for such news outlets as *The New York Times*, *LA Times*, *USA Today*, CNN, InfoWars, etc.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Then at this time we'd like to open
the floor for questions from
concerned citizens and we
appreciate an orderly conversation--

Before he can even finish, a mad dash to a few microphones set up strategically around the gym. A DULL ROAR from the crowd--

LATER - MONTAGE

Quick cuts of concerned community members.

First an ELDERLY MAN (60s, biker type)--

ELDERLY MAN

Just one question sir, do these
aliens--

DOUGLAS

Just to remind everyone, again, we
don't know what these lights have
been about. We have no reason to
believe the hole outside of town--

ELDERLY MAN

Well, whatever the hell they are...
do they love freedom?

A WORRIED MOTHER (30s)--

MOTHER

I don't hate nobody. But my
question is, what bathrooms will
they be using at Watercreek Park?
If you think I'm letting my
daughter go into the bathroom with
some reptile-looking thing you're
out your mind.

A more AGITATED MAN--

AGITATED MAN

The lights are one thing, now the
dogs--

DOUGLAS

The department has opened a full investigation--

AGITATED MAN

We don't want an investigation. We want answers.

END OF MONTAGE

Douglas can feel he is losing the crowd. As he struggles for words a lifeline. Meursault walks through the gym door and wanders towards her seat.

Murmurs ripple across the crowd. The volume increases. Buckshot rushes the podium and forces Douglas out of the way.

Douglas' eyes light up. As Meursault takes her seat, Douglas goes to speak only to be interrupted by Buckshot as he bulrushes the podium.

BUCKSHOT

Thank you, deputy. As he said, we are looking into all of this.

A tense handshake as Buckshot tries to usher Douglas back to his seat. A quick exchange of HUSHED WORDS that nevertheless are captured by the hot mic. Not that most of the mostly boomer audience can hear anything.

DOUGLAS

Sir, I brought in Agent Meursault and I am overseeing the investigation--

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)

Sit, down!

What the boomers do hear is a SHARP HIGH SCREAM OF FEEDBACK over the microphone as Douglas reluctantly takes his seat.

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)

To help out, the government has sent one of their best, So, Agent Meursault, you wanna come up here?

Meursault rises and walks towards the podium. Buckshot whispers to her as they pass one another--

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)

Keep this thing on the rails.

She takes his place at the podium and looks out into the crowd, finding Juliette.

The agitated man tries to WHISPER to his wife but it's much louder than he realizes.

AGITATED MAN

I don't have my glasses. Now is that a black man?

MEURSAULT

My name is Agent Myrl Meursault, and I am here on behalf of the Bureau of Rural Appeasement. We have no comment at this time.

This sends the crowd over the edge. The COMMOTION fills the gymnasium until it reaches a dull ring,

AGITATED MAN

This is who you bring? Some swamp monster from Washington?

Buckshot lowers his head.

EXT. WALLACE REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

A military humvee pulls up in front of the gymnasium. The door opens to reveal military boots. We track them as they walk towards the gym.

INT. WALLACE REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The commotion inside continues. Meursault can't control the townspeople. The back door opens and Major Weathers slips in without drawing too much attention.

AGITATED MAN

If this... D.C. swamp monster can't tell us what's happening, Mayor Buckshot, why did you even invite her here?

Buckshot rises from his seat.

BUCKSHOT

I didn't.

He pauses dramatically.

BUCKSHOT (CONT'D)

Deputy Douglas, did.

The crowd erupts. Townspeople stand and yell at Douglas until a voice of authority emerges from the back of the room.

MAJOR WEATHERS (O.S.)
Perhaps I can be of some
assistance?

The room goes silent. MAJOR WEATHERS (50s, strapping) enters in full military dress uniform with an absurd number of medals. He marches down the middle aisle towards the front. Meursault happily slips away from the podium.

AGITATED MAN
Who are you?

MAJOR WEATHERS
Major Daniel Gayasuta Weathers, and I'm in command of the sixth battalion and rear detachment from Camp Stanley, not far from your wonderful town. I've been around the world twice, and it sure does make you appreciate the great state of Texas.

A TOWNSPERSON turns to LOCAL HISTORY ENTHUSIAST sitting next to them.

TOWNSPERSON
What kind of name is Gayasuta? He an Indian?

