

Thistles

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FADE IN:

INT. PSYCHOLOGIST'S OFFICE - DAY - VHS

The office is boring, plain, and cheap. Only a degree and a certificate hang on the bland wall behind SAZHA DAVIDS, 13.

She's handsome, with creamed-coffee skin, a round face, and a pudgy stomach.

SAZHA

-- It was my mom who brought me here. I didn't have much choice in the matter.

Offscreen, someone sucks on hard candy. It scrapes their teeth.

LATER

Sazha's in a slightly different position.

She holds a tiny wooden jewelry box on her lap. A couple school books lay on the chair next to her.

SAZHA

(shrugs)

-- I'll live with it.

LATER

SAZHA

-- I don't regret them. She regrets them. She didn't want me with a white man.

LATER

Sazha shakes her head.

SAZHA

-- No, ma'am. She just said that at the time because she was angry.

LATER

SAZHA

-- Because I'm young.

Offscreen, a pen scratches rhythmically against a sheet of paper.

LATER

SAZHA

-- I've always been good in English. But he made me better. He made it easier to learn.

LATER

Sazha stares at the floor.

SAZHA

-- I think I'm doing okay.

LATER

Sazha jiggles the lock on the jewelry box to assure it's latched.

SAZHA

-- A plumeria box.

LATER

SAZHA

-- Just a nickname for a box to keep things in.

LATER

SAZHA

-- Keepsakes. Mementos.

She shrugs and looks down at the floor.

SAZHA

Anything you want.

END VHS

INT. PSYCHOLOGIST'S OFFICE - DAY

The same cheap white-walled office.

CORA DAVIDS, a mid-40's black woman with hair-weave, sits across from DR. PATTON, a 50's black woman.

A video of Sazha sitting in the office is paused on a TV in the background.

PATTON

She's very well spoken, but shy at the same time. Almost awkward.

CORA

She's always been like that.

Patton puts a piece of hard candy in her mouth and begins sucking on it.

PATTON

That's why it's going to be difficult to tell how she's feeling right now, and whether she's working through this successfully or not.

Cora nods.

PATTON

I can't take her as a patient because you're one of mine already.

Cora looks down at the floor.

PATTON

But during her evaluation, I saw no reason to refer her for any services.

CORA

It's just been her choices that have me worried about her. Not telling me about everything. Carrying that box around all the time. Protecting it.

Patton shrugs.

PATTON

It could be pictures of her brother. Pictures of 'him' even. You have to let her get through this whichever way she wants.

Patton reaches out and lays a hand on Cora's forearm for support.

PATTON

And you do, too. You've been through a tragedy and you admitted yourself you're not handling it well at all. You need to work through it.

Cora nods, but not assuringly.

PATTON

The easier it is for you to get through this, the easier it'll be to help Sazha through.

Cora looks at the TV, which has come unpaused. She watches Sazha tuck the wooden jewelry box snug under an arm.

FADE TO BLACK

FALL

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

It's shabby, drab, tiny, and crowded.

PHILLIP CRANDALL, mid-30's, lectures to a small sea of students, almost all of them black.

Crandall is pale with a receding hairline.

CRANDALL

-- Irregular full verbs differ from regular because the past inflection, or -ed participle inflection, are different.

The students yawn in boredom.

Some blatantly ignore Crandall and converse with the person next to them, or even the person a few desks over.

Crandall, visibly uncomfortable, does nothing to stop it.

He just raises his voice a decibel higher than the commotion.

CRANDALL

Some of these don't have the regular -ed inflection, or they have a variant of it. Burn, for instance.

Crandall turns to the blackboard forever caramelized in chalk dust.

He writes 'b-u-r-n'. Then, under it, 'b-u-r-n-e-d'.

CRANDALL

The -ed inflection of course is burned, which occurs alongside burnt.

Underneath 'burned', Crandall writes 'b-u-r'-

SNAP!

A pop-it smacks off the blackboard, inches from Crandall's hand, and startles him.

He eyes the class, who giggle at the silver fulminate rock and paper lying on the floor.

Balding and underweight, Crandall's not handsome; but he's not unhandsome.

He finishes the 'n-t' after 'b-u-r' on the blackboard.

CRANDALL

Irregular verbs typically have variation with their base vowel. Choose, chose, chosen. Write, wrote, writt-

ANTWAN

Why ain't we just reading?

ANTWAN sits in the middle of the class.

CRANDALL

What do you mean?

ANTWAN

Why ain't we just reading? Last year in English Miss Patty just made us read the whole time. It was still boring, but better than this.

Antwan gets a few nods and agreements on his side. Most, however, don't care.

Sazha sits up front, taking diligent notes.

CRANDALL

That was sixth grade Literature last year, and Mrs. Balantine had you read 'Penina Levine is a Potato Pancake'. This is seventh grade English. Your stories for Literature next quarter are harder and you need to learn the rules to understand the books.

He flips to the next page in the textbook.

CRANDALL

Now, since the -s and the -ing form are predictable for both regular and irregular verbs, the only forms you'll need to memorize for-

SNAP!

This one cracks high off Crandall's forehead and he jumps.

CRANDALL

Please!

The class breaks into hysterics, except for Sazha. She lowers her head, embarrassed for him.

STUDENT

His bald spot actually made it snap!

Crandall waits for the class to quiet, then reads word-for-word from the text again.

The faces continue to chatter and Crandall tries to keep his voice louder than theirs.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Empty.

Crandall slumps over his desk. He stares at a pile of papers in front of him.

A paper bag lunch sits next to him. There's a sandwich taken out, but no bites missing.

SAZHA

Mr. Crandall?

Crandall looks to the sudden visitor in the doorway.

CRANDALL

Sazha. Hi. What can I help you with?

She's polite and soft spoken.

SAZHA

I was wondering if I might be able to get some extra help.

Crandall gives a small giggle.

CRANDALL

You're doing fine, Sazha. You're the last person in class who needs any help.

SAZHA

It's just- I know the rest of them are holding me back. I've already been skipping ahead on my own and I'm having trouble with the temporal since clauses.

Crandall swallows and think for a couple of seconds.

CRANDALL

Have you talked to Mr. Clyde or Mrs. Griffin about skipping ahead a grade? Maybe up to a level you'll be par on?

SAZHA

That's the thing. I don't do so good in some of my other classes. At least not enough to be able and skip a year.

He nods.

CRANDALL

Well, I'll tell you what. Stop by the class after seventh period and I can give you a hand with them.

Sazha bites her lower lip.

SAZHA

If you don't mind, Mr. Crandall, I kinda don't want to do it here. If my friends see me- I just don't want them to think I'm above it or anything. They already tease me about how good my grade is.

CRANDALL

Well, there's really not anywhere else we'd be able to-

SAZHA

I saw that you live in the next building over from me and my mom and brother.

She gestures outside the windows.

SAZHA

My friends and I watch them play ball after school where you park your car. When I see you leave here, I can go meet you at your place.

CRANDALL

I don't know about that, Sazha.

SAZHA

It'll actually work out better for me. That way, I can stop and tell my mom I'm getting some extra help and where I'll be.

Crandall takes a deep breath and considers.

CRANDALL

All right. I'll probably be leaving here around four.

SAZHA

I'll watch for you, Mr. Crandall.

She smiles and walks out.

CRANDALL

Sazha?

She stops and turns back to him.

CRANDALL

I live in apartment 4-C.

SAZHA

I know.

Crandall watches her leave, perplexed.

EXT. PLAYGROUND COURT - DAY

Sazha straddles one side of a picnic bench while two of her classmates, ROBERTA GRIFFIN and TAMIKA HOWELL, sit across.

They watch the boys play basketball while Tamika braids Roberta's hair into tight cornrows.

TAMIKA

You think Rodney's got good looks?

ROBERTA

Yeah, he's got some looks.
He ain't got no game, but he got looks.

On the court, a tall RODNEY drives to the basket, but gets the ball ripped away from him in the process.

TAMIKA

I don't know about basketball, but I know at least one of the fingers on his right hand got some game.

Sazha and Roberta laugh loud.

Tamika waits until Roberta stops spasming from the laugh before she can finish a row of corn.

ROBERTA

How about you? He find out if your mouth got any game yet?

TAMIKA

He ain't gonna find that out for awhile. He's going to have to be happy with my hand for right now.

ROBERTA

I know who got better looks than Rodney, though.

SAZHA

You better not even say it, Berta.

TAMIKA

Who?

ROBERTA

Turrell.

Sazha can't help but laugh. She playfully reaches over and shoves Berta.

SAZHA

I knew you was going to go there!

ROBERTA

Ain't my fault your brother's the shit.

TAMIKA

Hecks yeah. If he'd lose some of those thugs he chill with, he'd be Youngstown's Taye Diggs.

ROBERTA

Huh-uh, girl. We already have our Taye Diggs.

TAMIKA

Who that?

ROBERTA

Two words... Mr. Bobby, that science substitute we had.

TAMIKA

I give it. You're right.

Even Sazha nods her head at that.

ROBERTA

That man is going to be the reason I become one of them biochemical scientist doctors is because of his class.

TAMIKA

Mr. Bobby only needs five minutes alone with me to find out my mouth has game.

Another fit of laughter.

Sazha keeps a constant eye on the entrance of the junior high across the street.

SAZHA

I think Mr. Bobby and Miss Kim are seeing each other.

TAMIKA

Why you say that?

SAZHA

Last week my mom was off and we saw them at dinner together.

ROBERTA

They was?

Sazha nods. They think about it in silence.

TAMIKA

I always thought she was kind of a bitch.

ROBERTA

You said she was your favorite teacher!

TAMIKA

Not now!

Sazha watches Crandall walk out the small school and cross the street.

He walks down the sidewalk towards his car.

SAZHA

What do you think of Mr. Crandall?

Tamika and Roberta look at each other, then burst.

Sazha joins them in the laugh, but half-hearted.

Tamika and Berta notice and pipe down.

TAMIKA

He's all right for a white man, I guess.

ROBERTA

He's a little old.

TAMIKA

And bald.

Sazha watches Crandall as a shabby BLACK MAN with an unkempt afro asks him something MOS.

Crandall shakes his head and answers awkwardly in the negative.

He fumbles the keys into the door of his Volvo.

TAMIKA

He's too quiet.

The beggar continues to press Crandall for change.

Crandall continues to shake his head and hurries to get in his car.

ROBERTA

My mom was who did his interview
over the summer. She said
something bad happened to him.
That's why he's so sad all the
time.

The black man finally gives up on Crandall and leaves him.

SAZHA

I think he's cute.

Tamika and Roberta look at her.

In the car, Crandall wipes nervous sweat from his face and
sulks, depressed.

Sazha watches him.

EXT. PLANNED PARENTHOOD - DAY

Protestors crowd the sidewalk, holding various signs:

'Diapers are disposable, babies are not!'

'Vacuuming your conscience isn't as easy, is it?'

'Death Roe Survivor!'

PROTESTORS

(chant)

Real doctors don't kill babies!

Real doctors don't kill babies!...

A security guard outside the clinic's foyer keeps a close
eye on them all.

Cora, donning a transit bus driver's uniform, stands among
them, holding her sign proud:

'Planned Herodhood - Satan's Little Helpers!'

Sazha walks down the sidewalk towards her mother.

SAZHA

Hi mom.

Cora has to stop chanting to reply.

CORA

What are you doing here, baby?

SAZHA

I just wanted to tell you I'll be
home a little later tonight.

Cora continues to thrust her sign at any on-coming traffic.

She also keeps her eyes peeled for any cars that might pull into Planned Parenthood's parking lot.

CORA

How much later? It's starting to get dark already.

SAZHA

Just a little bit. I'm getting some extra help in English.

CORA

English? Why English?

SAZHA

Mr. Crandall's letting me jump ahead and he's helping me with some of the advanced stuff.

Cora barely looks at her. Instead, she makes sure the drivers-by read her sign.

CORA

I'm working the nightline tonight, so I won't be home til after midnight. Make a frozen dinner and make sure you go to bed early.

SAZHA

I will.

Sazha hurries off.

