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THE RAIN OVER HANOI: A PERSONAL PROJECT ABOUT SCREENPLAY STRUCTURE, STORY, REPRESENTATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL STRUGGLE

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*THE RAIN OVER HANOI: A PERSONAL PROJECT ABOUT SCREENPLAY
STRUCTURE, STORY, REPRESENTATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL
STRUGGLE*

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Joan Maida Moua
May 2022

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STRUCTURE, STORY, REPRESENTATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL
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Approved by:

Rod Metts, Committee Chair, Communication Studies

Suzanne Arakawa, Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

A good screenplay is first and foremost a good story. Elements of a good story include compelling characters, a theoretical structure, and a well-executed premise. *The Rain Over Hanoi* is an extremely intimate and personal project about an Asian American expat living in Vietnam. Our protagonist's journey and coming of age is explored via the interactions she has with her old and new family. Communication through food, symbolism, and cultural exchange are also present throughout the screenplay, utilizing a realistic point of view for the benefit of a full story submersion experience to the reader/viewer. Themes of self-exploration, growing up, maturing, and intergenerational trauma are presented in the screenplay to heighten the dramatic impact of how a structured story is told.

This project contains a screenplay that explores themed elements weaved together to represent the stories of people who look like me and share the same experiences as me. Our stories are typically not told in Hollywood so *The Rain Over Hanoi* serves as a vessel to give our experiences a chance and a voice.

Keywords: Screenplay, script, screenplay structure, representation in the media, Asian representation

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DEDICATION

For mom, dad, Valarie, and all the misunderstood daughters of immigrant parents.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A Personal Project

I started this graduate program the same time that the COVID-19 pandemic started. My “Intro to graduate studies” class was one of the first and last in-person classes I took in my graduate career. Classes transitioned to online-only and it was great in the beginning; until I started losing motivation to be a good student. I wasn’t seeing my professors or classmates so I had no social obligation to keep up with my studies and deadlines. It was just easier to Zoom into classes, virtually wave goodbye to my professor in the meeting room, and then binge watch an entire TV show right after.

I saw my cohort graduate on time while I kept procrastinating and pushing off my academic responsibilities. They have jobs, families, and bills to take care of. I don’t pay tuition, I don’t pay rent, I don’t even pay for my phone bill. My parents pay for it all. I remember when I first got accepted into the program, my dad made a deal with me: As long as I go to school, he’ll take care of all the things financial. I had financial freedom that most students would trade places with me for in an instant, yet I couldn’t pull it together and graduate on time like the rest of my classmates. I felt guilt for the first time in my life.

I had it so good, so why couldn’t I be better? I started to look inward, but I couldn’t find the courage to tell anyone what I found. I was so depressed. I was

holding onto so many traumas. I didn't want to talk to anyone about it and burden them, so I started writing. I imagined a beautiful, perfect place that I could escape to and I wrote down every detail of it. The result is my screenplay: *The Rain Over Hanoi*.

I couldn't think of a better time to graduate and share my screenplay with the public. The world is opening up again as COVID cases drop and my goal when I leave here is to finish with a piece of work that I am proud of and that represents me and my experiences.

Influences

In the early stages of this project, I individually asked my committee members for movie suggestions with Asian leads. They all named *Parasite* (2019) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). *Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) were also sparsely mentioned. Although these movies are landmarks of Asian representation on the big movie theater screens, I personally need more. I'm not saying that every movie with an Asian lead needs to be shown in IMAX theaters, but I want more access to them. Movies that tell stories of people who look like me shouldn't be reserved for the niche group of film snobs who only know about the movie because they are heavily invested in the indie productions scene.

For example, three main films influenced and shaped the dramatic catalysts of my film: *Monsoon* (2019), *Minari* (2020), and *In the Mood for Love* (2000). All three films follow protagonists of Asian cultural descent. While

watching the movies, I found it easier to relate to them and their struggles. I saw myself in them, I saw my friends, my family. Let me elaborate.

Monsoon is a story about an outsider trying to blend in. The main character, Kit, returns alone to Vietnam decades after his family fled to Britain after the post-Vietnam War landscape. On the surface, it's a relatively slow and uneventful movie about a lonely guy traveling around a foreign country. But if you look deeper, it's a story about the pain of finding your cultural identity and the struggle of integrating it with your nationality. In my screenplay, *The Rain Over Hanoi*, I tried my best to also convey these themes of loneliness; of not knowing where your true home is.

Influenced by Kit's character, I shaped the narrative of my story through the eyes of Jen, a homesick girl who doesn't realize she's homesick. Any elderly person she meets can trigger a memory of her mom or dad. For every young girl she sees, she imagines her past self or her little sister in that situation. There's a scene in my script where a young Vietnamese girl gets harassed by an American tourist. Jen comes from America, where our poverty is better hidden away; masked behind hostile architecture, or in forms of homeless encampments under the highway overpass. In Vietnam, Jen sees that poverty is right in your face. Vietnam is poor- third world country poor. In Jen's time there, she realizes that her mom and dad probably grew up like this. She starts to understand where they come from and why they treat her the way they do. In her time spent in

Vietnam, she gains perspective- something that can't be taught through books or class. *The Rain Over Hanoi* is about self-journey.

Minari is another well of influence of where I drew my story points from. Thinking about this movie always makes me cry. It follows the story of the Yi family, Korean immigrants who move from California to Arkansas in hopes of better work. It also borrows elements from *Monsoon*, in that the family is in a "fish out of water" situation. They are not from here. They do not have people here. They aren't exactly welcomed here either. When Grandma, the family's only cultural ties back to Korea, comes to visit, she quite literally gets them back in touch with their roots- by planting a minari plant.