LOCAL HISTORY ENTHUSIAST
All the best American military leaders are white guys with a Native American middle name.

A nod from the townspeople. The answer seems to suffice.

MAJOR WEATHERS
And that's because there is no place like home. I am from here. Just like you.

BUCKSHOT
(taking the mic)
Major, first of all thank you for your service.
(then)
And thank you for coming tonight, something that I absolutely knew was happening. Some of our townspeople are concerned given recent events around these parts.

MAJOR WEATHERS
Mr. Mayor--

BUCKSHOT

Please. Call me Mayor Buckshot--

MAJOR WEATHERS

Mayor Buckshot. I would like to take this moment and tell this whole town something. We have had our eye on you. The Army is interested in expanding Camp Stanley into a semi necessary regional command center and we would like to start with a camp right here in Tehoka.

BUCKSHOT

Well that sounds, exciting. But may I ask what does that have to do with the lights--

MAJOR WEATHERS

The Army already has its best minds on it and as soon as I can disclose all the necessary information to ya'll, I will. A preview though -- it's nothing to worry about.

AGITATED MAN

Why should we trust you?

Weathers walks towards the man and reaches out to touch him on the shoulder.

MAJOR WEATHERS

Sir, have you ever served?

AGITATED MAN

I've never had the pleasure.

His WIFE (50s) chimes in from the seat next to him--

WIFE

He has high blood pressure. That's been his fight.

MAJOR WEATHERS

And a noble fight it is, ma'am. I served three tours in Iraq. Two of those with the U.S. military.

He turns to the crowd at large.

MAJOR WEATHERS (CONT'D)

There are just some things a man who hasn't served will never understand. Like the feeling of lining up to clear a house that intel tells you is occupied by insurgents. That few seconds of tranquility before the flash-bang goes off and you kick down the door. You shoot the guard. BANG! Another one comes down the stairs. BANG! One between the eyes.

Major Weathers is getting into it – the audience is transfixed.

MAJOR WEATHERS (CONT'D)

You hear crying from the stairs. Two children huddle in the corner. BANG! BANG! Right between the eyes. Your buddy was killed by a boy in a suicide vest. Never again.

The agitated man is now holding back tears. He is so proud.

MAJOR WEATHERS (CONT'D)

People ask me if I ever see those kids in my dreams. What I see is all the dead Americans they would've taken with them once they learned how much they hated freedom.

Impromptu patriotic music plays over the loudspeaker. Everyone is on the edge of their seats.

Douglas is incensed as Buckshot glad hands with Weathers, Dougla marches over to Meursault.

DOUGLAS

Did you see that? What is the army trying to hide? They know something. We have--

With the meeting over Meursault collects her things and goes to leave without responding--

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

You can't just leave.

MEURSAULT

Yes, I can.

Juliette watches this whole thing from the crowd. Meanwhile Buckshot and Weathers share a handshake to APPLAUSE--

BUCKSHOT

A good ole' fashion public, private partnership. What could possibly go wrong?

MAJOR WEATHERS

Who wants to have their picture taken with my humvee and rocket launcher?

The crowd rushes towards the doors.

EXT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Weather's marches back towards his humvee. More military vehicles and military personnel now surround it. After a moment, Douglas comes flying out the school trying to catch up.

DOUGLAS

Major! Major!

Weathers clearly doesn't want to talk but puts on a cordial face.

MAJOR WEATHERS

Deputy, congratulations on a successful meeting. what can I do for you?

DOUGLAS

I don't mean to overstep.

MAJOR WEATHERS

You already have.

Douglas senses aggression behind Weathers' stoicism.

DOUGLAS

This investigation belongs to my office.

MAJOR WEATHERS

The US military does not work with Sheriff's deputies--

DOUGLAS

Sheriff-elect. Basically. And sir
there is a legal theory called
Constitutional Sheriffs that
states that ultimate legal power
lies with sheriffs--

Before he can finish his sentence, Weathers' steps in so close so that his face is right next to Douglas' ear. He speaks forcefully under his breath in a way that makes the hairs on the back of Douglas' neck stand up--

MAJOR WEATHERS

Deputy I mean offense by this, but
this investigation is so far above
your head that they barely exist in
the same universe.

(then)

Best to stay out of it.

With that Weather's marches off and back to his humvee. The military caravan that formed around him fires up. Douglas is left powerless to only watch.

