

A DUST OF SNOW

Screenplay  
by

Jason Paul

October, 2015

Copyright 2015

FADE IN:

INT. 1970S HARDTOP SEDAN (MOVING)

DAY

A back seat view looking over the shoulder of TED (36) as he drives along a narrow canyon road glazed with precipitation. The sky is a threatening shade of gray. Cliffs abutting the roadside are dotted with snow.

No other cars in sight. Only the muffled whistle of winter disturbs a hypnotic pace along the roadway.

The sedan rounds a blind curve. A LONE FIGURE appears, perched on the shoulder, a silhouetted lump of winter clothing. The vehicle approaches the figure, a HITCHHIKER (50). His gloved thumb extends toward the windshield.

FROM THE ROADSIDE

The sedan brakes next to the Hitchhiker. Behind a frosted passenger window, Ted leans across the seat, rolls the window down, nods at the swathed stranger.

TED

Hello. Did you break down? Lost? Sky's starting to look pretty angry again. Better hop in.

The Hitchhiker slides into the seat next to Ted.

BACK INSIDE THE SEDAN (IDLING)

The Hitchhiker rolls his window up, shucks his neck gaiter and beanie, exhales. Despite the exposure to elements, he emits a friendly-suburban-neighbor aura.

HITCHHIKER

Thanks for stopping. I was messing around on the trails, thinking the worst of this weather was already past us. Should've known the one time I don't trust the forecast, it ends up being right on the money.

Ted notes the man's embarrassment, takes stock of his person; dirt and scrapes on his cargo snow pants, but curiously ill-equipped for an outing in this weather.

TED

Did you ditch your gear?

The hitchhiker glances over his body, tugs at the scrapes on his pants, slumps.

HITCHHIKER

It's a bit of a...an embarrassing story. There's a little cafe at the truck stop on the interchange about 20 miles ahead. Best coffee and homemade pies I've ever had. I got a buddy waiting for me there. My treat for putting you through all this trouble.

TED

No trouble at all. Sounds too good to pass up.

The Hitchhiker shoots Ted a comfortable smile.

THE SEDAN

rolls from the shoulder, cuts through the canyon road again.

BACK INSIDE THE SEDAN (MOMENTS LATER)

The Hitchhiker blows warm air into his hands, settles in.

TED

You promised me an embarrassing story?

HITCHHIKER

I got a hiking buddy. We want to join one of those outdoor survival clubs. All this talk about the apocalypse and doomsday makes average day-hikers like us want to prepare for the real thing.

TED

Makes sense so far.

HITCHHIKER

Until we throw back a few beers. He lays down a wager, says I can't last half a day in the mountains on my own. I'm feeling liquid macho so of course I say "you're on", and today he drops me off with a small pack of gear and my phone. He's at the truck stop waiting on my call.

TED

Would've been easy money for you during any other season.

HITCHHIKER

No truer words, my friend. So I'm hiking an incline and I slip on some loose rocks, take a tumble down a cliff through some brush and snow...

The Hitchhiker gestures again to the tears in his pants.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

My gear scatters, phone goes flying. It could've taken an ice bath in the stream for all I know, but I search a good hour before the sky changes.

The Hitchhiker recalls, shakes his head.

HITCHHIKER(CONT.)

I guess I felt if I didn't get back to the road right away, I wasn't going to make it out at all.

TED

Good call. This storm is gonna pounce before dusk. Your buddy might not have made it to you in time. And almost any phone on these canyon roads ends up groping for a signal until you come up on the interchange. Hit or miss.

HITCHHIKER

Me and my big, six pack drinkin' mouth.

TED

Well...lose a bet, live to hike another day. Something to be said for that.

HITCHHIKER

That's a good way to look at it.

TED

I'm Ted, by the way. Sorry, I don't think I even asked you for your name.

HITCHHIKER

That's right. You didn't.

Ted smiles, hangs for a response. The Hitchhiker puffs a recovery breath, glides right past Ted's comment.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

Boy I gotta tell ya, Ted. I'm really not sure what I would've done if you hadn't passed by.

Ted considers, shrugs.

TED

Whatever it took for you to survive, I suppose.

The Hitchhiker holds his look on Ted.

HITCHHIKER

Uh-huh. And what about you, Ted?

TED  
"What about me" what?

