THE FIRST STEP

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A February OWC Entry

FADE IN:

A MAN'S EYE

EXTREME CLOSEUP. Open wide. The man's skin is drenched in sweat, as he blinks away a fleck of dirt.

Then, the REVERSE ANGLE: staring up at a ceiling, concrete, chipped and battered with either age or lack of care.

SLIGHTLY WIDER on the Man's face as he continues to stare, perplexed, almost shocked. Despite the slight five o'clock shadow, it is still easy to recognize his natural posture and poise. Then again, that might just be the American in him. Either way, in this setting, his usual demeanor is changed, and his confidence is nowhere to be found.

His name is DAVID. And he doesn't know where the hell he is.

Suddenly, out of seemingly nowhere:

VOICE (O.C.) All it is is legalities.

Startled at the sound of this voice, David sits up. And it is only then that we realize:

He is sitting on a bed, inside of a prison cell.

And a small one at that.

A sink and mirror set off to the right, next to a cheap plastic john. Beside that, a bench nestled against the wall. And atop the bench, another MAN, the owner of the Voice.

> MAN That's the only thing keeping you in here. DAVID (re: Man and his surroundings) Jesus... MAN Nah. Just call me Leigh. DAVID Wh-who are you? LEIGH I just told you. DAVID (beginning to panick) No, I mean - what are you doing in here? LEIGH (simply) I'm... talking to you, brother.

Standing up, his mental alarm bells ringing:

DAVID Jesus, can you just give me a straight answer?!

LEIGH

Okay. Number one, for the last time, my name isn't Jesus. And number two, I think the trouble here is, you've been here for so long that you didn't seem to notice the transformation that it went through, brother.

DAVID

Okay. Number one, I'm not your brother. And number two, you didn't answer my question. What are you doing in here? Where is this place?

LEIGH You just added a new question.

DAVID (stern, unwavering) Answer them both!

LEIGH Alright. Well.. (gets up, goes to the sink and mirror) First one first. I'm in here to help you along. (turns faucet)

DAVID What, like read my last rites?

LEIGH Something like that. (whips neck with wash cloth)

DAVID You don't look like a priest.

LEIGH

Nah. I'm more like a... you know, a person who guides you, but also counsels you? You know what I mean?

DAVID (is he serious?) Like a.. <u>guidance counselor</u>? LEIGH (snaps his fingers, "bingo") That's the one. That's me.

DAVID I don't need any counseling.

LEIGH

See? That's the reason I'm here. You don't think you need any assistance, even when you don't seem to recognize your own situation. (checks his teeth, very carelessly and nonchalant)

DAVID

My situation? Alright, 'Leigh,' tell me, what is my situation? You apparently know more about me than you're letting on.

LEIGH

I'm not letting anything on. I'm just wondering whether or not you know how to get out of this thing. Or maybe you do, but you don't want to take the steps necessary to get out, Dave. It's worrisome.

Having hear the stranger speak his name:

DAVID H-How did you know my name?

 $$\ensuremath{\mathsf{LEIGH}}$$ Ah, I know a lot more than that.

Suddenly, an idea hits him, and things begin to make sense:

DAVID (points at Leigh, halfway between fear and fury) You. You put me here.

LEIGH (laughs amusingly, then:) No, Dave. I didn't put you here. You put you here. If anything, I'm here to --

He turns around, only to be greeted with David's forearm to his throat. He's pinned to the wall before he even realizes it.

DAVID (quietly freaking out) Listen. You're gunna stop with this psychological bullshit, and you're going to get me outta here.

LEIGH That's what I'm here to do. Get you outta this thing. But you have to be willing to --(struggles to get comfortable in David's vice grip, as best he can at least) Look, this.. this "thing," what you signed up for, it isn't even the same anymore. It's gotten so far out of your control that you don't even recognize it.

Not letting up, though his curiosity is evident:

DAVID

W-what do you mean?

LEIGH

How you got here, why it happened, you don't remember any of it. Both parties involved have their own agendas now. Forget communication, that shit's thrown to the wind.

DAVID W-what do you mean?

LEIGH

You just asked me that. You ask the same question and expect a different answer? You know what I mean. Both of you do what you please, whenever you please, based on what's best for yourselves. There's no more real words between you two. Hell, you can't even sit across the table from one another anymore. The only way anyone would know to connect you two is by a couple of signatures on a few legal papers. (sniggers) And you wonder how you got in here. That's rich.

David lets go of his cellmate, grasping more now onto his words than onto his throat.

DAVID So, what does that make you, huh? The Righteous Redeemer? LEIGH Once more, stop with the Jesus references.

DAVID (shakes head, worn out physically and emotionally) Right, right. Not a redeemer. Not a priest. Some kind of guidance counseling doctor of-

LEIGH No, no. A doctor would only be necessary if there was still something worth salvaging. I think that's the main issue, Dave: unlike you, I fully recognize that there's no chance of this thing mending itself. You've ever wanted to know what rock bottom looks like, look around ya, cuz I'm pretty sure you're standing in it right now. (hand on Dave's shoulder) Don't you see, Dave? This isn't an attempt at recessitation; this is a straight clean-up job. I'm not a medic, I'm a maid. I'm trying to help you sweep up this mess and move on from it as best you can.