INT. WALLACE HIGH SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The gym is almost empty. JANITORS stack chairs. Douglas, still shaken, marches back into the gym to check on the democratic process.

He looks over to the one polling station where only 12 PEOPLE are in line. A POLLING WOMAN (60s) approaches the line.

POLLING WOMAN

I do want to let y'all know that we
just ran out of "I voted" stickers.

The group murmurs in discontent. Almost everyone leaves.

Douglas hangs his head.

INT. MOTEL - MEURSAULT'S ROOM - NIGHT

The measly possessions are all packed. Meursault places her phone and bottle of Xanax in her bag when a KNOCK at the door. Meursault thinks she knows who it is and marches to the door--

INT. MOTEL - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Juliette waits at the door. It swings open--

MEURSAULT
Deputy I told you--

She stops when she sees Juliette--

MEURSAULT (CONT'D)
Oh--

JULIETTE
You can't imply someone looks like
Deputy Douglas and then swallow the
rest of your words, agent.

MEURSAULT
I'm not-- That's not-- I thought
you were someone else.

JULIETTE
Clearly. I saw you at the meeting
and I wanted to thank you.

MEURSAULT
For what?

JULIETTE
Deputy Douglas is not pressing
charges against my students. And in
my experience he--

MEURSAULT
Is a menace? A terror to himself
and the community? The absolute
last person who should ever be in
law enforcement?

JULIETTE
I was going to say "is allergic to
daftness" Or "has an intensity for
the letter of the law".
(then)
But most importantly, he is just a
person and flawed as all of us are.

MEURSAULT
I'm glad I could help.

JULIETTE
They are good boys. Hopefully the
world is much kinder to them than
Tehoka has been.

(then)
(MORE)

JULIETTE (CONT'D)

If you're not in too much of a rush to get out of town, I would love to take you to dinner. As a proper thank you.

MEURSAULT

That's not necessary.

JULIETTE

It is. There is a lot bad in this world. Any spark of good should be nurtured.

MEURSAULT

How did you know where I was staying?

JULIETTE

This is not that big of a place, agent. So what do you think?

Meursault considers--

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

Douglas leaves the gas station, opening up a bag of Funyuns and sipping on a Slurpee.

Across the street, in the cover of darkness, is a band of YOUTHS in black hoodies, huddled around something. Douglas notices--

DOUGLAS

Hey!

The band begins to scatter. Douglas gives chase, throwing his Slurpee to the ground.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

What are you--

He sees what they were huddled around. One of his campaign signs, which features Douglas with his arm around a poorly photoshopped President Ronald Reagan.

The sign has been defaced with spray paint, including horns on Douglas' head. The text that once read "Reagan says, vote Douglas!" now reads "Reagan says, vote Satan!"

When the youths realize who is chasing them, they all stop. One of the youths steps forward and removes his hood. It's Radnor, who now sports two black eyes.

RADNOR

It's fine. He doesn't have a gun.

Douglas watches as Radnor marches towards him, and without a second thought removes Douglas' night stick and smacks Douglas on the side of the leg.

The hit drops Douglas to his knees just as Radnor unleashes a wide swing of the stick straight to side of Douglas' face.

BLACKOUT

EXT. DOWNTOWN - SBARRO'S PIZZA - NIGHT

Downtown is dark and quiet, except for one beacon of light and activity – the local Sbarro's Pizza joint.

INT. SBARRO'S PIZZA - NIGHT

What in any reasonable universe should be a local mom and pop establishment is instead a mid-tier pizza franchise.

The patrons don't know the difference. The place is packed with FAMILIES and other various LOCALS.

In the middle of the fray is a booth more prominent than the rest. A gold plaque on the wall notes that this is Vanessa Carlton's booth.

Below the plaque is a poorly-developed photo of the aforementioned singer. In the way pizza establishments have photos of famous patrons, this restaurant instead just has the one photo of a road-worn and confused Vanessa Carlton sitting in the booth, captioned "Vanessa Carlton - 2005."

Meursault and Juliette sit across from one another.

MEURSAULT

I was kind of expecting something more... unique. I thought that's what you specialized in.

Juliette shrugs.

JULIETTE

Franchises are cheaper.

EXT. SBARRO'S PIZZA - NIGHT

THROUGH WINDOW

Meursault and Juliette continue their date. Conversation flows, Meursault even cracks a quick smile.

