

CURTAIN CALL

Written by

Bill Meeks

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

A shitty city square, covered in dirt and dead leaves.

INSERT - A graffiti-covered sign: WELCOME TO EVERLY HEIGHTS, HOME OF THE ARTS.

A taxi pulls up. NAT GRECO (35) climbs out, hands buried in the pockets of safety-pinned pants held up by brown suspenders. She runs a hand through her purple faux-hawk.

NAT

"Everly Heights, Home of the Arts?"
Not for a long fucking time.

Nat turns and strolls down the street.

NAT

Some old white dude named Kierkegaard said, "you live life forward, but you only understand it backward." That's just nostalgia-wanking bullshit. If you're like me, you end up back in the same piece of shit town you ran away from when you were eighteen. I'm Nat. Nice to meet you.

EXT. GASTON'S DINER - DAY

INSERT - A glass window, with a painted sign: **30 YEARS - SAME FOOD, SAME RECIPES, SAME COOK. WE NEVER CHANGE A THING.**

Nat reads the window as she takes a drag off her cigarette.

NAT

It's funny you showed up now.
Tonight's the final performance at Cornerstone Theater. You've probably already heard people talking about it.

BENJAMIN AINSLEY (38), a young urban professional dressed to impress, steps in front of Nat.

BENJAMIN

DUDE... Nat! Are you here for Cornerstone's final show?

NAT

(to camera)
See? People are talking about it.

BENJAMIN

What?

NAT

I moved back last week.

BENJAMIN

Did the "Everly Heights magnet" pull you back?

NAT

Yeah. The big city was a big flop. I'm staying in Postal's basement while I figure shit out.

Benjamin looks at his digital watch. *Shit.*

BENJAMIN

Well, good luck...

NAT

You know anybody hiring?

BENJAMIN

Can't say that I do... Yet.

NAT

Yet?

BENJAMIN

I might invest here in town. If it goes, I'd hire you.

NAT

That doesn't help me much today.

Benjamin looks at his watch again. Now he's really late.

BENJAMIN

I gotta run. See you around?

NAT

Unfortunately.

Benjamin offers a sympathetic smile and continues on his way.

Nat flicks her cigarette in the street. She stops. Damn it. She scoops up the butt, puts it out on the sole of her shitkicker boot, then tosses it in the trash.

NAT

Just because the town went to shit doesn't mean I want to burn it down.

(MORE)

NAT (CONT'D)

These old buildings are made of
flash paper. A warm breeze would
light them up.

The wind BLOWS. A cloud covers the sun. Nat looks into the
sky, shrugs, then pulls open the door to Gaston's Diner.

INT. GASTON'S DINER - DAY

Nat plops down at the counter and opens a menu. MICHAEL
SPECIAL (66), a disheveled old academic with gray hair and a
hint of mischief in his eye, bites a dry slice of rye toast.

Nat peeks at Michael over her menu.

NAT

(to camera)

He's Michael Special. He's been in
charge of the theater since I was a
kid. You'd think he'd have better
things to do today than go out for
breakfast. Then again, he's always
been the "pothead professor" type.
He probably forgot. Want me to
screw with him?

(to Michael)

Dude, you ever think we're living
in a simulation?

Michael washes down his toast with some hot tea.

MICHAEL

Life is the simulation. Truth only
exists on the stage.

Nat hops over a stool and puts out her hand.

NAT

Nat Greco. You don't remember...

Michael leans over and hugs her.

MICHAEL

Natalie! You did our summer theater
series back in ninety-three. Under
Milkwood, if I recall. Where have
you been?

NAT

Getting my Master's at OU.

MICHAEL
Ohio University has a fantastic
theater program.

NAT
I only minored in Theater.

MICHAEL
Understood. It's better to major in
something more realistic.

NAT
I majored in Philosophy.

MICHAEL
Oof.

Nat picks at a sugar packet on the counter. Michael takes an
awkward bite of toast.

NAT
You don't need any help at the
theater, do you? I heard tonight's
your last show.

MICHAEL
That's what the bank says, but I
refuse to lay down my sword. Tell
you what... I'm liquidating some
props and costumes. Can you help me
sell them online? I'll give you
minimum wage, plus five percent on
anything you sell.

NAT
Hell yeah. Sounds easy enough.

An older waitress, THELMA MEESE (61), waddles over to Nat.

THELMA
You two look like you're up to
something.
(yells in the kitchen)
GASTON! FOX IN THE HENHOUSE!

GASTON (60), the old Cajun cook, comes out from the kitchen
with fire in his eyes.

GASTON
What did I tell you, Special? If
you won't sell that theater to me,
I ain't gonna feed ya'!

Michael Special stands and collects his things.

MICHAEL

Fine, but I'll burn Cornerstone
down before I'll let you have it.

Thelma squints. She doesn't trust that man. Not one bit. She pulls out her pad and turns her attention to Nat.

THELMA

What can I do you for?

NAT

Hot chipped ham, and a
complimentary water.

(to Michael)

Should I get this to go?

MICHAEL

No. Stay. Enjoy. I'll meet you at
Cornerstone. Reality awaits!

Michael throws kisses as he backs out the door.

Gaston scoops chipped ham burnt in thick gooey BBQ sauce out of a crockpot and onto a plate. He slides it to Thelma, who takes it over to Nat.

THELMA

Hot chipped ham, fresh from the
kitchen.

Nat takes a bite. She spits it out into a napkin.

NAT

This must be reality. No simulation
would taste this bad. How long has
this been there?

THELMA

Since yesterday.

(leans in)

So, I heard you chatting with him
about a job.

NAT

Yeah.

THELMA

You wanna turn one job into two?

NAT

I'm intrigued.

THELMA

GASTON, we got a live one!

Gaston leans in close.

GASTON

Honey child, I'll put it to you straight. We want to buy the theater. A little bird told me Special is pulling some shady shit to keep the doors open. I need you to find proof and get it to Thelma and her girls by noon so we can stop him.

NAT

And what do I get out of it?

GASTON

I'll match whatever he's paying you, plus I'll comp your meal. Ain't no doubt about it, bubby.

NAT

My professors would call this immoral, but they don't have student loans, right? I'm in.

Gaston shakes Nat's hand. She shudders at the greasy heat emanating from his oversized paw. He notices her shirt is hanging open and leers. She squirms, pulls her hand away, then picks up her napkin to wipe off the grease.

EXT. PANCAKE - DAY

Nat lights a cig as she approaches a burned-out boarded-up building.

NAT

What a creep... But look at me! First week back and I've got two jobs lined up. I mean, I feel bad for Mr. S, but-- HOLY SHIT.
Pancake.

INSERT - A funky faded marquee on the building: THE PANCAKE - PUNK ROCK THAT FLIPS YOUR FLAPJACK.

NAT

I went to a million punk shows here back in the day. Gutter punks from the tri-state area... that's Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia... stopped here on their way to gigs in Pittsburgh or Cincinnati.

(MORE)

NAT (CONT'D)

Thing is, they made more playing
Everly Heights. The mayor gave The
Pancake a grant every year, so they
could get big acts like RxPx and
Nosloo's Staff.

EXT. EVERLY HEIGHTS CITY HALL - DAY

A faded brick building with a huge cement bust on the steps:
The likeness of MAYOR BROWN, a distinguished politician.

NAT

This town lost a lot when it lost
Mayor Brown.

Nat scratches a match across his nose to light her cigarette.

NAT

Everly Heights is surrounded by
farmland. The farmers got
government corn subsidies back in
the nineties, which the city taxed.
Mayor Lane used their taxes to fund
the arts, which the farmers fucking
hated. They voted him out in the
early aughts and gave the Arts
money to the cops. Assholes.

Two cops push a JUNKIE in cuffs up the steps. His eyes are
glassy. He's not fighting them.

NAT

This opioid epidemic is sad, man.
Half the people I grew up with end
up in the morgue with a needle in
their arm. I used to get upset when
I saw a dead friend pop up in my
Facebook feed. Later on, I'd get
angry. Now, I'm what the smackheads
would call "comfortably numb."

LOUIE LOOP (19), a nerdy kid with curly hair and thick
glasses, walks down the street playing with his Yo-Yo.

NAT

Didn't I see you on YouTube?

Louie snaps his Yo-Yo back into his hand and bows.

LOUIE

Louie Loop, Everly Heights's third-
biggest YouTuber, at your service.
Wanna see my Witch's Wallop?

NAT
I play for the other team, boss.

LOUIE
Your loss...

Louie does tricks with his Yo-Yo as he walks away.

EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

As Nat walks by the rusty swing set, she spots a strange figure in the sandbox: BEATRIX KNAPP (41), in a flowing black dress and purple shawl, peers into the sand. A little stinkbug crawls across. Beatrix lays her finger in its path.

BEATRIX
Come to mama, you ugly thing.

The stinkbug crawls onto her finger. She flicks it back into her mouth then grinds it between her teeth.

BEATRIX
You're part of mama now.

NAT
Get a damn sandwich, lady.

Beatrix spins around, a bug leg stuck in her teeth.

BEATRIX
My lovies are delicious.

NAT
To you.

Michael Special happens by, carrying a heavy box from EVERLY HEIGHTS PRINTING COMPANY.

MICHAEL
Beatrix! I hope I'll see you at tonight's performance of Romeo and Juliet.

NAT
They'll have better snacks.

BEATRIX
My sisters and I will be there, although we were hoping the final show would be Macbeth.

MICHAEL
 (coughs)
 The Scottish play. It's bad luck to
 say--

BEATRIX
 Macbeth?

Michael loses control of his cough.

MICHAEL
 You've... doomed... us all.

She snatches another stinkbug from the sandbox and eats it, her eyes locked with Michael's. He turns away in disgust.

MICHAEL
 Filthy. Absolutely filthy.

BOOM! Rain drizzles down over them. Beatrix tilts her head back and drinks it up.

BEATRIX
 Cleaner now.

MICHAEL
 Come on, Nat. We've work to do!

Michael pulls his jacket over his head and jogs away. Nat jogs after him.

NAT
 Good luck with the diet, lady.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - DAY

An old converted church. The dingy bricks form a steeple with an old wooden sign mounted over the massive double doors.

INSERT - The sign: CORNERSTONE printed over faded drama masks.

Michael and Nat splash up the sidewalk and run onto the stoop and under the eave.

NAT
 This place looks like it needed a
 good wash.

Michael looks up at the steeple with pride. He sees it AS IT USED TO BE, before the downfall, all shiny and new.

MICHAEL
If only Mayor Lane was still here
to fund us...

NAT
I was just telling them about him.

MICHAEL
Who?

Nat shoots us a little wink.

NAT
Never mind. So, where do I start?

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - OFFICE - DAY

A dusty room stuffed with boxes, trunks, and clothes racks.
Michael hands Nat a stack of labels on a clipboard.

MICHAEL
Start here.

Nat picks up a STRAW HAT.

NAT
Most of this junk is junk.

Michael digs in a box and gives Nat a DIAMOND RING.

MICHAEL
There are a few choice items. Make
sure you list things for what
they're worth.

NAT
How much are we looking to make?

MICHAEL
Ten grand? Enough to pay off our
outstanding debts.

NAT
Ten grand? That's nothing. I owe
more than that to Columbia House.

MICHAEL
It might not seem like much, but
I've been keeping this place alive
with my wife's life insurance money
for a decade. There's nothing left
to... I just want to clear the
books for a potential investor.

NAT
Who'd want to invest in this
shithole town? No offense.

MICHAEL
Chosen Few Productions, but say
nothing. Gaston has spies
everywhere.

Nat offers a weak smile.

NAT
Heh. Who would I tell?

Michael hugs Nat in a TGIF-sitcom, fatherly way.

MICHAEL
I know I can trust you, Nat.
(heads to the door)
I'll be in the light booth if you
need me. Give it that "theater kid
energy," and break a leg!

Michael bows and exits stage right. Nat looks through the
junk, searching for... something?

NAT
What a rat's nest. There's got to
be something to-- Oh. JACKPOT.

INSERT: A banker's box labeled COVER-UPS.

NAT
"Cover-ups?" A little on-the-nose.

She pulls out a tuft of hair and turns it over.

INSERT: A cheap label - MERKIN (HAIR, 1987).

NAT
What the hell is a merkin?

INSERT: Another banker's box labeled ROMEO & JULIET.

Nat digs through the file folders until she finds THE
EVIDENCE. The document GLOWS as she reads it.

NAT
Now that's a cover-up.

She folds the paper and shoves it into her back pocket.

MICHAEL (O.S.)
Say, can you--?

Nat swings around and puts up her dukes.

NAT
Mother fu-- Oh. It's you.

Michael stands there, a wad of dollar bills in his hand.

MICHAEL
Everything okay? You look anxious.

NAT
I forgot my meds this morning.

Nat closes her eyes and turns away.

MICHAEL
Hmm... Before you get started, I need you to get some popcorn bags from the market.

NAT
The one down by Leroy's?

MICHAEL
Indeed.

Michael hands her some cash. A THUNDERCLAP.

MICHAEL
Make sure to take an umbrella.

NAT
I'll be fine.

EXT. LEROY'S PUB - DAY

Rain pours down the gutters into the drain. Nat's SHITKICKER BOOTS splash rainwater as she opens the door of the pub.

INT. LEROY'S PUB - CONTINUOUS

JIM COLVIN (55), an intense fit man with a military haircut, bends over the dinged-up bar and wipes it down with a rag. Nat, waterlogged and dripping, pulls up a stool. Jim slings his rag over his shoulder and shuffles down to her.

JIM
Welcome. You should've brought an umbrella, ma'am.

NAT
Where's Leroy?

JIM

Oh, Leroy passed a few months back. We were friendly, you see. I worked downstairs, so I'm keeping an eye on the place while his kids sort out his affairs.

NAT

I'd say I'm surprised, but that dude was ancient when I left.

Jim tosses a coaster down.

JIM

Time comes for all of us. What'll you have?

NAT

Coffee, with a shot of Bailey's.

JIM

A little early for Irish Cream...

NAT

It's gonna be a long day.

Jim pulls a coffee cup out from under the bar. He pours in Bailey's. Coffee. He stirs it and scoots it over to Nat.

JIM

Going to Cornerstone tonight?

NAT

I just came from there. That place used to be so great. What happened?

Jim looks out the window as the rain clears up.

JIM

Nobody cares about the arts these days. Only the crap telemarketing jobs pay anything in this town. And slinging smack, of course.

Nat slugs down half her coffee.

NAT

Those opioids are a bitch, huh? I thought I could avoid it. Hitch a ride out of town and get an education, but here I am, stuck in Everly Heights like everybody else. Where do I line up for my needle?

JIM
 Don't talk like that. You'll find
 your way. You're strong. Trust me.
 I'm a great judge of grit.

Nat smiles, then tips her glass to Jim and takes a sip. Jim
 tosses his rag under the bar and pulls out a suit jacket.

JIM
 I'm closing for an hour to go visit
 my sweetheart at work.

NAT
 Sorry. I'll chug this.

Jim waves away her concerns.

JIM
 No rush. Pull the door behind you.
 It'll lock on its own.

Nat picks up her coffee and toasts the air between them.

NAT
 Can do.

Jim pulls an umbrella out from under the bar. He considers
 it, then pulls out another one and hands it to Nat.