Grandma sows the seeds of the minari roots, not because somebody told her to, but because she wanted to, but because she saw the importance of it. It's a way so that her family could thrive and live on land. She had foresight, something that the dad character didn't have. I wanted *The Rain Over Hanoi* to be about conflict and clashes in values and views between generations, just like in *Minari*.

Grandma's actions in this movie remind me of the philosopher quote: "a society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they'll never sit in." Grandma planting the minari seeds is self-less, but it's not at the same time. It's a weird conundrum. She's planting these roots for her family, but isn't her family just an extension of herself? It's a beautiful movie and a very heavy influence on my script and how I define a place as a home. Inspired scenes from *Minari* that

are showcased in my script are when Jen's mom brings her peppers from her garden and when Jen's boyfriend shows her his rooftop garden. Simply put, home is where you can lay your roots down.

In the Mood for Love is where I draw my inspiration about themes of "communication through food" and "expressing yourself and your love for another person through food." Cooking and eating with a special someone is so intimate. You pick out a dish that will cater to their palette. You take extra care and caution into preparing the meal. And finally, your work goes inside them. *In the Mood for Love's* romantic atmosphere of busy street food stands and the intimate moments captured in a secluded restaurant booth, were a significant influence on how I wanted to visualize and hear my movie. When I got stuck, I just watched *In the Mood for Love*.

These stories are important to me. They help shape my world view and make me realize that I'm not alone; that my struggles aren't mine to burden exclusively. Asian representation matters.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Asian Representation in Media

Hollywood has been misrepresenting Asians in American media since the era's golden age of film making. These hurtful and dangerous tropes fetishized Asian women, emasculate Asian men, and turn our physical features into caricatures for cheap, easy laughs. Asian actors and actresses are stuck playing a kung-fu master with a long grey beard, a virgin nerd with thick-rimmed glasses, or the sexy, brooding, exotic girl with a streak of purple or blue hair. In the following section, I will be reviewing scholarly texts to break down these stereotypes and hopefully make some room for change and accurate depictions of Asian representation in media.

Breaking Stereotypes

The Model Minority

The model minority trope is a “seemingly positive” notion often applied to people of Asian descent. It's a trope where the Asian character conforms to the white American values, but can never truly reach or be part of the “normal” social standing (Kawai, 2005). The model minority follows the law, climbs the corporate ladder, and subscribes to a nuclear family unit. It puts Asians on screen in a box and it translates to real life too.

The Yellow Peril

Yellow peril is when Asians are seen as foreigners who have the potential to undermine a white nation's economy and cultural customs (Kawai, 2005). It creates paranoia and promotes exclusivity. In addition, the term "yellowface" was coined to both ridicule and dehumanize Asians. Our cultures and customs were diluted down to the color of our skin so that our existence was for entertainment purposes only. It treats the Asian race as a costume.

What Makes a Good Story?

Sometimes a good story is a simple story. Sometimes the best part of the story is the ride of emotions and twists and turns that it takes you on. Regardless of what you find amusing, a good story has two major components: Characters and structure.

In order to help shape my theoretical framework, I used John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story* and J.J. Murphy's *Me and you and Memento and Fargo: How independent screenplays work* as a guide to compare and contrast my structures and storytelling techniques to the works that came before me.

Characters

The main character, or protagonist, is your gateway into their world. Through them we learn about the laws and politics of their world, we meet the people they meet, etc. The character controls the narrative through their thoughts and actions. It is what we base our feelings for them on. Think about your favorite movie character ever. Is it Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*? A once bright-eyed

aspiring Jedi, hardened by the politics of his universe? Or do you want someone a bit darker? Someone who crosses the line of morality like Lou Bloom from *Nightcrawler*- a freelance news producer who will go to any lengths to get the perfect story.

A character's motivations are what drives the story (Murphy, p. 30). When I was brain storming my script, I had hardest time giving my main character Jen motivation. I needed action, I needed to get her out of the house and get the story rolling, and this required ambivalence. I knew that a passive protagonist was not going to work for my story because her world was going to be boring when we enter it. Jen is short-tempered, has no patience, and doesn't open up to people. I knew that if I wanted to make her a compelling character, I had to have people who took her out of her comfort zone. She was dormant in her lifestyle and wanted to leave the mundane-ness of suburbia. All she needed an opportunity. Enter the side characters.

Tina is Jen's character foil. If Jen stays home, then Tina goes out. If Jen is the responsible friend, then Tina is the reckless friend. The point of a character foil is not to point out opposites traits of both characters, but to highlight those traits in the characters. An example would be in the Marvel comic book movies. Steve Rogers is the All-American golden retriever. Tony Stark: Genius playboy billionaire philanthropist. But what's interesting is when the dynamic flips. The character foils go head-to-head, either solidifying and reinforcing their ideologies,

or challenging them and breaking the character's world view forever. The fun part of screenwriting is that I get to choose with outcome I want.

For Jen's storyline, I always knew that she was going to come back home. She stole money from mom, she runs away in shame, but in the end, she has to come home. It's in her character's core to take care of people. Knowing this fact while writing Jen made it easier to give her obstacles to face and overcome.

Structure

The classic three-act structure is the most basic and easy-to-follow narrative device. As outlined in Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat*, the structure follows basic story beats (p. 70.) An example would be: girl meets boy, girl falls in love with boy, girl finds out that boy is a ninety-eight year old blood-sucking vampire. I have a pretty serious crime happen early on in my story: Jen steals her mom's savings stash. I could have chosen to take the story to Mexico; Jen lives out the rest of her days sitting on a beach with a pina colada in her hand. Or I could make her run off with the money and an ex, and as the trail gets hotter, the relationship's truths start to shine through. I could have an unreliable narrator like in *Gone Girl*, where the main character chooses to omit certain information to the viewer/reader.