A car pulls into the parking lot and the protestors surround it, thrusting their signs at the car's windows.

They change their chant.

PROTESTORS

Don't be a murderer! Don't be a murderer!...

An embarrassed WOMAN sits in the passenger's seat of the car, hiding her face.

EXT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT BUILDING - EVENING

Downtown, Sazha walks a semi-crowded sidewalk surrounded by tall ten story buildings.

She approaches one.

TURRELL

Sazha!

She sees TURRELL, 18, walk out of the next building over.

SAZHA

What?

He jogs over. He's tall, athletic, and muscular. He could probably take Taye Diggs.

He eyes her up and down.

TURRELL

Where're you goin'?

SAZHA

I'm getting some extra help in one of my classes.

TURRELL

You still been saving that money moms has been giving you for lunch?

SAZHA

Come on, Turrell! You know I've been saving that!

TURRELL

I just need a Philly for tonight, that's all.

Sazha, reluctant and angry, digs two ones out of her pocket and hands it over.

SAZHA

No more now. I'm serious. Or I ain't going to put your name on the present.

TURRELL

A'ight, a'ight. I hear you.

He hurries off. She walks into the building's foyer.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Drab, tiny, and crowded. Not shabby, though.

Crandall keeps it clean, just dull and cheerless.

He and Sazha sit across from each other at a tiny table, his nose in a book. She stares at him.

CRANDALL

'He's been getting bad headaches since he has joined the army' entails that he's still in the army, while 'He's been getting bad headaches since he joined the army' leaves it open as to whether or not he's still in the army. Based from

CRANDALL
that perspective, since clauses can
or can't have verbs in the perfect.

SAZHA
I see it now.

CRANDALL
Want to take a break?

She nods.

CRANDALL
Another glass of milk?

SAZHA
Yes, please.

CRANDALL
Sorry I don't have any pop.

He walks into the kitchen.

Sazha looks around at the bookshelves in the apartment,
filled with miscellaneous books and spiral notebooks.

A moment later, Crandall returns. Milk for her and water
for him.

SAZHA
You live here alone, Mr. Crandall?

CRANDALL
Yep. Just me.

SAZHA
If you're so alone at home, why do
you make yourself so alone at
school?

CRANDALL
What do you mean?

SAZHA
Why do you eat lunch by yourself
and not with the other teachers?

CRANDALL
What are you here for, english or
psychology?

Sazha laughs.

SAZHA
English.

He smiles at her.

SAZHA

I'm just sayin', Mr. Crandall.
The kids, especially the older
ones, don't give you a lot of
respect because they think you're a
pushover. They think you're easy.

Crandall gestures to her book.

CRANDALL

Come on, let's go. Back to
pro-forms.

SAZHA

Can I use the bathroom first?

Crandall chuckles.

CRANDALL

Yeah. It's through the bedroom and
to the left.

SAZHA

Thank you.

She stands, walks through the bedroom and into the bathroom.
She closes the door behind her.

Crandall laughs to himself and reads through his book.

After several moments, the door opens and Sazha quietly
steps up behind Crandall, nude, and presses her crotch
against his elbow.

SAZHA

I don't want you to be alone
anymore, Mr. Crandall.

The tufts of unkempt pubic hair against his arm startle him
and Crandall quickly backs out of his chair.

CRANDALL

Sazha! What are you doing?

She steps towards him.

SAZHA

I want to be with you.

She backs him against the wall.

He still denies her, but is scared to use any physical force
to push her away.

She presses her lips against his, but he doesn't kiss back.

He finally manages to turn his head from her.

CRANDALL
Sazha, I can't. You're only
twelve-

SAZHA
Thirteen.

CRANDALL
It's illegal.

SAZHA
Not if I want it to happen.

She still tries to kiss him.

He has to grab her by the wrists to keep her from groping at
his crotch.

CRANDALL
I'm more than twenty years older
than you, Sazha. It's still
illegal.

SAZHA
I thought you wanted me. You said
that I was beautiful.

It dawns on Crandall and he looks at her.

CRANDALL
Did you read my notebook?

She nods and continues to press her bare body against him.

SAZHA
I like you, too.

CRANDALL
Sazha, that's not how I meant it.

Crandall has to shove her to keep her from grinding her
crotch against him.

Not hard. Just enough so she knows that he means no.

She looks at him.

Naked and embarrassed, she sobs and runs back into the
bedroom.

CRANDALL
Sazha-

She slams the door behind her.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sitting on his bed, Turrell rolls herbs into his philly and opens the window to smoke.

He glances to the next building over and sees Sazha in Crandall's bedroom.

She's naked and wiping tears away from her cheeks with a towel.

Turrell's face grows with fury.

Across the way, Sazha puts her pants back on.

EXT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - LATER

Crandall sits at the table.

He turns when he hears Sazha come out of the bedroom, fully clothed this time.

CRANDALL

Are you okay?

She collects her books at the table, embarrassed.

SAZHA

I'll leave.

CRANDALL

Sazha-

She stops.

CRANDALL

You are beautiful. But, that's not how I meant the note to be taken. It wasn't even really a note.

Crandall has to think of the words.

CRANDALL

You have great vocabulary skills, and you're doing tremendous in English. You have it in you to be a great writer.

Sazha gives him an awkward look.

CRANDALL

The extra help will benefit you. You're exactly right what you said earlier, about the class holding you back. You should be on an accelerated English program.

SAZHA

After what just happened- I don't even want to go to your class anymore. I'd be too embarrassed.

CRANDALL

Then let's forget it, it's behind us. We'll never look back. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. I won't tell a soul.

SAZHA

I don't know.

CRANDALL

Well, there is a little something to be embarrassed about.

SAZHA

What?

CRANDALL

You just tried seducing the ugliest teacher in school.

Sazha laughs. The ice between them breaks a little.

SAZHA

You're not ugly, Mr. Crandall.

Crandall smiles and shakes his head at her.

CRANDALL

Trust me, I know I'm not that high on the totem pole of good looks.

SAZHA

Neither am I.

Crandall shoots her a 'stop that' look.

CRANDALL

So, are we still on for after-school help? In the classroom, though?

She wipes a tear away.

SAZHA

Yeah.

Sazha stares at a picture on a shelf. A younger, happier, muscular Crandall posing with a young woman and child.

SAZHA

Who's that?

CRANDALL

My wife. And son.

SAZHA
Where are they?

CRANDALL
They passed away. In a car
accident.

She looks at the picture closer.

SAZHA
Were you high school sweethearts?

CRANDALL
No. College. We did a thesis
together.

SAZHA
You've been sad since they've
passed.

Crandall nods.

SAZHA
It shows.

Crandall looks at her.

SAZHA
Do you hate them?

CRANDALL
My family? No. It's not their
fault-

SAZHA
I mean the kids at school.

She looks high on his forehead for a mark from the pop-it.

SAZHA
Do you hate them for what they do
to you?

CRANDALL
No. Absolutely not. I was a
student before. I know how cruel
kids can be.

SAZHA
You should stick up for yourself.
I'd hate them if they treated me
mean.

Crandall walks over to a shelf and pulls out a thin book.

SAZHA
I mean, I know I'm ignored by a lot
of them, but they've never treated
me mean.

CRANDALL

You ever hear of José Martí?

She shakes her head. He opens the book and points out a passage to her.

CRANDALL

I came across this years ago.
It's helped me realize things about
myself when I needed it.

Sazha's eyes follow the passage.

SAZHA

I grow a white rose in January the
same as in July for the sincere
friend who offers me his helping
hand.

CRANDALL

(from memory)

- And for the cruel one who tears
me away from the dreams for which I
live, I grow neither weeds nor
thistles... I grow the white rose.

Sazha digests it.

SAZHA

It's beautiful.

CRANDALL

Do you understand it?

SAZHA

I think so. Treat everybody the
same?

CRANDALL

Conflict and differences shouldn't
base anyone's opinions on how they
feel about someone else. You
should look at everyone with the
same eyes, through the same
rose-colored glasses.

SAZHA

You should look at yourself with
those same rose-colored glasses.

This stops Crandall and he thinks about it.

SAZHA

Just don't let them walk all over
you. All you need to do is connect
with them.

Crandall nods.

Sazha notices a jewelry box on a shelf.

SAZHA

Was that your wife's?

CRANDALL

Yeah. Her plumeria box.

SAZHA

Plumeria box?

Crandall wipes dust off it.

CRANDALL

She always kept it on her dresser with the same plumeria-scented perfume bottle on top of it. She never used the perfume. Ever.

He smiles, thinking back.

CRANDALL

I don't know if she hated the perfume, that's why she never used it, or if it was special to her.

Crandall swallows.

CRANDALL

So after about three years, I just started referring to it as her plumeria box, and the name's stuck with me since.

Sazha nods.

CRANDALL

She hardly ever kept jewelry in there, though. Just pictures she kept close. Ticket stubs from movies or shows we went to. She did keep a locket I got her in there.

SAZHA

All that stuff still in there?

CRANDALL

(nods)

I added a couple things here and there.

SAZHA

I think it's really sweet.

Awkward silence.

SAZHA

It's getting late, huh? I should probably go eat before my mom comes home.

CRANDALL

She's not home?

SAZHA

Working. Don't worry. I told her where I was going to be.

Sazha gathers up her books.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - NIGHT

Almost closing time. Crandall makes it just inside the doors before a LIBRARIAN can lock it.

He walks immediately to the urban section up front.

INT. DAVIDS' LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Clean and tidy. Sazha walks in and gently closes the door behind her.

She turns around and Turrell slaps her. Hard.

TURRELL

The hell you think you're doing?

Sazha grabs her cheek.

SAZHA

Ow! What the hell, Turrell?

TURRELL

The fuck you think you're doin' with that white man?

SAZHA

What are you talking about?

Turrell throws her into his --

BEDROOM

-- and she lands on his bed.

TURRELL

I seen you with him, Sazha.

He points out the window and she looks.

Crandall's bedroom and adjacent bathroom window can be seen across the way.

SAZHA
You were watching me?

TURRELL
I saw you wiping his come off your
face.

SAZHA
Turrell, you don't know what you
saw.

He slaps her harder.

TURRELL
How you gonna go do that with a
grown man?

She pushes him away.

SAZHA
Leave me alone! It's not what you
think!

TURRELL
I'm going to tell mom about this.

She looks at him, angry.

SAZHA
You do and I'll tell her what
you've been doing. Just mind your
own business!

She pushes him out of the doorway and leaves. He watches
her go, shaking his head.

He looks out his window again to Crandall's empty bedroom.

EXT. STREET CORNER - NIGHT

With a library book and a notebook in hand, Crandall waits
patiently.

Finally, a city bus pulls up and stops. Crandall waits for
the door to open and he gets on.

INT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

Crandall nods at the bus driver, Cora.

CORA
(warm)
How you doin' tonight?

CRANDALL
Good, thank you. Jerry not on this
route tonight?

CORA

He's on vacation for the week.
I'm filling in for a couple days.

Crandall nods and takes his seat. He opens his notebook to a blank page and begins writing.

CORA

You goin' all the way downtown?

Crandall has to stop writing.

CRANDALL

No. I'll be getting off at Friar Hall.

Cora looks at him through the rear-view mirror.

CORA

Oh.

Crandall's gone back to writing in his notebook again.

INT. FRIAR HALL - A.A. MEETING - NIGHT

Twenty or so people sit at different tables, listening.

Sitting next to Crandall, DERRICK CLYDE, 50's, speaks.

CLYDE

It was when I stopped living in the problem and began living in the answer, that the problem went away. And acceptance is the answer to all of my problems. When I'm disturbed or bothered by something, I can't find any serenity until I accept that something as being exactly the way it's supposed to be. Nothing happens in God's world by mistake.

A lot of people nod their heads. Crandall just listens, jotting occasionally in his notebook.

CLYDE

Until I accepted being an alcoholic, I couldn't stay sober. Unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I can't concentrate on what needs changed in the world. I have to concentrate on what needs changed in me and my attitudes.

More nods and ad libs of approval.

CLYDE

And with that I pass.

GROUP
Thank you, Derrick./Thanks,
Derrick.