JIM
 Here. It's nice out, but the rain
 is bound to kick up.

NAT
 Thanks, old-timer. Have fun with
 your sweetheart.

EXT. A CUT ABOVE HAIR SALON - DAY

Jim grabs the doorknob to the salon. He pulls back his hand
 back, hesitates, then grabs it again.

JIM
 Screw it.

He opens the door.

INT. A CUT ABOVE HAIR SALON - CONTINUOUS

A two-seater salon with ancient hair driers. SHELLY YOKUM
 (40) spins around.

SHELLY

What did I tell you about bothering
me at work?

Jim pulls a carnation from his jacket and offers it to her.

JIM

Just call me Romeo.

Shelly smacks the flower from his hand.

JIM

If you won't give me your heart,
I'll take a haircut.

He sits down. Shelly SIGHS. She wants to send him away, but she's not successful enough to turn away a paying customer. Resigned to her fate, she drapes a barber cape around him.

JIM

High and tight.

She runs her hand through his thinning hair.

SHELLY

It's already pretty tight.

Thelma, from Gaston's Diner, enters the shop in a hurry.

THELMA

You got what I need, girl?

Shelly pulls a BAG OF GRAY HAIR from her smock.

SHELLY

Cut it fresh this morning, just
like you asked.

THELMA

Thanks, dear. Come by for some of
Billy's muffins.

Thelma takes the bag of hair, then exits.

JIM

What was that all about?

SHELLY

I'm not sure. She told me she
needed "fresh gray hair" this
morning, and wouldn't you know it,
Mr. Special came by. Stay still.

Shelly moves her sheers around his head. SNIP. SNIPSNIP.

JIM
Did I ever mention you remind me of
my ex-wife?

SHELLY
Every time you come in...

JIM
If only I hadn't lied to her for so
long, or introduced her to Cynthia.

SHELLY
I'm your hairstylist, not your
therapist.

Jim rips off the cape and stands.

JIM
Thanks for the cut. I'll leave you
be... Unless you want to grab
lunch, on me?

She looks at the poor old fool with sympathy.

SHELLY
I'm sorry you don't have nobody,
but that don't make me your
somebody.

Jim reaches out and pats Shelley's hand, a little too
familiar. She pulls it back.

PRE-LAP: A SLAP.

EXT. A CUT ABOVE HAIR SALON - CONTINUOUS

Jim, freshly slapped, stumbles out the door. He was pushed.

SHELLY
GET THE HELL OUT.

Shelly SLAMS the door. He looks around, disorientated.

NAT (O.S.)
Hey, Romeo...

Jim spins around.

NAT
I hope that wasn't your sweetheart.

Jim SIGHS and shoves his hands in his pockets.

JIM
I guess not.

NAT
I locked up the bar for you.

JIM
Thanks, dear. I could use a drink.

Jim totters down the street, dejected. Nat doesn't like seeing him sad, so she turns and KICKS in the salon door.

INT. A CUT ABOVE HAIR SALON - CONTINUOUS

SHELLY
What the hell?

Nat jumps up in Shelly's face.

NAT
What'd you do to that poor old man?

SHELLY
You mean my stalker?

NAT
No, I... Wait. He's stalking you?

SHELLY
For months.

NAT
God. Sorry. What a creep.

SHELLY
I don't think it's sexual or nothing. He's just a lonely old man who ain't used to being told when he's overstepping his boundaries.

NAT
He's not getting off that easy. I'll put the bastard straight.

SHELLY
I don't need your help. Only person what can help me is God himself.

INT. TRI-COUNTY BAPTIST CHURCH - DAY

PASTOR NAGEE (60s), dressed like it's Sunday morning, pats Shelly's hand on the pew beside him.

PASTOR NAGEE

I'm not sure God has an answer for you here. Our Father helps those who help themselves. Have you considered a self-defense class?

Shelly pulls her hand away.

SHELLY

Jim's former military, Pastor Nagee.

PASTOR NAGEE

He worked for the IRS.

SHELLY

That's what he tells people, but other folks say he worked for some hush-hush government thing.

PASTOR NAGEE

I've heard the rumors, not that I believe them. Jim's wife left him, you know. For a woman.

SHELLY

He chaws on about her all the time. I'm over it, and I ain't going out with an old fool.

PASTOR NAGEE

The good book says you've got to give a man grace, Sister Shelly.

Pastor Nagee points to a stained-glass window.

INSERT: The window, LOT'S WIFE turns into a pillar of salt as LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS look on in horror.

PASTOR NAGEE

Take Lot. He found love later in life.

SHELLY

Didn't he knock up his daughters in a cave?

Pastor Nagee smiles.

PASTOR NAGEE

And from Lot's May-December romance came Moab, Ammon, and begat begat begat, we're sitting in a church in the greatest country in the world.

Pastor Nagee takes Shelly's hand again. She shivers.

PASTOR NAGEE
God works in mysterious ways. Don't
mistake a blessing for a curse.

Shelly pulls her hand away and stands.

SHELLY
Sorry, Pastor, but you ain't gonna
change my mind.

EXT. TRI-COUNTY BAPTIST CHURCH - DAY

Beatrice squats on the stoop with her witchy sisters VERONICA (41) and REBECCA (41), both in flowy black tops and purple leggings. The door SLAMS open. Shelly storms out with Pastor Nagee behind her.

BEATRIX
Spare some change?

REBECCA
Be the change.

VERONICA
A change would do you good.

SHELLY
I ain't got no change.

Pastor Nagee confronts the other women as Shelly shuffles off down the street.

PASTOR NAGEE
Beatrice, leave my flock alone.

VERONICA
So you can poison them against us?

Beatrice pushes Veronica out of her way.

BEATRIX
Sister, let me do the talking.
(to Pastor Nagee)
Where do you get off picking on us?

PASTOR NAGEE
"Do not suffer witches, for you
will be defiled, for I AM THE LORD
YOUR GOD."

Beatrice spits on the pastor's shoes.

BEATRIX
 You're the defiler, you HYPOCRITE.
 We've all heard the stories about
 your camp.

Pastor Nagee's cheeks turn red.

PASTOR NAGEE
 ENOUGH DISTRACTIONS. I'm protesting
 today and I gotta get my sermon
 ready. Get off church property and
 go do... whatever it is you do.

Beatrice hops down the stairs. Her sisters follow.

BEATRIX
 Come, sisters. Let's get pumpkin
 spice chai from the market.

EXT. CONVENIENCE MARKET - DAY

Beatrice and her crew CACKLE as they skitter into the market.
 A cheap CAR sits out front.

IN THE CAR

NIELS VON WAHL and RICKI JO DANIELS (mid-20s), preppy, but
 plain, watch through the window.

NIELS
 That was them, right?

RICKI JO
 Are you sure we should do this?

NIELS
 Anything for our dreams, pidgin.

Ricki Jo SIGHS, then unbuckles her seat belt. She opens her
 door and almost hits Nat, who's heading into the store.

NAT
 WATCH IT, BROOM HILDA.

INT. CONVENIENCE MARKET - DAY

Beatrice and her girls pour PUMPKIN SPICE CHAIS at the
 automated drink machine. Nat runs in, rushed and worried.

NAT
 You got popcorn bags?

The CLERK reaches under the counter.

CLERK
 Yep. You need popcorn?

Nat throws a wad of cash on the counter and takes the bags. She's already halfway out the door as she shouts...

NAT
 Nah.

Beatrix approaches the register with a pumpkin chai latte. She reaches into her robes and pulls out a LOYALTY CARD.

BEATRIX
 Three punches, please.

EXT. CONVENIENCE MARKET - DAY

Nat pushes by Niels and Ricki Jo waiting by the rusted, busted payphone.

NIELS
 Watch yourself, Joan Jett.

Nat spins around and puts her fist in his face. He SHRIEKS.

NAT
 That's what I thought.

Nat stomps off.

Niels smiles at Ricki Jo. She doesn't smile back. She tries to say she's scared. She tries to say she's happy with how things are. She tries to say many things, but before she says any of them, Beatrix bops out sucking down a pumpkin spice chai.

BEATRIX
 Mmm... Burnt.

Niels and Ricki Jo wave. Beatrix sneers at them.

NIELS
 AHOY. We heard you make people pretty.

BEATRIX
 Mama makes people all sorts of things. What do you have in mind?

RICKI JO
I don't know if you noticed, but
we're pretty plain.

Beatrix GIGGLES. She noticed.

NIELS
Mr. Special wouldn't even cast us
as Romeo and Juliet because we are
so ugly. I AM SICK OF THIS.

Ricki Jo takes his hand. This is far from the first time his
passion has boiled over and she's had to calm him down.

NIELS
If you can only help us...

BEATRIX
Hold this.

Beatrix shoves her drink into Niels's hands, then pulls a
receipt from her pocket and scratches something on the back.

INSERT: She draws a strange GLYPH on the back of the receipt.

BEATRIX
Take this glyph.

Beatrix hands it to Niels and snatches her drink back.

NIELS
What's a glyph?

Beatrix pats the dumb boy's face.

BEATRIX
A magical symbol, dear.

RICKI JO
What do we do with it?

Beatrix leans in. The sky grows dark. The wind WHIPS.

BEATRIX
Carve it into your flesh, then come
find Mama so she can cast my spell.

RICKI JO
Carve it into our skin?

NIELS
With a knife?

BEATRIX
I thought you two were kinky. Some
prefer the prick of a needle

NIELS
Like a tattoo?

BEATRIX
A tattoo will do.

INT. BIG TERRY'S TATTOO SHOP - DAY

BIG TERRY (37), a huge tattooed dude with frosted tips, sketches a new design behind the counter. Niels and Ricki Jo walk in. Big Terry looks up from his work.

BIG TERRY
Hey, friends. Can I--

Niels whips out the receipt with the glyph.

NIELS
We need matching tattoos. We have
own design.

Big Terry takes the receipt and looks it over.

BIG TERRY
There's a lot of detail in your
little sketch here. You'll want
them four inches across or they'll
smudge.

RICKI JO
You probably don't have time.

Ricki Jo rubs her arm. She doesn't want this. Niels doesn't notice. He pushes in front of her.

NIELS
How much? Price is not an object.

BIG TERRY
For two? Three-fifty, bro.

RICKI JO
Oh, that's way too much.

Niels grabs Big Terry's big hand and shakes it.

NIELS
Let's do it.

Big Terry looks at Ricki Jo. He's seen that look before.

BIG TERRY
 She's not convinced. I don't tattoo
 without enthusiastic consent.

NIELS
 She wants this. You want this,
 don't you, pidgin?

She doesn't, but she's not one to make waves.

RICKI JO
 Stage fright. I need a minute, is
 all.

Big Terry's phone BUZZES. He pulls it out.

INSERT: A text message - BENJAMIN: Pumped for lunch ;)

BIG TERRY
 Shit. I gotta meet an old buddy.
 Take your minute. If you want the
 ink, meet me back here at three.

INSERT: A text message - BENJAMIN: Meet me at Chi-Chi's.

BIG TERRY
 Isn't Chi-Chi's closed?

Niels and Ricki Jo shrug.

EXT. THE OLD CHI-CHI'S - DAY

The chain restaurant stands in ruin. The cracked Chi-Chi's sign leans against the dumpster. Next to his GREEN VAN, Big Terry smokes with Benjamin in the parking lot.

BIG TERRY
 This place is a shithole, bro.

BENJAMIN
 I'm buying it with my inheritance.

BIG TERRY
 It's a deathtrap. You remember Dick
 Armstrong? He got all hopped up on
 junk and jumped off the roof. Broke
 his damn neck.

BENJAMIN
 Oh, wow... I'll invest. Renovate.

BIG TERRY

You could turn it into a comic book shop like we used to talk about.

BENJAMIN

What is this? The nineties?

Big Terry tosses his cigarette down and stomps it out.

BIG TERRY

It's an idea.

Benjamin puts his hand on Big Terry's shoulder.

BENJAMIN

It's good to see you. After what happened last time I was in town--

Big Terry pulls away.

BIG TERRY

You said we didn't have to talk about that.

BENJAMIN

Of course not, dude.

Benjamin's shoulders slump. He blows smoke out his nose.

BENJAMIN

So, ready to grab lunch?
(points at Chi-Chi's)
Not here, of course.

Big Terry backs away.

BIG TERRY

I should get back to the shop.

BENJAMIN

Sorry I brought it up.

Big Terry throws a bunch of fake punches, layering on the machismo extra thick to compensate for...

BIG TERRY

HA. It's whatever, bro. I have a bunch of clients this afternoon.

BENJAMIN

So... Cornerstone tonight?

Benjamin goes in for a hug. Big Terry dodges it.

BIG TERRY
I'm good, bro. I'll be there.

Big Terry climbs in his green van. Benjamin takes a long drag off his ciggy as he watches him drive off.

BENJAMIN
See you soon.

Benjamin wanders down the street and into...

INT. GASTON'S DINER - DAY

Benjamin takes a seat at the counter and pushes the menu away. He doesn't need it.

THELMA
BENNY. Long time, no see. Sit down, sit down. Sitting's cheaper than standing. You want chipped ham, right? Five bucks.

Ben throws a five-spot on the counter.

BENJAMIN
You know it. Is Gaston back there?

THELMA
Sure thing, hon. I'll send him out.

She walks back to the kitchen. Gaston comes out, wiping his hands on his apron.

GASTON
Well, who-dee-doo... Benny, you got BIG, bubby.

Gaston goes in to hug him. Stops. Squints. He remembers, then takes a step back.

GASTON
Wait a tick. I got a bone to pick. 'member back, oh say, ninety-five? You come in and ordered an open-faced turkey sammie?

BENJAMIN
No?

GASTON

Well ya' did, then ya' said you
lost your wallet and you'd come
right back with the money, then ya'
never come right back.

BENJAMIN

Are you sure? It was years ago...

Gaston rips off his apron and throws it at Benjamin, then
taps his temple.

GASTON

Oh, Gaston remember everything. I
figure you owe me six ninety-nine.

BENJAMIN

Entrees were two bucks back in
ninety-five.

GASTON

You ever hear 'bout inflation?

Thelma comes out, a plate of BBQ chipped ham in her hand, her
purse on her shoulder. She puts the plate down.

THELMA

Here, honey. Gaston, watch things
out here. I gotta go see that young
lady I told you about.

Gaston and Benjamin stare each other down.

GASTON

Go on, Thelma. I got it covered.

THELMA

You boys be good now.

Thelma straightens her purse and heads out the door onto...

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Thelma digs around inside her purse. She fingers a coffee cup
and plastic bag with a tuft of grey hair. She smiles, then
marches on.

EXT. WALKING BRIDGE - DAY

A long cement bridge with green guardrails stretches out over
a lazy creek. Nat leans over the rail to watch the water.

FOOTSTEPS. Nat turns. It's Thelma. They meet in middle. Nat looks around, then pulls THE EVIDENCE out of her bag.

NAT

You were right. Mr. S has me selling off bougie donations from a Mr. And Mrs. Pearl.

THELMA

"Juliet's" parents. Give me that.

Thelma snatches the paper from her hand and reads it.

THELMA

How does this make a pea's difference in a soufflé?