Parked across the street is Douglas' van

INT. VAN - NIGHT

Douglas now with a black eye of his own watches Meursault and Juliette.

INT. SBARRO'S PIZZA - NIGHT

Back inside, Meursault's disposition changes when she notices some dirty looks from patrons directed at them, particularly from RANDY (20s) at the next booth over.

MEURSAULT
(turning to him)
Is there something I can do for
you, sir?

Randy stands and walks to their booth.

RANDY
You can take your soy-eating
coastal elite values-ass out of our
town.

JULIETTE
Randy--

RANDY
Ms. Chambers, I ain't got no
problem with you, cause you taught
me about books, but *she's* trouble.
I can tell. She's here to change us
and our town. Get us to stop saying
Merry Christmas and what not.

A crowd begins to form around them. Angry voices call out from the other tables.

ANGRY VOICE 1
You can't take Christ out of
Christmas.

ANGRY VOICE 2
He's the reason for the season.

Juliette has had enough.

JULIETTE
We should be leaving anyway.

She takes Meursault's hand and leads her away from the growing mob and towards the door.

RANDY
Merry Christmas.

INT. DOUGLAS' HOME - NIGHT

Douglas' childhood home. With his mother bedridden, the rest of the house goes largely unused.

INT. DOUGLAS' HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Douglas begins his nighttime routine and starts water for tea.

LATER

He places the kettle and a cup on a tray.

INT. DOUGLAS' HOME - GLADYS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

Douglas' mother GLADYS (70s) lies in bed on her laptop. Douglas enters with the tea. She doesn't look up.

DOUGLAS
Here's your tea, Mama. Remember,
the doctor said it's important you
get enough sleep--

GLADYS
Do you think this write-up on the
Cloverdale Post Office in Winston-
Salem is going to finish itself?

DOUGLAS
Mama, you ain't never been to
Winston-Salem.

GLADYS
That's what they want you to think.
(then)
I'm a grown woman, I'll go to bed
when I want.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Meursault and Juliette walk down the street alone.

JULIETTE

I'm sorry about Randy.

MEURSAULT

Can't help but think it wouldn't be a problem if one of us was a man.

JULIETTE

Certainly true. You know, there's a law in this town saying if two unmarried women are spending time together after sundown it can be considered a covenant. Rarely enforced but still on the books.

(then)

But no matter what you'd still be an outsider to them.

MEURSAULT

The truth is I feel like an outsider everywhere these days.

JULIETTE

Why is that?

MEURSAULT

I don't know

JULIETTE

Well when was the last time you didn't?

MEURSAULT

Before my mom passed.

JULIETTE

I am so sorry. How long ago was that?

MEURSAULT

Over a year. But you're the first person I've told.

Juliette is gobsmacked at this admission. Her tone becomes that of a school teacher admonishing a student.

JULIETTE

Agent...

(then)

That simply won't do.

Meursault laughs to deflect.

JULIETTE (CONT'D)

It's not funny. I demand you tell me why that is.

MEURSAULT

I don't know.

(off her look)

And I'm not trying to get out answering. I just-- When she died I lost all feeling. All connection to anything. To everything.

JULIETTE

You lost all hope. That thing with feathers that perches in the soul.

MEURSAULT

Yeah.

(then)

Why are you here? In Tehoka?

JULIETTE

I don't want to disappoint you with my answer, but... I just am.

MEURSAULT

You don't ever feel like you're missing things? Out in the world?

JULIETTE

The world happens here too. Places like this are a lot like people. If you give them a chance, they might surprise you.

(then)

This was pleasure, agent.

MEURSAULT

Let me walk you home?

JULIETTE

Thank you. That's kind, but... best not have the whole town thinking we're witches.

At a cross street the two diverge, until Juliette suddenly turns back. She yells over her shoulder--

JULIETTE (CONT'D)

At least not yet.

With that, she turns and walks off into the night.

DOWN THE STREET

Now alone, Meursault carefully navigates the streets of Tehoka, still unfamiliar with her new surroundings. Suddenly, something stops her-- The unsettling SOUND OF RIPPING FLESH.

ALLEY

Meursault ducks into an alley, following the noise. She peers into the darkness and, after a few moments she sees it. The source of the sound. A dog. It was clearly once domesticated, but now seems almost rabid as it tears into the carcass of something.