Everybody's attention turns to Crandall. He clears his throat.

CRANDALL
My name's Phillip, and I'm an alcoholic.

GROUP
Hello, Phillip./Hi, Phil./Welcome,
Phillip.

CRANDALL
I want to thank everybody, for sharing...

Crandall thinks for an awkward moment.

CRANDALL
But I just kind of want to listen today.

GROUP
Thank you, Phillip./Thanks,
Phillip.

Crandall lowers his head and the next person begins.

EXT. FRIAR HALL - LATER

Crandall chases Clyde out the door.

CRANDALL
Mr. Clyde?

Clyde; black, friendly, and respectable; stops and turns around.

CLYDE
Phillip? How are you?

CRANDALL
I'm good. I was wondering if I could speak with you for a moment.

Clyde notices the library book in Crandall's hand.

CLYDE
Yeah? What can I do for you?

CRANDALL
Actually, it's about the kids.

He shrugs and gives a small smile.

CRANDALL

And a little bit of what you said
about living in the answer.

CLYDE

O-kay.

CRANDALL

You know the children are well
below the average for the
curriculum.

CLYDE

Yes, I do know. Miss Griffin and
myself are currently putting
together an accelerated Summer
program. We just have to figure
out how to squeeze it in under
budget.

CRANDALL

And that is a fantastic idea.
But the students are well beyond
lost in my classes, and they have
no chance whatsoever to grasp any
of the scholastic reading material
the board asked us to assign.

Clyde smiles and looks again to the book in Crandall's hand.

FADE TO:

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - MORNING

Cora finishes cooking while Sazha and Turrell just pick.

CORA

You's are quiet today. Everything
all right?

Sazha shrugs. Turrell plays with his food.

SAZHA

Just tired, I guess

CORA

There's another girl scheduled
today, so I'll be there this
afternoon. Then I have to work the
nightline again tonight. There'll
be pasta sauce warmed in the crock
pot, just boil some noodles for it.

She looks at Sazha specifically.

CORA

You going to be getting help again
after school today?

Sazha eyes Turrell, who just stares back.

SAZHA

Yeah.

CORA

All right. Make sure you're home
before dark.

Cora stands and grabs her purse.

CORA

There's money on the counter for
lunch, baby. I love you guys.

She walks out the door.

Sazha immediately stands and grabs her bookbag before
Turrell even has a chance to speak.

She grabs the fistful of ones off the counter and leaves.

After Sazha's gone, Turrell picks up the phone and dials.

TURRELL

(into the phone)

'Sup, cuddy? ... Hey man I need you
to do me a solid.

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

The kids talk loud, except for Sazha. She sits with her
book open and ready to go.

Crandall walks in and the kids keep talking just as loud.

CRANDALL

Quiet down, guys.

They continue.

CRANDALL

(firmer)

Quiet, please.

The students don't even acknowledge him.

CRANDALL

QUIET!

It startles the kids and they stop, except for JUWUAN who
continues to talk to the girl in front of him.

She realizes Crandall means business and tries to ignore
Juwuan.

Crandall walks to the back of the classroom and drags Juwuan's desk, with Juwuan still in it, against the back wall, away from the other students.

As Crandall walks back to the front of the class, Juwuan scoots his desk back up to where it was and Crandall turns sharply.

CRANDALL

Move that desk another inch and you'll be explaining to Mr. Clyde why you're hitting teachers in the head with pop-its. I'm sure your grandmother would love it if you get suspended a second time this month.

Juwuan stops scooting and stays quiet.

Before Crandall turns back around, he sees Roberta's cornrows and smiles.

CRANDALL

I like your hair.

Berta blushes, and Tamika, the next desk over, smiles.

ROBERTA

Thank you.

Crandall takes the front of the class again.

CRANDALL

I apologize for being a little late, but I was having a conversation with Mr. Clyde and Mrs. Griffin this morning.

ANTWAN

About what?

CRANDALL

You guys.

TAMIKA

What about us?

CRANDALL

Your reading level. I don't think you're ready for 'Mice and Men' yet. I'm going to have you read something else.

ANTWAN

Penina Levine?

Crandall smiles.

CRANDALL

No, not Penina Levine. It'll still be a challenging story, but I think you'll find more interest in this one.

Crandall holds the book up.

ROBERTA

'Standing Against the Wind'?
My mom's been reading that book.
I told her I wanted to read it
after her.

CRANDALL

Mrs. Griffin's the one who
ultimately talked Mr. Clyde into
putting it into the curriculum.

TAMIKA

What's it about?

ROBERTA

A girl our age moves with her
mother to a hood in Chicago.

ANTWAN

We'll be reading that?

CRANDALL

That depends.

TAMIKA

On what?

CRANDALL

Your performances for the rest of
the semester. Like I said, it's
still going to be a challenging
story and there's still some simple
sentence structure you guys have to
learn.

Crandall looks at them, a little more confident now.

CRANDALL

Mr. Clyde and I really want to see
you guys start making the efforts
to get your grades up.

Sazha smiles at him as he opens up his text book.

CRANDALL

Now, seriously, non-jokingly, who
can confidently, actually give me
an example of an adverb?

Sazha raises her hand. No one else does.

But they do all open their book to look for the answer.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Turrell walks down a ghetto neighborhood, past \$500 cars with \$2,400 paint jobs parked in the street.

He walks up a driveway and onto a porch where a twenty-something THUG sits, smoking a camel.

They talk MOS and the thug discreetly hands Turrell a small revolver.

Turrell shoves it into his shorts and gives him dab back.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Crandall grades papers. Sazha knocks and he looks up.

CRANDALL

So, how'd I do today?

SAZHA

Better, Mr. Crandall. I still noticed a little bit of nerves, but you'll get there.

CRANDALL

Well, you know, this opening up thing takes some time.

SAZHA

I'm kind of mad I read 'Of Mice and Men' for nothing now, but I'll get over it.

CRANDALL

Did you like it?

SAZHA

Yeah, I did. A lot. It was sad.

CRANDALL

Then it wasn't for nothing.

Sazha smiles.

CRANDALL

I did want to talk to you about something, though. Mrs. Griffin and I have to see what we can do about ordering copies of the book for the class after school. I'm not too sure how long that'll take.

SAZHA

Okay.

CRANDALL

If you'd still like the help, you can come over to my place when I get home, as long as-

SAZHA

I know. Nothin' funny. I'm sorry about that, Mr. Crandall.

CRANDALL

It's done with. There's nothing to be sorry for.

Sazha nods. Crandall stands and grabs his brown bag lunch.

CRANDALL

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go figure out where teacher's lounge is.

Sazha laughs.

EXT. CRANDALL'S BUILDING - DAY

Turrell walks into the foyer. He tries his best to conceal something in his shorts.

INT. BUILDING HALLWAY

Turrell takes out his ID card and slips it into the door jamb of 4C.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Turrell walks in and closes the door behind him.

He makes sure the revolver's loaded and opens up a closet door.

He pushes a few old jackets out of the way, including a woman's and a young child's coat.

He tucks himself inside and closes the closet behind him.

EXT. PLAYGROUND COURT - DAY

Sazha, Roberta, and Tamika sit at the bench again, watching the boys play.

TAMIKA

That was cool of Mr. Crandall, though, to give us a book like that. I didn't want to read about mouses anyway.

SAZHA

It's not about mice. It's about a hard-working man who takes care of a friend that's retarded.

ROBERTA

You read it already?

SAZHA

I liked it.

TAMIKA

Straight up, though, how come we call Mr. Bobby Mr. Bobby and Miss Kim Miss Kim, but we don't call Mr. Crandall by his first name?

ROBERTA

Because we don't know his first name?

SAZHA

Phillip.

TAMIKA

Mr. Phillip. Sounds better than Mr. Crandall.

ROBERTA

How you find that out?

SAZHA

I heard another teacher call him it before.

TAMIKA

I never seen another teacher talk to him.

ROBERTA

Even my mom calls him Mr. Crandall.

Crandall walks out the school doors and to his car.

TAMIKA

Is it me, or was he happy today?

SAZHA

He was happier.

ROBERTA

I wonder why.

Sazha shrugs and smiles.

Before Crandall gets into his Volvo, he waves at the girls. They wave back.

SAZHA

I got to go now.

Sazha grabs her book bag. Berta and Tamika watch her walk away.

Sazha is happy, too.

EXT. CRANDALL'S BUILDING - DAY

Sprinkling. Thunder roars from the clouds in the distance.

Sazha approaches the building.

She thinks nothing of the commotion in the foyer and walks towards the elevator.

INT. BUILDING HALLWAY

Sazha steps off the elevator and notices a small crowd huddled around apartment 4C.

She hurries and pushes her way through the tiny pack of people trying to look in the apartment.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

People look in from the doorway, disgusted.

Crandall paces back and forth by the dining table, talking on the phone.

CRANDALL

-- He just jumped out of my closet, screaming and threatening to shoot. I couldn't understand anything else he was saying...

Turrell lies on the floor, his forehead disintegrated.

Blood and brown juice seep out and puddle around his sharded skull.

CRANDALL

... I was able to grab the gun and we struggled. Then the gun went off ... Yes, I do have a gun here, but I couldn't get to it. It was his that discharged...

Sirens blare outside the window below.

CRANDALL

... I hear them now ... All right.

Sazha shoves her way through the people at Crandall's doorway.

She sees Crandall alive and relief flashes across her face.
Then she sees the body on the ground.

SAZHA
Turrell?

She rushes to the lifeless body.

SAZHA
What'd you do?

She hugs him, despite the sticky mess. She speaks softly.

SAZHA
What'd you do, Turrell?

Crandall can only watch her hug the corpse.

She gives Crandall an evil glare.

SAZHA
What'd you shoot him for?

Sazha loses it. She stands and slaps at Crandall's face.

SAZHA
What'd you go kill him for?

CRANDALL
Sazha! Stop!

He doesn't protect himself from Sazha's blows.

The tiny crowd gathered around Crandall's door just watches.

Two POLICE OFFICERS make their way into the apartment and pry Sazha off Crandall.

OFFICER #1
Settle down.

She still slaps at Crandall.

OFFICER #1
Settle down!

Officer #2 looks at Turrell's disintegrated forehead, then back to Sazha trying to get out of #1's grasp.

OFFICER #2
Who's she?

CRANDALL
She's a student where I teach at.

OFFICER #1
What's she doing here?

CRANDALL

She lives nextdoor. She knows him.

OFFICER #2

How?

CRANDALL

I don't know. After she saw him,
she just started hitting me.

#2 looks at Sazha and points to the body on the floor.

OFFICER #2

Do you know who that is?

Sazha takes a moment and settles. A little.

Finally, she nods.

OFFICER #2

Who is he?

SAZHA

He's my brother.

Crandall takes a deep, disgusted breath and shakes his head.

Sad, he looks at the body laying on the ground.

The officers just look at each other.

EXT. PLANNED PARENTHOOD - EVENING - LONGSHOT

Thunderstorming.

The protestors thrust their signs at passing cars through
the rain.

Cora is the loudest and angriest of the picketers, as they
all dare one of the cars to pull into the parking lot.

The two police officers approach and it takes a moment for
Cora to realize they want to talk with her.

She finally walks off to the side with them and they speak
MOS.

She breaks down, falls to her knees, and flails her arms
through the rain.

She claws at the wet sidewalk with her fingers.

The officers give her a moment of mourning before they help
her to her feet and walk her back to their cruiser, trying
to cover her head from the rain.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Crandall sits at his dining table, his head in his hands.

Turrell's body's been removed, but the puddle where his head was remains.

Crandall stares at it. He stands and goes to the kitchen.

He comes back with a mop and bucket filled with hot water.

With the mop, he splashes some water onto the brown puddle to break it down a bit.

He quickly stops and takes a deep breath.

He puts the mop down and grabs his keys off the dining table.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - EVENING

Crandall sets down two bottles of cheap vodka in front of GERALD SMITHERS, late-60's with a granite voice, behind the counter.

SMITHERS

Fifteen-ninety.

Ashamed and reluctant, Crandall hands the money over.

The old man notices Crandall's awkwardness.