NAT

Mr. S was supposed to give everything back after the show. Oh, you'll like this. He has an investor lined up. Some outfit called... WHO THE FUCK?

Beatrice, Veronica, and Rebecca approach.

BEATRIX

Do you have what we need?

THELMA

Oh, I got it all, honey...

Thelma pulls out the coffee cup.

THELMA

A cup with his spit...

Thelma pulls out the baggy with the gray hair.

THELMA

A lock of his hair...

Thelma hands over the printout Nat gave her.

THELMA

And proof of his selfish sins.

NAT

What the fuck?

THELMA

You're gettin' too big for your britches. Now get. You can pick up your money back at Gaston's.

Nat lights up a ciggie, then throws up two middle fingers.

NAT

As Dad used to say, "pleasure doin' business with ya'." Later, bitches.

BEATRIX

It's witches, dear.

VERONICA

We'll eat you like a bug.

Rebecca and Veronica CACKLE as Nat turns and walks away.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Nat walks along the curb like she's on a tightrope.

NAT

Believe it or not, those witches aren't the weirdest people I've met in this town.

The GHOST of an old veteran, FLOAT (70s), rides his bicycle down the street with forty homemade flags mounted to the handlebars. He waves at Nat. She waves back.

NAT

Don't worry. He's no ghost, just a memory of a man named Float. AM or PM, you'd see that old fart riding around screaming his head off...

FLOAT

(screams)

STAY AWAY FROM CHI-CHI'S. QUAKERS
KILL PEOPLE IN THE PARKING LOT.

NAT

Crazy shit like that. He kicked the bucket a few months back after some douche in a red truck crashed into him and split his skull open.

Float's ghost fades away.

NAT

They'll have to find somebody else to close out the Christmas parade this year.

EXT. EMPTY LOT - DAY

Nat sits on the scorched foundation and smokes a cigarette.

NAT

Then there's the poor Infantinos,
who lived in the house that used to
be here. Their daughter, Tina, went
missing right after graduation. It
was all over the news. Her mom...
didn't take it well.

Nat flicks her cigarette. Ghostly flames flicker across the lot. A woman SCREAMS.

NAT

The house burned down with
everybody inside. Two days later,
Tina came back.

More ghosts: A policeman loads YOUNG TINA (19), dressed like a Viking, into the back of the car as she kicks and spits.

YOUNG TINA

I was a SPACE VIKING, ASSHOLE.

The figures fade away.

NAT

They kicked Tina out of the psych ward a few years back after her family's money dried up. If you see her around, don't make eye contact.

EXT. GRECO'S ITALIAN KITCHEN - DAY

A classy Italian restaurant, in its prime. Now, boards are nailed over the broken windows. Nat flips the bird.

NAT

If you ask anybody in this town to name the weirdest character, they'll say George Greco. Dad was an old-fashioned kinda Italian, if you get what I mean.

The GHOST OF GEORGE GRECO (50), in his wife-beater undershirt and cheap gold chains tangled in his salt-and-pepper chest hair, chomps on a cigar.

NAT

Dad ran drugs out the back of this dump for the mob in Steubenville. Good calzones though.

Nat chucks a rock through a window. SMASH.

NAT

You know what Dad did when he found out I was gay? Kicked my ass out and sent his boys after me. I was lucky to get out of here alive.

Nat puffs on her ciggie and blows George's ghost away.

NAT

That's the thing about Everly Heights. Every corner you turn, you run into another ghost.

Nat bumps into TRAVIS HAGEE (41), dressed in flannel and denim. He smiles at Nat, shy one tooth.

NAT

Watch it, ass.

TRAVIS

Watch your own ass, darling. I sure am.

Nat PUNCHES Travis in the breadbasket. He falls over.

TRAVIS

You know you want it.

She kicks him in the kidneys. He GROANS in pain. Nat smiles, lights a ciggie, and walks away.

NAT

(to camera)

Guys like him bring down the IQ of this whole town by forty points.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - DAY

Nat puts out her cigarette and opens the door.

NAT

Listen, all that shit about the witches stays between us, okay?

Nat smiles.

NAT
I knew you were cool.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - STAGE - DAY

Michael paces while he screams into his phone.

MICHAEL
I'm HIP... I'm WITH IT. I refuse to
be another artistic casualty.
(beat)
I'll pay it off. Jeremy's going to--

The door SQUEAKS. Nat sulks down the aisle toward the stage.

MICHAEL
I've got to go, Matheson. We'll
talk later.
(hangs up)
You got popcorn bags, I hope.

Nat tosses the popcorn bags on the stage.

NAT
Of course.
(burps)
What else would I be doing?

Michael inspects the bags.

MICHAEL
Good, good. And the popcorn?

NAT
You didn't ask for popcorn.

MICHAEL
The popcorn was implied.

NAT
Whatever. I'll go get it now.

She turns back up the aisle. Michael bounds off the stage.

MICHAEL
No, no. To eBay with you. I'll get
the popcorn.

Michael walks up the aisle. He stops. Turns.

MICHAEL
Oh. Don't let anybody from Gaston's
in here.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I saw Thelma poking around yesterday. Whatever it is that crusty cook is up to, I want no part in it.

(spins around as he EXITS)
I'm off!

NAT

What a douche nozzle.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - DAY

Michael swishes mouthwash and spits it out on the sidewalk. He marches on, a man with divine purpose.

EXT. CONVENIENCE MARKET - DAY

RYON PAISLEY (37), a burnout in a beanie and faded JNCO jeans, plays guitar next to the ice machine.

INSERT: A sign in his guitar case-- ANY \$\$\$ HELPS.

Michael strolls by, barely noticing the down-on-his-luck musician. Ryon stops playing and tugs at Michael's jacket.

RYON

You got a couple bucks, man? I'm trying to get some soup.

Michael pulls away, then looks into Ryon's eyes.

MICHAEL

Ryon Paisley? Why I haven't seen you since our summer production of Godspell.

Ryon recognizes the old thespian. His emaciated face smiles a boy's smile.

RYON

Mr. S! I hear you got a big show tonight.

MICHAEL

Indeed. I hope you'll make it down.

Ryon points to the sign.

RYON

I ain't even got money for soup.

MICHAEL

We have comps. I'll put you on the list at the box office.

RYON

Hell yeah. I'll check it out.

Michael opens the door to go into the store.

MICHAEL

Excellent. See you tonight.

RYON

Uh... The soup? I'm still hungry.

Michael frowns, then takes out his wallet.

MICHAEL

Uh, sure. How much do you need?

RYON

I can get a bag for ten.

MICHAEL

A bag of soup? How novel.

(hands him a ten)

It always feels good to help a wayward soul.

RYON

Thanks, Mr. S. See you tonight.

Ryon waves until Michael is out of view, then packs up his guitar and takes off for...

EXT. RAILYARD - DAY

Ryon carries his guitar case between the trains, searching for somebody receptive to his business inquiry. There. DANNY CHANCE (39), a "hobo" with a patchy beard, pulls his trench coat tight as Ryon approaches him.

DANNY

You looking?

Ryon pulls out the ten spot with some other crumpled bills.

RYON

Hell yeah, man. Hook me up with an eighth of the dirty.

DANNY

Heroin, right?

RYON
Yeah. Whatever... Heroin.

DANNY
Sure. Give me the moolah.

Ryon shoves the bills into Danny's hand.

RYON
Hurry up. I'm jonesing.

Danny pulls his FBI BADGE out of his coat pocket.

INSERT - Danny Chance's FBI badge. In the photo, he's business casual and clean-shaven.

Danny flips Ryon around and slaps on the cuffs.

DANNY
You're under arrest. I'm--

Ryon blinks twice.

RYON
Danny Chance, boy detective? What's with the shitty beard?

DANNY
I can't help it. It grows in like this. Now turn--

Danny squints at Ryon.

DANNY
Ryon?

Danny uses his key to unlock the cuffs. Ryon rubs his wrists.

DANNY
What the heck are you doing here? I heard you were busy rocking Nashville's butt off.

RYON
Yeah... Nashville fucking sucked.

DANNY
Sorry your dream didn't work out.

RYON
Dreams never do.

DANNY

Dreams do come true. Look at me. I was helping kids find lost pets a year ago. Now I'm in the FBI.

RYON

You're working? Give me my money back. You don't need it.

DANNY

A couple bucks isn't going to change anything. Look at you. All the tats and piercings. Sores all over your face. Those veins. Is getting high worth all that? Stop shooting up, Ryon.

A SHOT from a nearby boxcar. Danny pulls out his gun.

DANNY

What the heck?

RYON

You'd better check that out. Ain't trains, like, interstate commerce?

DANNY

You're coming with me.

A CRACK from inside the boxcar. Ryon backs up.

RYON

Oh hell no. Last time I was in a boxcar, it didn't end well.

DANNY

Fine, but quit the smack. I don't want to read your obituary on Facebook.

Ryon slings his guitar over his shoulder and takes off. Danny hopes he'll see him again, but he's not counting on it. He peeks around, gun drawn, then climbs through the door into...

INT. BOXCAR - CONTINUOUS

RONDA ROUSE (35), in loud leggings and gaudy costume jewelry, picks through a shipping crate. She tests the weight of a GUN in her hand. Just right.

INSERT: In the crate-- Guns, gas canisters, other weapons.

Danny grabs her from behind and shakes the gun from her hand.

RONDA

Let go, you boy detective twat!

DANNY

You're under arrest for attempted theft of... Oh, gosh... Forty-ish military-grade weapons.

RONDA

They ain't mine, buddy.

Danny turns Ronda around, but she fights him. Ronda spits in Danny's face, then pushes him back and breaks free. She grabs his gun and smiles. She's in control now.

DANNY

ENOUGH. Ronda, we went to church camp together. Don't do this.

Ronda forces Danny up against the back wall with the gun.

RONDA

We was both different then. I ain't gonna shoot you, Danny, but I can't let you go. Toss me them cuffs.

Danny does as he's told. Ronda handcuffs him to a wall hook.

DANNY

Someone will find me.

Ronda stuffs the weapons in a duffel bag.

RONDA

Buddy, by the time they do, it won't matter.

She climbs out of the car and pulls the door closed behind her, leaving Danny in the dark. He struggles. Gets a hand into his jacket pocket. Pulls out the SPARE KEY.

DANNY

You aren't getting far.

EXT. BUS STOP - DAY

Ronda runs up as the bus pulls away. She bangs on the door. The bus stops. She lugs her duffel bag up the steps.

RONDA

Thanks. I got a ways to go.

INT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ronda sits down with her duffel bag in her lap. Another stop.

CHARLIE CAPIOLA (45), garnished with piss-colored sweat stains in the pits of his dress shirt, topped by matted hair he hasn't combed in a week, trips on a step. He CHORTLES his distinctive chortle, quite like a warthog gasps for breath as it sinks into a swamp.

CHARLIE

Oh, my. Sorry about that.

Charlie sits next to Ronda, panting. Ronda twists her face. What's that smell? She looks at Charlie, then waves at the driver in the rearview mirror.

RONDA

HEY, BUDDY. Make this guy find another seat. His breath smells like SHIT.

Charlie looks down his nose at the worrisome woman's attire.

CHARLIE

(chortles)

I may have chronic halitosis, but at least I don't look like I raided the discount bin at a thrift store.

He takes out a hanky and pats the sweat off his head.

RONDA

You ain't no Calvin Klein.

CHARLIE

Forgive me I'm discombobulated. I need my insulin. I'm diabetic, you see.

Ronda's eyes soften. She puts a hand on his shoulder.

RONDA

My Pap was diabetic. Lost his foot because he couldn't stop eating Fudge Rounds, the rascally bastard.

CHARLIE

I'm sorry to hear that. And sorry for the snark. I'm a theater critic. Snark is what I do.

Ronda runs her hand across the loud pattern on her leggings.

RONDA
So you like my outfit?

CHARLIE
It's quite THEATRICAL. You'd be at home in a production of Godot.

RONDA
Aww, thanks, buddy.
(looks out window)
Plenty of folks out today.

Charlie yanks the cord. DING. The bus stops.

CHARLIE
(chortles)
What do you expect? There's a play!

EXT. EVERLY HEIGHTS GAZETTE - DAY

A tiny office between two abandoned storefronts, with a rusted newspaper dispenser by the door. Enter Charlie.

INT. EVERLY HEIGHTS GAZETTE - DAY

Michael Special sits in the cramped one-room office, holding a sack of POPCORN KERNELS on his lap as he admires the old awards bolted to the wall.

CHARLIE
Who let you in here? Sit.

They glare at each other across Charlie's messy desk.

MICHAEL
Did you get that e-mail I sent you?

CHARLIE
Michael, your e-mail shocked me.
I'm a professional critic. I don't write good reviews just because the director asks me to.

Michael puts his head in his hands.

MICHAEL
Help me save Cornerstone, Chuck...
For the love of theater. I have an investor, but a bad review could sink the whole deal.

CHARLIE

I sympathize, but my credibility is at stake.

MICHAEL

Smart, Chuck. You'll be the most credible theater critic in a town with no theater.

Michael storms out and SLAMS the door behind him.

INT. COMMUNITY BUILDING - DAY

Michael THROWS open the SUPPLY CLOSET door. His jaw drops.

MICHAEL

WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU DOING? There are kids here. Put that away.

PETER POSTAL (44), a skinhead in a sleeveless undershirt, suspenders down, pants around his ankles, scratches his butt.

MICHAEL

Get out, or I'll call the cops.

Postal covers his bait and tackle as he pulls up his pants.

POSTAL

(in a bad working-class
British accent)

Oy, bruv, I'll go. Just trimming things up for the lady, innit?

Postal pulls his suspender back on with a SNAP.

EXT. THE KOFFEE SHOP - DAY

A small beige building surrounded by café tables. SNAP. A HACKY SACK soars through the air. Postal catches it and chucks it back at THREE OLD STONERS playing in the street.

POSTAL

Ya' bloody hippies!

Nat comes down the sidewalk. She does a double-take at the camera, then gives us a wink.

NAT

Hey, Postal. Sorry I didn't say goodbye this morning.

POSTAL

Your loss, luv. Ronda made us a proper English breakfast.

NAT

Like I want to shit myself.

POSTAL

(smiles)

Savvy.

Nat gestures to the shop.

NAT

You going in?

POSTAL

The bastards banned me. They say I'm... Oh, what's it? Obscene or somefin'?

NAT

Sounds like they know you.

They LAUGH.

INT. THE KOFFEE SHOP - DAY

The bell above the door DINGS. Nat enters. JEREMY HAHN (36), a geeky guy in shorts and a DOGBOY ADVENTURES t-shirt, looks up from his notebook, then jumps up to hug Nat.

Nat throws up her dukes.

NAT

Back off, or I guarantee you'll lose both those arms.

Wait. She knows him.

NAT

Jeremy Hahn?

Nat goes in for the hug.

NAT

I heard you were some Hollywood big shot now.

JEREMY

Yeah. I just moved back. I got married.

NAT

Me too... Moved back, anyway. Still haven't found Mrs. Right.

JEREMY

It's funny. I tried escaping Ohio for years, but the second I do, this town pulls me right back.

Nat nods.

NAT

The "Everly Heights Magnet."

JEREMY

Will I see you at Cornerstone tonight?