Even from distance, Meursault can see the blue gums. She's frozen, but the dog seems to sense her and looks up. A snarl. Its eyes light up in a way that shakes Meursault to her core.

Without thinking, she turns and runs. She doesn't dare look back.

INT. DOUGLAS' HOME - DOUGLAS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room of someone 15 years younger than Douglas. Movie posters and memorabilia fill the room - most notably the movies of one Russell Crowe.

The centerpiece is a poster of Crowe from the movie *Gladiator* - the pinnacle of western masculinity.

Douglas stares at Russell longingly. He can almost imagine that Russell is staring back at him.

Suddenly, a CRASH from outside.

EXT. DOUGLAS' HOME - NIGHT

Trash cans next to the house look recently disturbed.

Douglas exits and tries to follow the noise.

DOUGLAS

I swear if it's one of you kids--

A dog is scrounging around in one of the knocked-over trash cans. Douglas recognizes it - it's Ms. Thompson's dog Dixie.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

What, that old lady don't feed you?
Go on get--

The dog turns toward Douglas and snarls. It looks even more deranged than the last time Douglas saw it and it now sports gums that are a bright shade of blue. Douglas immediately assumes a defensive position and moves slowly towards the dog, picking up a shovel.

The two size each other up before the dog jumps and launches itself at Douglas who swings the shovel only for it to fly out of his hands.

By the time Douglas swings around the dog is already pouncing again this time tackling Douglas to the ground.

As they hit the ground Douglas throws the dog off of him with all his might. The dog quickly regains its balance and snaps at Douglas' legs as he tries to crawl away towards the shovel that rest a few feet away. Douglas kicks at the animal's head.

Douglas locks his eyes on the shovel and crawls as fast as he can towards it. He grabs the shovel just as the dog jumps at him again. This time Douglas' wide swing finds its home and hits the dog in the face.

The dog drops to the floor, dead. Douglas winds up and swings the shovel down at the dog repeatedly.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - MEURSAULT'S ROOM - NIGHT

Meursault is asleep in the bed. Douglas stands over her. On the nightstand sits her bottle of Xanax. It's never far away.

As if sensing him, Meursault jumps awake.

DOUGLAS

I need to show you something.
Get dressed. I'll be in the car.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

The van is running outside the motel. Douglas is waiting in the driver's seat. Meursault enters apprehensively.

LATER

The van is on the road. Inside, it's dead silent.

MEURSAULT

What happened to your eye?

DOUGLAS

Kids. And dogs.

INT. DOUGLAS' HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Douglas leads Meursault through the house.

MEURSAULT
Where are we going?

DOUGLAS
Keep your voice down. My mama's
sleeping.

They arrive at the door to the basement. Douglas motions for her to walk down the stairs.

MEURSAULT
I'm not going down there.

She tries to step away from the door, but Douglas cuts her off. There is no getting past him.

DOUGLAS
I ain't going to hurt you.
(then)
I need you.

INT. DOUGLAS' HOME - BASEMENT - NIGHT

Complete darkness. Then one overhead light goes on to reveal a conspiracy theorist's basement. The walls are covered with newspaper clippings and a large map of the United States.

The clippings are from paranormal activities in small cities all over the country. Thumb tacks mark the towns from each story on the map. Meursault is drawn in.

DOUGLAS
Fifteen, maybe 20 others. All small
towns, no one has heard of. All
start with lights at night.

Douglas leads Meursault across the room to a collection of plastic bags. He removes one more bag from his pocket.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
Bugs. Taken from the crash site.
Special form of maggot that thrives
in areas of high radiation.
Hiroshima, Chernobyl. Knew I had
seen them somewhere before.
(motions to the other
bags)
(MORE)

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Stool samples from every dog that's
died here. Found a maggot in one
that died on me today.

That's a lot of dog poop. Meursault covers her nose. Has that
smell been there the whole time?

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

This is bigger than lights. This
land is deeply sick. And only one
thing can be behind it...

Douglas motions to a corner of the room, and Meursault turns
to reveal--

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Lizard people--

Photos of prominent government personnel with lizard heads
cover the wall.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

They're behind it all. An ancient
alien reptilian race. Been biding
their time until they can bring
their friends here.

Meursault has seen enough - Douglas is clearly unhinged. She
turns and makes a break for it. Douglas is just distracted
enough for her to slip past him.