He bags the bottles and Crandall takes them. Crandall nods a quiet thank you before he leaves.

Smithers watches him go.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha and Cora sit on the floor, crying.

Cora stands and opens Turrell's closet door. She stares at his clothes.

She reaches out and grabs an empty sleeve of one of his shirts.

She breaks down.

She reaches out and pulls all of his clothes together and hugs them tight, trying to breathe him in.

Sazha watches her in tears.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Crandall sops up the rest of the blood and bits of brain into the mop.

The drying blood just smears at first, but begins to break apart with the water.

Crandall drinks straight from one of the bottles of vodka on the dining table.

He continues to sop up the puddle.

After a few swipes of a dry mop, Crandall pauses and bends down. He picks up a fragment of bone and examines it.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Turrell's burial service is massive.

Almost the whole school's there; students, teachers, and administration. All but Crandall.

A lot of Turrell's older friends are there, high-schoolers and thugs alike.

A minister leads everybody in prayer as Sazha holds and comforts her crying mother.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - DAY

Crandall eats dry toast. He washes it down with a gulp of rum now.

The empty vodka bottles sit haphazard on the table.

He cringes at the taste, but shakes it off. He puts down his toast and just stares straight ahead.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sazha cleans out Turrell's bedroom by herself.

Most of the clothes are taken off their hangers and folded on the bed.

In the corner of the closet, Sazha discovers a loose piece of wood covering a small cubby hole.

She pulls the wood out and reaches her hand in.

A bag of herb, a rock, a clear pipe, a bowl, and pictures.

Sazha looks closer at the pictures.

They're of her family when her father was still alive and Sazha was very young.

Most of the pictures are of a much younger Turrell and his father, and of Sazha as a baby.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

A substitute, MR. BOBBY, fills in for Crandall. He reads from a textbook, explaining along the way to the kids.

Sazha's desk is empty.

INT. FRIAR HALL - A.A. MEETING - DAY

Clyde listens to the person speaking. He looks over at the vacant seat next to him.

Crandall's usual spot.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - DAY

Crandall's passed out on the couch, a half-bottle of rum on the floor next to him.

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - DAY

Cora sits, sad.

Sazha approaches from behind and sets the pictures in front of her mother.

Cora just glances at them.

CORA

Where you get these from?

SAZHA

Turrell's closet.

Cora fingers through them slowly. Sazha sits down across from her. Cora lays the pictures back down.

CORA

I was so mad at him when he stole those. He said he tore 'em up and threw 'em out.

SAZHA

Why'd he take them?

Cora starts crying again.

CORA

He was so mad at your dad for dying. He became so angry after that. Every time I punished him, he just rebelled worse and worse. He was mad cause I wouldn't let him

CORA
go over a friend's house. That's
when he took them.

She wipes away the tears.

CORA
And he's stayed mad since then.
Right up to the very end.

Sazha takes a deep breath.

SAZHA
Turrell was...

Sazha can't finish. Cora looks at her.

CORA
Do you know why he went over to
that man's apartment?

Sazha shakes her head.

SAZHA
No.

Cora stands and tosses the pictures in front of Sazha.

CORA
Burn 'em.

Cora picks up her purse and a picket sign and walks out the apartment.

Sazha picks up the pictures and looks at them. Nostalgic.

EXT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Crandall lies on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

The phone rings and startles him up.

He takes a swig of the rum that's left on the floor and walks to the phone. He picks it up, tired.

CRANDALL
Hello?

Through the receiver, an angry voice spews out obscenities and threats.

Crandall hangs the phone up. He shakes his head.

After a moment, the phone rings again and Crandall pulls the plug out the wall.

He walks back to the couch and throws himself down.

He takes another swig of the nearly empty bottle of rum and closes his eyes.

FADE TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

Mr. Bobby still stands in for Crandall.

Crandall walks in, tired, and stops when he sees the substitute's still there.

CRANDALL

I'm sorry. I thought I was supposed to come back today?

MR. BOBBY

Mr. Clyde's been trying to reach you. I think he wants a word with you.

Crandall nods.

He looks at the class and sees that Sazha's desk is empty.

The rest of the students look at him with disdain. Juwuan levels his chin at him.

INT. CLYDE'S OFFICE - DAY

Derrick Clyde and MRS. GRIFFIN, a 40's black woman, talk.

Crandall steps in the doorway and knocks.

Clyde and Griffin, with genuine concern, stand to greet him.

CLYDE

Phillip. I'm glad to see you.

Crandall shakes hands and nods.

GRIFFIN

How are you, Mr. Crandall?

Crandall takes a moment and actually thinks about the answer.

CRANDALL

I'll be okay.

CLYDE

Please, have a seat.

Crandall does.

Clyde takes the seat behind his desk and Mrs. Griffin walks around behind Clyde.

CRANDALL

How's Sazha doing?

Clyde and Griffin look at each other.

CLYDE

We're not exactly sure. She still hasn't been back to school yet.

Crandall nods.

CLYDE

I've been trying to get a hold of you the past couple days.

CRANDALL

I'm sorry. I've had to keep the phone off. I've been getting a lot of angry calls lately.

CLYDE

You shouldn't have to be going through this. I know you did absolutely nothing but defend yourself from an attacker, in your own home. You don't deserve any of this harassment.

Behind Clyde, Griffin nods. Crandall shrugs.

CRANDALL

It's just a couple calls. I'm sure most of the time it's the same person anyway. Sounds like it, at least. I guess everybody can start to sound the same when they're so angry.

Clyde thinks how to respond very carefully.

CLYDE

Phillip, you do understand Turrell used to be a student here, correct?

CRANDALL

I didn't know exactly, but I assumed so after I found out he was Sazha's brother.

Clyde still has to think carefully. Griffin takes over.

GRIFFIN

A lot of the students here have older siblings that went to school with Turrell. And because of that, we've realized that a lot of the students are harboring some of the ill will of their older brothers

GRIFFIN

and sisters, who don't understand what position you were in when you shot Turrell.

Crandall meekly defends himself.

CRANDALL

I didn't point the gun and shoot him in the face. The gun... His gun- discharged in the struggle. I never could've shot anybody, even just defending myself.

GRIFFIN

And we do understand that. It's just that the board wants to take the proper steps to alleviate the situation. Take away any chances of a further confrontation.

CLYDE

We're not talking about our board here at the school, Phillip. Please don't think that. We are behind you one hundred percent. This was the city's decision.

CRANDALL

I'm fired?

CLYDE

We're trying really hard not to call it that. If you'd like to put a resignation in, we won't even call it a forced. I promise you, wherever you decide to go, we'll give you a full recommendation. Even if you'd like us to arrange a position somewhere, we'll do anything we can to help. I'll do anything I can to help.

GRIFFIN

Derrick and I both agree about your idea to have the kids read that new book. The students' performance has increased ten-fold since you brought up the idea. You'd be a great addition to any school.

Crandall rubs a temple.

CRANDALL

I don't have any money whatsoever right now to be able and move again.

CLYDE

Like I said, I'll be more than
happy to help you in any way.

Crandall doesn't know what else to say. He just sits there.

CLYDE

I'm very sorry this happened,
Phillip.

CRANDALL

Do you need a statement from me?

GRIFFIN

I can type something up and all
you'll have to do is sign it.

Crandall nods and stands up.

GRIFFIN

I'll do it real quick before you
leave.

She hurries out of the office.

CRANDALL

I guess I'll come back after the
final bell and pack my desk.
There's not much, so-

CLYDE

Between you and me, Phillip, as
your friend...

Clyde looks to the splotches around Crandall's eyes and
forehead.

CLYDE

Did you go out on a binge last
week?

Crandall swallows and nods.

CRANDALL

Yeah.

Clyde doesn't say anything. Just nods back.

CLYDE

I hope to see you there tonight.
I'll save your seat.

Crandall just stands there.

Finally, he gives an awkward nod and leaves.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Alone in the park, wasting time, Crandall sits and watches a creek flow by.

He looks over his shoulder to make sure no one's around. He pulls out a small pint of vodka and sips.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Crandall packs his stuff into a single box.

CHESTER, a large, warm-tempered black janitor, walks in.

CHESTER
You need some help in here, Mr. Crandall?

CRANDALL
No, thanks. I got it, Chester.

CHESTER
You sure?

CRANDALL
Yeah. This is about everything.

CHESTER
All right. I'll walk you out to your car, then.

CRANDALL
Mr. Clyde send you in here to make sure I didn't take anything from the school?

CHESTER
Naw. You know Mr. Clyde ain't like that at all.

Crandall picks up his box. Chester looks him in the eye.

CHESTER
He sent me to make sure the school doesn't do anything to you.

Crandall just looks at Chester, confused.

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

Chester escorts Crandall to his Volvo.

Every student, some even older and not students there, crowd around. They glare at Crandall.

Evil stares, even from some of the school personnel, like the crossing guards.

Chester has to clear some of the people aside to make room for Crandall to get through to his car.

EXT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Crandall sits in his Volvo, his packed box in the passenger's seat.

He debates what to do.

Finally, he gets out the car.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Crandall searches for a bottle.

The old clerk, Smithers, leans against the counter, on the telephone.

SMITHERS

(into the phone)

... Can you close up the store for me a little later on? ... I got to get to the drug store before they close and get Martha her prescriptions ... I appreciate it.

Smithers hangs up.

Crandall settles for a fifth of rum and approaches the counter.

SMITHERS

You know you've become my number one customer these past weeks? That's not exactly a good thing. Especially in this town.

Crandall opens his wallet and only sees a dollar bill.

He looks up at Smithers, who only shrugs.

SMITHERS

Maybe you should take it as a sign.

Crandall folds the wallet back in his pocket and politely puts the fifth back where he had got it from.

EXT. PLANNED PARENTHOOD - DAY

The picketers scream out a chant. Cora screams the loudest.

PROTESTORS

Real doctors don't kill babies!
Real doctors don't kill babies!...

She thrusts her sign almost into the on-coming cars' windshields so they see it.

Her sign has a drawn picture of a cartoon mom slashing her cartoon baby's throat wide open.

It even has the blood spray coming out the baby's neck.

The sign reads 'Abortion is no different!'

Soon, a car pulls into the parking lot and the protestors swarm around it, changing their chant.

PROTESTORS

Don't be a murderer! Don't be a
murderer! ...

A security guard rushes over and does what he can to hold the crowd back.

A YOUNG WOMAN gets out the passenger seat, embarrassed.

Cora, fury on her face, screams at the top of her lungs. She shoves her sign into the woman's face.

CORA

DON'T BE A MURDERER! DON'T BE A
MURDERER!...

Cora loses her emotions.

She begins wailing the young woman over the head with her sign. She screams the chant louder and louder.

The woman, startled, protects her head with her arms.

Cora twists the sign by the handle and attacks from different angles to connect with the woman's head.

Even the protestors are taken aback as Cora keeps pounding the woman's head over and over with the sign.

Soon, the wood handle of the sign splinters and snaps. She continues to hit.

The YOUNG MAN driving the car realizes what's happening and rushes to his girlfriend's side.

The security guard gets to Cora and restrains her.

Cora, miserable, is in tears.

CORA

My baby just died! Do you hear me?
My baby just died!

Cora tries to get the young woman's attention.

CORA
Ain't no child should have to die.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Crandall walks in with his cardboard box of things and kicks the door closed behind him.

He sets the box on his dining table and checks the fridge.
No beer.

He gets on his knees and checks under the sink. He digs deep, but no random bottles there, either.

He rolls over on the kitchen floor and takes a deep breath, staring at the ceiling.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sazha lies on the bed. She combs through the pictures she had found.

She sets them aside and walks over to her dresser.
She leans into the mirror and looks at her reflection.

She frowns.

INT. BUS - NIGHT

Cora, silent, ignores the small chatter from the few passengers behind her.

She sulks to herself.

She slows the bus and it comes to a stop. She reaches out, pulls a gear, and the door opens.

Crandall gets on the bus.

Sulking himself, he tries his best to smile for her.

CRANDALL
How are you?

Cora doesn't even look at him.

CORA
(monotone)
Fine.

