

A CUT ABOVE THE REST

by

Chris Bodily

FADE IN:

EXT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - DAY

A brightly-colored light-blue building, somewhat large for a fast food joint.

The logo on the sign consists of yellow cursive.

Patronage seems light: Only seven cars in the parking lot, and another at the drive-thru.

STEPFORD (PRE-LAP)  
Good news, everybody...

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

Manager DAN STEPFORD (36), white shirt, tan pants, tie, dark sunglasses, addresses three employees.

The employees are dressed in light blue uniforms with yellow vertical stripes and white paper hats with the Stepford's Burgers logo on either side.

The uniforms match the building's color scheme.

Stepford and two employees have wide smiles, which seem eerie and somewhat unnatural.

PHIL (19), also sporting sunglasses, talks into his drive-thru headset.

PHIL  
Hold on, ma'am.

Static through the headset.

STEPFORD  
We have a very special guest coming in today.

He pauses. Anticipation.

STEPFORD  
Victor Herman.

Phil and DAVE (21), chubby, dark sunglasses, freeze for a beat. Then, they gasp, cheer, and applaud.

Nodding, Stepford signals that he has more to say. Phil and Dave quiet down, their smiles never diminishing.

CHUCK (31), blond hair, neutral expression, is the only one not smiling eerily or wearing shades. Standing next to the cash register, he shifts his eyes, as if confused.

CHUCK  
Excuse me, Mister Stepford, but who's Victor Herman?

Phil and Dave gasp.

A PATRON, male, huge unnatural smile, drops his burger onto the tray and freezes, motionless.

STEPFORD

It's alright, everybody! Chuck's new here.

CHUCK

What did I do?

The patron goes back to eating his burger and minding his own business.

STEPFORD

Chuck. Mister Herman is only the most powerful food critic in this state. A review from him is like a review from God.

PHIL

What do you need us to do? Stepford's has been in business for how long--

STEPFORD

My father opened this restaurant forty years ago, and we've never gotten one bad review. Give Mister Herman the best damn service you can.

The three employees nod.

STEPFORD

Oh, and Chuck, before I forget...

He hands Chuck a pair of sunglasses.

CHUCK

What do I need these for?

Mr. Stepford walks to the back without answering.

Chuck tries on the sunglasses. His body gradually trembles and contorts.

CHUCK

What's going on? Help!

The trembling slows to a crawl. He buries his head in his hands, breathing heavily.

VICTOR HERMAN, 50, brown suit, carrying a clipboard with pen and paper, enters the restaurant. Neutral expression on his face. Very professional.

He walks up to the cash register and clears his throat.

VICTOR  
Excuse me, sir.

Chuck lowers his hands, revealing the same unnatural smile as everyone else.

CHUCK  
You must be Mister Herman?

Victor reads Chuck's name tag.

VICTOR  
And you must be Chuck?

CHUCK  
Welcome to Stepford's. May I take your order?

Victor feigns a smile similar to Chuck's.

He stares at Chuck, and then, clearly feeling awkward, resumes his previous expression.

Victor seems somewhat uncomfortable. He reads the menu.

VICTOR  
I hear you have the best hamburgers in town?

CHUCK  
Can't argue with that.

Chuck lets out a light chuckle, causing Victor to wince. Victor clears his throat.

VICTOR  
What comes with a Number Four?

CHUCK  
Number Four is the kids meal.

VICTOR  
Oh, I apologize. I don't have my glasses.

Victor scribbles a note.

VICTOR  
I'll just have your classic Stepford Burger with nothing on it, large fries, and a large Pepsi, please.

CHUCK  
To stay, right?

Victor nods.

CHUCK  
Your total is eight dollars.

VICTOR  
Eight dollars?! Why so much?

CHUCK  
I guess because you're paying for  
quality.

Victor scribbles a note. He looks back up to Chuck, trying to calm his demeanor.

VICTOR  
How long do I have to wait?

Chuck gives him a large cup. Victor takes it.

CHUCK  
One minute, on average.

Victor goes to the soda machine. He grabs his pen and scribbles more notes.

VICTOR  
McDonald's is cheaper. And I'm a  
food critic!