HITCHHIKER  
Are you willing to do whatever it takes  
to survive?

Ted's glances shift between the Hitchhiker and the road. A curious turn in the conversation, but he rolls with it.

TED  
I would hope so.

The Hitchhiker studies Ted, gauges his response.

TED (CONT.)  
I'd hope even more that I would never  
need to find out.

Ted grins; a witty tailpiece comment. The Hitchhiker's friendly eyes falter. This is not the man we met.

Ted grips the wheel, holds a confused stare on the Hitchhiker. Ted eases off the accelerator, about to voice discomfort.

The Hitchhiker lunges for Ted's right wrist with an open handcuff. It clamps and zips around Ted's wrist. Ted pulls his cuffed hand away from the wheel. The sedan swerves out of his control.

The Hitchhiker snatches Ted's cuffed wrist. Ted is caught between escaping and controlling the wheel. The Hitchhiker's grip finds the empty handcuff. He tightens the cuff around the wheel, seizes the wheel, helps Ted regain control.

Ted - chest heaving, heart pounding - shakes the immediate scare, but quickly dials back in; he is being held captive. He steadies his breathing.

TED  
What do you want?

HITCHHIKER  
I want you to drive.

TED  
Where?

HITCHHIKER  
To where I tell you to stop.

Ted's face sinks. His eyes linger on a KEYCHAIN PHOTO dangling from the ignition - a GIRL (17) smiling. Her hairdo and style indicate a recently bygone era. Ted's helpless look averts to the windshield, toward the highway.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY (LATER)

The sedan motors along a stretch of road choked by a deep forest of snow-dappled hemlock trees; a place where anyone can get lost or disappear.

BACK INSIDE THE SEDAN

Gears are turning in Ted's head, but he remains calm.

TED  
You know, I've got... there are people  
who love me...

His eyes lock again on the girl in the keychain photo.

HITCHHIKER  
Stop here.

FROM THE ROADSIDE

The sedan halts on the shoulder, dwarfed by the forest.

BACK INSIDE THE SEDAN

The Hitchhiker jiggles the gear shift into "park", kills the engine. Ted senses an ugly unraveling of events.

TED  
Whatever it is you think you want to  
do...if you need money, if you need a  
car...

HITCHHIKER  
I need you to shut your mouth.

The Hitchhiker unzips his coat, pulls a military bowie hunting knife from a chest-mounted sheath. He inches closer to Ted's face.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)  
You told me you'd do whatever it takes to  
survive. I wanna see if you're right.

He nods toward a stand of hemlock trees over Ted's shoulder, on the other side of the highway. Ted follows the look - careful to keep his body still. Eyes back on the Hitchhiker.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)  
We're gonna take a walk together, then  
I'll give you a head start. When I do,  
(gestures with the knife)  
I'll put her away... but then I get to  
load a real hunter's tool.

Ted's face tightens.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

It's stashed far enough off the trail that by the time my finger finds the trigger, you could cover plenty of distance to earn yourself a survivor's chance.

Ted holds on the Hitchhiker, can't believe what came about by trying to help someone. The Hitchhiker dips his knife into Ted's crotch, the sharp point lodged so snugly it nearly pierces skin. Ted is statue still.

The Hitchhiker retrieves a cuff key from his coat pocket, gestures toward Ted's left hand.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

Unlock yourself from the wheel, drop the key back in my hand, then slip the empty cuff on your other wrist. Wisely.

Ted complies - unlocks, dumps key in waiting palm, zips cuff to his wrist. Split-second thoughts of an escape remain only thoughts. He hangs on the Hitchhiker's next instructions.

The Hitchhiker stashes the cuff key, plucks car keys from the ignition.

Ted holds once more on the keychain photo, looks as if he is losing something very valuable. Clearly he cares for the girl in this photo.

The Hitchhiker pockets the car keys, prods his knife deeper into Ted's crotch, leans past Ted, tugs Ted's door slightly ajar. He straightens up in front of Ted.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

Face forward, put your forehead against the wheel, hands in your lap.

Ted does exactly as instructed.

The Hitchhiker pulls his knife from Ted's crotch up to Ted's temple. Its sharp point dents the circle of thin skin. Ted winces, reminded of who is in charge.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

I'm going to get out, and when I open your door, you're gonna do the same, Ted...slowly and smartly.