Crandall takes a seat towards the back of the bus.

The bus begins moving again and it's silent.

Crandall's head jerks with the bumps the bus runs over.

Cora calls out from the front of the bus and startles him.

CORA

You gettin' off at Friar Hall?

Crandall thinks about it a moment. Finally, he nods.

CRANDALL

Yeah.

Silence again.

Crandall leans his head against the window and closes his eyes. Cora watches the road in front of her.

She slows the bus and opens the doors for a loud group of teens. One of them's Juwuan.

They pay their fare and go to take their seats.

Juwuan sees Crandall as Cora starts pulling off again.

JUWUAN

What the fuck are you doing here,
bald man?

CORA

Hey! I'm not having any of that
tonight. You leave that man alone.

JUWUAN

You let him on here, Miss Cora?

Crandall just sits there. He looks at Cora, confused.

CORA

What do you mean 'did I let him on
here?'

JUWUAN

You let Crandall on your bus?

Cora makes dead eye contact through the mirror. Crandall realizes right away.

He stirs in his seat. Cora just stares at him.

CORA

You Phillip Crandall?

Crandall just stares at her a moment. Finally, he nods.

Cora stops the bus. She starts breathing heavy.

CORA

Get off.

Crandall just looks back at her, not knowing what to say.

CORA

Get off right now!

Crandall still wants to talk to her to explain, but doesn't know how.

Juwuan steps by the door so he can get off with Crandall.

CORA
I said leave him alone. Life'll
take care of a drunk.

Cora slams the bus into park. She stands in the aisle to face Crandall.

CORA
Mister, I'm not going to tell you
again, get off my bus right now!

She starts crying.

CRANDALL
I'm sorry. I didn't-

CORA
Please! Don't talk to me!

Crandall nods. He just sits there, stunned.

Cora rushes over to him and raises her hand. Crandall leans back in his seat.

CORA
Get off my bus now before I can't
turn back!

Cora slams him in the forehead.

Crandall just lowers his head. He doesn't protect himself from her.

CORA
NOW!

Cora slams him again.

Crandall, ducking, stands and maneuvers around Cora. She hits him one last time for good measure.

Crandall hurries out the door and just stands there.

He watches the doors close and the bus speeds off, the engine roaring down the road.

Crandall starts to breathe heavy.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Crandall hurries in and fishes through different dresser-tops and drawers.

He digs through pant pockets in his dirty laundry, but finds only small change.

He counts it up.

CRANDALL
(under his breath)

Shit.

INT. DRUGSTORE - NIGHT

Crandall searches the aisles. He finally finds the dental hygiene section.

INT. DRUGSTORE - LATER

Crandall approaches the counter, carrying a bottle of mouthwash. It's a knock-off of the antiseptic Listerine.

Smithers, the old man from the liquor store with the granite voice, a customer now, hands money over to a MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN behind the counter.

SMITHERS
Thank you darlin'.

Smithers leans on the door to leave, but stops when he sees who approaches the counter behind him.

Crandall shamefully pays mostly in dimes for the mouthwash.

SMITHERS
Hey.

Crandall looks at him.

SMITHERS
Would you like to get some coffee?

Crandall shakes his head.

CRANDALL
No, thank you. Coffee kind of
tears me up inside.

Smithers looks back to the bottle of mouthwash Crandall's paying for and laughs. Hard. He shakes his head.

Crandall even smiles, but only for a moment.

SMITHERS
Just thought you could use a
friend. If you ever do decide you
need one...

Smithers shrugs and leaves.

Crandall has to count out a few nickels.

INT. FRIAR HALL - A.A. MEETING - NIGHT

Crandall's seat is empty. Clyde shakes his head at it.
A STRANGER walks into the room and leans down to Clyde.

STRANGER
Anyone sitting here?

Sorrowfully, Clyde shakes his head.

CLYDE
No.

Clyde pulls the chair out for the stranger, who sits.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Crandall sits on his couch.

He takes several large gulps of the mouthwash. He cringes and shivers at the taste.

Someone knocks. Crandall just closes his eyes.

After a second knock, Crandall, dazed, stands. He sets the bottle on a shelf and answers the door.

CRANDALL
Sazha.

She stands there, sad, in a shirt and sweatpants.

CRANDALL
You okay?

She shakes her head and tears up. Her voice is strained.

SAZHA
Did he attack you?

Crandall just looks at her.

SAZHA
Did he come at you first?

He nods.

CRANDALL
Yeah. He came out of the closet.

She cries a little louder.

SAZHA
Did you aim for his head?

Crandall doesn't say anything. He just looks down at the floor and begins to tear up.

SAZHA

Did you aim to shoot him in the
face?

He finally looks up at her through the tears.

CRANDALL

Yes.

Sazha closes her eyes.

CRANDALL

(slurs)

I didn't know what to do. I had no
idea who he was.

She collapses into his arms.

He takes her inside and closes the door behind them.

CRANDALL

I'm so sorry.

She sobs, then presses her lips against his.

It catches him off-guard. He pulls his face back from her.

CRANDALL

Sazha, don't.

SAZHA

You owe me this.

He just looks at her.

SAZHA

Don't deny me this time.

She presses her lips against his again.

He doesn't kiss back, but he doesn't pull away, either.

She keeps her lips pressed against his as she speaks.

SAZHA

You owe me.

Sazha takes Crandall's hands and wraps his arms around her
for him.

He takes his hands off her, but she puts them back in place.
He doesn't want to, but he doesn't restrain.

She licks at his lips and backs him up to the couch.

Nowhere else to go, he falls back on it.

She slips her sweatpants off and kneels over him.
She grinds against his crotch.

Drunk, he accepts her tongue in his mouth and kisses back.

She takes one of his hands and gently places it on one of her breast nubs.

He pulls it away, but she puts it back for him again.

SAZHA

You owe me this.

She reaches down and digs him out of his pants.

EXT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Sazha steps out the foyer.

Halfway to her own building, she stops and looks down. She bites her lip and smiles.

She walks into her own building's foyer.

INT. DAVIDS' LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Cora, exhausted and red-eyed, lays on the couch.

She watches a news report about a woman taking things too far at an abortion clinic, leading to protest rule-changes.

Cora shakes her head at herself.

The door opens behind her and she snaps the TV off.

Sazha walks in.

SAZHA

Hey momma.

Cora just lays there. She wipes snot from her nose with the back of her hand.

SAZHA

I'm sorry I'm late-

CORA

(stern)

Good night.

Sazha stands there a moment and looks at the back of her mom's head. Cora doesn't even look back at her.

SAZHA

Night, mom.

On her way out of the living room, Sazha quietly slides the portable phone off the hook and tucks it under her shirt.

Cora just stares at the blank TV.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha dials a number and cradles the phone between her ear and shoulder. It rings.

She looks out the window and across the way to Crandall's bedroom and bathroom. It's empty.

The phone rings again.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Crandall sits on his couch and takes a swig.

The phone rings and it goes to the answering machine.

SAZHA

(filter)

Hi, Phillip. I was walking back to my place, and I could feel you dripping out of me.

Crandall leans his head back and closes his eyes.

He pulls a long drink of the mouthwash. He doesn't cringe anymore at the taste. It goes down smooth.

SAZHA

(filter)

I'll see you tomorrow in class. I love you.

The machine clicks off.

He massages the bridge of his nose. He starts to cry.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sitting at the dining table, Crandall nears the bottom of mouthwash.

He writes on a piece of notebook paper and stands up, shit-faced and unbalanced.

He walks into his --

BEDROOM

-- and sits on the edge of his mattress.

He opens a bedside drawer and takes out a small revolver.

Crandall loads it, slams the chamber shut, and closes the drawer back up.

He just sits and stares for a few long moments.

Finally, he cocks the gun.

Something catches his eye in the other room and Crandall stares at the floor next to the dining table, where he had sopped up Turrell's messy head.

Crandall turns around and looks at the wall and his pillow behind him.

He thinks things through, then stands up.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sazha's sound asleep on Turrell's bed.

In the window above the bed; across the way in Crandall's bedroom; Crandall stands up from his bed and, carrying his revolver, walks into the next room over; his bathroom.

Crandall kneels down on the floor in front of the toilet and leans his head over the toilet bowl, face first.

He reaches behind him as best as he can and presses the nose of the revolver to the back of his head. He pauses.

Finally, Crandall pulls the trigger.

The shot isn't heard because of it being in the next building over, but Crandall's head snaps and jerks and his body goes limp.

His skull disintegrates and tissue splatters into the toilet bowl.

Sazha stirs just a little in her sleep.

FADE TO BLACK.

A siren roars.

SLAM CUT IN:

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha shoots her eyes awake from the siren.

She looks out Turrell's window and sees blinking police strobes revolving in the street below.

She looks across the way to Crandall's apartment and sees officers roaming the bedroom and bathroom.

Sazha looks closer and notices a body face down in the toilet. The same clothes that Crandall was wearing earlier.

She backs away from the window.

Her breaths get heavier and heavier and she starts to hyperventilate.

She puts her hand over her mouth to stifle her cries.

She paces back and forth, not knowing what to do.

INT. CRANDALL'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Officer #1 stands directly behind Crandall's body.

#2 walks into the bathroom and holds up a piece of notebook paper. The one Crandall left on the dining table.

OFFICER #2
Definitely a suicide.

OFFICER #1
What's it say?

#2 reads from the note.

OFFICER #2
'I'm sorry about giving up on my recovery. I can't live with what I did to that poor child.'

#1 lowers and shakes his head.

OFFICER #1
Child? He must've felt bad for shooting that kid the other week.

#2 nods.

OFFICER #2
Just protecting himself, and he still felt guilty.

OFFICER #1
(shrugs)
Thoughtful guy, though. He made for an easy clean-up.

#2 looks closer at Crandall.

OFFICER #2
For the landlord.

#2 moves Crandall's head to the side and sees a massive chunk of brain in the toilet water.

OFFICER #2
Not the coroner, though. He's the one who's got to fish that out.

#1 grunts and squints, wishing he didn't see it.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha looks out the window into Crandall's bedroom and bathroom. It's empty.

The police cars with their strobing lights are gone below.

Sazha turns around and looks out Turrell's bedroom door.

Seeing the coast is clear, she grabs a card off the dresser and walks out the room.

INT. BUILDING HALLWAY - NIGHT

Sazha approaches Crandall's door, 4C. It's locked.

She slides the card she had taken off the dresser, Turrell's ID, into the door jamb and slowly pries it open.

She closes the door behind her.

INT. CRANDALL'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Sazha noses around.

She keeps looking back to the couch, where her and Crandall had made love earlier.

She walks into the bedroom and then into the bathroom.

She looks at where she saw Crandall's body hunched over the toilet. The blood spatter is gone.

She puts the toilet seat and lid down.

Blood and spinal fluid had seeped into the crack where no one had cleaned.

She walks back out into the main room and over to a set of shelves against a wall.

She picks up the picture of a happier, more muscular Crandall with his wife and son.

She runs a finger over the picture of his face.

Sazha tucks it under an arm and grabs a couple of his books off the shelf. The ones he pointed out as his favorite.

She also notices a few of his notebooks and curls them into her arms.

Finally, she picks up his plumeria box.

She tip-toes back out the door, locks it, and closes it behind her.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sitting on the bed, Sazha opens the jewelry box.

More pictures of Crandall and his family. Ticket stubs from movies and plays. A necklace and a bracelet.

She also takes two plastic sandwich bags out. Each have locks of hair in them.

One bag has longer and flowing hair in it. A woman's hair.

The other has short and fine hair. A child's hair.

Sazha puts them all back in and sets the box in the cubby hole in Turrell's closet.

She walks back to his bed and flips through his notebooks.

Finally, she finds the page with a note addressed to her and she reads it again.

She smiles and cries at the same time.

Then, she notices writing on the other side of the page and flips it over.

It's another note, addressed to Tamika.

And then on the page before that, another note addressed to Antwan.

And then another note on another page addressed to Juwuan.

Sazha flips back and forth between them all and starts shaking her head no over and over.

She cries harder.

Finally, she gives up and slams the notebook shut.