DAVID You seem to think it's so simple.

LEIGH

Well, to put it <u>simply</u>, Dave, I seem to the only one of us that isn't willing to sit around and ignore the big Pink Elephant in the room anymore. And I'm warning you, the damn thing only grows with time. After a while, it can get pretty suffocating. And I don't know about you, brother, but I for one enjoy <u>breathing</u> ever once in a while.

It takes a moment for David to absorb this. Leigh's words have struck something in him. Self revelation? A sense of realization? A coming to terms? We don't know. Not yet anyway.

DAVID So... what now?

5.

LEIGH (sarcastic) Ah, fancy that. I spend the past several minutes explaining that you need to step up on your own, and the first thing you do is ask for me to point you in the right direction. How ironic. DAVID (equally so) You know, for someone who's telling me to stop pondering and start taking action, you sure do talk a lot. LEIGH (grins a bit) Fair enough. (beat) Well look. My advice, since you seem to understand what I'm getting at, is to now, try to get out of this thing. If you don't, you are only prolonging the inevitable. DAVID Well, ya know, I'd love to, pal, but if you haven't noticed (approaches locked cell door) It's sorta locke-(points to lock, then stops) Nestled there, protruding from the lock's cylinder, is a key. DAVID (CONT'D) But how did -LEIGH See? The key to get out of this has been there the whole time. You just haven't used it yet. DAVID (taken aback) Y-you knew the key was there the whole time? LEIGH Yep. DAVID And you didn't tell me? LEIGH I was planning to.

DAVID Ah yeah? And when was that? LEIGH Right about -(looks at wrist as if it were a watch) Now. DAVID (a tad ticked) Well, thanks a lot. LEIGH Are you going to turn the key or not? David considers, places his hand on the key, twists it --Nothing happens. DAVID It's not -LEIGH It takes a little effort. David tries again, twisting a tad harder. Again, nothing. He RATTLES the lock in frustration. DAVID The damn thing won't -LEIGH (getting down to business) Look, Dave. Getting out of this trouble will take some effort. And I need to know that all of my talking and all of my advice has not been for nothing. Because in a few moments, you are going to wake up.

Suddenly, <u>it all makes sense</u> to Dave. By the way his eyes are darting, and his facial expressions are changing, we see he understands what this all means, even if we personally don't.

LEIGH (CONT'D) And when you wake up, an opportunity will arise.. an opportunity to get the hell out of this thing. I need to know you're willing to say the four words.

We have <u>no idea</u> what they are talking about. But the weight of the words seems to hit the mark with both these men.

LEIGH (CONT'D) The four words that have been on your mind, on the tip of your tongue, for so long now. Those four words are the key to starting out of this shitty situation. It's time to stop complaining about what's upstairs before even reaching the staircase. And I think it would be in your best interest to take my word for it: if you don't make the move, neither will she. And if nothing changes, then no good can come of it. I need to know that you'll be willing to take that first step to the end of this god awful thing.

David looks at Leigh, then back at the key, then at the sink, the bed, the mirror...

And without control, he just starts LAUGHING, almost to the point of tears.. It's not a fit of insanity; it's a paroxysm of wonderment.

DAVID So... I guess this was just a dream then. A figment of my imagination. That'll teach me to combine Egg Roll Express and Jack Daniels in the same meal.

LEIGH (chuckling as well) Ah. Now you're confusing self-reflection with food poisoning. I find that a bit insulting, brother.

DAVID Well, last time I checked, <u>I</u> wasn't your guidance counselor.

LEIGH If that was meant to be an apology, then I forgive you.

Both men hold for a moment, both with smiles on their faces... David leans the cell bars.

DAVID This is gotta be someone else's dream. I could never come up with a metaphor like this.

LEIGH No kidding. It's the shit movies are made of.

DAVID (turns back to Leigh) And you.. you're just an epiphany? LEIGH

No. (smiles) I'm a Democrat.

Grinning, a new aura about him, David takes a deep breath, places his hand on the lock, and <u>turns the key</u>.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - EARLY, EARLY MORNING

David wakes up to the sound of a separate key turning, this one coming from his front door.

Moving the Chinese to-go box from his lap to the coffee table, he gets up from the recliner, tosses the empty Scotch bottle into the bin, just as

The front door opens, and in walks David's WIFE, dressed J. Crew, though her ruffled hair goes well with her wrinkled, tucked-in blouse. She sets down her shoulder bag, takes the sunglasses off of her forehead, and checks her cellphone, all before even acknowledging David.

Then again, he really doesn't make much of an effort either, until:

DAVID Well, good morning. WIFE (re: Chinese take-out box) You fall asleep in the recliner again? DAVID Where were you? WIFE Long night at the office. DAVID (checks clock) It's 2 in the morning. WIFE It was a very long night at the office. DAVID (his nerves getting him) What, uh, what took so long? WIFE (shifts into the stern qear) I was at the office. It doesn't matter. Anything else you want? 9.

DAVID Honestly? (here goes) I want a divorce.

Suddenly, time stops.

His wife turns to him, almost as stunned by what he said as he is himself.

For what seems like an eternity, the two just stare at one another, unable to think of any words with which to follow up those four.

Somehow, against all characteristics...

He's taken the first step.

FADE OUT.