I chose not to do this. I wanted a linear plot. According to Linda Segar, a linear plot runs the risk of being too boring, or "without [dimension]" (Murphy, p. 88). While I was writing, I kept this thought in mind. I was so concerned about the movie not having enough set pieces or beautiful locations or drama, but then I

realized that this is not going to be that type of film. This is a slice of life film. It's slow, boring, but beautiful and exciting at the same time- just like real life. I wanted Jen and Jen's world to be realistic more than anything. I opted out of the drama and loud explosions and traded it for intimate moments on the balcony and whispered conversations on a rooftop garden in the middle of a busy city.

Chapter 7 of Murphy's book is all about flashbacks. During the planning process of my story beats, I was advised by all three members of my committee not to use flashback sequences to tell a story. In retrospect, I realize why they all told me that: it's really hard to use correctly without being too on-the-nose. I also realized that my story doesn't need flashbacks. Life doesn't work in flashbacks. It's not realistic because we can't go back in time and change the past. We can only move forward.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Project Overview

The main goal for this project was to develop and produce a feature length screenplay. Through a series of screenplay analyses and a literature review of relevant film production sources, I was able to draft up a script treatment. From there, I outlined my story beats and made a series of character study notes. The software to write and format the screenplay that I used was Final Draft 10.

I consulted J.J.Murphy's *Me and you and Memento and Fargo: How independent screenplays work* and John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story* when I needed character, story, and narrative structure help.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

This project is a creative project. I knew that I wouldn't have the traditional process of putting together an extensive literature review, conducting studies, or typing up methodologies, hence why I chose to do a project. I'm a student but I'm not a scholar. I mean this in that I love to learn to new things, but my strength isn't from synthesizing sources and creating a new meaning; rather, I observe and I write and I observe and write some more. I am true to form, a post-structuralist. I believe that meanings change depending on society. I also believe that texts and symbolism have the power to move society and I can't think of a better way than to do it through a film.

APPENDIX A
"THE RAIN OVER HANOI"
SCRIPT TREATMENT

The Rain Over Hanoi

Treatment - November 2, 2021

Writer: Joan Moua

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Logline

An Asian American expat living in Vietnam is called back home by her sister when their mother gets sick.

Genre

Drama, family drama, coming of age

Synopsis

This story follows Jen, an Hmong American expat in Vietnam. Jen is tired of saving face for her parents, friends, and relatives after her failed academic accomplishments. While scrolling through social media, Jen sees an old college friend, Tina, living the good life in Vietnam. Interested, Jen reaches out to Tina and reconnects. Jen needs little to no convincing to leave her minimum wage job and emotionally distant family. With not enough money in her bank account for a one way plane ticket to Vietnam, Jen's desperation leads her to steal from her mother's secret stash of cash savings.

She arrives in Vietnam and falls in love with the country: The people, the food, the weather, the roadside cafes, their way of transportation, etc. Jen finally starts enjoying life. Jen has cut off her parents. She constantly struggles with the guilt of "I don't owe them anything, I can be selfish" and "They're my parents, they taught me everything I know, I can't just leave them like this." Jen pushes these thoughts down with partying and alcohol. She meets Minh, a man twice her age who has hurts and secrets of his own. The months go by but Jen always thinks about her family. She sees them in the people of Vietnam. But one day, Jen gets a call from her younger sister Catherine, or Cat. Cat tells her that Mom suffered from another stroke and this time, it's serious. Cat tells Jen that she and Dad need her help taking care of mom. This leads to a series of phone call conversations between Jen and Cat where they talk about all the family issues. It's

therapeutic; they finally talk about Cat's suicide attempt, mom and dad's life before their refugee journey to America, life in general, etc. It is through these phone call conversations with her younger sister that Jen starts to heal from her repressed intergenerational traumas.

Eventually, Jen decides for herself to go back home. Minh is sad about this news, but understands her. Jen gains perspective from her time in Vietnam. It is then that she sees her parents as *people*, individuals who had hopes and dreams and a life before she was born, instead of just seeing them as "mom and dad." Jen arrives back home on a dark snowy night. Her parents leave the porch light on for her, awaiting her homecoming.

Themes

Internal struggles of guilt, loyalty to family
Self-exploration, growing up, maturing
Intergenerational trauma

Characters

Jennifer (Jen): Protagonist, 23, Hmong. Strong-willed. Outspoken. Short tempered.

Mom: Early 50's. Hmong. Hardworking. Blue-collar. Immigrant from Laos.

Dad: Late 50's. Hmong. Stern. Arrogant. Immigrant from Laos.

Catherine (Cat): 17. Hmong. Jen's younger sister. Quiet. Insecure. Creative. Artistic.

Minh: 48. Vietnamese. Jen's boyfriend. As an infant, was adopted out of Vietnam.

Returned back to the country in his early 20's. Quiet. Mysterious. Cool. Romantic.

Tina: 23, white American. Jen's old college friend. Moved to Vietnam right after college to find easier work. She helps Jen with her move to Vietnam.

Mr. Tran: Late 70's. Vietnamese. Jen's new boss. A surrogate father figure to Jen for her time being in Vietnam.

David: 27. Hmong. Jen's estranged brother.