Victor reads the logos of the different beverage options. Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, Dr. Pepper, Mountain Dew, Tropicana Lemonade, "Stepford's Special Red" and water.

He observes the lone patron eating his burger and fries, particularly the thick, reddish-brown sauce dripping from the juicy patty.

Victor shivers.

Chuck holds up a tray with Mr. Herman's food.

CHUCK  
Mister Herman, your order's ready!

Victor turns around toward the cash register, grabbing his wallet and taking the tray.

VICTOR  
Could you hold my clipboard for me,  
Chuck?

Chuck does so.

VICTOR  
Thank you.

Victor pays with a ten dollar bill. Chuck gives him two dollars in change.

CHUCK

Enjoy your meal, Mister Herman.

Victor sits down at the table behind the other patron.

Victor reviews his

NOTES

Each one is handwritten in print, moderately sloppy.

Black ink.

The first note reads: "Every one of my colleagues has acted strangely since reviewing Stepford's Burgers. It's as if they're a completely different person. A P.I. friend of mine has been investigating for the last six months."

The second reads: "The building is unusually large for a fast-food restaurant. Who needs that much storage space?"

The third reads: "Interior quite clean."

The fourth note reads: "Cashier familiar with menu when I tested him. Assumed he was rookie, but quite bright."

Number five reads: "\$8 price tag of #2 pricey."

Victor flips over to the next page, written on another piece of paper.

The final note, at the top of the page, reads: "Acceptably quick wait time, nice selection of Pepsi products, friendly atmosphere unnerving and suspicious."

BACK TO SCENE

Victor sets his notepad down.

He unwraps his Stepford Burger, inspects it. Lifts up the bun: Two pickles.

VICTOR

I thought I told you no pickles?

Another scribble in his notepad. He puts the pen down and resumes his business.

He takes his first bite of the burger. Something odd, yet satisfying, about the taste.

He turns his head toward Chuck.

VICTOR

Excuse me, young man, Chuck. May I speak to your manager please? Don't worry, you didn't do anything.

Dan Stepford enters calmly.

STEPFORD  
Mister Herman?

Victor points to the burger.

VICTOR  
Some good stuff, but this doesn't  
taste like any beef I've ever had.  
What kind of meat is this?

STEPFORD  
Oh, it's... meat.

VICTOR  
But what kind? Beef, ham, pork,  
chicken, turkey? Human?

Victor chortles, clearly joking.

Mr. Stepford's smile diminishes somewhat.

STEPFORD  
We use only the finest beef. No  
beef in the world tastes like ours.  
Not McDonald's, Burger King,  
Wendy's, Red Robin, Carl's Junior.

Victor picks up a fry and takes a bite. Tasty, but  
something's off.

VICTOR  
And these fries don't taste like  
fries. They don't even taste like  
potatoes.

Victor takes out his cell phone.

VICTOR  
My friend Bobby's a P.I. He's  
been--

Stepford confiscates the phone.

STEPFORD  
Would you mind stepping in the  
back?

Victor reaches for his phone, to no avail.

STEPFORD  
Please?

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

Moderate light from an overhead bulb. Everybody is scattered  
around the area.

VICTOR  
Spit it out, Mister Stepford.

Dave holds out a bloody hatchet, still dripping.

Victor is the only one not smiling or wearing sunglasses.

STEPFORD

You know too much.

A man SCREAMS.

Victor turns to his left to see who it is.

Another SCREAM.

VICTOR

Bobby!

The man is BOBBY, Victor's private eye friend, with his stomach ripped open, bleeding, and guts dangling. His eyes are wide with fear.

So are Victor's. He turns his head back toward Mr. Stepford and his minions.

VICTOR

You, you... cannibals!

STEPFORD

We're not cannibals. Cannibals eat people. We merely serve them.

Standing next to Bobby is a perfect BOBBY CLONE, wearing only briefs. Motionless like a mannequin, eyes open, unnaturally wide grin.

The real Bobby ekes out his last breath.

BOBBY

(weakly)

Victor...

Bobby passes out, dead.

The unassuming smiles juxtaposed with the blood and butchering visibly disturbs Victor. He trembles.