EXT. DOUGLAS' HOME - NIGHT

Meursault flies out the front door with Douglas not far
behind.

Douglas can't let her leave and grabs her to try and stop
her. A struggles ensues as Meursault tries to free herself
until BANG--

A moment before anyone recognizes what happens and then--

DOUGLAS

Ah!

Douglas collapses to the ground blood spilling from Douglas'
leg.

MEURSAULT

What the hell was that?!

DOUGLAS

My gun!

MEURSAULT

You can't keep a gun in your pants!

Before Douglas can explain, the night sky lights up, just as it did before. Seeing the lights for herself, Meursault can't help but be taken in by them.

Douglas' beams with vindication. Then he lets out a MANIACAL LAUGH.

DOUGLAS

Come on. We gotta get to the crash site.

Meursault tries to help Douglas up but he pushes her away. They both make a run for the van. With all his injuries, Douglas can only hobble.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

Meursault is now driving, the siren light is flashing. Douglas tends to his wound in the passenger seat.

MEURSAULT

(looking up at the lights)
What the hell is happening?
(looking at Douglas)
What are you doing?

DOUGLAS

Making a tourniquet. Turn right.

Meursault yanks the wheel and the van swerves. Knives fall out of their boxes in the back.

IN THE BACK

Webster holds on for dear life underneath a shelf. Knives drop to the floor around him, one falls blade first and sticks into the ground near his face.

EXT. CRASH SITE - NIGHT

A fence has been installed around the perimeter.

Meursault helps lift Douglas over the fence. Meursault hops the fence easily as Douglas hobbles off in the direction of the hole.

DOUGLAS

Follow me.

A safe distance away, Webster, careful to not let Douglas or Meursault see him, follows.

EXT. CRASH SITE - NIGHT

The desolate site from earlier is now crawling with MILITARY PERSONNEL, mostly huddled around the large hole.

Douglas and Meursault watch from a safe distance as Major Weathers yells at a LIEUTENANT. They are too far away to hear, but it's clear that he's yelling about the lights.

Next to the hole is a collection of military vehicles including one with a large conveyor belt which is the process of LOWERING A LARGE SAUCER LIKE SHIP INTO THE HOLE. Not out of the ground, into the ground.

Meursault can't believe her eyes. Douglas beams with excitement. Until something else grabs his attention.

DOUGLAS

Webster.

Meursault looks back and sees Webster hurrying towards them. Douglas motions to him to turn around. Meursault stands, but Douglas pulls her back.

Suddenly, a light shines on Webster, who instinctively raises his hands in surrender. A PRIVATE walks towards him.

AT WEBSTER

The private forces Webster to his knees.

PRIVATE

How'd you get here, kid?

(after no response)

This area is for authorized,
military personnel only. You don't
talk? Say something.

Growing impatient, the soldier grabs Webster's arm.

PRIVATE (CONT'D)

Answer me! Fine, you're coming--

Out of the darkness, Douglas pounces. With one swing Douglas smashes a rock into the private's head. He immediately collapses to the floor.

Meursault scoops up Webster and makes a break for the van.

INT. VAN - NIGHT

The van pulls up in front of Meursault's motel. Douglas is bloodied, but he can drive.

DOUGLAS

His mom won't even know he was gone. He's smart like that.

MEURSAULT

Douglas, we just watched the military put who knows what into the ground. What're they doing? What do we do?

Her energy is becoming frantic the more she processes. Somehow it is Douglas now who seems like the cooler head.

DOUGLAS

They're gonna know someone was there, but they can't say nothing. We just need to act normal until we can do some more digging. Clearly, there is somethin' here they don't want getting out.

Meursault relents - Douglas is right. He opens the door.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Meursault-- Get some sleep. We start fresh in the morning.

MEURSAULT

(looking at Douglas' leg)
You're gonna have to clean yourself up first.

Meursault shuts the door behind her. Once alone Douglas lets out a confident smile. He looks at his now bloodied leg and pulls up the leg of his pants to reveal a deep bite. While still bloodied the gash is now also a GLOWING BLUE.

A look of deep concern from Douglas. As he continues to inspect the wound he doesn't see as a head appears behind him.

THROUGH WINDOW

A classic alien head appears outside the driver side window. The face is oval-shaped and comes to a sharp point at the bottom. The eyes are deep set, black, and seem to be locked on Douglas.