The Hitchhiker trains his knife in Ted's direction, slides away, pops the passenger door, exits.

FROM THE ROADSIDE

The Hitchhiker shuts his door. His look pans the landscape; no witnesses. He walks to Ted's door, pulls it open, knife aimed at Ted.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

Your turn, Ted.

Ted slinks out awkwardly due to the handcuffs, but no funny business. The Hitchhiker motions with his knife for Ted to clear the door, motions toward the stand of hemlock trees.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

Past that first thicket of trees you'll  
find a trail that winds through them.  
I'll find what I need, and together we'll  
find out how this game ends.

Ted inhales, holds a moment longer, but sees in the Hitchhiker's eyes that there are no second thoughts, no mercy rule. Ted makes a last effort at reasoning.

TED

If I make it far enough away from you,  
we'll both be in the ass end of this  
forest when a bitch of storm hits.

The Hitchhiker grins, admires Ted's lofty attempt.

HITCHHIKER

I think you already have a good idea how  
this turns out.

Ted turns toward the hemlock forest. He walks across the road gingerly; maybe a car will pop up on the horizon...

But the Hitchhiker follows without incident, his knife aimed at Ted's nape.

Ted's footfalls hit the wet dirt on the opposite shoulder. He trots forward. High, snow-patched hemlock branches now block the sky directly above him.

OFFSCREEN - the echoed CAW of a CROW.

Ted looks up just as a BLACK CROW glides INTO FRAME from out of the forest. The crow stretches its talons, lands effortlessly atop a hemlock directly in Ted's walking path.

The crow rustles a light dust of snow off of the hemlock branches. White powder drops gracefully to the ground just in front of Ted. Ted stops in his tracks, eyes the fresh fall, so lost in the moment that he kneels before it.

HITCHHIKER

Hey!

The Hitchhiker clenches his teeth, grips the knife tighter. His steely stare tells Ted he just messed up.

HITCHHIKER (CONT.)

On your feet and move forward.

Ted pivots toward the Hitchhiker, still kneeling. His trepid demeanor disappears. Defiant in his crouched stance, he shoots a cool, matter-of-fact look at the Hitchhiker.

TED  
No. I was just thinkin'...

The Hitchhiker flashes a skeptical stare, hangs on Ted's words...

TED (CONT.)  
I'm not playing anymore.

The Hitchhiker's mouth opens, but before he can summon a response...

BLAST!

A GUNSHOT. A crimson EXIT WOUND splays across the Hitchhiker's forehead. His body jars, stiffens. A mass of liquid and flesh cannons from the wound, scatters around him.

THE CROW

SHRILLS and thrashes atop the hemlock, launches off the branch and far away fast.

BACK TO THE HITCHHIKER

His lifeless eyes lock eerily on Ted. His body drops like a stone straight down and OUT OF FRAME.

DIRECTLY IN THE B.G., OUT OF FOCUS - JIMMY (38) stands behind the barrel of a smoking long range rifle. The BACK SEAT DOOR on the driver's side of the sedan is OPEN behind him. A black blanket draped over his body dangles to the ground.

FROM A BIRDSEYE VIEW

the gruesome layout of the scene momentarily frozen in time - Ted and the blood-laden body, a blanketed Jimmy and his steady rifle. The ECHO of the rifle CRACK undulates through the air until it is carried off forever.

BACK TO TED

He eyes the body blankly; exactly the end result he planned. Ted's cuffed hands reach for the Hitchhiker's coat pocket. A jingle of car keys as Ted clutches them inside his fist.

His look tilts up to Jimmy. Jimmy lowers his rifle, pulls the blanket off, it plops on the road. He turns to the sedan. His hand sweeps the back seat floor, snatches a plastic body bag. He walks across the road to meet Ted. Ted rises.

Both men move unphased in the midst of this brutal aftermath; clearly a routine they have carried out many times before.

JIMMY

You coulda lured him further off the road. Would've been less of a mess. When it's your turn to clean up, you can be as fancy as you want. Damn winding road almost made me throw up all over the back seat.

Ted looks up at the peaks of hemlocks in front of him, retraces the path of fallen snow kicked down by the crow.

TED

You saw what I saw, Jimmy?

JIMMY

Uh-huh.