NAT

Of course. I'm working there now.

JEREMY

AWESOME.

JENNIFER SIMONSON (22), nerdy barista, enters from the back.

JENNIFER

Yo, what can I get you?

NAT

Can I get a pour-over of Grogg?

Jennifer makes the pour-over coffee behind them.

NAT

(to Jeremy)

You know, coffee's good, but I could really--

JEREMY

Go for a drink? Same.

NAT

Hey. Cancel that--

JENNIFER

OUCH.

Jennifer jumps back, hot coffee pouring down the counter.

NAT

Coffee... Thanks.

JEREMY
One shot. I told Laura I'd be good.

NAT
Sure. One shot.

Jeremy chugs the last couple sips of his coffee.

INT. LEROY'S PUB - AFTERNOON

Jeremy does one shot, then puts the empty glass down next to three others on the bar. Nat SLAPS his back.

JEREMY
ONE MORE SHOT.

Jim Colvin, the old bartender, pours two more shots.

JIM
Careful, son. You don't want to overdose on cheap vodka.

NAT
The hell he doesn't!

Nat and Jeremy pick up their shots, CLINK their glasses together, and drink.

JEREMY
Speaking of overdoses, did you hear about--?

NAT
Tre, Jeff, Skunkatron, Matty, Suzie, and Bibby Bupkis? Yep.

JEREMY
I didn't hear about Bibby. He got me into podcasting. Don't know where I'd be without Bibby.

NAT
You'd be in fucking Everly Heights.

JEREMY
Maybe he wasn't all that important.

The two old friends share a DARK CHUCKLE.

A BANG from the back door. Jim springs into action, snatching the shotgun from under the bar.

JIM

Those Raptors are at it again.

JEREMY

Those assholes are still around? I heard they disbanded when their boss jumped off the old Chi-Chi's.

JIM

That just pissed 'em off. Go out the front. This might get ugly.

He kicks the back door open and steps out.

JEREMY

What a nice guy.

NAT

Don't let him fool you. He's a creeper. Hey, did he give us the--?

EXT. LEROY'S PUB - ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Rain drizzles down over the cobblestones. The door SLAMS open. Jim levels his shotgun at the intruder. A beat. He relaxes. Lowers the gun.

JIM

Bill?

MR. MATHESON (57), a nebbish man in a raincoat, huffs and puffs as he lugs a CASE OF ORANGE JUICE to the door.

MR. MATHESON

Salutations. I brought your OJ.

Jim leans his shotgun against the wall. A brick JIGGLES. Jim COUGHS, then takes the orange juice from Mr. Matheson.

JIM

Your supplier finally come through?

MR. MATHESON

We had to switch. It's the first time I've had to change suppliers since I opened The Koffee Shop.

JIM

Can't count on anybody these days.

Mr. Matheson leans down and jiggles the loose brick.

MR. MATHESON

Do you remember Float? The guy with the bike flags?

Jim nods, solemnly. He doesn't like where this is going. Mr. Matheson pokes at the other bricks.

MR. MATHESON

He used to say there was a secret passageway back here. Something about the military invading other dimensions. Crazy, right?

Jim CHUCKLES. He's nervous. Sweating. There's a secret in his eyes, but he hides it well enough to fool Mr. Matheson.

JIM

Yeah. Crazy.

Mr. Matheson looks at his watch.

MR. MATHESON

Apologies. I need to get going.

JIM

Where's your car?

MR. MATHESON

Why pollute the environment? Besides, I love a good workout.

He takes off down the alley, full of energy.

EXT. SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

Mr. Matheson stops to catch his breath. He sees something.

MR. MATHESON

Well, that's a new way to do aerobics, I must say.

EXT. THE OLD CHI-CHI'S - AFTERNOON

TINA INFANTINO (38), dumpy and fully nude with long, matted hair covering her breasts, does lunges in the parking lot. Benjamin stands there, shocked.

TINA

UP. And down. And STRETCH... And two... And back to one...

Mr. Matheson comes up beside Benjamin.

BENJAMIN
Are you seeing this shit?

MR. MATHESON
BENJAMIN. That's Tina Infantino. I had her in class. She was a bit after your time. Smart as a whip, until--

Tina runs in place.

TINA
Are you ready to do the workout?

BENJAMIN
Do I look like I work out? Put your clothes on before my realtor shows up.

Tina stops cold. Her eyes glaze over with a thousand-yard stare.

TINA
(flat)
Realtor... Reality... All realities within me. I'm electric. I am the stars and the wind and air. I AM--

Tina's eyes flutter. She looks down at herself.

TINA
Naked. OH, GOD. MY CLOTHES. Who took MY CLOTHES?

MR. MATHESON
You took them off somewhere, again.

Mr. Matheson takes off his raincoat and hands it to Tina. She slips it on, then hides behind her hair.

TINA
Sorry. I need food. My sugar's off.

BENJAMIN
Here. It's dollar slice day at Square's.

Benjamin hands a few dollars to Tina.

BENJAMIN
My treat.

She takes the money.

TINA

Uh, thanks. Sorry for the trouble.

MR. MATHESON

It's fine, Tina. You can't help it.

BENJAMIN

What toppings are you going to get?
I like the ham, personally.

Tina thinks...

INT. SQUARE'S PIZZA SHOP - AFTERNOON

A dingy little kitchen staffed by teens. Tina stands at the counter and looks over the menu. GREG LLOYD (16), Cornerstone Theater's Romeo, stands at the register in his pizza uniform.

TINA

Can I get avocado on a pizza?

GREG

If we had any, sure.

TINA

I'll find one. Don't turn off the oven until I get back.

GREG

We won't, Tina.

On her way out, Tina passes KELSEY ABERNATHY (33), a peppy preppy tour guide with a NAMETAG and everything. Tina exits.

KELSEY

Poor woman.

GREG

She pees in our dumpster.

KELSEY

I have to hide her from my tours.

Greg hands Kelsey a box with TWO SQUARE PIZZA SLICES as Nat walks in. Nat stops in her tracks. Little RED HEARTS float around Kelsey's head.

NAT

HO-LY SHIT. Kelsey. I should've known I'd find you here, picking up a couple squares.

KELSEY

I heard the magnet pulled you back.

They hug. A WARM AURA surrounds them. Nat's lost in it, but Kelsey spots the CLOCK on the wall and steps back.

KELSEY

I have a thing, but let me buy you something real quick. For old times' sake.

NAT

Are you sure?

Kelsey tosses two dollars on the counter.

KELSEY

Garçon, two slices for my girl.

NAT

Thanks. So what are you into?

KELSEY

I teach tourists the history of Everly Heights.

NAT

Want to take my friend here for a tour? They're new in town.

They both look at the camera.

KELSEY

(whispers to Nat)
They look a little shady.

NAT

Don't worry. They're cool.
(to camera)
Hey, this is my old pal--

KELSEY

You can say ex. Anybody who cared about me being bi is dead.

NAT

Oh. Sorry. This is my ex, Kelsey.

KELSEY

(to camera)
Howdy. Hope you don't mind if I eat while we walk.

Kelsey walks out the door. A beat.

NAT

Go. I'll meet you at Cornerstone.

EXT. SQUARE'S PIZZA - AFTERNOON

Kelsey takes a bite of her pizza.

KELSEY

C'mon, slowpoke. We have a lot to cover, and I have tourists waiting for me at City Hall.

EXT. FRANKLIN W. DIXON MEMORIAL LIBRARY - AFTERNOON

Kelsey takes another bite and points at the library.

KELSEY

This is Franklin W. Dixon Memorial Library, built in nineteen-ninety-four. Funny story about the name... We had a famous kid detective in town. Danny Chance, if you've heard of him. To capitalize on the big article they did on him in Parade Magazine, the city named the new library after the guy who wrote The Hardy Boys. Thing is, Franklin W. Dixon isn't a real person. It's a pen name for a bunch of writers. Mayor Brown fired the Deputy Mayor for that oversight...

She takes another bite and moves on.

KELSEY

Follow me. We have to stay on schedule.

EXT. DIXON PARK - AFTERNOON

Kelsey stands in front of a grand fountain.

KELSEY

Welcome to Dixon Park, site of the nineteen-ninety-nine Cyber World's Fair, where the first shots rang out in the ongoing Everly Heights culture wars.

GHOSTS OF REDNECKS AND ARTSY FOLKS appear on the green. They toss kettle corn, funnel cake, and beer at each other, an epic battle worthy of at least seven MTV Movie Awards.

KELSEY

They scheduled the Country Jamboree festival the same weekend as Shakespeare in the Park. Tensions between local artists and the incoming rural population boiled over. It was a real shit show.

Kelsey points to a statue of a scared boy looking for help.

KELSEY

That? It's a memorial for a kid who went missing back in ninety-four. A local scandal at the time. They blamed the dad. The kid showed up in the freezer at Convenience Market four months later mumbling something about a "water world." He OD'ed last winter over on that bench. Guess we care more about people when they're gone.

EXT. TRAIN TUNNEL - AFTERNOON

A dark tunnel cut into the hillside.

KELSEY

Winter's pretty bad here. During the depression, hobos would huddle up in this tunnel on cold, snowy nights. It's big, but not so big you can fit a train and a person in it side-by-side.

A train appears at the other end, revealing CRIMSON STREAKS on the sides of the tunnel, dulled with soot and age.

KELSEY

This town's depressing. I don't usually say that on my tours, but you get it.

Kelsey tosses her pizza box in a bin, then hikes up the hill.

KELSEY

Come on. This view's to die for.

EXT. MILLER'S LEAP - AFTERNOON

INSERT: A PLAQUE of a man on a horse going down a steep hill.

KELSEY

The site of Miller's famous "Leap of Faith." They did a segment on the History Channel about it ten years ago, if you caught it. Here, in seventeen-eighty-two, General George Miller found himself trapped outside Fort Riding's walls when a squad of Shawnee attacked.

She points across the street to a rundown bar. GHOST NATIVE AMERICANS chase a ghost soldier, MILLER, on horseback. The ghosts barrel toward the cliff.

KELSEY

Left with no other option, Miller jumped his horse over the impossibly steep hill.

Kelsey points down. The hill is steep. Almost a wall, really. Miller and his horse disappear over the side. The Native Americans fade away.

KELSEY

You couldn't walk down that, right? But General Miller rode his faithful steed Melman straight down it, shooting the Shawnee behind him as he went. Despite Miller's daring leap, more Shawnee were waiting at the bottom of the hill.

Miller rides his horse down the hill. An ARROW hits him in the chest. He rolls to a clearing at the bottom and lands next to a STATUE OF MILLER AND HIS HORSE, MELMAN.

KELSEY

Don't feel too bad for Miller. He spent years following the river, killing every Shawnee he found. He had it coming. OH. We should get a move on. Nat's waiting for you.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - AFTERNOON

Nat paces on the sidewalk, smoking. She waves to Kelsey.

NAT

Did they give you any trouble?

Kelsey smiles at the camera.

KELSEY
They barely said a word. Gotta jet.

Kelsey hugs Nat. A spark. There's something there...

NAT
See you tonight?

KELSEY
I hope so.

The two women lock eyes and offer each other knowing smiles. Kelsey jogs off to her next group.

NAT
She's preppy, right? But in a good way. Can I admit to you I still have a crush on her? I still have a crush on her. We hooked up my last night in town.

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

On top of a hill overlooking the hospital, YOUNG NAT AND KELSEY (both 19) make out in an old HONDA.

BACK TO PRESENT

NAT
It only happened because I was leaving. Her parents were religious types. You know, it's weird she can see you. I wonder--

Michael Special taps Nat on the shoulder.

MICHAEL
Who are you talking to?

NAT
Nobody.
(to camera)
I know what you're thinking. "Why can Kelsey see me but Mr. S can't?" Let's say our shared history made her more "open" to seeing you. As Aristotle said, "Where perception is, there is also pain and pleasure, and where these are, there is desire." Or maybe it's like an STD?

Michael COUGHS.

NAT
 You get it.
 (to Michael)
 What's up?

Michael points at the theater.

MICHAEL
 You're supposed to be upstairs
 helping me achieve my vision.

Nat takes out another smoke.

NAT
 Let's get real, Mr. S. You have me
 selling donations you're supposed
 to give back after the show. I'm,
 like, an accessory.

Michael looks up at the steeple, gleaming in the sun.

MICHAEL
 It's my only shot at saving
 Cornerstone. I should've known
 you'd see right through me. I need
 to right the books and make this
 crumbling church look like a good
 investment. I have to save it...
 For Jennifer.

NAT
 Jennifer?

Michael pulls a faded Polaroid of JENNIFER SPECIAL (35), a
 bohemian blond, from his breast pocket.

MICHAEL
 My dearly departed wife. My shining
 star. My inspiration. We built this
 holy place.

The GHOST OF JENNIFER SPECIAL stands on the sidewalk, looking
 up at the theater with pride. Michael reaches out for
 Jennifer's ghost. She FADES AWAY at his touch.

MICHAEL
 My heart.

NAT
 What happened?

MICHAEL
She died, tragically, in a painting
accident.

EXT. THE SPECIAL'S GARAGE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Jennifer mixes some paints for an ABSTRACT ART PROJECT.

NAT (V.O.)
A painting accident?

Jennifer lights up a joint, then picks up an open jug of
paint thinner to clean her brushes.

MICHAEL (V.O.)
They happen more often than you'd
think.

A single ember falls off Jennifer's joint into the jug. A
spark. Flames. The joint falls. Fire runs up her loose
sleeves. She SCREAMS...

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

MICHAEL
I lost my home, and my heart, in
one swift swoop.

Nat puts out her cigarette, careful to extinguish the cherry.

NAT
That's a sad story, but it doesn't
make what you did ethical.

Michael sits down on the stoop, exhausted.

MICHAEL
It's the only thing I could think
to do. The eBay profits from the
Pearls' donations will right the
books. Once my investor commits,
I'll pay them back.

NAT
But what about tonight's show?

MICHAEL
The show must go on, like always.
Juliet's dress isn't designer, and
Romeo's crown is plastic, but if it
saves this holy place, it'll be
worth a dip in production value.

Nat looks down. Thinks. Relaxes. She gives Michael a playful punch in the arm.

NAT

You won me over. I'll get back to eBay after I run a quick errand.
(to camera)
I need to talk to Thelma before her witches do something I'll regret.

MICHAEL

Don't go. There's still so much to do.

NAT

It'll take half an hour, tops. I won't let you down, Mr. S.

EXT. CITY HALL - AFTERNOON

Ronda Rouse, in a fresh pair of leggings, stands on tiptoe, peeking into a window. FOOTSTEPS. She pretends to tie her shoe. Nat strolls up. Ronda cringes at her torn jeans.

RONDA

They'll see you coming in that outfit. Have you thought about leggings?

Nat sneers.

NAT

Hell no. I'd rather wear a diaper.

RONDA

HA. Do it. You'd be INFAMOUS.

A SLOT MACHINE ringtone on Ronda's phone. She pulls it out.

RONDA

Gotta go. It's my skinhead.

NAT

Tell Postal to take it easy on the machines, for once.

INT. VIDEO POKER ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

The poker machines BEEP AND BLOOP. GLASSY-EYED PATRONS slump over the consoles, feeding them quarters. Ronda stands at the door, looking for someone. She spots him.