Setting

Minnesota, United States

Hanoi, Vietnam

Rural countryside, Vietnam

APPENDIX B
THE RAIN OVER HANOI
AN ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY

THE RAIN OVER HANOI

Written by

Joan Maida Moua

EXT. MINNESOTA SUBURBS - MORNING

Light snowfall lands on the trees in the quiet suburbs of Minnesota.

A split-level suburban home painted baby blue.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME - MORNING

From an iPad leaning on the kitchen counter, plays "60 Lub Xyoo" by Kos Lis and Suab Nag.

This is a Hmong family household.

The rice cooker bellows out puffs of steam from the release hatch.

MOM, early 50's, is tending to a sizzling pan of heavily seasoned ground pork. She leaves the kitchen for a brief moment and comes back with a black lanyard dangling with multiple keys.

She chooses a key and unlocks the knife drawer.

MOM

Where's my cutting board. Who used
my nice cutting board?

Mom retrieves a chef's knife, a wooden cutting board, places them on the counter, and then locks the drawer again.

She leaves the kitchen to put the keys back in a closet at the end of the hallway.

Mom stops by JEN's room which is completely dark except for the single bright desk lamp illuminating the room.

Sitting in a chair hunched over the desk is Jen, early 20's.

Jen has unkempt hair, wearing raggedy old pajamas, sits cross-legged, focused and carving away at a miniature wooden patio chair.

The miniature model of a summer home that she is working on is nearly complete.

MOM (CONT'D)

(in Hmong)

Jen. Go get cilantro from the store
for me.

JEN
 (in English)
 Isn't there some in the fridge?

MOM
 It's rotten. No good any more.

Mom moves to open Jen's window curtains. Jen winces at the sudden light change.

MOM (CONT'D)
 (in Hmong)
 Did you just wake up?

JEN
 Nope. I haven't slept yet.

Mom shakes her head and lets out a sigh.

MOM
 (in Hmong)
 Kid's these days.

INT. SMALL CONVENIENCE STORE - MORNING

A bell above the entrance door chimes as Jen enters the store.

Three older Hmong ladies behind the counter gossip and watch the news on the TV.

Jen kicks the snow off her boots and does not attempt to make eye contact.

She goes straight towards the produce isle.

She bags up three cilantro bundles and plops it on the counter.

One of the ladies makes her way over to ring Jen up.

HMONG WOMAN
 Hi honey. Two-seventy-nine please.

Jen places the money on the counter.

HMONG WOMAN (CONT'D)
 (in Hmong)
 Do you know how to speak Hmong?

Jen smiles sheepishly at her.

JEN

No, sorry. I can only understand it.

HMONG WOMAN

Why didn't your mom teach you?

The other two ladies stop talking and look over at them.

JEN

She didn't want to, I think.

The other two women whisper to one another.

Jen gathers her stuff.

The ladies murmur and shake their head in disapproval as Jen leaves the store in a hurry.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME - MORNING

In the basement is DAD, late 50's. He is at his standing desk.

He works on his model airplanes. Like Jen's room, the desk lamp is the only light source in the dim space.

He squints through his thick-rimmed glasses as he brushes off specs of dust from the piece of plastic airplane wing he is sanding down.

He works in complete silence.

We move upstairs to CATHERINE's bedroom (goes by Cat, 17). Plastered on the wall are posters of pop music idols and a whiteboard calender full of her important dates, scribbles, and doodles.

Cat sits up on her bed. She is wearing a matching cat print pajama set, with headphones blasting music.

She is doodling away on her iPad, mumbling some lyrics to herself.

She yanks out her left earphone.

CAT

What?

JEN

(off screen)

I said where's my fucking gray shirt?

Jen, wearing a dirty tank top and work uniform pants, is frantically digging through a pile of dirty laundry at the base of Cat's closet.

MOM
(From downstairs)
Jen? What time do you have work?

JEN
Ten to six!

Jen continues to rummage through the clothing pile.

JEN (CONT'D)
(to herself, frustrated)
Didn't I already tell her earlier today?

Jen finally manages to pull out a gray turtle neck sweater from the clothing pile. She yanks off the shirt she's wearing and hurls it at Cat.

CAT
Hey! Ow?

Jen puts on the gray sweater and hurries up to leave, before saying to Cat:

JEN
Stop taking my shit.

CAT
(mimicking Jen)
Stop taking my shit.

Jen hurries down to the kitchen to grab her keys.

MOM
Eat before you go.

JEN
I don't have time.

Jen leaves out the garage door.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - AFTERNOON

Jen is seen rushing out of the opening garage door, outer coat half on, mid-chewing on a granola bar, fumbling with her backpack and keys.

She's in the middle of the driveway when Mom follows out the door. Mom is waving a pair of black fuzzy gloves in her hand.

MOM

Jen. Wait- Your dad is gonna leave
the light on for you.

JEN

(irritated)
Yeah, I know!

MOM

Here, your gloves.

JEN

Oh, right.

MOM

For your hands.

Mom helps Jen put the gloves on.

JEN

I got it. Get back inside, it's
cold.

Jen waves off her mom and jumps in the car. She blasts the
heater on and then pulls out of the driveway.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Mom and dad eat at the kitchen breakfast nook near the bay
window.

Cat comes into the kitchen with her headphones still in her
ears.

She doesn't say a word to them.

She fixes herself a plate with very small portions, and then
goes to eat in her room.

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE CHECKOUT LINE - EVENING

The department store is decorated with Christmas themed
decor. Christmas jingles play on the overhead speaker.

It is very busy as customers are shopping in shoulder-to-
shoulder proximity.

The store is a mess as a result of everyone rummaging through
the clothes, looking for their size.

Random items are not supposed to be where they are as a
result of people too lazy to put them back.