She sobs into her pillow.

SAZHA
What did I do? ...

Over and over again, she starts punching the bed.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Gerald Smithers scans through the newspaper and comes to the obituaries.

He finds Crandall's picture, one taken recently for the school yearbook.

Smithers grimaces when he recognizes the face.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Crandall's graveside service is lonely.

Only Derrick Clyde and another PERSON FROM AA sit in the pouring rain.

Smithers arrives and sits. A PRIEST leads them in prayer.

PRIEST

Our Father...

ALL

(simultaneous)

... Who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

PRIEST

Amen.

CLYDE AND PERSON FROM A.A.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory of God. Amen.

Sazha watches it all from behind a distant tree. She mutters to herself.

She closes her eyes and raises her face to the wet sky.

SAZHA

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

She trails off as she opens her eyes and sees the tiny crowd disperse.

SAZHA

Forgive us our trespasses.

Smithers stays seated in his folding chair as the others leave. Even the priest.

He just stares at the cheap casket.

Sazha makes sure Mr. Clyde is gone and walks towards the grave site and coffin, the hole already dug.

Smithers' eyes are shut in thought as Sazha approaches.

She walks around and puts her hand on the coffin.

Smithers shoots his eyes open and watches her from behind.

Sazha's body trembles and she hangs her head.

She kisses the palm of her hand and presses it on the casket.

She turns back around and Smithers is gone.

She takes a seat in a folding chair.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY - LATER

Sazha still sits in the folding chair in the pouring rain.

She watches the gravediggers finish burying the casket in the mud.

From a nearby road in the cemetery, Smithers watches her.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Sazha sits at her desk, staring at Crandall's notebook in front of her.

The rest of the class talks, waiting for class to start.

MR. BOBBY

All right, guys, settle down.

The class obediently does.

MR. BOBBY

Before we start today, Sazha spoke with me this morning and she has something she'd like to share with you guys.

Everybody looks to Sazha and she begins to blush.

MR. BOBBY

Miss Davids, the floor is yours.

Sazha gets up from her desk, but stops and pauses a moment.

She grabs her stomach, and then is fine again.

All the students watch as she carries Crandall's notebook with her to the front of the class.

She's nervous. It takes her a moment to think of what to say.

SAZHA

I was seeing Mr. Crandall before he
killed himself.

Mr. Bobby looks at her, alarmed. The rest of the class
listens patiently.

SAZHA

He was teaching me some of the
harder stuff in the book to help me
with my writing.

Mr. Bobby relaxes.

SAZHA

One of the times I left, one of his
notebooks got mixed up with mine
and I finally went through it the
other day.

She feels the discomfort and clutches her stomach again for
a moment.

SAZHA

He was writing notes to each one of
us.

This piques the interest of the class.

ROBERTA

Notes?

ANTWAN

What do they say?

Sazha waits for the class to stop murmuring to themselves.

SAZHA

I think he was going to give them
to us at the end of the year.

Sazha opens up the notebook to the first hand-written note.

SAZHA

Tamika.

Tamika's shy at being the first one.

Sazha recites from the notebook:

SAZHA

You're probably the most unique
person I've ever met.

Tamika shrugs, agreeing with it.

The class is still too unsure to respond.

SAZHA

While at times loud-

Tamika agrees with that, too.

SAZHA

You're still one of the most
respectful and kindest people I've
ever came across.

Tamika smiles.

SAZHA

You've got a true skill with hair
and I hope it takes you everywhere
you want to go in life.

Everybody looks at Tamika and smiles at her. She puts her
head down, modest of the attention on her now.

SAZHA

Antwan.

Everybody turns their attention to Antwan.

Juwuan, in the back of the class, is the only one not into
this. He keeps his head down in his desk and an angry look
in his eye.

SAZHA

When things get boring, you're
always the one to make everybody
laugh and smile.

Antwan lets a little smile pass his lips, then he makes it
disappear again.

SAZHA

I hope I can be there to see the
look on your face the day you
realize just how smart you really
are.

A few people begin to laugh now. Even Antwan can't hold the
smile back anymore.

Juwuan ignores everybody, the angry look still in his eye.

SAZHA

Roberta.

Berta gets shy and turns red.

SAZHA

You're the most jolly student I've
ever had.

The class laughs and Berta jiggles in her seat. She puts a
hand over her mouth to cover her laugh.

SAZHA

I've never seen you down and you never let anybody else get down, either. I've only been with this class for a couple months, now, but I can see that you're a true friend to more than just one person in the room.

Berta gives a shy smile.

Sazha gets quiet a moment and gives a quick glance at Juwuan, who still looks angry.

SAZHA

Juwuan.

JUWUAN

No.

The class gets quiet.

JUWUAN

I don't want to hear it.

Sazha continues anyway.

SAZHA

You're the strongest person I've ever met in my life.

JUWUAN

I said 'no', Sazha.

Sazha still continues. The class gets uncomfortable.

SAZHA

I wish I can be as strong as you are.

Juwuan tries to yell at her, but he can only choke out a whisper.

JUWUAN

(strained)

Stop.

SAZHA

I wish I can be as caring and as protective as you.

Juwuan swallows and shakes his head.

SAZHA

I can't imagine having to grow up the way you have, having to move and reposition your little brothers and sisters away from the windows

SAZHA
when they fall asleep at night,
just so no stray bullets from
outside can hit them.

Juwuan starts to sob.

SAZHA
You don't have to ever worry about
growing up Juwuan, because you
already are a man.

Juwuan loses his emotions and cries. Sazha and a few others
begin to tear up a bit also.

Not wanting anybody to see him, Juwuan stands from his desk
and hurries out of the classroom.

Mr. Bobby lets him leave to get himself together again.

Sazha looks at the door left open.

ROBERTA
What did he say about you?

Sazha looks at her, surprised. She wasn't planning to share
that one.

Finally, she shakes her head.

SAZHA
He never got to me.

Mr. Bobby stands up.

MR. BOBBY
All right, let's take a break for
right now, Sazha. You can finish
the rest when everybody's together
again, okay?

Sazha nods. She closes the notebook and takes her seat
again.

Mr. Bobby begins reading from a textbook to the class.

Sazha keeps her textbook and notebook closed.

She stares out the window, lost in thought.

Suddenly, she puts a hand to her mouth to hold back a burp,
and another one.

She goes pale.

Sazha raises her hand to get Mr. Bobby's attention.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha's made it her own room, complete with the view of Crandall's old apartment.

She puts make-up on in the mirror.

She applies a touch of lipstick, smacks her lips, and smiles at herself in the mirror.

She's happy.

She picks something up off the dresser and looks at it. The smile on her face grows bigger.

She sits down on the bed and opens up Crandall's plumeria box. She throws the item in with Crandall's other things.

A pregnancy test. With two lines.

She closes the box and hides it back in the small cubby hole in Turrell's closet.

The closet is now filled with Sazha's unflattering wardrobe.

She walks merrily out the bedroom.

INT. GYNECOLOGIST'S WAITING ROOM - DAY

An OB-GYN NURSE steps out from the back office.

OB-GYN NURSE

Sazha?

Sazha stands up and walks towards her. Other patients waiting look at her.

OB-GYN NURSE

Where's your mother at, sweetie?

SAZHA

It's just me.

The nurse lowers her voice so no one else can hear.

OB-GYN NURSE

Are you here for contraceptives?

Sazha shakes her head.

SAZHA

I'm pregnant.

OB-GYN NURSE

Oh, I'm sorry. We're going to need a parent here for that.

SAZHA

I thought I could get prenatal care and ultrasounds to make sure the baby's okay until I tell my mom.

OB-GYN NURSE

Not from here. You'll need a statement from the court saying you're independent for us to treat you.

SAZHA

But my mom'll find out if I go to court.

OB-GYN NURSE

I think that's the idea.

The nurse shrugs and looks at the next person's name.

OB-GYN NURSE

Maybe Planned Parenthood or a public clinic can help you, but the best thing for you to do is tell your parents and they'll be able to guide you from there.

Sazha just nods, dispirited.

OB-GYN NURSE

Trust me, honey. They'll seem sad at first, but they'll get excited and be buying things for the baby in no time.

Sazha hangs her head and walks to the doors, past the other patients looking at her.

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - DAY

Sazha makes her mother breakfast.

Cora just sits at the table, staring at nothing. Depressed.

SAZHA

D'you get my report card yet?

Cora nods.

SAZHA

When'd it come?

CORA

Other day.

SAZHA

Did I do good?

CORA

You're the one who's been going.
You know how you did.

Sazha goes back to making breakfast.

She sees the broken and splintered anti-abortion sign leaning in a corner. The one with the cartoon mother splitting the cartoon baby's throat.

There's also a new sign. Freshly painted.

Sazha motions to it.

SAZHA

You going there today?

CORA

This afternoon, a girl's scheduled.

SAZHA

I thought you couldn't go back.

CORA

I just got to promise to stay back
across the street with them, now.

Sazha flips over an egg, careful not to break the yolk.

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

Sazha sits at a computer. She researches prenatal care.

After a moment, she also looks up 'midwives and doulas in Ohio.'

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sazha digs an envelope out the cubby hole, stuffed with ones.

She pulls out a huge wad.

INT. DRUGSTORE - DAY

Near the pharmacy, Sazha compares ingredients and prices on different bottles of over-the-counter prenatal vitamins.

LATER

Sazha approaches the middle-aged woman behind the counter with the bottle she has chosen.

The woman eyes Sazha skeptically. Sazha anticipates the question coming.

SAZHA

My mom's not feeling so good. She asked me to get 'em for her on my way home from school.

The answer appeases the woman and she rings up the vitamins.

INT. NURSE'S OFFICE - DAY

The SCHOOL NURSE stands over Sazha, who lies on a couch.

SCHOOL NURSE

You still feel a little dizzy?

SAZHA

A little.

SCHOOL NURSE

And you felt fine all morning until after lunch?

SAZHA

I still feel fine. I just got dizzy. I don't have a headache or stomach ache or anything.

SCHOOL NURSE

All right. Just lie down for a bit longer until it goes away, okay?

Sazha nods and closes her eyes.

SCHOOL NURSE

I'll be in to check on you from time to time.

SAZHA

Okay.

The nurse feels Sazha's forehead one last time and walks out to the main office.

Sazha quickly gets up, not dizzy at all, and checks to make sure no one's looking in and the nurse is gone.

She grabs a stethoscope hanging on a wall and walks over to the window.

She pries it open, reaches her hand out, and drops the stethoscope to the ground.

She closes and locks the window again and jumps back to the couch to lie down.

INT. DAVIDS' BATHROOM - NIGHT

Sazha, clothed, sits on the toilet.

She lifts her shirt above her belly and puts the ear tips of the stethoscope to her ears.

She presses the chest piece against her belly and struggles to listen.

She maneuvers and remaneuvers herself into different positions until she feels comfortable and can hear the best.

She stays as still as she can.

After a few moments, she smiles.

FADE TO BLACK

SPRING

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Sazha doodles on the back of a notebook cover.

She pays no attention to Mr. Bobby, who reads a chapter of 'Standing Against the Wind' to a quiet, attentive class.

She writes down a list of baby names, but only two are circled and have a question mark after them.

'Phillip Jr.' and 'Turrell Jr.'

She draws a heart around 'Phillip Jr.'

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - NIGHT

Cora just sits at the table and stares at nothing while Sazha cheerfully cooks.

She sets a plate down in front of Cora and sits across.

CORA

Why we been eatin' nothin' but
vegetables?

SAZHA

I just want to eat more healthy.

CORA

It doesn't matter if it's healthy.
You eat too much of anything, it's
still bad for you. Your cheeks are
getting fat.

Sazha, who has gotten plump, looks down at her food and picks at it. Cora just stares at hers.

INT. DRUGSTORE - DAY

Sazha walks from the vitamin aisle to the counter, where the middle-aged woman clerk waits.

Sazha sets the prenatal vitamins on the counter.

CLERK
Nineteen ninety-five.

SAZHA
I thought it was seventeen.

CLERK
I'm sorry. The price must've went up on them the past couple months.