Postal, Ronda's skinhead, jumps up and kisses her.

POSTAL
I've missed that face, luv.

RONDA
Petey... D'you get our... supplies?

He throws Ronda a BAG OF DOPE. She inspects it.

RONDA
That's my skinhead.

CHIMES. Travis, the abrasive redneck, swaggers in, a nub of chaw tucked in his bottom lip.

TRAVIS
You the lady with the goods?

POSTAL
OY. She's spoken for.

TRAVIS
Gaston sent me.

Ronda pushes Postal into a poker machine. TING.

RONDA
You FBI, buddy? You gotta tell me.

TRAVIS
Hell no. I hate them "Fibbies."
Sooner they clear outta town,
sooner things get back to normal.

Ronda gives him a careful look. She'll trust him, for now. She pulls a TEAR GAS CANISTER and HANDGUN from her bag. Travis takes the gun and checks the chamber.

TRAVIS
Mighty nice piece. I'll call her
"Old Betsy." How's that gas work?

Ronda puts her finger through a ring on the canister.

RONDA
Finger in. Pull out. Run.

TRAVIS
Easy peasy.

Travis hands her a ROLL OF BILLS. She hands him the canister.

TRAVIS
See y'all at the show. Watch out
for me. I'm taking OLD BETSY.

Travis kicks the door and runs out waving the gun over his head.

POSTAL
I fucking hate rednecks.

Ronda fans out the money.

RONDA
Their money spends well enough.
Want to throw some in the poker
machine? Double our take?

Postal swipes a twenty from the stack.

POSTAL
I'm going for a pint.

She grabs him by the suspenders and plants one on him.

RONDA
Hurry back.

POSTAL
Won't be but a minute, love.

Postal stumbles out the door.

INT. LEROY'S PUB - LATE AFTERNOON

Postal stumbles in the door. He takes a seat at the bar and slaps down his money.

POSTAL
Oy, Grandpa. Pint of yer' finest
piss. I ain't got but a minute.

Behind the bar, Jim Colvin looks up from his book: **HYPERSPACE** by Michio Kaku.

JIM
Mickey's, coming up. How's your
Grandma?

POSTAL
She's fine, mate.

Jim CRACKS the cap off the drink and hands it over, then busies himself with bar work to avoid eye contact.

JIM
Tell her I miss working with her.
How's... Ramona?

POSTAL
Get over it, man. She left ya'. The
better hen won out.

Enter Tina Infantino, clothed, frightened, and out of breath.

TINA
AGENT COLVIN. I saw a portal.

Jim pulls Tina aside.

JIM
Tina, what have I told you? There
is no such thing as a portal.

POSTAL
What the bloody hell is she on
about?

JIM
Nothing. She's crazy.

TINA
Do you have an avocado?

JIM
See?

Tina breaks away from Jim and grabs a pen off the bar.

TINA
An infinity expander? I KNEW IT WAS
ALL REAL. Let me at those
chronotrons...

Tina snaps the pen in half and drinks the ink. Jim yanks it
away before she drains it.

JIM
TINA. Oh, Tina. Look what you did.

TINA
Sorry, Agent Colvin. I need an
avocado.

Tina climbs up on the bar, rests her head on a napkin
dispenser, and closes her eyes.

POSTAL
Agent?

Jim gives Postal his beer.

JIM
When she goes off her meds she says
all sorts of nonsense.

Jim kneels to examine the INK STAIN on the floor.

JIM
I'll need some industrial cleaner
before this sets. Watch the bar?

Postal drinks his beer. Tina SNORES and scratches her armpit.

POSTAL
(burps)
What's in it for me?

JIM
Unmonitored access to the tap?

POSTAL
Sold.

INT. HARDWARE STORE - LATE AFTERNOON

Mr. Matheson stands at a shelf stuffed with various cleaners.
He reads the label on a bottle of ACID WASH.

JIM (O.S.)
Any good deals?

Mr. Matheson, startled, drops the Acid Wash.

Jim grabs the bottle with surprising speed and precision,
then puts it back on the shelf. Mr. Matheson furrows his
brow.

MR. MATHESON
You're mighty spry for a man our
age. Thanks for the save. My new
barista overdid a pour-over and
made quite the mess.

JIM
I've got a stain to deal with too.

MR. MATHESON
The perils of entrepreneurship.
(looks off)
Some days, I wish I'd stayed a
simple math teacher.

JIM
I'm with you. I left a cushy
government job with a pension
for... ink stains.

MR. MATHESON
Ah, yes. You were a tax man.

Jim looks off, nervous.

MR. MATHESON
Depressing work, I'm sure.

JIM
(smiles)
It was always an adventure.

MR. MATHESON
Adventure? At least somebody's
having fun with taxes.

Jim looks away, back to the bottles on the shelf.

JIM
What do you need to clean up?

MR. MATHESON
Coffee.

JIM
You need Brown Out.

Jim grabs a jug of BROWN OUT off the bottom shelf.

MR. MATHESON
Oh, yes... BROWN OUT. I forgot
about this stuff.

JIM
Makes sense.

MR. MATHESON
What?

JIM
Nothing. Good luck.

Mr. Matheson takes the jug.

MR. MATHESON
Thanks, Jim. This...

INT. THE KOFFEE SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

Mr. Matheson plops the jug of Brown Out down by the register.

MR. MATHESON
--should get those stains out.

Jennifer, the barista, picks up the jug.

JENNIFER
How do you use this stuff?

MR. MATHESON
Spray it, then come back in five
minutes to wipe up.

She hits the coffee stains with several spritzes.

JENNIFER
Sweet. I'm taking a smoke break.

Mr. Matheson tips his glasses and looks down his nose at her.

MR. MATHESON
"Men talk of killing time, while
time quietly kills them."

JENNIFER
That's beautiful. Is it from a
play?

MR. MATHESON
I saw it on Facebook.

Mr. Matheson pulls the cord to open the blinds.

EXT. THE KOFFEE SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

A YO-YO spins on the end of the line. It snaps back into the hand of Louie Loop, Yo-Yo expert.

Jennifer rolls her eyes and takes a puff of her cigarette.

LOUIE
Prepare to be amazed. Louie Loop
presents... THE WHIRLING DERVISH.

A snap of the wrist. The yo-yo unwinds. He grabs the string with his fingers and pulls it taught. The yo-yo spins in a figure eight.

JENNIFER
That shit is wack.

LOUIE
You shouldn't be so judgmental.

JENNIFER
Says the guy with a shitty bowl cut
and a yo-yo fetish.

Louie touches his hair.

LOUIE
The bowl cut is coming back.

JENNIFER
It's not coming back.

LOUIE
Regardless, I could use a trim
before tonight's show. C'mon, boy.
Let's see if Shelly has room in her
schedule for me.

Louie uses his yo-yo to "walk the dog."

EXT. A CUT ABOVE HAIR SALON - LATE AFTERNOON

Louie walks his yo-yo to the door, snaps it up, and goes in.

INT. A CUT ABOVE HAIR SALON - CONTINUOUS

Shelly snips away at the freshly-shaved Danny Chance's hair.
She takes a towel off her shoulder and knocks the loose hair
off her trimmer.

SHELLY
Sorry, Louie. I'm finishing Danny,
then I gotta doll myself up for the
show.

LOUIE
Guess I'll have to depend on my
trusty yo-yo to impress the ladies.

Louie does a quick series of maneuvers with the yo-yo.

SHELLY
Good luck with that.

Louie leaves.

SHELLY
Bless his heart. Look down, honey.

Danny looks down as she trims his neckline.

DANNY
What a weird guy.

SHELLY
Speaking of weirdos, you're law
enforcement, right? State police?

DANNY
FBI.

SHELLY
Even better. You think you could
get me a restraining order for this
guy I got stalking me?

DANNY
Who?

SHELLY
Jim Colvin.

Danny fidgets in his seat.

DANNY
Jim? Gosh, can't help with Jim.

Shelly spins the chair around.

SHELLY
Why the hell not?

Danny stands up, tripping over himself as he rips off his
smock. He tosses a few bills on the counter.

DANNY
Uh... Thanks for the cut. Umm...
(leans in)
Off the record, you're right to
steer clear. Jim has... baggage.

SHELLY
He ain't hiding that, honey. You
tell Mel I said howdy.

DANNY
Will do. Gotta run.

EXT. DIXON PARK - LATE AFTERNOON

Danny runs through the park. He spots MELODY TRAINOR (37), all business in sunglasses and a suit, sitting on a bench next to Ryon the guitar player, in cuffs.

DANNY
(out of breath)
Mel... Shelly says howdy... RYON?

Ryon gives Danny a dirty look. Melody pulls out her phone.

INSERT - Photo: Ryon taps the tip of a needle in an alley.

MELODY
Caught him using behind Convenience
Market.

RYON
Call her off, man. We had a deal.

Melody gives Danny a dirty look.

MELODY
Danny, you can't make deals with
criminals because you know them.
This is the FBI. We do things by
the book.

DANNY
It's Ryon we're talking about.
Heck, he taught me how to play
guitar.

MELODY
You play guitar?

DANNY
TV theme songs, mostly. Point is,
he's not a bad guy.

MELODY
Then let him prove it.

Melody pulls up on Ryon's cuffs. He winces.

MELODY
TELL US WHERE YOU GOT THE SMACK.

RYON
Some redneck. I don't know his
name. He had a tattoo on his wrist.
You know the bear on the cereal?

DANNY
 (in a Sinatra-esque tone)
 Sugar Bear?

RYON
 Hell yeah, man.

DANNY
 Classic.

MELODY
 I doubt there are too many people
 with Sugar Bear tattoos. Take him
 in. I'm on it.

Melody pushes Ryon over to Danny, then pulls out her phone and types.

INSERT - The phone, a website for Big Terry's Tattoo Shop.

INT. BIG TERRY'S TATTOO SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

Melody, alone in the foyer, RINGS THE BELL on the counter.

MELODY
 Terry?

Big Terry pulls back the curtain. Ricky Jo sits in the chair, biting her lower lip and squeezing Niels's hand. Her glyph tattoo is mostly done.

NIELS
 Hurry, pidgin. We have to meet--

Big Terry pulls the curtain shut.

BIG TERRY
 MEL. What's up? You looking to
 freshen up that tramp stamp?

Melody blushes.

MELODY
 I'm working. Do you remember giving
 a white male a "Sugar Bear" tattoo?

BIG TERRY
 Hell yeah, bro. Now, don't tell him
 I told you... Tattooer/Tattooee
 confidentiality...

MELODY
 Is that a thing?

BIG TERRY
Hell yeah, it's a thing.

Melody zips her lips.

MELODY
Mum's the word.

BIG TERRY
You know that hick? Gavin
something? The red-head who drives
the red pickup truck with the
Confederate Flag in the back.

MELODY
Travis Hagee.

BIG TERRY
Right. Travis. I gave him a Sugar
Bear on his wrist.

Niels peeks out from behind the curtain.

NIELS
Have you not made us wait enough?

BIG TERRY
Oh, calm down. I'll be right there.

MELODY
Go on. You've been a big help.

BIG TERRY
You and Danny got my bike back that
summer. It's the least I can do.

Melody smiles. It's nice when people remember. Big Terry
shakes her hand, turns, and goes...

IN THE BACK

He grabs his tattoo gun and gets back to work on Ricki Jo.

MONTAGE

-- He digs the needle in.

-- Ricki Jo squeezes the armrests

-- Niels holds Ricki Jo's hand. She pulls it away.

-- Big Terry adds a bit of shading.

BACK TO SCENE

RICKI JO
Is it over?

BIG TERRY
One little touch...

Big Terry gives her one last ZAP, then pulls back the gun to reveal the finished glyph. Niels grabs Ricki Jo's hand and pulls her out of the chair.

NIELS
Come. We must go. We are late!

The couple runs out.

Big Terry picks up his sketch pad to continue work on a pencil sketch of a STINKBUG.

EXT. WALKING BRIDGE - LATE AFTERNOON

Beatrice lifts a stinkbug off the ground with her fingertip, then gobbles it down. Niels and Ricki Jo look at each other. GROSS. Beatrice takes two sprigs of rosemary and brushes the couple down.

BEATRIX
Bile, bile. Unfortunate child...

The wind picks up. THUNDER and LIGHTNING.

BEATRIX
From earth to sky... From street to field... What's trapped inside will be revealed.

A MAGICAL GLOW surrounds the couple. Dry leaves funnel around them, obscuring their faces.

RICKI JO
Do you feel that?

NIELS
It's working, pidgin. YOU'RE CHANGING.

Niels looks into Ricki Jo's eyes with joy. WAIT. He frowns.

NIELS
This isn't--

The young lovers twist in the wind, changing, morphing.

MONTAGE

- Dark bags bulge under their eyes.
- Niels grows a unibrow.
- Creases crack across their foreheads.
- Their teeth spread apart.
- Scars and bruises bubble up across their cheeks.

BACK TO SCENE

One last CRACK OF THUNDER. The sky clears. Ricki Jo and Niels stare at each other in disgust.

BEATRIX
(cackling)
AHA. HAHA. Inside, you let
jealousy, vanity, and selfishness
consume you. Now everybody can see
how ugly you truly are. I call it
the "Dorian Gray."

Ricki Jo falls at Beatrix's feet.

RICKI JO
Change us back. Please.

Beatrix throws the sprigs of rosemary into the water below.

BEATRIX
Only you two can clean the rot
inside. Scoop it out with a spoon!
(stomach growls)
Mama needs food. The dark arts take
so much out of you.

Niels falls weeping into Ricki Jo's arms.

NIELS
You'll pay for this.

EXT. GASTON'S DINER - LATE AFTERNOON

INSERT - A sign on the door: BACK IN 15.

Beatrix narrows her eyes and looks through the window.

INSIDE GASTON'S

Thelma spots Beatrix from behind the register.

BACK TO SCENE

Thelma peeks out the door.

THELMA

What is it? Gaston's got a meeting.

BEATRIX

Give Mama a pumpkin muffin before we talk about tonight.

THELMA

Billy ain't here yet, and I thought we-- Pipe down. That girl's coming.

Nat storms up to Thelma and pokes her shoulder.

NAT

I need Mr. Special's papers back.

THELMA

Are you joshing? You pulling my leg? We had a deal.

Thelma shoves a stack of CASH into Nat's hand.

THELMA

Here's your money. This relationship is over. Now GIT.

Beatrice sniffs Nat's hair.

BEATRIX

Should I turn her into a cockroach?

Thelma lowers her glasses and gives Nat a once-over.

THELMA

Looks like you already done it.

Nat throws the money back at Thelma.

NAT

Keep it. Whatever you're planning, Mr. S doesn't deserve it.

The ladies CACKLE as Nat stomps off.

INT. GASTON'S DINER - CONTINUOUS

The bell RINGS. Thelma comes back in. She marches over to Gaston, who sits at a table. Across from him, Travis, the hick with the missing tooth, eats his steak.

THELMA
That punk rock girl wouldn't take
the money, by the by.

GASTON
Hell yeah. More for us.

Thelma gives Gaston the cash. She spots the empty BUTTER BOWL
on their table.

THELMA
(muttering)
Step out for two shakes and the
whole place falls apart...