The line at the checkout area nearly wraps around the entire store.

The store is understaffed, as it is only Jen and a few other staff members.

Jen is on cash registers tonight, wearing a demeaning Christmas work uniform. It's a bright green vest with red lining and white fabric balls and silver tinsel randomly sticking out.

A montage of customers at Jen's cash register:

WOMAN 1: Elderly black woman, wearing lots of layers and a thick scarf. She's holding up a thick parka jacket.

WOMAN 1

Honey look, there's a tiny tear on the side of the jacket here. This is a gift for my grandson, he's stationed in Colorado. Is there anything you can do about it? It's the only one left on the rack.

The woman squints and leans forward to look at Jen's name badge which is clipped to her shirt pocket.

WOMAN 1 (CONT'D)

Jan, is it?

WOMAN 2: Middle aged white woman, graying hair, business suit and puffy coat. She's shuffling through her large purse. She has an English accent.

WOMAN 2

Can I use this coupon code or is it online only? Wait I think it's expired. I'm in a hurry so be quick about it.

YOUNG MAN: Early 20's, Hispanic, big diamond earrings. Looks nervous.

YOUNG MAN

Can I pay off my charge card here? Hold on, can you see how much I owe? Because it's a lot. Like wait, you guys can't see how much is in my account, right? Or how much debt I'm in? Can I make a payment without giving my information because I also forgot my ID.

WOMAN 3: Middle white woman aged, short bob cut with blonde highlights, messy under eyeliner. She's holding a long receipt and is waving it back and forth.

WOMAN 3

(talking slow,
condescending)

What do you mean I can't return the item without having the item with me! I have my receipt! And I'm absolutely not waiting at the customer service line!

WOMAN 4: Elderly Hispanic woman, short, wearing thick rimmed glasses.

WOMAN 4

(In broken English)

Do you speak Spanish?

WOMAN 5: Asian, middle aged, with a crying toddler in the cart seat and two twin boys screaming and chasing each other around the registers. Has a cart full of baby and teenager clothes.

WOMAN 5

Who's the manager right now? I might know them and they can give me a discount, I used to work here.

OLD MAN: Elderly white man, under-dressed for the snowy weather.

OLD MAN

What size am I?

GREG: Middle aged white man, Jen's boss. He has a radio in his shirt pocket which is attached to an ear piece. Radio chatter can be heard because of how loud the volume is.

He leans over the counter to whisper to Jen:

GREG

Heya Jen, someone peed in the men's dressing room.

CUT TO:

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Jen is wearing yellow rubber gloves and a face mask covering. She's on her knees, aggressively spraying and scrubbing a dark spot of urine on the carpet.

Jen's coworker SAMANTHA, young black woman, sneaks into the dressing room.

SAMANTHA

Oh my God, you scared me!

JEN

Uh sorry? Why are you in here?

SAMANTHA

I'm hiding from Greg. I clock out in five minutes and if he sees me, he'll give me something to do and ask me to stay late and I'm too nice to say no.

JEN

Girl, look him dead in the eyes and say no.

SAMANTHA

I can't!

Jen takes off her rubber gloves.

JEN

You recently got hired right?

SAMANTHA

Yeah, like two weeks ago. This is the first time I've ever had a job in retail during the holidays.

JEN

Yeah I thought so. Y'know, sometimes I see you working too hard, being too nice to the customers.

SAMANTHA

Is that a bad thing?

JEN

No, I'm just joking around with you. I like that you're a hard worker, but one piece of advice from someone who's held multiple service jobs: Pace yourself.

(MORE)

JEN (CONT'D)

The work will always be there even if you rush, so don't burn yourself out trying to get it all done super fast.

SAMANTHA

Wow. I never saw it that way.

JEN

Four words I live by, as soon as I clock in: Minimum wage, minimum effort.

SAMANTHA

That needs to be put on a T-shirt or something.

Jen and Samantha laugh to themselves.

JEN

And walk slow and take the long route to the break room.

Jen flashes a smile at Samantha.

SAMANTHA

How long have you been here?

JEN

About five months.

SAMANTHA

Do you like it here?

JEN

Yes and no. I like my coworkers.

SAMANTHA

Yeah. Do you work anywhere else?

JEN

I used to go to school, I was really good at it, but I quit because it just wasn't for me. You?

SAMANTHA

I just work here and at the corner store. I can't afford school at the moment.

JEN

Are you saving up?

SAMANTHA

Yeah, but is this job honestly worth my sanity?

JEN

I- I think you and me are going to get along very well!

SAMANTHA

Haha oh my god yes! But I think I wanna quit soon.

JEN

Why? I meant I know why, but why?

SAMANTHA

I don't like the customers. Some of them are so rude.

JEN

Ooo! Story time?

SAMANTHA

Like one time I was scanning a lady's stuff and she put her coupons on the counter and tapped on it aggressively as if I didn't see it. Like lady, I saw it but I'm kind of busy scanning your other shit at the moment.

Jen bursts out laughing.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)

I didn't scan the coupon and she was too stupid to look at the receipt after.

JEN

I can beat you; the other day a man came in wanting to pay off his store card and he then proceeded to fish out his soggy, loose pocket change of \$13.98 and in that moment, I knew that man was capable of evil.

The two laugh, trying to keep quiet.

JEN (CONT'D)

Wait until you see a live robbery happen in front of your eyes.

SAMANTHA

Wait what?

Jen nods.

JEN

One time, our manager Greg got robbed at gun point and Greg needed to get the register keys across the store, so the robber walked over with him, gun to Greg's head and he asked Greg to hurry it up, but Greg had knee surgery the other week and told the guy he didn't feel like walking faster. And the robber couldn't do anything about it so he just followed Greg for like five minutes in slow silence.