The clerk looks at the weight Sazha has gained. Sazha hides it well, though, thanks to her big-boned frame.

CLERK
When's your mother due?

SAZHA
Two months.

Sazha counts the crumpled ones and change in her hands.

SAZHA
I only need a couple more dollars.
Can I give you the rest tomorrow?

CLERK
I'm sorry, we're not allowed to do that here. We used to, but now a new manager's started. He's really buckling down.

Sazha pockets the money and, deflated, leaves.

EXT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Sazha walks down the street.

She sees Smithers sweeping the sidewalk in front of his store and crosses the street to him.

He looks up at her.

SAZHA
Would you like help?

He stops sweeping and leans against the push broom.

SAZHA
I could really use a little money if you don't mind.

SMITHERS

I see you somewhere before?

SAZHA

Awhile ago. At my teacher Mr.
Crandall's funeral.

Smithers remembers and nods.

SMITHERS

I was wondering how you knew him.

SAZHA

How did you know him?

SMITHERS

From around the neighborhood.

Sazha looks through the windows of the liquor store to the
countless bottles inside.

SMITHERS

How much you need?

SAZHA

Just a couple dollars.

SMITHERS

Well, I can't put you on the
payroll on a count of your age and
this being a liquor store and all.
But I suppose it couldn't hurt to
give you a couple bucks out of the
pocket for sweeping my sidewalk.

He hands the broom over to her.

SMITHERS

I appreciate it.

SAZHA

So do I.

Sazha begins sweeping and Smithers leans against the store.

SAZHA

How many times a week do you sweep?

SMITHERS

Whenever I get bored of being
inside. Or tempted. How many
times a week do you want to sweep?

SAZHA

As often as you've got money out of
the pocket.

Smithers laughs.

SAZHA

I know I'm young, but I'll really need a lot of money soon.

Smithers looks at her belly.

SMITHERS

I'm sure I can find things for you to do around the store where you won't have to touch any bottles.

SAZHA

Thank you.

Sazha still hasn't stopped sweeping.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha digs the new bottle of prenatal vitamins out of her bookbag and shuffles a pill out.

She shoves the rest of the bottle into the cubbyhole in the closet and takes the stethoscope out.

She tucks it under her shirt and walks out the room.

INT. DAVIDS' BATHROOM - NIGHT

Sazha closes the door behind her and lays the stethoscope on the sink.

She pops the prenatal pill and cups a hand under the faucet.

She gulps the pill down with the water from the tap.

She sits up on the sink and lifts her shirt.

She puts the eartips of the stethoscope in and expertly places the chestpiece on her bulging tummy.

She finds the heartbeat right away and listens with a smile.

Suddenly, the door opens and Cora walks in, surprised to find Sazha on the sink.

Sazha throws the stethoscope down and jumps off the sink.

She pulls the baggy shirt back down over her belly.

But Cora's already seen.

CORA

The hell you doin'?

Not knowing what to do and frantic, Sazha automatically starts washing her hands.

SAZHA
Nothin', momma.

CORA
Why you got that pressed against
your belly?

SAZHA
No reason, momma.

Cora shoves Sazha back a little. She makes her look directly in her eyes.

CORA
Why you pressin' that against your
belly?

SAZHA
I don't know, momma.

Cora shoves her back against the wall now. Sazha's scared.

CORA
You better tell me.

SAZHA
Just because.

CORA
'Cause what?

Cora grabs Sazha by the shirt collar and shoves her against the wall.

Sazha just whimpers.

CORA
Tell me!

Sazha shuts her eyes. Tears squeeze out from the displacement.

SAZHA
Because I'm pregnant.

Cora slams Sazha back against the wall hard this time.

Sazha's head bounces off the drywall and Cora slaps her face hard off the rebound.

Sazha doesn't move. She's in shock.

CORA
The hell you mean you're pregnant,
Sazha?

Cora slams Sazha in the nose with the palm of her hand, much like she was slapping Crandall.

CORA
Pregnant by who?

Sazha doesn't say anything. Cora grabs her throat.

CORA
Pregnant by who?!

Sazha shakes her head, trying to get out of Cora's grasp.

SAZHA
I don't know.

Cora throws her to the ground by the throat.

CORA
What 'shoo mean you don't know?

SAZHA
I don't know, momma... I don't
know.

Cora kicks her in the bulging belly. Over and over.

Sazha does her best to protect her stomach.

When she can't deflect the kicks with her knees, she tries to soften the blows with her arms.

SAZHA
No, momma. Don't! Please don't.

CORA
You better tell me! Who got you
pregnant?

Cora still kicks at her daughter.

SAZHA
I don't know, momma. Please, stop.

Cora stops and bends down to grab her by the shirt collar again.

CORA
Who you been sleeping with?

She slams the back of Sazha's head against the floor.

CORA
Huh?!

Sazha tries to answer, but nothing comes out. She cries.

CORA
You sleepin' with more than one
person?

It takes her a while, but Sazha finally nods.

Cora lets go of Sazha's shirt and stands up, frustrated.

CORA
What do you mean you're sleeping
around, Sazha?

Sazha takes the chance to stand up. She backs up against a wall and grabs her stomach.

She breathes heavily.

CORA
Didn't I teach you better than
that?

Cora brushes an extension out of her face.

CORA
Huh?

SAZHA
Yes, momma, you did. I'm sorry,
momma.

CORA
Who's is it?

SAZHA
I don't know. I really don't,
momma.

CORA
Well who all you been sleepin'
with?

Sazha's reluctant, but finally whispers.

SAZHA
Mr. Crandall.

CORA
What?

Sazha doesn't answer, and Cora just stares.

SAZHA
His name was Phillip Crandall. He
was my teacher in-

Cora reaches out and shoves Sazha.

CORA
I know who he is! I remember who
shot my son! And you've been
sleepin' around with him?

SAZHA
It's not like that, momma.

Cora shoves her again. Harder.

CORA

Wha'shoo doin' with a grown man,
Sazha? What'chu doin' with a
blonde man?

Sazha shakes her head, crying.

SAZHA

I don't know, momma. I don't know.
I liked him.

Cora looks her daughter up and down.

CORA

How long you been pregnant?

Sazha looks at her mom, her fear in her eyes.

SAZHA

Seven months.

CORA

You serious? You fuckin' serious?

Cora shoves her again.

CORA

The hell you thinkin' Sazha?

Sazha just shakes her head. She doesn't know how to answer.

Cora tries to control herself.

CORA

Who else?

Sazha's quiet. She doesn't answer.

She doesn't want to answer.

CORA

You said you don't know who's it
is. Who else been sleepin' with
you?

Sazha still doesn't answer.

CORA

Who?

Sazha looks Cora straight in the eye.

SAZHA

Turrell.

Cora slaps her. Hard.

CORA
You watch your fuckin' mouth,
little girl.

She grabs Sazha by the throat.

CORA
Don't you be telling no lies about
your dead brother.

She lets go of Sazha's throat and slaps her again.

CORA
Now who you be sleepin' with?

SAZHA
It was Turrell, momma.

Cora grabs both of Sazha's cheeks and squeezes.

She pinches so hard her hands slip and Cora tucks them under her armpits so she won't do anymore damage.

SAZHA
He was comin' into my room at
night.

Cora just stands there. Crying.

CORA
For how long?

SAZHA
The couple months before he died.
I didn't tell you because I didn't
want you to send him away.

Cora shakes her head in disbelief.

SAZHA
I didn't like what he was doing.
But I didn't want him to leave,
either. I knew that losing him
would've been worse than you losing
dad.

Cora sobs.

CORA
He touch you like that when you
were younger?

Sazha shakes her head.

SAZHA

Just those couple months. I think he started doing harder drugs before he died. I found some in his room with the pictures and threw them away.

Cora looks at Sazha, then just walks out of the bathroom.

Sazha turns around and looks at herself in the mirror. She winces at how beat up she is.

She picks the stethoscope off the floor and positions herself to listen to the baby's heartbeat again.

She has to search, but finally finds it.

She closes her eyes and smiles in relief.

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - NIGHT

Sazha walks out the bathroom, down the short hallway, and into the kitchen.

Cora tackles her to the floor.

She grabs the nearby busted abortion sign, the one with the mother slicing her child, and begins wailing Sazha over the head with it.

CORA

Ain't no child of mine going to be having her teacher's baby.

SAZHA

Momma, stop!

Cora throws the abortion sign to the side.

She sits on her to pin her down and slams Sazha in her big belly over and over with both fists.

Sazha tries to block as many of the blows to her stomach as she can.

She even tries to throw her mother off of her, but Cora's too heavy.

CORA

She ain't gonna be walkin' around with her brother's baby, neither.

SAZHA

Momma, please.

Cora stands up and readies herself.

She leaps up into the air and, leading with an elbow, concentrates all her weight onto Sazha's stomach.

Sazha screams out in pain. Cora smacks her in the face.

CORA

Keep your mouth shut before someone
hears you!

Sazha whines.

SAZHA

Please don't do this, momma- I want
to have the baby- I want to take
care of it.

Cora stands and throws all her weight down on Sazha's pregnant belly again, elbow first.

Sazha grunts and screams out in pain again.

CORA

I said quiet!

Cora reaches for a nearby pan and slams Sazha over the head.

Sazha's eyes roll back in her head for a moment, then she comes to again, disoriented.

Sazha begins breathing heavy.

Cora continues to beat on Sazha's stomach with her fists.

SAZHA

Momma, don't.

Sazha breathes heavier and heavier out her mouth.

Cora stops and listens.

They're birthing breaths.

CORA

Bitch, don't you even... I swear to
God I'll strangle it.

Sazha, on her back, terrified, uses her elbows to crawl back away from her mother.

She breathes faster.

Cora grabs hold of Sazha's sweatpants and violently tugs them off her.

SAZHA

Momma!

CORA

I ain't letting that bastard out.

SAZHA

Please momma. Please leave him
alone. Don't touch him.

Cora rips off Sazha's panties and sees how bad Sazha's
dilated.

The top of the baby's head peeks through.

Sazha takes stronger, deeper lamaze breaths.

Cora grabs the busted abortion sign and aims the splintered
end between Sazha's legs.

Sazha tries to clamp her legs shut, but Cora keeps them
separated with a rigid arm.

She jams the splintered, jagged handle of the sign up inside
Sazha and into the baby's head.

Over and over, she jams and shoves.

Sazha screams and twists and writhes in agony. Cora keeps
jamming the splintered wood up inside.

CORA

Hope I tear you up so bad you won't
use it no more!

More shoving. In and out.

Sazha's screams finally turn into little whimpers, and her
breathing slows.

Cora stops and throws the sign down on the floor.

She stares at her daughter and the wreck between her legs.

Sazha continues to breathe heavily, gasping for air.

CORA

Go in the bathroom and finish. I
don't want that mess out here.

Sazha, still whimpering, gets to her hands and knees and
carefully crawls towards the bathroom.

INT. DAVIDS' BATHROOM - NIGHT

Sazha lifts herself off the ground just enough to get in the
empty bathtub.

She just sits there, spreading her legs as far as she can.

Her breathing starts to get heavy again. More lamaze
breaths.

Outside the door, Cora knocks.

CORA (O.S.)

And don't even try to fit it down
the toilet, neither. You put it
all in a trash bag and take it to
the dumpster.

Sazha squints her eyes shut and shakes her head at her
mother's coldness.

She continues her birthing breaths.

Finally, she starts to push. And push.

Her face freezes in pain and she gives one more giant push.

The body flops out into the tub, still connected to Sazha
from the umbilical cord.

The mess of a head lays nearby, torn away in fractured
pieces from the splintered handle.

It soaks in a shallow puddle of blood and tissue.

Wet hair clings to flesh on the pieces of soft skull.

Sazha covers her mouth, sick at the sight. She moans.

After a moment, she forces herself to look closer.

It was a boy.

Sazha picks up one of the larger pieces of skull with flesh
and hair still clung to it and washes the tissue and fluid
off under the bathtub spigot.

Blonde hair. Caucasian.

Sazha cries and cuddles with the body and as much of the
head as she can gather.