Ted nods. So it really did happen. Jimmy unfolds the body bag, straightens it, lies it flat next to the dead body.

TED

I was thinking about what today was.

JIMMY

Thirty years to the day.

TED

Yeah.

Ted's glazed eyes hold on the snow patch at his feet. He drifts into a reverie...

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. HOUSE

DAY

Farm style; 2-story, weather-beaten, surrounded by timber and neglected acreage. The last house on the outskirts of town. A long dirt driveway leads to the two-lane highway that carries folks into a valley of empty rolling hills.

The land and trees are drizzled with snow. Far from a Norman Rockwell painting, but for adventurous rural kids, it is their playground.

A boy - YOUNG JIMMY (8) - trots with a purpose INTO FRAME. He lugs a fishing pole and tackle box. YOUNG TED (6) enters, slacking behind Jimmy. He hauls a pole and gear, doubles his pace to catch his older brother.

YOUNG JIMMY

Hurry up, Teddy. The ice on the lake will melt away by the time we get there.

YOUNG TED

I am hurrying up, Jimmy. You hurry up, you maroon.

YOUNG JIMMY

It's not "maroon", it's "moron", ya moron. Only Bugs Bunny says it the other way. Did you bring the grubs?

YOUNG TED

Yeah, I brought the grubs. Did you bring the minnows?

YOUNG JIMMY

I brought the minnows. I'm not dumb. Charlie Abney's old man drilled some holes in the ice. I bet the bluegill are biting fast today.

YOUNG TED

Yum.

OFFSCREEN - a SCREAM, an intense rumble of VOICES pulsing behind the 2nd-story window of the house. AMY (17), Jimmy and Ted's father FRANK (40), mother LOIS (40). The peak of a domestic dispute. The boys freeze, turn to the commotion.

FRANK (O.S.)

Get back here, ya little tramp! Now!

AMY (O.S.)

Leave me alone!

LOIS (O.S.)

Frank! Please! You're hurting her!

FRANK (O.S.)

Lois, I told you to shut up and bring me another beer!

OFFSCREEN - A CRASH of hurled glass.

FRANK (O.S.)(CONT.)

Now do it, goddamnit!

YOUNG JIMMY AND YOUNG TED

watch the window, defenseless but not shocked. The episode is horrifyingly familiar.

AMY (O.S.)

Don't talk to mom like that!

FRANK (O.S.)

You! Get the hell over here! What, I'm not good enough for ya? I'll show you what a real man is! Gimme some of that!

AMY (O.S.)

I said get your hands off me!

OFFSCREEN - A loud slap, a piercing SCREAM.

FRANK (O.S.)

Little slut! You're just a tease, aren't you! Hey! Where you goin? You runnin' away again! I'm comin' right behind you!

LOIS (O.S.)

Oh God, Frank. Please stop! Please, she's our daughter!

FRANK (O.S.)

Goddamnit, woman! How many times do I have to tell you to mind your goddamn business!

LOIS (O.S.)

No! No, Frank! No!

OFFSCREEN - A physical struggle. A body crashes into a wall. Lois whelps in pain. A slap. Another slap. A SCREAM.

FRANK (O.S.)

Now look what you done to yourself, Lois! I said keep your fat mouth shut, or I'll shut it for you! She's mine, I'll do whatever the hell I want with her, you understand?

OFFSCREEN - Bodies rustling. A slap. A SCREAM.

FRANK (O.S.)

You like that, Lois? That what you want? Will that shut you up? Huh? Huh? Huh!

OFFSCREEN - slaps, desperate SCREAMS, CRYING, then...

BLAM!

The unmistakable roar of a GUNSHOT.

YOUNG JIMMY AND YOUNG TED

blench; wide eyes, gulps in their throats. For a moment there is a silence, a stillness from the house; everyone processing what the hell just happened.

OFFSCREEN - light SOBBING picks up behind the window, then a blood-curdling SCREAM; Lois is hit by the gruesome scene.

THE FRONT DOOR OF THE HOUSE

swings open. Amy darts out, a .38 revolver in her hand, a messy, hastily packed knapsack on her shoulder. She blitzes toward a pickup truck in the driveway.

YOUNG JIMMY

Amy!

Amy stops, finds Jimmy's voice. She runs to meet her brothers; red welts on her face and blood in her nose.