SAMANTHA

If I were the robber, I woulda just left-

JEN

Me too! The embarrassment!

SAMANTHA

Oh my god! I hate it here!

CUT TO:

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE CHECKOUT LINE - NIGHT

Jen is at her register, wringing up an older woman's purchase.

The line at the registers is still very long and the customers look very unhappy.

An Arab couple is arguing in the distance. The couple approaches Jen.

ANGRY MAN

(thick Arab accent)

You, listen. Why does the sign say \$9.99 but it price checks as \$13.99?

JEN

Hmm?

ANGRY MAN

This is illegal. I'm a lawyer and
this is illegal.

JEN

Boohoo. Let me finish up with this
customer first.

The angry man is shocked at Jen's customer service skills.

ANGRY MAN

No, I want you to come with me and
look for yourself. Come.

The man looks at his wife.

ANGRY MAN (CONT'D)

My wife is very angry with these
prices.

She was not.

JEN

Is it really that serious? You
couldn't find anyone else on the
sales floor?

ANGRY MAN

(to his wife)
I don't care. You, stay.

ANGRY MAN (CONT'D)

(to Jen)
You, come.

The man crosses his arms in discontent. Jen looks to the
customer she was previously working with.

JEN

Are you paying cash or card today?

The older woman customer dumps loose bills and change onto
the counter.

Jen looks at the woman, expecting her to count it out. They
don't.

Jen gathers what is due and prompts the register to open.

JEN (CONT'D)

(deadpan)
I'm out of dollar bills.

Jen quickly walks over to her COWORKER, an older white woman, the next few registers over.

JEN (CONT'D)

Hey I don't have a radio, can you call over Greg for some dollar bills?

COWORKER

My walkie's dead, sorry. I have some single dollars, but you need to remember to return it to this register when you get the chance.

JEN

Got it, boss.

Her coworker hands her a few one dollar bills. Jen puts them in her pants pocket.

Jen returns to her register.

JEN (CONT'D)

Sorry about that.

She gives the customer their change and then goes to talk to the unhappy customer.

JEN (CONT'D)

Okay sir, what can I help you with?

ANGRY MAN

Come, follow me. You-

The man looks at his wife.

ANGRY MAN (CONT'D)

Stay here so we don't lose our spot.

Jen looks at the woman.

JEN

(to the woman)
I'll be right back.

Jen follows the man over to a display of men's thermal long sleeve shirts. There is a large digital sign that says \$9.99 for the shirts.

ANGRY MAN

Look. Look at the sign. It says \$9.99.

JEN

Okay sir, that's actually an in-store brand, so I can change the price for you, no problem.

ANGRY MAN

No, let me see a manager.

JEN

We're short on radios and I don't have one to call him over. I can try to find them but they're gonna tell you the same exact thing.

ANGRY MAN

Okay, do it.

Jen leaves the man and leisurely walks around the store to find Greg. She finds Greg in his office, watching the news on the break room TV, feet up in the air.

The break room is a mess, with half opened shipment boxes everywhere.

JEN

Hey, there's a customer who wants to tell you about a price change.

GREG

I'm busy, go ahead and just honor it. And get me some five star surveys. Too many people complaining to corporate about long lines and I don't wanna take another call from the higher ups.

JEN

It's literally only three of us on the registers tonight.

Greg's eyes are glued to the TV, a news story playing about refugees escaping a war crisis.

GREG

(muttering)
Dirty immigrants.

Jen rolls her eyes.

JEN

So what do I tell him?

GREG

I don't know, give him what he wants.

JEN

He wants you.

Greg gets up, visibly annoyed. He shoves past her.

GREG

Don't leave your register again.

Greg leaves the break room. Jen stays to watch the news for a moment. Footage of families waiting in long lines at a refugee camp play as a news anchor commentates over it.

Jen spins on her heels and walks back to the men's section of the store. The man is pacing around the area.

JEN

He said that I'm allowed to fix the price for you.

ANGRY MAN

No no no no no. Your manager has to come over and fix it. This is a scam, what if other customers want to buy the shirt? Look how busy it is!

JEN

I understand, we'll fix the price for them as well. Look, the line is building up and people wanna get out of here as much as I want them to leave.

ANGRY MAN

Well that's no way to treat a loyal customer. And what if the customer doesn't notice the price at the register? The sign is wrong and this is illegal. You know that I'm a lawyer right?

JEN

Yes sir, but the sign here is digitized. I can't change it, I'm just a cashier who is currently not cashier-ing because you're keeping me here and we're talking in circles. There's nothing I can do about this sign.

ANGRY MAN

You can't go into the computer and fix it?

ANGRY JEN

And what computer are we talking about now?

Jen glances behind her, the line of people has not gone down.

ANGRY MAN

I don't know, I don't work here.

JEN

Sir, I'm just a cashier. How many times do I have to tell you this?

ANGRY MAN

(raising his voice)

This is a scam, you people are scammers!

Jen looks at the man, appalled.

JEN

If you're a lawyer, why are you complaining about prices? You can't afford a fucking \$15 shirt?

The man was too stunned to speak. People are starting to look over at them.

ANGRY MAN

It's \$13.99. What is your name? I'm going to report you to corporate.

JEN

My name's Jen. Let me go clock out and you can raise your voice at me again.

Suddenly Greg appears from the clothing racks.

GREG

Hello sir, what's the issue here?

ANGRY MAN

This is illegal, I'm a lawyer. And this girl should be fired for treating customers like this.