She grabs the butter bowl, then shuffles back behind the
lunch counter. Travis takes another bite of his steak.

GASTON
Okay, bubby. You know where and
when you're meant to be tonight?

TRAVIS
Yes, sir. I'll be there with Old
Betsy at my side.

GASTON
"Old Betsy." I like that. Now, let
me just find that ticket and--

Something catches Gaston's eye.

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW

BILLY FREE (39), a pastry chef, pulls a cardboard box from
the FREE FAMILY SWEET SHOP out of his van.

BACK INSIDE

GASTON
Shoot. You'd best go. Billy's
coming with muffins, and everybody
knows he's a snitch.

Travis wipes his mouth on his sleeve and stands.

TRAVIS
I gotta get my alignment checked
anyhow. Dang mud boggin'.

Billy busts in.

BILLY
I've got muffins!

Travis squeezes by Billy. Billy gives him a suspicious glance and puts his box on the counter next to a carafe of coffee.

INT. CAR SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

A pot of burnt coffee cools next to a CRT television.

Travis throws his keys on the counter.

TRAVIS

You do those laser tire alignments
I seen on TV? My truck is rockin'
harder than Charlie Daniels.

BARNEY (40s), a grease monkey, hangs the keys on a pegboard.

BARNEY

Yup. That guy's ahead of you.

Barney points to two folding chairs. Jeremy Hahn sits in one, writing in his notebook. Travis sits down and looks at Jeremy, then at the TV, then back at Jeremy.

TRAVIS

I seen you somewhere before.

Jeremy slumps in his seat and puts a hand over his face.

JEREMY

No, I--

Travis smiles, exposing his missing tooth.

TRAVIS

Jeremy. You was dating Angela when
we started screwin'.

Jeremy remembers.

JEREMY

Yeah. Time moves on. I wonder what
happened to Ang...

TRAVIS

We got hitched.

JEREMY

Oh, yeah? Good for you.

Travis digs his elbow into Jeremy's side.

TRAVIS

Guess the best fella won, huh?

Barney tosses some keys on the counter.

BARNEY
Mr. Hahn? Aveo's ready.

JEREMY
That's me. Just in time, too. I
have to get to the theater.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - EARLY EVENING

A POSTAL WORKER loads priority packages onto his truck.
Pastor Nagee preaches at passersby from his perch on the
steps.

PASTOR NAGEE
Theater distracts us from the BREAD
OF LIFE. Nobody comes to salvation
but by JESUS.

Jeremy gets out of his Aveo.

JEREMY
Calm down. It's a fucking play.

Pastor Nagee shakes his bible at Jeremy.

PASTOR NAGEE
You lived in HOLLYWEIRD, son.
Excuse me if I cover my ears.

The pastor covers his ears.

PASTOR NAGEE
I AIN'T GONNA LET YOUR SATAN SPEAK
INTO MY HEART.

JEREMY
Typical Christian. Shut out
anything that doesn't fit your
narrative.

Nat peeks her head out of a second-floor window.

NAT
I told you to LEAVE.

The Pastor snarls.

PASTOR NAGEE
Fine, but I'll pray for you.

JEREMY
That sounds like a threat.

PASTOR NAGEE
That's because it is.

Pastor Nagee gives an evil little smile as he waddles off.

NAT
COME ON UP.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - LOBBY - EVENING

Jeremy closes his eyes and breathes in the musty odor of a thousand nights of theater. He opens his eyes.

JEREMY'S POV - Michael Special stands there, swooning.

JEREMY
AHH. Uh, hi, Mr. Special.

Michael gives Jeremy a big hug.

MICHAEL
JEREMY HAHN. Cornerstone's own
Hollywood hotshot.

Michael grabs his arm and takes him up the grand faded staircase.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - OFFICE

Nat hunches over the keyboard as she browses eBay. Michael pulls Jeremy into the room behind him.

MICHAEL
There's my minion. How goes the
sale?
(to Jeremy)
Nat's selling off some old props.

ON THE COMPUTER - Nat pulls up the account ledger, listing many completed auctions.

NAT
The mailman just took another load.

JEREMY
I saw, like, fifty boxes out there.

Nat leans back, hands behind her head, satisfied.

NAT

People are all over this shit. What can I say? I'm great at... What do you call it? The big block of text where you say what the thing is?

JEREMY

The description?

NAT

Yeah. I'm great at those.

MICHAEL

How much have you made?

Nat crunches the numbers on a calculator.

NAT

Let's see... Eleven-thousand four-hundred and sixty-nine dollars. Heh. The only thing I couldn't sell was the merkin...

(holds it up)

Nobody wants a used pubic wig. Not even the weirdos.

MICHAEL

Ah... Everything's going to plan.

JEREMY

Plan?

MICHAEL

Oh, we've got a lot planned for you tonight.

Michael looks at his watch.

MICHAEL

Damn. It's Juliet's call time. A director's work is never done.

He rips a suit jacket off the back of a chair.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - DRESSING ROOM - EVENING

Michael rips back the curtain.

MICHAEL

And how is my ingénue doing this--

He stops short. SHARLA PEARL (15), Michael's Juliet, wearing a Shakespearean gown, sits in front of the makeup mirror, mascara dripping down her face.

MICHAEL
Sharla, dear... WE HAVE A SHOW.

Sharla looks at herself in the mirror. What a mess.

SHARLA
I can't find the bougie wig my
parents bought me.

Michael pulls a CHEAP RATTY WIG down off a hook.

MICHAEL
We got you another one... The
lighting was--

Sharla puts her head down on the counter.

SHARLA
And I can't find the ring I give to
the nurse. It's how Romeo knows the
message came from Juliet. Without
the ring, the SHOW WILL BE RUINED.

Michael sits down next to her.

MICHAEL
It's not your fault.

SHARLA
Yes, it is. My parents spent
thousands on this show, and I
couldn't even keep track of a ring.

MICHAEL
I took the ring. And the wig...

Sharla lifts her head.

SHARLA
Seriously? Give them back.

MICHAEL
...then I sold them.

Sharla SLAPS Michael... Drama students, right?

SHARLA
I'll never forgive you for this.

MICHAEL

We need the money to save
Cornerstone. I promise I'll--

Sharla perks up. She hugs Michael.

SHARLA

Save Cornerstone? I'd be lost if I
didn't have the theater. All is
forgiven. Seriously.

A GOLDEN GLOW surrounds them.

IN A DISTANT BATHROOM

Beatrice showers. The INGREDIENTS FOR HER SPELL are laid out
on the counter. A GOLDEN GLOW surrounds the DOCUMENTS Nat
gave her on the Walking Bridge. The glow fades...

BACK TO THE DRESSING ROOMS

The glow fades here, too.

MICHAEL

Thank you for your understanding,
my Juliet. I promise I'll pay your
parents back for the donations.

SHARLA

Oh, screw them. They have more
money than they know what to do
with. But what about the ring?
That's, like, a huge plot point.

MICHAEL

The show must go on. Use this one.

Michael twists a SILVER RING off his pinky. He grabs Sharla's
hand and shoves the ring into it, then holds up his hand to
reveal a matching ring.

MICHAEL

My wife and I wore these rings to
honor our commitment to the theater
and each other.

SHARLA

I can't take your wife's ring.

MICHAEL

Don't worry. She'd find it poetic.

Sharla slips the ring on her finger. She dabs at her makeup
with a tissue.

SHARLA

You're the best, Mr. S. I... I can fix this. I just need some air.

MICHAEL

Curtain in fifteen.

SHARLA

Thank you, fifteen.

Sharla runs out.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - ALLEYWAY - EVENING

Sharla leans against the brick wall.

SHARLA

Fifteen minutes. Get it together.
You're an ACTOR.

GUITAR MUSIC hits her ear. She looks over at RYON, who strums a song behind the dumpster. His fingers move effortlessly up and down the fretboard. He looks up at her, eyes glassy.

SHARLA

I didn't know anybody was out here.

RYON

(smiles)
Nobody is, man. You got a smoke?

Sharla grabs the door handle.

SHARLA

I... I have things.

She runs back inside. Ryon shrugs and goes back to playing.

Postal wanders up in his least-faded pair of skinny jeans and a uniform shirt. He stops, listens, then whips out a KAZOO.

POSTAL

Oy, bruv. I swiped this from the community center when I was using their dog clippers to trim me bait and tackle. We should jam, yeah?

Postal blows an off-key melody. Ryon stops strumming.

RYON

Dude. DUDE. HEY. I'm kinda vibing here, man. By myself.

Postal slips the kazoo in his pocket and pulls out some DOPE.

POSTAL
How's about you vibe on this?

RYON
The pigs robbed me blind.

POSTAL
Consider this a free sample.

Postal tosses Ryon the bag.

POSTAL
If it does ya' well, I got plenty more. Careful though. That stuff will knock ya' back on yer arse.

RYON
Thanks, man. I owe you.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - LOBBY - EVENING

The citizens of Everly Heights mill about with their fancy smoking jackets and eight-dollar half-glasses of wine. Postal stumbles his way through the crowd.

GASTON (O.S.)
HONOR YOUR DEBTS.

Postal flips around to discover Gaston and Benjamin arguing by the guestbook. This should be interesting.

BENJAMIN
Let it go, dude.

GASTON
You didn't let go of my sammie.

Gaston grabs Benjamin by the scruff of his shirt. Postal jumps in and pushes the men apart.

POSTAL
Boys, boys. This is the theater, innit? There's etiquette.

GASTON
I'll calm down after he pays me.

POSTAL
How much you owe the bastard?

BENJAMIN
Seven bucks. From TWELVE YEARS AGO.

Postal smacks Benjamin.

POSTAL
Bruv, you got an inheritance, yeah?
Pay your fucking debts.

BENJAMIN
Fine.
(digs in his pocket, pulls
out a twenty)
Do you have any change?

Gaston snaps the bill out of Benjamin's hand.

GASTON
Nope. Pleasure doing business.

Gaston wanders away. Benjamin FLIPS HIM OFF.

BY THE STAIRS

Niels FLIPS OFF Michael Special. Ricki Jo looks at Michael with big, bloodshot eyes. Sorry about him.

MICHAEL
NIELS. Don't be rude.

NIELS
I am the rude one? HA. You are the
rude asshole, my friend.

Michael notices their faces.

MICHAEL
Were you two in an accident?

NIELS
See? He thinks we're ugly.

MICHAEL
Ugly? I never said you were ugly.
(gestures at their faces)
True, I don't know what's going on
here... But by community theater
standards, you two are practically
Bradjelina.

NIELS
Then why did you not cast us in
your final play?

Michael looks around. Leans in.

MICHAEL

(whispers)

This stays between us. I wanted to cast you two as my leads. You both impressed me during the Summer Season.

Ricki Jo slaps Niels in the arm. *Told you.*

NIELS

Then why did you not cast us?

MICHAEL

Sharla's parents are loaded. They threw a lot of money into this production. Sure, I could have cast Niels as Romeo, but would you two really want me to split you up?

Ricki Jo and Niels look at each other. The answer is obvious. There's no way in hell they'll share life's stage with anybody but each other.

NIELS

I... I may have made mistakes.

RICKI JO

That's a fucking understatement.

MICHAEL

Don't worry. If Cornerstone Theater has a future at all, you both have a rich future at Cornerstone.

Ricki Jo and Niels's smiles stretch their faces, which makes the sores ooze even more. They remember the witch's curse, and their smiles fade. Michael gives them a parental hug, like the end scene of an episode of Family Ties.

MICHAEL

You two aren't looking too hot. You should grab a snack.

AT THE SNACK COUNTER

Nat fills a bag with popcorn. She sneaks a piece. Gaston slaps Benjamin's money down. She chokes on a kernel.

GASTON

There's Thelma's snake in the grass.

NAT

Shut the fuck up before somebody hears you.

GASTON

One popcorn, darling. And thanks for all your help. When we reopen this dump, first drink's on Gaston!

NAT

What you're doing to Mr. Special isn't right. I'm out.

She hands him a bag of popcorn. He munches, mouth open.

GASTON

Enjoy the show.

Gaston wanders off. Nat fills more popcorn bags.

NAT

(to camera)

You ever feel like you made a huge mistake? I-- Oh, shit. Here comes trouble.

Shelly the hairdresser storms up. Jim the old bartender, follows her like a lost puppy.

SHELLY

You work here? Good. I know I said I could handle the old man, but he ain't taking the hint.

Jim smiles an awkward smile.

JIM

I thought--

A slap to Jim's back. It's Pastor Nagee.

PASTOR NAGEE

JIM. Shelly, I see you're finally giving the old man a chance.

JIM

You are?

Shelly looks away.

NAT

Hell no. Look at her, man. She's fucking terrified. You gotta go.

JIM

I never meant to scare you, Shelly.
You were kind, that's all.

NAT

You can't count on people to know
the intentions behind your actions,
dude. It doesn't matter what you
mean. It matters how you make her
feel.

Nat grabs Jim's arm and pulls him toward the door. Jim
struggles, but she's younger and stronger.

AT THE DOOR

JIM

Please. I'll leave her be. I shut
down the bar for this. It's the
last--

Nat kicks the door open and shoves him out the door.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

Jim rips his PROGRAM in half, then throws the pieces away.

JIM

Tossed away... Forgotten... Again.
But isn't that always the way?

Thunder CLAPS in the distance. He pulls up his collar, shoves
his hands in his pockets, and walks.

EXT. LEROY'S PUB - NIGHT

Jim pulls out his keys, but the door is already open. He
looks around, then goes inside.

INT. LEROY'S PUB - CONTINUOUS

Jim hears A MURMUR in the dark. FEET SHUFFLE. His shoulders
stiffen. A LOUD SNORE. He holds up a PEN FLASHLIGHT.

Tina's still asleep on the bar. Jim relaxes and shoves the
pen flashlight back into his pocket. He goes behind the bar
and pours himself a drink.

JIM

Oh, Tina... Guess we'll both miss
the show. Here's to Cornerstone.

As he takes a sip, A CLANGING from the kitchen. He puts down his glass and creeps towards the door...

SMASH. A DARK FIGURE kicks the door into Jim's face.

CRASH. Jim falls to the ground.

BANG. A gunshot. He's hit.

RALPHIE FARINA (40), a biker in a beat-up leather jacket with a RAPTOR stitched on the back, puts his gun in its holster.

RALPHIE

The Raptors send their love.

Jim flops around in his own blood. He reaches for his pen flashlight, but Ralphie kicks it behind the bar.

RALPHIE

Don't fight it, old man. Nobody's gonna miss you.

Tina hits a button on the pen flashlight.

TINA

The Infinity Expander? I remember, Agent Colvin. I REMEMBER.

A PULSING SOUND. Ralphie turns around.

JIM

Good, Tina. It's locked on Dimension 86. You... need... to...

TINA

It's all true. You said I was crazy, but it's all TRUE.

Tina points the pen flashlight/Infinity Expander at Ralphie.

RALPHIE

If you wanna see more of me all you gotta do is ask, little lady.

TINA

LITTLE? I am INFINITE.

She hits the button. A PORTAL opens up behind Ralphie.

THROUGH THE PORTAL - A glorious castle protected by a magic green forcefield.

Ralphie turns, mesmerized. Tina KICKS him in the back. PURPLE INSECTS swarm him.