SAZHA

I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry.
I promise I tried to protect you.
I promise I did.

She puts the body back down on the tub floor and leans back
as far as she can.

She reaches down and grabs the umbilical cord still attached
inside her.

She yanks and tugs at it. She takes deep breaths and pushes
at the same time.

Finally, a bluish-hued placenta squeezes out of her and
plops next to the body.

More tissue and amniotic fluid leak out of her into the base
of the tub.

Awkward, she stands up, sore and in pain.

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - NIGHT

Sazha slowly steps out the bathroom and looks around, keeping an eye out for her mother.

Cora sits on the couch in the living room.

Sazha quietly walks into the kitchen and puts her sweatpants back on.

She grabs a garbage bag and a roll of aluminum foil off the refrigerator.

On her way back out the kitchen, she stops and looks at a pile of blank posterboards. The ones her mother uses to draw picket signs on.

She grabs one and slips it under an arm.

INT. DAVIDS' BATHROOM - NIGHT

Sazha picks up the fragments of skull and face and wraps them in pieces of aluminum foil nice and tight.

She finds the piece with the nose and hinged lips, almost puckered together.

She drops her head a moment, then wraps it in foil.

Sazha lays the posterboard on the floor.

She reaches in the bathtub and picks up the placenta sac. She gently places it down on the posterboard.

Careful not to rupture or puncture the sac, Sazha presses lightly down on it and rolls it back and forth.

The placenta leaves blue, purple, and red hues on the posterboard, like watercolors.

She also presses the umbilical cord connected to the sac down on the posterboard to leave its impression.

Satisfied with the tree-like image and shades on the posterboard, Sazha lifts the placenta sac up and sets it down in the garbage bag.

She reaches in the tub again and lifts out the tiny headless body, mushed and torn around the neck and shoulders.

She gently places it into the garbage bag with the placenta.

She looks at the rest of the ooze and tissue at the bottom of the tub. She turns on the hot water.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha lays the posterboard with the placenta print down on the desk and turns the lamp directly on it to dry.

She reaches in the cubbyhole in the closet and takes the plumeria box out.

She opens it and puts the pieces of skull and hair wrapped in foil in with Crandall's other keepsakes and mementos.

She closes the jewelry box back up and puts it back in the cubbyhole.

Sazha picks up the trash bag with the body and placenta in it and walks out the room.

INT. DAVIDS' HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

On her way out the apartment, Sazha stops and looks at her mother in the living room.

Cora just sits there, staring at the TV that's turned off.

Sazha walks out the door with the trash bag.

FADE TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

At her desk, Sazha reads through her notebook with the list of baby names.

She goes straight to the 'Phillip Jr.' that's circled with a heart and underlines it three times

She looks at the name sadly.

She closes her notebook, lifts up her desk, and sets it inside, next to Crandall's plumeria box.

The jewelry box now has a lock on it.

Sazha opens it and stares at the tiny packages of foil inside, and the baggies with the locks of a woman's and child's hair.

And the old pictures of Crandall and his wife and son.

She furrows her brows at them.

She closes and locks the box back up.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Smithers reads the paper behind the counter.

Sazha finishes stocking plastic bottles of pop into a reach-in cooler.

Sazha walks over to him, slightly limping.

SAZHA
Anything else, Mr. Smithers?

SMITHERS
Naw, that's all for today. I appreciate it all.

He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a couple bills.

SAZHA
How's your wife doing?

SMITHERS
She's doing better. Today.

He hands the bills over to her.

SAZHA
Thank you again, Mr. Smithers.

SMITHERS
If ya don't mind me asking, what are you saving so much up for, anyways?

Sazha grabs her bookbag and the plumeria box from behind the counter. She's hesitant to answer.

SAZHA
How close were you with Mr. Crandall, my old teacher?

SMITHERS
Not very, but enough that I felt bad when I saw him in the paper.

Sazha holds the jewelry box up.

SAZHA
Well, I kinda took this from his place after he died and before they cleaned it out. I shouldn't've. I think he wanted to be buried with it. I'm trying to save up enough to put it down in there with him.

SMITHERS
All these weeks you've been helping me, that's what you've been needin' the money for?

SAZHA
Mostly.

SMITHERS

How close are you?

SAZHA

It's too much for them to dig up the casket and put it in there, but I almost got enough for them to bury it above him. I suppose that'll be close enough.

Smithers just looks at her.

SAZHA

I kinda do need another favor from you, if you'll do it.

He smiles.

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - EVENING

In the kitchen, Sazha cooks dinner. Red meat.

Cora sits at the table, staring at nothing.

All the abortion picket signs and posterboards are gone now.

Sazha turns off the stove and sits down with her plate. Cora looks at her, expecting hers.

Sazha doesn't even look at her.

Cora grunts at the rudeness and walks over to the frying pan on the stove. There's nothing in it.

CORA

You didn't make me none?

Sazha doesn't answer. She just eats.

INT. TURRELL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sazha glues her and Crandall's yearbook photos together.

She puts it in the plumeria box, on top of a photo with Crandall and his wife.

Sazha hears Cora approach in the hallway and hurries to close the box.

She sets it on the dresser and sits down at her desk. She starts browsing through a book and taking quick notes.

Cora walks in. Sazha doesn't even look at her.

CORA

We got to have a talk.

Sazha doesn't even stop writing.

Cora looks at the picture hanging above Sazha's desk. The placenta print.

CORA
You takin' up art now, instead of
writing?

Sazha looks at the posterboard.

SAZHA
It'll be my only one.

CORA
It's pretty. What is it, a tree?

Sazha doesn't answer. She just goes back to writing.

CORA
I want you to talk with the doctor
I've been seeing. I think that
maybe she can help you.

Sazha finishes writing her sentence before she answers.

Cora walks around and sits on the edge of the bed.

SAZHA
Help me with what?

CORA
With everything that you're going
through.

Sazha just stares at the wall, not wanting to look her mother in the eye.

Cora reaches out and gently takes her daughter's hand.

Sazha finally turns and looks at her mom.

CORA
We have to talk about everything
you can tell her. And what you
can't.

Sazha lets out a little snort of laughter.

CORA
If you tell her too much about
everything, they'll take you away.

Sazha turns towards the wall again and swallows.

INT. PSYCHOLOGIST'S OFFICE - DAY

Sazha sits across from Patton in the bland room.

PATTON

I know how much you don't want to be here today. I appreciate you coming.

SAZHA

It was my mom who brought me here. I didn't have much choice in the matter.

Patton sucks on hard candy. It scrapes her teeth.

PATTON

Are you mad at your mother for making you come?

SAZHA

(shrugs)

I'll live with it.

PATTON

She tells me you've done some things that you regret.

Sazha takes her time and thinks before she answers.

SAZHA

No.

PATTON

You didn't do those things?

SAZHA

I don't regret them. She regrets them. She didn't want me with a white man.

PATTON

Was it because he was white that she didn't want you with him?

SAZHA

No, ma'am. She just said that at the time because she was angry.

PATTON

Do you know why she didn't want you with him?

SAZHA

Because I'm young.

Patton scribbles a note on a yellow legal pad.

PATTON

You speak very well for someone your age, and for where you're from. Did he help you with that?

SAZHA

I've always been good in English,
but he made it better. He made it
easier to learn.

PATTON

What did you want from your
relationship with him?

Sazha doesn't answer that one. She just lowers her head and
waits for the next question.

PATTON

Do you miss him?

SAZHA

I think I'm doing okay.

Patton motions to the box on Sazha's lap.

PATTON

Your mom says you've been very
protective of that. Is that a
jewelry box?

Sazha jiggles the lock to make sure it's latched.

SAZHA

No, ma'am.

PATTON

What is it?

SAZHA

A plumeria box.

PATTON

Plumeria? What's that?

SAZHA

Just a nickname for a box to keep
things in.

PATTON

What kind of things?

SAZHA

Keepsakes. Mementos. Anything you
want.

PATTON

What do you keep in your plumeria
box?

Sazha doesn't answer that one, either. She just stares at
the floor for a long moment.

Finally, she shrugs.

INT. WAITING ROOM - DAY

Cora sits, holding her purse in her lap. She takes a couple deep, nervous breaths.

She can't stop glancing at the office door across the room.

Finally, it opens and Sazha walks out, carrying a few school books and her plumeria box tucked safely under an arm.

Cora stands to face Sazha, but Sazha doesn't even acknowledge her. She walks right by and out of the room.

Cora watches her leave.

After a moment, Dr. Patton appears in the doorway of her office and gestures Cora inside.

Cora takes one last glance at the door Sazha had exited and, nervously, walks into Patton's office.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Sazha hands her bookbag to Smithers over the counter.

SMITHERS

Hey little missy.

Sazha gives a polite smile.

SMITHERS

How was school?

SAZHA

It was good.

SMITHERS

Your appointment go okay?

SAZHA

Yeah.

Smithers looks at the jewelry box under her arm.

SMITHERS

I called and talked to the people at the cemetery. They said I could give it to them today and it'd be buried in the morning.

SAZHA

They'll do it, then?

SMITHERS

I had to lie. I told them I was his father. Though I guess I could've been his granddaddy.

SAZHA

Thank you.

She pulls out a wad of small bills.

SAZHA

I'm sorry it's all ones. How much is it exactly?

SMITHERS

Don't worry about that. You've been working hard for me. You keep savin' up your money for something else.

SAZHA

No, Mr. Smithers, I can't let you-

SMITHERS

It wasn't really all that much anyway.

SAZHA

I can't let you pay for my mistake.

SMITHERS

I don't want to hear another word of it. Now you got a back room full of candy boxes you got to arrange.

Sazha stops arguing and smiles.

She takes the plumeria box and heads to the back room.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - BACK ROOM - DAY

All organized.

Sazha sits on a milk crate, holding the box in her lap.

She cries. Hard.

Smithers peeks in and sees her hunched over the box. He leaves her alone to her good byes.

Sazha kisses her hand and presses it on the box, much like she did with Crandall's casket.

INT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Sazha puts Crandall's plumeria box on the counter. She still has tears in her eyes.

SAZHA

I'm finished.

SMITHERS

I'll watch and make sure they bury
it for you.

SAZHA

I might be a little late again
after I get off school tomorrow.

Smithers nods.

SMITHERS

Take as long as you need.

Sazha takes one more sad look at the box, and leaves.

Smithers looks through the blinds to make sure she's gone,
and he looks at the box.

He takes out a tiny screwdriver and holds it up to the lock,
then stops.

He reconsiders, and tucks the tiny screwdriver back into his
pocket.

SMITHERS

(to himself)

It's none of your business, old
man. Whatever it is, it's well
over now. Just let it all die.

Smithers goes back to reading the paper.

INT. DAVIDS' KITCHEN - DAY

Sazha makes dinner. Cora sits at the table, staring
straight ahead at nothing.

Sazha turns the stove top off and sets her plate at her own
seat and pauses. Cora watches her.

Sazha walks back over to the stove for another plate.

This one she sets down in front of Cora, and takes the seat
across from her.

Cora looks at the plate, then up to Sazha.

Sazha just starts eating. Cora nods.

CORA

Thank you.

Cora slowly picks up her fork and begins eating.
Sazha still doesn't make any eye contact with her.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Sazha writes on a cut-out piece of paper, oblivious to the class going on around her.

Two popsicle sticks lay nearby on the desk, with a plastic roll of scotch tape.

Sazha leans back and stares at what she wrote.

EXT. CRANDALL'S GRAVE - DAY

In a light rain, Sazha kneels down and shoves the two popsicle sticks into a tiny fresh mound of dirt in front of Crandall's tiny gravestone.

CRANDALL (V.O.)

I grow a white rose in January the
same as in July for the sincere
friend who offers me his helping
hand...

The piece of paper Sazha had written on is scotch-taped between the two sticks.

'Phillip T. Crandall, Jr.'

CRANDALL (V.O.)

And for the cruel one who tears me
away from the dreams for which I
live, I grow neither weeds nor
thistles...

Sazha gives a small, sad smile as the rain sprinkles down around her.

SLAM CUT TO BLACK

CRANDALL (V.O.)

I grow the white rose.