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE - NIGHT

A tiny, cluttered office. Stacks of binders and loose papers are scattered everywhere.

Greg types away on the keyboard on his desk.

The lighting makes the skin under his eyes look extra thin.

Jen and four of her coworkers, all young girls, stand opposite of where Greg is sitting.

GREG

Okay ladies, Tammy and Hannah, you two can head home since you reached your sales goals. And the rest of you are on floor duty tonight. And Jen, could you stay back for a moment?

The girls leave the room and Jen steps forward.

GREG (CONT'D)

Close the door for me.

Jen moves to close the door.

GREG (CONT'D)

We're letting you go.

JEN

Huh?

GREG

This is your final strike.

JEN

Wait what? What did I do?

GREG

You didn't show up last week when we really needed you and earlier this week, there was another customer complaint about you. Remember the discount miscommunication?

JEN

Okay, I forgot to give that lady %15 off an \$8 order. Was she really crying over \$1.20?

GREG

These discounts matter to these people. They work hard for their money, they deserve to spend it.

JEN

That doesn't mean they get to treat us like trash though.

Greg sighs.

GREG

Okay, Jen- please. Enough with the backtalking.

JEN

I-

Jen catches herself.

GREG

Plus you violated your meal time yesterday but I still saw you eating your lunch on the clock.

JEN

I missed my lunch because the line was out the door because you're too cheap to hire more cashiers.

GREG

Okay. Jen. Also add on that little debacle earlier tonight.

JEN

The dude acts like I can hack into the fucking mainframe and change the fucking prices-

Jen throws her arms up in disbelief.

GREG

Listen, look on the bright side and consider yourself lucky! At least you're not hungry or homeless during the holidays. You actually have it so good, so what's with the attitude? You should be happy! Cheer up!

Jen glares at Greg.

GREG (CONT'D)

You can pick up your paycheck next week.

INT. DIFFERENT DEPARTMENT STORE - DAY

Jen is now behind the customer service desk at a different department store.

Her uniform has a bright yellow "trainee" sticker on it.

She's folding clothes from a messy bin that's labeled "returns."

A woman wearing scrubs, NURSE (late 40's), walks up to Jen's counter. She has a tote bag bulging with items to return.

JEN

Hi, can I help you with something?

NURSE

Ah yes, I have a lot of things to return here.

The Nurse starts pulling out perfume bottles, kid's clothing, and kid's shoes out of her bag.

NURSE (CONT'D)

These have been sitting in my car for so long.

Jen is watching the Nurse unload her stuff onto the returns desk.

Jen sees her new boss from the corner of her eye watching them from behind the clothing racks.

Jen meets her boss's eyes. He mimics a smile with his face and hands, signaling Jen to put on a smile.

Jen subtly rolls her eyes and puts on a fake smile. The woman is done unloading her items.

JEN

All right ma'am do you have a receipt for these items? Or the card that you paid with?

NURSE

Yes, here is the receipt.

The nurse hands Jen her receipt. Jen scans the receipt and then starts handling the perfume bottles first.

JEN

I don't think these are ours, I've never seen this brand in this store before.

Jen shows the Nurse the perfume bottles.

NURSE

Oh! I'm so sorry, I've been looking for these everywhere too.

Jen and the Nurse share a laugh.

JEN

That's okay, it happens to the best of us.

The Nurse puts her perfume bottles away in her tote bag.

Jen continues to scan the kid's clothes. Once finished, she scans the shoes.

JEN (CONT'D)

Okay, it looks like the shoes are past the return policy so you can't return them.

NURSE

What do you mean?

JEN

It's been too long since you made the purchase to return them. Our time limit is 180 days, so about 6 months.

The Nurse gawks at Jen. Her happy demeanor completely switches and she is now upset.

NURSE

So what can you do about it?

Jen holds the receipt up so that the both of them can look at it. She points to the date on top of the receipt.

JEN

The computer won't let me do your return because it's past the 6 month return policy. I can process the return without the receipt, so that you can get at least some money back in a store credit.

NURSE

Will I get my full refund? The price that I paid for it?

JEN

No, it's already been too long, but you can get some of it back on a store credit, so it's better than nothi-

The Nurse snatches the receipt from Jen.

NURSE

When did they make this new policy because this is ridiculous.

The Nurse starts putting her items back in her tote bag.

NURSE (CONT'D)

I've been shopping here forever.

JEN

Well, you *did* have 6 months to return it. If you didn't care about it enough to return it within the 6 months time frame, I don't know why you're so upset about it now.

The Nurse is done putting all her items in her bag. She takes the receipt and starts ripping it up into tiny little pieces.

JEN (CONT'D)

Oh wow, very mature.

The Nurse is ignoring Jen.

JEN (CONT'D)

Are you done? Are you happy? Get all your little theatrics out, let everyone know how angry you are that you can't return your cheap ten dollar shoes.

The Nurse continues ripping up her receipt.

JEN (CONT'D)

And at your age too? Throwing a tantrum?

The Nurse gathers all her receipt confetti into her hands.

JEN (CONT'D)

Wow. This is actually so embarrassing for you.

The Nurse throws the receipt confetti right at Jen's face.

Jen takes a second to process what happened. The Nurse leaves without saying a word.

START DAY DREAM SEQUENCE:

As the Nurse is leaving, Jen comes from behind the Nurse, grabs a fistful of the Nurse's hair and then slams her to the ground.

Jen tightens her grip on the Nurse's hair with her left hand and starts beating down on the woman's face with her right hand.

JEN (CONT'D)
Fucking bitch!

The Nurse's items roll out of her bag. Jen grabs one of the shoes and starts beating the Nurse with it.