As he falls through the portal, his SCREAMS echo out. Tina lowers the Infinity Expander. The portal closes. She goes to Jim's side. His breath comes short and shallow.

TINA
Agent Colvin, hang on. I'll get help.

JIM
(coughs)
I'm sorry, Tina. For hiding the truth from you... For making you forget what we did together. I-- GAH. I'm sorr--

Jim dies in Tina's arms. The clarity in her eyes fades away. She drops his head on the ground. PLONK.

TINA
Oh, no. No, no. No.

She pulls at her hair.

TINA
What did you do? What did you do?

She smacks her head in frustration.

EXT. LEROY'S PUB - NIGHT

Tina runs out the front door.

TINA
WHAT DID YOU DO? WHAT DID YOU DO?

She rips off her shirt and barrels down the street.

EXT. GASTON'S DINER - CONTINUOUS

Thelma locks up. When she turns, Tina stands topless in the middle of the street as she takes off her shoes.

THELMA
Put your shirt on, you HUSSY.

Tina doesn't pay her any attention. She runs on.

EXT. THE KOFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Danny and Melody, the FBI agents, sit at a table out front.

INT. THE KOFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Jennifer the barista flips off the open sign.

JENNIFER
God, this is boring.

As she turns back to her work, the now-nude Tina runs by the window. Danny spits out his coffee.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

Charlie, the laughing critic, wipes spittle from his mouth as he hobbles down the sidewalk. Tina streaks by.

CHARLIE
(chortles)
Is this part of the show? How Brechtian!

He stops and cocks his head. The SOFT SOUNDS OF FINGERPICKED GUITAR echo in his ear.

CHARLIE
Oh... Preshow music! Where is--?

Michael Special stands on the steps and CLAPS.

MICHAEL
Okay, people. We're starting soon.
Finish up your cancer sticks.

Charlie wobbles inside, but we follow the GUITAR MUSIC around the side of the theater and down the...

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - ALLEYWAY - CONTINUOUS

Ryon, the junkie musician, plays his guitar. A USED SYRINGE lays on the ground beside him. His shoulders shiver. His face is damp. He sings...

RYON
*STUCK IN A TOWN THAT WON'T MOVE ON,
WE SCREAM BUT NEVER MAKE A SOUND.
WE FLY BUT NEVER LEAVE THE GROUND
BECAUSE WE'RE DOOMED TO STICK
AROUND **IN OUR TOWN...***

MONTAGE - IN AND AROUND EVERLY HEIGHTS

-- Tina runs out of steam at MILLER'S LEAP. While she catches her breath, she looks over the STEEP HILL.

RYON (O.S.)
WE LIVE BUT WE'RE BARELY ALIVE.

-- Jim's dead eyes stare into eternity, his body in a pool of blood on the floor. Nothing's gonna get that stain out.

RYON (O.S.)
SO MANY MISTAKES WE BARELY SURVIVE

-- Nat watches Michael Special pump himself up backstage. She looks out through the stage curtain.

-- Tina climbs over the railing, looks up at the STARS, then puts her arms out to FLY. Her eyes FLICKER as she falls...

RYON (O.S.)
*BECAUSE ALL OUR DREAMS ARE LIES IN
 OUR TOWN...*

-- Beatrix and her witchy sisters take their seats.

-- Sitting in the third row, Ricki Jo glares at Niels.

RYON (O.S.)
*WE'RE WAIST-DEEP IN THE GROUND IN
 OUR TOWN...*

-- Tina's body tumbles down the hill.

RYON (O.S.)
*WE LET EACH OTHER DOWN IN OUR
 TOWN...*

-- Michael pushes by Nat and walks onto the dark stage.

BACK TO SCENE

RYON
SCREAMS DON'T MAKE A--

Ryon's eyes pop open. He GAGS. Grabs his chest. Falls... His cold, dead eyes stare up, locked on the church tower atop Cornerstone Theater. The bell BONGS, BONGS, BONGS, BONGS...

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - STAGE - NIGHT

The house lights flash. The patrons take their seats. Charlie scoots by without regard for anybody else's personal space.

ON STAGE

In the spotlight, in front of the red curtain, Michael Special raises a human skull in the air.

MICHAEL

Alas, poor Cornerstone. I knew her well.

He tosses the skull to a BOY in the front row, who SCREAMS.

MICHAEL

Keep it. Welcome to Romeo & Juliet, a tale of two lovers fighting for the heart of their kingdoms...

IN THE AUDIENCE

Nat plops down in a seat next to Jeremy.

JEREMY

Hi.

NAT

(whispers loudly)
QUIET. THIS IS A THEATER.

ON STAGE

MICHAEL

I've always thought of Cornerstone as my kingdom, but I can't rule forever, and nobody has stood out as an heir apparent quite like Jeremy Hahn, writer of the critically-acclaimed indie drama Horsepower Declining.

A SMATTERING OF APPLAUSE. A screen lowers from the ceiling.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Jeremy slumps in his seat and covers his face with his hand.

JEREMY

Oh, God.

ON STAGE

MICHAEL

Jeremy might be a Hollywood hotshot now, but I know him as the chubby geek who showed up to audition for Children's Hour. The only boy who showed up, I must say.

ON THE SCREEN - A production still. A young, chubby Jeremy glares at two SCHOOLMARMS as he hands them their groceries.

MICHAEL (O.S.)
 Jeremy quickly rose through the
 ranks with key roles in The Man Who
 Came To Dinner...

ON THE SCREEN - Young Jeremy dressed as an escaped convict.

MICHAEL (O.S.)
Clue: The Musical...

ON THE SCREEN - Young Jeremy wears a purple smoking jacket
 and brandishes a candlestick as a weapon.

IN THE AUDIENCE

JEREMY
 Kill me, please.

MICHAEL (O.S.)
 And as Seymour in Little Shop of--

CHARLIE
 (chortles)
 Is this a play or an acting reel?

JEREMY
 Yeah, Mr. S. These people came to
 see a show, right?

Jeremy looks around. Three people clap.

ON STAGE

MICHAEL
 Fine. On with the show.

The screen SQUEAKS as it rolls... back... up... Michael nods
 politely until it's done.

MICHAEL
 Without further ado about
something... Cornerstone Theater
 presents... Romeo & Juliet.

Lights down. MUSIC UP. Spotlight on the NARRATOR (30s), in
 purple and gold tights, clutches a sword at her side.

NARRATOR
 In fair Verona, where we lay our
 scene, from ancient grudge to new
 mutiny, where civil blood makes
 civil blood unclean...

IN THE AUDIENCE

NAT
 (whispers to Jeremy)
 I'm grabbing a smoke.

JEREMY
 Hurry back.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - NIGHT

Nat takes a drag of her ciggie as she leans against the door.

NAT
 (to camera)
 I'm not going back. Gaston and those witches have been plotting shit this whole movie. I'm sure as hell not going to be there when it sticks. I've done enough.

Travis, the redneck, trots up. He's in a hurry.

TRAVIS
 This the place where the queers put on plays?

NAT
 More or less. Hi, I'm Queen Queer.

She puts out her hand. Travis doesn't take it. He pushes by her and pulls the door open. Nat SLAPS it closed.

NAT
 You can't go in without a ticket.

Travis puffs out his chest.

TRAVIS
 You wanna try and stop me, honey?

Nat reaches into her pocket and pulls out a COMP TICKET.

INSERT - The ticket, with RYON P. written on it in red ink.

NAT
 Calm down, toxic masculinity. We had a comp who didn't show.

Travis snatches the ticket and stomps inside.

NAT
 (takes a drag)
 See? I'm not all bad. That guy was an asshole, but I helped him out.
 (MORE)

NAT (CONT'D)

(beat)

I see you judging me. C'mon, man,
live and let live.

The door opens. The camera goes inside and turns around,
impatient. Nat stomps out her cigarette.

NAT

You really think he's dangerous?
More dangerous than the witches?
Fine. I'll stay

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - STAGE - CONTINUOUS

Greg and Sharla, the star-crossed young lovers, hold hands.
Greg looks off, forlorn.

GREG

I must be gone and live, or stay
and die.

He pulls Sharla close. They kiss.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Travis slides into his seat and pulls his jacket tight like
he's hiding something, because he is.

Nat keeps an eye on Travis as she makes her way back to
Jeremy. She stops at Niels and Ricki Jo, uglier than ever, as
they sit in their emotions and block the aisle.

NAT

(whispers)

Eww... I mean, can I get through?

Niels and Ricki Jo stand up to let her pass, then sit back
down. Niels gestures to the stage.

NIELS

(whispers)

It should be us up there.

RICKI JO

Mr. S had his reasons, Neils. I--

Niels leans forward to watch the young lovers on stage.

NIELS

Still, it makes me think... Even
these attractive people have
problems, no? There is no such
thing as fairy tale.

Ricki Jo looks away and caresses her oozing face.

RICKI JO
There's such a thing as a witch's
curse.

NIELS
Perhaps we used our looks as an
excuse for our problems.

RICKI JO
We have more problems now... All
because you wanted to be hot.

NIELS
My pidgin, forgive me. I would do
anything to save us from this fate.

She takes his hand. He takes hers.

RICKI JO
It's okay. We'll face the world
together, no matter what we look
like. If Steve Buscemi can get
work, there's hope for us too.

NIELS
And he gets much work.

RICKI JO
Exactly. You'll be--

Behind them, Charlie's hands SHAKE as he stands. His face is clammy. His eyes, unfocused and bloodshot.

CHARLIE
Be QUIET. This is... This is a...

RICKI JO
Are you okay?

ON STAGE

Greg and Sharla break the kiss. Greg smiles.

GREG
Awesome.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Charlie wobbles to his feet.

CHARLIE
He broke character... This... is...

He passes out, laid over the theater seats like an old drape.

MICHAEL

If this is your idea of a review...

Ronda, Postal's weapons-dealing girlfriend, runs over. She rummages through Charlie's pockets.

RONDA

We gotta help him, damn it.

NAT

POSTAL. Your lady's robbing that dude while he's having a brownout.

Postal leans back in his seat and smiles.

POSTAL

That's my gal.

RONDA

I ain't robbin' him. He's got sugar problems.

Ronda pulls a SHOT KIT out of Charlie's coat pocket: One vial of insulin. No needles.

RONDA

Anybody got a needle?

Several PATRONS raise their hands.

REDNECK

Yeah.

OLD WOMAN

Here ya go, dear.

JUNKIE

Mind if it's used?

Ronda uses the old woman's needle to shoot up Charlie. His eyes flutter open.

CHARLIE

Hrm... Huh? The woman from the bus?

RONDA

You're lucky I was here. These theater freaks was gonna let you die.

CHARLIE

(chortles)

That will also be in the review. Thank you, ma'am. You know your way around a needle.

RONDA

You should see me with a gun.

BACK OF THE THEATER

Gaston locks the back doors. CLANK. He gives Travis a nod.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Travis nods back, then pulls out "Old Betsy" and the tear gas canister. Nobody notices. He lets off a SHOT.

TRAVIS

SHUT UP, Y'ALL.

They all shut up, except Michael, who raises his hand.

MICHAEL

Sir, we don't allow weapons in--

Travis aims Old Betsy at Michael.

TRAVIS

I do what I like.

MICHAEL

Of course. We'll make an exception.

JEREMY

Calm down, man. This is a--

Travis shoots off another round.

JEREMY

Perfect time for me to "shut my trap." I get it.

Jeremy sits back down. Travis waves the tear gas canister in the air. The crowd quiets down.

TRAVIS

Follow the nerd's example. Anybody tries anything, I'll gas all y'all.

Beatrice, Veronica, and Rebecca GIGGLE in the front row, rise from their seats, and flip back their witch's cloaks.

BEATRIX

Mama will take over from here.

VERONICA

It's opening night.

REBECCA

The timing's right.

BEATRIX

The real show's about to begin.

CHARLIE

A play-within-a-play? Now you have my attention.

Pastor Nagee leaps to his feet. Spit flicks off his lips.

PASTOR NAGEE

Brothers and sisters, are we going to let WITCHES order us around? This town is going to HELL in a handbasket.

Beatrix points her crooked finger at the Pastor.

BEATRIX

You're the one taking it there.

PASTOR NAGEE

Just like the devil to cast doubt on a SERVANT of GOD.

(to the crowd)

Friends, if we don't act, Everly Heights will be overrun with witches, junkies, and homosexuals.

The crowd GASPS. Michael shoves Pastor Nagee.

MICHAEL

Sir, homophobia isn't welcome here. This is a theater.

Benjamin locks eyes with Big Terry from across the room. Big Terry nods to him.

PASTOR NAGEE

"A man shall not lay with another man, sayeth the--"

Big Terry lurches up on his feet.

BIG TERRY

You didn't have a problem with homosexuals back at church camp.

Pastor Nagee wipes away flop sweat with a pocket square. His HEART RACES. He feels the eyes of the crowd like darts in his skin. Big Terry grabs him by his cheap blue tie.

PASTOR NAGEE

Don't do it, brother. The Lord--

BIG TERRY

Bro, you can't say "The Lord" this
and "The Lord" that and expect
people to excuse your sins.

(to the crowd)

This hypocrite groomed me when I
was a counselor at his church camp.
I was seventeen.

PASTOR NAGEE

Oh, God...

BIG TERRY

He made me feel ashamed, but I'm
not ashamed anymore. I'm gay, and
Pastor Nagee is too.

Big Terry puts Pastor Nagee down. The old hypocrite sinks
into his seat like a dog who peed on the carpet.

NAT

It's always the assholes bitching
the loudest.

BACK OF THE THEATER

Gaston, with one CLAP of his hands.

GASTON

Enough of this CLAPTRAP. Ladies, do
yer' voodoo.

ON STAGE

Beatrice, Veronica, and Rebecca stand in all their witchy
glory. Beatrice reaches into her cloak and pulls out the
EVIDENCE, COFFEE CUP, and Michael Special's GRAY HAIR.

BEATRIX

Now, Michael Special, you'll pay
for your tricky tricks.

REBECCA

Our spell is the trickiest.

Sharla pulls at Beatrice's arm. Light reflects off her RING.

SHARLA

NO. STOP. He's a good man.

Beatrice raises the items above her head.

BEATRIX

*Spirits of air... Masters of
light... Aid this holy coven in our
perilous fight. Punish this man for
his greedy misdeed. Good women,
take cover. Bad men, TAKE HEED!*

Wind WHIPS around the room. Patrons scramble for their programs. The EVIDENCE POPS and FIZZLES and FAILS.

VERONICA

We should have used Latin.

Beatrix rips the document in half.

BEATRIX

My spell... Some nosy gnat forgave
him for his transgressions? BAH. No
matter, sisters. I have--

LOUIE (O.S.)

The people are here for a show.

A yo-yo SMACKS Beatrix in the face.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Louie Loop, yo-yo king, catches his yo-yo. The crowd CHEERS.

LOUIE

LOUIE LOOP, Everly Height's third-
biggest YouTuber, unleashes his YO-
YO OF JUSTICE!

Louie chucks his yo-yo back at the witch.

ON STAGE

Beatrix catches the yo-yo.

BEATRIX

You think a yo-yo can stop me?

She WHISPERS something to the yo-yo, then chucks it back.