Finally, Douglas looks over and sees the face. He jumps. Reaches for a weapon only to discover the face is only a balloon. One of the many lost by the Dippers earlier that day which is now aimlessly floating in the night.

A wind picks up the balloon again carries it away. Douglas is left still on edge from the encounter.

Then he feels something. His eyes follow the sensation to between his legs. A spark of manhood. Douglas fires up the van. He's got one more stop to make.

INT. MOTEL - HALLWAY - NIGHT

A long, desolate hallway. Every door exactly the same, except for Meursault's, which has a bulky manilla envelope sitting in front of it.

EXT. SHERIFF'S ANNEX - NIGHT

A dull SIREN as the van skids to a stop. Douglas fumbles out, his movement still constrained by his condition.

Nevertheless, anticipation is killing him as he waddles towards the door.

INT. MOTEL - MEURSAULT'S ROOM - NIGHT

The door shuts behind Meursault as she opens package and removes two worn books — *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Color Purple*.

As she flips through the tattered pages she finds a note tucked in like a bookmark.

"Some light reading... in case you decide to stick around, --Juliette." Meursault inspects the note before placing it on the nightstand next to her Xanax.

She sits on the bed and takes in her surroundings. Guess she's going to have to get used to this.

INT. SHERIFF'S ANNEX - NIGHT

Darkness. Then JOSTLING from the door as Douglas struggles with the knob. Finally the door swings open, shedding just enough light into the dungeon-like space.

CLOSE ON

Douglas, as the excitement disappears from his face and is replaced with confusion.

The chair is empty. Candy is gone. The cuffs used to restrain her lie on the ground. The only evidence she was ever there.

This disappointment is too much for Douglas. He picks up Webster's chair and throws it against the wall.

Cheap plastic doesn't even do him the service of breaking. He tries again, and then again. A RHYTHMIC THUD as he tries desperately to break the chair. Nothing.

Finally, Douglas gives up and collapses to the ground.

BLACKOUT

THE GROUP CHAT

Written by

David Espey

Date night. RYAN sits with his girlfriend EMMA. Dinner is going nicely enough as they share a LAUGH.

RYAN (V.O.)
It started so...simply.

BAILEY (TEXT & VO)
Hiya, may I be the first to welcome
all of the new sisters of Gamma Pi
Beta. So fun meeting everyone at
initiation. Lol. Everyone looked so
cute and *adorbs* I just couldn't
take it. Btw remember the pigs
blood is a chapter secret! Sister
bond! Introduce yourselves!

ANNIE (TEXT & VO) ZOE (TEXT & VO)
Annie. Zoe.

LAUREN G. (TEXT & VO)	LAUREN B. (TEXT & VO)
Lauren G.	Lauren B.

Ryan scrolls to the top of the message. He is one of 170 members.

RYAN (V.O.)
Who does that? Group chats aren't
supposed to be that big.

RYAN
Yeah, I think I got added to A
group chat by mistake.

EMMA

That's so funny. They must have put
in the number they wanted wrong and
it just happened to be yours.

RYAN

What do I do?

EMMA

Just text them and say it was a
mistake.

Ryan nods. Seems easy enough. He types out a message that
also displays over him. His voice narrates.

RYAN (TEXT & VO)

Haha, I think you added the wrong
person. I'm def not in a sorority,
mostly cause I'm 32. Lol. Good luck
with your sisterhood and all.

Ryan hits send and thinks his problems are solved, until--
The barrage of messages doesn't stop

VANESSA (TEXT & VO)

Vanessa.

HAYLEY (TEXT & VO)

Hayley.

More names follow, swallowing Ryan's message whole. Emma
reads his worry.

EMMA

They'll notice. Just might take a
minute.

Ryan nods. Maybe she's right. He places his phone face down
on the table and continues dinner.

Almost immediately once the phone is on the table, BUZZ--
Then again, and again. A constant drone of BUZZING. Ryan and
Emma share a worried look.

RYAN (V.O.)

I had no idea what had just been
set in motion.

INT. OFFICE - MEETING ROOM - DAY

Ryan is in the middle of a very normal and very boring office
meeting. BUZZ-- He peaks at his phone. The voices narrating
now taunt him.

BELLA (TEXT & VO)
Oh my god, there is the cutest
pumpkin patch like 15 min away.
Would anyone be down to go?

CARA (TEXT & VO)
OMG, I love pumpkins!