VICTOR

Bobby! You, you...

Bobby's clone immediately comes to life and dresses himself in the real Bobby's clothes. Very little blood on them.

The clone marches toward Victor. Victor takes a step back.

BOBBY CLONE

Victor! Long time, no see. Put 'er there.

The Bobby Clone opens his arms for a hug.



VICTOR

You're not Bobby! What have you maniacs done?

BOBBY CLONE

Victor, it's me! Bobby. We've been friends for twenty years. Remember?

Victor looks on over to the real Bobby's body, gutted and still losing blood -- something out of Friday the 13th.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

The lone patron BITES into his hamburger, his teeth RIPPING off a large, meaty, juicy piece.

He washes it down with a gulp of Pepsi.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

Dave creeps toward Victor with his hatchet.

Victor grabs it, accidentally hitting Chuck in the face and knocking his sunglasses onto the floor. The sunglasses play a continuous A note, tuned to 432 Hertz.

Chuck trembles, dropping his frightening smile.

Engraved on the arms of the sunglasses is the Bose logo.

STEPFORD

No!

CHUCK

What... what happened?

VICTOR

These cannibals brainwashed you.

CHUCK

But I don't even smoke weed, dude.

VICTOR

I said "cannibals."

Victor points at Mr. Stepford, Phil and Dave.

STEPFORD

Enough!

Dave marches forward, zombie-like.

DAVE

Give me that back!

Victor swings the hatchet at him. Dave, dodging the weapon, grabs Chuck's sunglasses off the floor and forces them on Victor. Victor resists and grunts.

He tries to push Dave away, to no avail.

Dave pins him to the floor. Victor uses the hatchet like a shield. Dave shoves the shades onto him.

Victor screams, then kicks Dave in the groin, knocking him over. The hatchet spins around on the floor.

Victor throws the glasses off before they can brainwash him. SMASH! He stomps on the sunglasses, disintegrating them.

Phil and Mr. Stepford march toward Victor like robots or bloodthirsty zombies. Victor takes five steps back.

VICTOR  
Are you even human?

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

The patron shoves a handful of fries in his mouth.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

Phil and Mr. Stepford march closer.

VICTOR  
Stop! Stop it!

Closer.

Dave picks himself up, grabs the hatchet and follows suit.

VICTOR  
Please.

Even closer. Victor takes another step back.

Chuck guards Victor like a human shield.

CHUCK  
Mister Stepford!

WHACK! SPLISH! Dave hacks Chuck in the stomach, drawing blood. Chuck clenches his stomach and falls to his knees, sputtering, gasping, and coughing.

But it's no use -- his intestines fall out.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

The patron takes a swallow of his Pepsi before taking another huge bite of his burger.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

Chuck sputters, coughs, dies.

VICTOR  
Chuck!

Victor glares at his enemies.

VICTOR

You want a review, I'll give you a review.

Mr. Stepford pulls out a fork and sharp knife from his pant pockets. He and his minions continue marching forward.

STEPFORD

It had better be good...

OVER BLACK

Victor SCREAMS in horror.

SLASHING, HACKING, STABBING.

More SCREAMING, followed by GRUNTING.

FADE IN:

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

Victor fills up his cup with Pepsi. He then grabs a lid and straw, putting them on.

He turns around, revealing an unnatural smile. He returns to his table.

A "Help Wanted" sign now hangs outside the window.

A WOMAN (25), T-shirt and jeans, pretty, enters the restaurant, holding her stomach and smiling.

Mr. Stepford stands behind the counter.

STEPFORD

Welcome to Stepford's. May I take your order?

WOMAN

I'll have a Number Two with Pepsi, please. Make that two Stepford Burgers.

Mr. Stepford nods.

STEPFORD

You're in luck, these babies are fresh.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

A hamburger patty slops onto the bottom bun, followed by onions, pickles, and the sauce.

Finally, the top bun to cap it off. A perfect burger.

INSERT - NEWSPAPER

Victor's rave review of Stepford's Burgers.

The headline reads: "Welcome to Good Burger"

Followed by the lead-in:

"Stepford's best hamburger I've ever tasted"

FADE OUT.

THE END