IN THE AUDIENCE

The yo-yo wraps around Louie's legs. He loses his balance.

ON STAGE

BEATRIX

I'm done with the party tricks.

Beatrice lifts a GLOWING AMULET over her head.

BEATRICE
EYE OF HORUS, CAST YOUR GAZE FAR.
TRANSFORM THE WICKED INTO WHAT THEY
REALLY ARE.

The audience braces for impact.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

A CLAP of thunder. Lightning strikes the steeple. The roof catches fire.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - STAGE - CONTINUOUS

The audience shields their eyes.

BACK OF THE THEATER

CRASH. Lightning shatters a stained-glass window. GLASS rains down on Gaston. He falls. Thelma runs to his side.

THELMA
GASTON. Somebody help!

ON STAGE

The witches SHRIEK as lightning transforms them into STINKBUGS. They skitter off into the audience.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Nat's boot SQUASHES the three stinkbugs. She doesn't notice.

NAT
Gross. Where the hell did the
witches go?

MICHAEL
What does it matter? They're gone.
ON WITH THE SHOW.

Jeremy smiles. His heart GLOWS. This place feels like home, and he's proud he'll be the one to save it. When-- He SNIFFS.

JEREMY
Does anybody else smell smoke?

ON STAGE

The actors run out from the wings.

SHARLA
The roof's on fire. Seriously.

GREG
RUN.

The crowd panics. Travis waves his canister of tear gas.

TRAVIS
STOP, YOU DAMN HIPPIES...

Travis pulls the pin. The canister EXPLODES in his face. The crowd pushes past him, shirts over their mouths. They RAM THE DOORS until they CRACK OPEN.

INT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Nat runs by the snack counter. A loud POP. She ducks. Fresh popcorn overflows out of the popcorn machine.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

MONTAGE

-- A fire truck drives through the crowd. The SIREN SCREAMS.

-- A KID laughs at Niels and Ricki Jo. They run off.

-- Travis wheezes as he carries Gaston down the front steps with Thelma close behind them.

-- The firemen hook up their hoses.

-- Benjamin scowls at Big Terry.

-- Ronda and Postal help Charlie the laughing critic out.

-- The firemen storm into the theater.

BACK TO SCENE

A fireman drags Michael Special, doubled-over with a wicked COUGH, out of the theater. Nat and Jeremy run up to him.

NAT
You okay? You look like Quasimodo.

Michael waves her away.

MELODY

He's dead. You let him go again, didn't you? This is what happens when you trust people. They get hurt.

A GUNSHOT from out front. Melody lifts her revolver.

MELODY

Damn it. Stay with the body, Danny.

Melody disappears down the alley.

MICHAEL

My patrons. I have to protect them.

Michael limps after Melody. An awkward pause.

DANNY

Does anybody want to say a few words? I'm sure Melody has everything--

Another GUNSHOT. Michael SCREAMS.

NAT

Mr. Special? SHIT.

Nat takes off down the alley. Danny lifts his gun.

DANNY

WAIT. IT'S DANGEROUS.
(lowers his gun)
Darn it.

JEREMY

You didn't stand a chance.

EXT. CORNERSTONE THEATER - CONTINUOUS

A crowd gathers. Melody watches from the back as Michael Special puts pressure on his BLEEDING SHOULDER. Travis stands across from Michael and rubs his red eyes. He has Old Betsy. His shirt's torn, revealing a SUGAR BEAR tattoo on his wrist.

TRAVIS

Y'all best stay back...

Michael Special takes a step toward Travis as Nat and Jeremy push their way through the crowd.

MICHAEL

I knew somebody like you would--

BANG. Travis shoots Michael in the chest. He falls back. Nat catches him. Jeremy helps lower him to the ground.

JEREMY

Come on, Mr. S. This town needs you.

MICHAEL

There's no time... Nat... Jeremy...
It's on you now. Promise me you'll
keep Cornerstone alive. Our love...

Michael looks at the smoldering remains of Cornerstone.
GHOSTS OF MICHAEL AND JENNIFER SPECIAL cut the OPENING DAY
RIBBON. Michael points to his chest.

MICHAEL

Jennifer was always here to help
me. I'll always be there for you...

NAT

We got it, sir.

JEREMY

We'll save it.

MICHAEL'S POV - Niels and Ricki Jo hold each other across the street as they watch Michael bleed out.

MICHAEL

Maybe one day, you'll give it to
two young lovers, like we were,
once upon a time...

Michael's eyes flicker. He fades.

NAT

Mr. S? Wake up. The fucking show's
gotta go on, dude.

Nat lays Michael's head on the ground. Jeremy puts his hand on Nat's shoulder. She stands and turns to Travis.

NAT

I'm gonna kill you.

Travis aims the gun at her.

TRAVIS

Stay back, or the next one--
(coughs)
Next one's gonna pop your head like
a watermelon.

Melody pops out of the crowd, gun drawn.

MELODY
PUT THE GUN DOWN. I'M FBI.

TRAVIS
The "Fibbies?" Oh, shit.

Danny waves.

DANNY
I'm FBI too.

TRAVIS
You?

DANNY
I know. It's true.

Travis aims his gun at Danny.

TRAVIS
Y'all ain't gonna--

BLAM. Nat's shitkicker boot KICKS the gun out of his hand.
She PUNCHES him.

NAT
That's for Mr. Special, asshole.

And AGAIN... POW!

NAT
And that's for Cornerstone.

One LAST PUNCH. CRACK-OW!

NAT
And that's because that Sugar Bear
tattoo is a piece of shit.

BIG TERRY (O.S.)
HEY.

DANNY
We'll take it from here.

Melody and Danny pull Travis up by the arms. Melody gets up
in Travis's face.

MELODY
You're going away for a long time.

TRAVIS
HEY. HEY. This ain't my doin'.
She's the one what sold me the gun.

Travis points at Ronda, who tends to Charlie by the fire truck. Postal stands a few feet away, scratching his butt.

Travis points to Gaston on a stretcher.

TRAVIS

He's the one what put me up to it.

Melody slaps the cuffs on Travis.

MELODY

But you pulled the trigger.

Danny walks over to Gaston.

DANNY

Sir? Did you put him up to this?

GASTON

OF COURSE NOT, ya' damn fool. I'm an upstanding member of the community.

Billy Free, the muffin man, pushes his way to the front.

BILLY

Danny? I have information.

DANNY

(waves)

BILLY. The nicest guy in Everly Heights. What's up?

BILLY

I saw them huddled up in the corner scheming today when I dropped off my famous muffins. The good ol' boy ran when Gaston saw me coming in.

GASTON

He's lying. Ain't no doubt about it, bubby.

Danny pulls out cuffs.

DANNY

I'm willing to give anybody the benefit of the doubt, but when you accuse Billy Free of lying, I know you're full of crap.

Two POLICE CARS pull up, sirens blaring.

MELODY

We're taking you both in for conspiracy, discharging an unlicensed firearm, murder, and whatever else we can come up with.

Two COPS lead them away. The POLICE CHIEF goes to Melody.

POLICE CHIEF

Agent Trainor? Thanks for the assist. I was advised to tell you your asset Jim Colvin was killed tonight.

MELODY

Colvin? Shit.

Danny puts a hand on her shoulder. She wipes away a tear.

MELODY

He was a damn legend.

DANNY

So sad how he ended up... The town creeper.

Danny spots Ronda over by Charlie. He whips out his gun.

DANNY

RONDA. RONDA ROUSE. Stay right there. You're under arrest for embarrassing and imprisoning a federal agent.

Charlie holds up his hand, still weak.

CHARLIE

Nonsense. This woman is a hero. If it wasn't for her quick thinking I'd be in a diabetic coma.

Nat pushes her way to the front of the crowd.

NAT

It's true. She saved that hyena's life.

Danny pops his tongue in his cheek. A beat.

MELODY

Danny Chance, don't you dare...

Danny lowers the gun.

DANNY

Come on, Mel. She's, like, the only person out here tonight who helped. You'll stay out of trouble, won't you, Ronda?

POSTAL

The hell she will.

Ronda shoves Postal, who trips over the curb.

RONDA

I'll keep my nose clean, buddy.

Paramedics lift Michael Special's body into the ambulance. Danny looks at Melody like a hopeful little puppy. She SIGHS and put her gun in the holster.

MELODY

Fine. We have enough paperwork.

ACROSS THE STREET

Niels and Ricki Jo watch the ambulance drive away.

RICKI JO

Mr. Special was a great man. What a sad ending...

NIELS

For all of us...

Ricki Jo takes Niels's hand.

RICKI JO

Remember when we were happy? Back when you weren't so worried about "making it?"

Niels pulls his hand back.

NIELS

You wanted to make it too.

RICKI JO

You asked me to move to Hollywood with you. What was I supposed to do? Let the man I love go?

Niels turns to her.

NIELS

It was my silly dream. But you are my reality, pidgin.

(MORE)

NIELS (CONT'D)

If you are by my side, I have made it already, even if I never leave Everly Heights.

RICKI JO

For real?

NIELS

For reals, for real.

They kiss. A little spark between their lips. Their faces TRANSFORM, leaving them both a bit more attractive than they were before.

Nat sulks by and puffs on a cigarette. Eyeliner streaks down her cheeks, all 90s alt-girl chic. She notices the lovers.

NAT

GET A ROOM.

Ricki Jo breaks the kiss.

RICKI JO

Sorry. We're in love.

NAT

I'm fucking with you. At least somebody's happy tonight. You two are looking a lot better.

Ricki Jo and Niels look at each other. RAPTURE. BLISS. The curse is lifted. Blood rushes to their cheeks. They can't help but kiss each other, more in love than they've ever been.

Nat field strips her ciggie as she crosses the street.

NAT

(looks at camera)

Come on, you peeping Tom.

Nat sits on a bench and stares up at Cornerstone, charred, crumbling, soaked. Jeremy sits down beside her.

JEREMY

A lot of memories, up in smoke.

NAT

Hell of a fire though. It's a shame we couldn't save it.

JEREMY

Who says we can't?

NAT

GOSH. Sure! Let's just glue the ashes back together.

JEREMY

What do you think tonight was all about? I'm bringing the arts back. My investors in Hollywood are going to help me turn Everly Heights into the next Atlanta.

NAT

You're "Chosen Few Productions?"
Shit, man. We're no Atlanta.

JEREMY

No, but that works in our favor. Out here, production costs are next to nothing. I'm turning this rusty old town into a bonified movie studio.

Jeremy points to some OLD ABANDONED SHOPS down the street. His vision SPRINGS TO LIFE as he speaks.

JEREMY

We'll convert these abandoned buildings into sets.

He gestures to the charred theater.

JEREMY

And we'll rebuild Cornerstone to keep the spirit of Mr. Special alive.

NAT

Sounds like you have a plan.

Jeremy snatches Nat's cigarette, takes a puff, then hands it back. She doesn't mind. They used to do this all the time.

JEREMY

Thanks. Don't tell Laura.

NAT

Don't worry about it.

JEREMY

You know... I need an artistic director. Somebody who can set the agenda for us, *theatrically* and *philosophically*.

(MORE)

JEREMY (CONT'D)
 (smiles)
 You know anybody?

NAT
 FUCK YEAH. Me.

JEREMY
 I was hoping you'd--

Benjamin walks up and points across the street, where the police load Travis and Gaston into the back of a squad car.

BENJAMIN
 Can you believe this shit?

JEREMY
 Everly Heights is WAY more exciting
 than I remember it.

NAT
 Agreed.

BENJAMIN
 Definitely.

Ben looks over at Big Terry, who goofs around with some of the actors from the show. He SIGHS.

JEREMY
 You doing okay, Benny?

BENJAMIN
 Every time I turn the corner I run
 into another ghost.

Nat spots Kelsey the tour guide giving a statement to a COP.

NAT
 I feel that.

Jeremy puts his arm around his friends.

JEREMY
 This town is in crisis, but the
 Greek word for 'crisis' also means
 'opportunity.' Tonight's a night of
 endings, but it could be a night of
 new beginnings for all of us.

NAT
 Maybe so.

BENJAMIN
 Yeah. What the hell, right?

DOWN THE STREET

Benjamin extends his hand. Big Terry shakes it.

BENJAMIN

You kicked ass up there. Way to put
Pastor Nagee in his place. So, does
that mean you're--

BIG TERRY

Out? Yeah, I guess. Do you--

BENJAMIN

Want to grab a drink? Yeah. We
could go to Leroy's--

BIG TERRY

I hear the guy who was running
Leroy's got shot.

BENJAMIN

Mr. Colvin? Shit. Tonight sucks.

BIG TERRY

A drink would make it better...

BENJAMIN

We could stop by the Convenience
Market... Grab some forties.

BIG TERRY

Take them to the Walking Bridge...

BENJAMIN

That'd be great, dude.

Big Terry looks at Benjamin, takes his hand, and smiles.

Nat watches Benjamin and Big Terry kiss under the
streetlight.

NAT

Looks like everybody's getting a
happy ending, except for Mr. S, of
course. And yours truly.

Kelsey runs over and hugs Nat.

KELSEY

Quite a show tonight.
(looks at camera, waves)
Oh. Your needy friend is here. Hi.

NAT

They do need their hand held.

KELSEY

You don't have to tell me. I gave them a tour.

Nat whips her bangs out of her eyes and gives Kelsey a LOOK.

NAT

So, what are you doing tonight?

Kelsey blushes.

KELSEY

Depends on what you're doing...

RED ELECTRICITY shoots between them. Nat smiles.

NAT

Getting a happy ending?

Postal and Ronda stumble up. Postal waves a SIX-PACK.

POSTAL

OY. NAT. You ready to head home? We got Rolling Rock.

Nat glances at Kelsey.

NAT

You two kids get the house to yourselves tonight. I've got plans.

Ronda wraps her arms around Postal.

RONDA

Suits me fine. Wanna get wild?

POSTAL

Don't I always? OY. OY.

He pumps his arm as Ronda leads him away.

KELSEY

"Plans," huh?

NAT

So many plans.

Kelsey plants one on her.

KELSEY

We should go to the cemetery...

NAT

(gestures to camera)
Let me walk my friend to the bus station first.

KELSEY
They need their hand held, right?

EXT. BUS STATION - NIGHT

A bus pulls in, heading SOMEWHERE NEW.

NAT
That's you, right?
(the camera "nods")
So, you want to hear my whole big
"philosophical" takeaway?

The bus doors open. The DRIVER empties the baggage compartment. He points to the back of the bus.

DRIVER
Stack your baggage here. Leaving in
five.

Nat grabs a suitcase and lugs it over as she speaks.

NAT
Thanks, five! Kierkegaard says we
understand life backward, but live
it forwards. I'm here to tell you
that you can live life backward...
You can go home again, as long as
you don't do it because you're
afraid to start something new.

Kelsey waves at Nat from across the way. Nat waves back.

NAT
Speaking of, I gotta get back to
Kelsey, and you gotta get the hell
out before the magnet traps you
here in Everly Heights, the once
and future home of the arts. Don't
worry. There's always another show.

ON THE BUS

Kelsey and Nat kiss outside the window. The bus pulls out, passing familiar spots, including...

INSERT - A sign: FAREWELL FROM EVERLY HEIGHTS, OH.

THE END