VALARIE (TEXT & VO)
OMG, I love patches!

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Movie night with Emma. Ryan's phone sits on the table, always buzzing. Ryan has a new strategy, ignore. It's not going well. He wants to look.

RYAN (V.O.)
They even added the girl they
thought was me, and it didn't
matter. Like some cruel twist of
the knife by fate herself

Ryan can't resist and checks it. Emma can't believe it. It's clearly driving a wedge between them.

BAILEY (TEXT & VO)
I'm such an idiot, I forgot Laney,
lol. Just added her!

LANEY (TEXT & VO)
Happy to be with my girls! Don't
have all your numbers, who all is
in here?

Ryan's face drops, he knows what's coming.

RYAN
No, no, no...

A flood of texts appear above him, all the same names he has seen before with their voices. The noise bleeds together like the a howling void.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Another date night at the same restaurant. Ryan is looking more disheveled. Unshaven. He's put on weight. The light mood from the first scene is gone.

Ryan's phone BUZZES constantly every time with the voice. He doesn't have to look anymore. He just hears the voices.

DANNY (V.O.)
What's everyone's plan for tonight?

KAREN (V.O.)
We're having a kick back with the
baseball team at my place, you
should come.

GABBY (V.O.)
OMG, so fun.

BECCA (V.O.)
OMG so fun.

Ryan and Emma sit in silence. Emma says anything to fill the void.

EMMA
Maybe, I'll get a salad?

RYAN
OMG I love that for you.

Emma gives Ryan a "what the hell" look. He covers his mouth shocked by what just came out of it.

RYAN (V.O.)
It started to affect the people
around me

INT. APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ryan lays motionless in his bed. His wellbeing continues to deteriorate.

EMMA
Maybe we can go do something
tonight?

Ryan's face is ghost white.

RYAN
Tonight is formal.

His eyes are locked on his phone. He knows what is coming.

BUZZ--

INT. APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Moving day but only for Emma. Half the stuff in the apartment is now gone. Emma leaves with her final box.

Ryan is wrapped in a blanket on the couch.

RYAN (V.O.)
And then came...the...emojis.

BUZZ from his phone. Emojis fill the space over his head. Money mouth, praying hands, sleepy face...

INT. APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

More BUZZING as Ryan sleeps. He stirs awake and feels like eyes are on him. He flips over where a Godzilla style manifestation of the SLAY EMOJI looms over him--

INT. STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL - EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

The source of the voiceover--

Sun pokes through a bared up window. A shell of what used to be Ryan sits across from a THERAPIST. Ryan is in the middle of a cigarette. He smokes now?

He holds up a hand drawn emoji, the upside down half smile.

RYAN

What the hell is this? Why is it upside down? Did he get decapitated? What am I supposed to do with that?

THERAPIST

Why not just leave the chat?

Ryan takes a long drag of the cigarette.

RYAN

You don't get it? Do you?

INT. APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY

Back to before being institutionalized, Ryan looks at his phone. He's finally gonna do it.

He looks at his phone and clicks the "leave chat" button. That was so easy? A smile overtakes his face. The first sign of life in awhile.

Then-- BUZZ. Ryan looks at his phone another chat. Less people but the same numbers, voices follow.

BROOKLYN (TEXT & V.O.)

Oh my god, I can't believe you did that. Takes some balls to stand up to Bailey like that?

LAUREN G. (TEXT & V.O.)
 Can I be honest with you guys? I
 kind of hate Bailey.

LAUREN B. (TEXT & V.O.)
 OMG, me too.

NATALIE (TEXT & V.O.)
 The other day, I saw her eat a
 whole muffin.

LAUREN B.
 OMG are you serious?

LAUREN G.
 OMG. What a pig.

Before Ryan can even process this. A BUZZ from a different
 chat. More numbers from the original chat.

BAILEY (TEXT & V.O.)
 Are you mad at me?

Another BUZZ-- A different chat.

CHRISTINA (TEXT & V.O.)
 Okay, se we need to find someone to
 run against Bailey for chapter
 president next semester.

The hope disappears from Ryan's face. A loud maniacal LAUGH--

INT. STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL - EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

Back in the exam room, Ryan is LAUGHING not out of amusement
 but as a manifestation of the his psychosis. The therapist
 just writes notes in their file.

BLACKOUT