She is dressed new wave style - bright colors, studded belt, bracelets. Her Echo and the Bunnymen shirt is stretched, torn, mottled with blood - some hers, some her father's. Her tone is reassuring, not wanting to scare the boys.

AMY

Hey, Sweeties. I'm o.k. Your big sis is o.k.

The boys are cautious, still sense that things have gone awfully wrong and will never be the same. Amy stashes the gun in her waistline, kneels before the boys, draws them in to make them feel safe.

YOUNG TED

Where are you going?

Amy braces her emotions for the most difficult talk she will ever have in her short life.

AMY

I have to go.

YOUNG JIMMY

Why?

AMY

Because I have to. I can't stay here anymore.

YOUNG TED

Did you do something to dad?

Amy wants to explain, half-thinks even at their age the boys will understand. But there is no time to explain, no time to look back, no time to cry.

AMY

I might be gone a really long time, but I promise as soon as I can, I'll come visit you again...wherever you might be.

YOUNG JIMMY

Are you going to California to become famous like you always said you would? Are you gonna be in the movies?

AMY

I'll send you a postcard of the ocean.

YOUNG TED

Can you take us with you?

AMY

Oh, sweetheart, I really wish I could, but I can't right now. But someday I'll buy a big mansion on the beach for each of you, okay?

YOUNG JIMMY

What about mom?

AMY

Mom's gonna be just fine, 'cause she'll have the two strongest, smartest, best boys in the whole world looking after her.

YOUNG TED

But you'll be all alone. Who'll take care of you?

AMY

Don't worry, Teddy. Please don't worry, sweetie. I'll be just fine. I'll pick up a friend or two along the way.

YOUNG JIMMY

Please don't go, Amy.

YOUNG TED

Please. We don't want you to leave.

AMY

Shhh. Hey. Remember the poem?

The boys stare at her in silence, sad faces.

AMY (CONT.)

Remember what we think about when something makes us feel scared or sad? Say it with me...

"The way a crow shook down on me, the dust of snow from a hemlock tree..."

YOUNG JIMMY / YOUNG TED / AMY

"has given my heart a change of mood, and saved some part of a day I had rued."

Amy smiles crookedly through tears. The boys sob. The three kids share a long, tight hug before Amy breaks off for one last look into their eyes.

AMY

I love you two so much.

Amy rises, blows kisses, clasps her heart, throws her knapsack on her shoulder, turns away before the boys see the worst of her heartbreak. They watch her run to the truck.

Amy stops short of the driver's side door, pulls the revolver from her waistline, launches it into a thick, twisted patch of snow-blasted shrubbery where it will be well-hidden and - in time - long forgotten.

Amy jumps into the truck. The boys watch her drive down the highway until she is out of sight.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

CU - THE KEYCHAIN PHOTO OF THE GIRL

in Ted's hand. The girl is Amy.

Ted hangs loosely to his reverie, his look still distant.

TED

All those years mom never told anyone but us what really happened. Told the cops and everybody else that dad had one too many and started playing around in his gun cabinet.

JIMMY

It was all supposed to work out. It should have. Amy really hoped that it would. Trusted that it would. Trusted too much.

Jimmy frowns at the dead body.

JIMMY (CONT.)

too many of the wrong people.

Ted snaps back to reality, turns toward Jimmy.

TED

She said she'd find a friend on the way. She deserved a friend, not some lump of shit who lied his way into that truck just to leave her for dead on the roadside.

JIMMY

All's I know is the more assholes like this one that we get rid of, the less chance anybody's ever gonna harm a sweet seventeen-year-old girl again.

Ted nods; good enough.

JIMMY (CONT.)

(gestures to the dead body)  
Cuff key?

TED

Pants pocket.

Jimmy kneels next to the body, retrieves the cuff key.

JIMMY

You give me a hand with this, we'll be  
outta here before the snowstorm hits.  
Whadda ya think?

Ted rubs the keychain photo gently, peers upward past the  
hemlock tips to the imminent storm brewing in the sky.

TED

I think it's gonna be a good day.

FROM A BIRDSEYE VIEW

Ted and Jimmy stand over the dead body, engulfed by the vast,  
empty canyon landscape. No witnesses, no one even on the  
verge of approaching to discover them in the midst of their  
plan. The brothers work together - as they have always done.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END