Jen's new boss tries to break up the fight but gets hit with one of Jen's punches.

JEN (CONT'D)
I'll fucking kill you too!

Jen continues beating the Nurse's face in.

END DAY DREAM SEQUENCE.

Jen comes out of her state of shock.

She looks up from the receipt confetti on her desk and see's a new customer in front of her, trying to get her attention by snapping at her.

Jen picks out the receipt confetti from her hair and puts on a fake smile for the new customer. She looks more like she is about to cry.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME - NIGHT

Mom enters the house through the garage door. She is wearing a waitress uniform and her hair is a bit messy. The clock reads 11PM.

She kicks off the remaining snow off her non slip shoes then sets her purse and lunch bag by the stairs.

She takes off and hangs her heavy snow jacket and lets out a heavy, tired sigh.

Mom hangs up her waitress apron on the hallway hooks, grabs her purse, and hobbles her way into the kitchen.

She reaches the two-seat table near the kitchen's bay window and slowly sits down. She rubs her feet for a moment.

Mom rummages through her purse and messily piles on the loose money bills onto the table. She gets up to grab a bowl of rubber bands and then sits back down to start sorting the tips she made tonight.

The house is dead silent.

Dad has moved from building his model airplanes in the basement to taking a nap in the TV room.

Cat is laying under her covers, scrolling through her social media accounts.

Jen's room is empty.

Mom carries a stack of bundled bills to her bedroom closet. Behind the rows of clothes is a gray, worn, fabric suitcase.

It is made out of scratchy material and some zippers don't close all the way.

Mom puts the money into the suitcase. It's a hefty amount of cash, all neatly sorted into their denominations.

She puts in tonight's tips, struggles a bit to close it up, heads for the showers, and goes to bed.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - NIGHT

Jen pulls up to the driveway. The light at the front porch is on for her.

The clock in her car reads 1AM.

INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

A dim bare light bulb from the ceiling hums as it's turned on.

Jen stands over a washing machine, pressing away at the buttons. The sound of water rushing to fill the basin fills the room.

Jen leaves and then returns with the lanyard of keys.

She chooses a key and inserts it into the overhead cabinets above the washing machines.

She pulls out a bottle of bleach, pours it in, then locks away the bleach again.

She separates her whites into the laundry.

Jen stops by at her dad's work desk. She clicks on the desk lamp and closely examines the model airplanes.

DAD

You're doing laundry this late?

Jen, startled, steps back from the desk.

JEN

It's Cat's clothes. If Mom doesn't do it for her, she won't either. You guys spoil her too much.

DAD

Yeah, yeah. She's our baby.

Dad walks to his desk. He grabs his glasses from the desk drawer to put them on. He picks up a nearly finished model airplane.

DAD (CONT'D)

What do you think? Does it look real?

Jen leans into the airplane that Dad is holding.

JEN

Do you put the brown dust on it intentionally?

DAD

Yeah to make it look dirty like it used to look like on the aircraft carrier.

JEN

Hmm.

They stand in silence as Jen watches her dad work.

JEN (CONT'D)

Do you miss being in the Navy?

DAD

Sometimes. I miss the food.

JEN

You're joking. What kind of food would they give you?

DAD

Ah, my favorite is the fried catfish.

JEN

Catfish? How are you getting catfish in the middle of the Pacific ocean?

DAD

It comes pre-fried and frozen. The cooks on the ship fry it up and serve it with some pickles and coleslaw. Ah, I want some now.

JEN

That's... I literally have nothing to say about frozen fried catfish. Also doesn't catfish tastes like dirt?

DAD

No! It's good! Sometimes I hopped back in line for seconds.

JEN

(chuckling)
Oh my god.

DAD

It's good, I'll make it for you sometime.

JEN

Please, don't. I won't eat it.

DAD

I know how to make it like they used to. You'll like it.

Dad sets the model airplane down, turns his desk light off, and heads upstairs. Jen sits on the dryer machine and pulls out her phone.

DAD (CONT'D)

(off screen)
Jen?

JEN

What?

DAD
(off screen)
Talk to Cat more.

JEN
What do you mean?

DAD
(off screen)
Just talk to her more.

JEN
Ummmm. Okay.

DAD
(off screen)
Also sleep early, we're going to
the craft store tomorrow remember?

JEN
Got it. Wait, Dad?-

DAD
(off screen)
Yeah?

JEN
I quit my job.

There is a pause.

DAD
(off screen)
Again?

JEN
Yup.

Dad appears again from the stairs, a look of concern on his face.

DAD
What happened?

JEN
Don't tell mom. I hated it. I'm so
tired and drained by the end of the
day and I hate people and my
bosses. And they make me stay late
to clean up and organize the store
just for it to be a mess the next
day.

DAD

I hated my job too, but I did what I had to do to put food on the table.

JEN

Yeah I know, but I absolutely *hate* it.

Dad is silent for a moment.

Jen hops off the dryer machine that she was sitting on.

She crosses her arms and avoids Dad's eye contact.

DAD

You know that you kids keep me on the right track? There are times when I wake up and I think: I don't want do this, I don't wanna do that, I don't wanna go. But I always put you guys first.

Dad goes to the basement window to look at the snow fall.

DAD (CONT'D)

Me and your mom worked so hard so that you, your brother, and Cat don't ever have to struggle like we did.

JEN

I know.

DAD

Sometimes we gotta do what we gotta do, even if we don't wanna do it. It's about sacrifice. These are the things we do for each other.

JEN

I know. I miss David sometimes.

DAD

I miss your brother too. But he's off doing his own thing.

JEN

Yeah but it wouldn't hurt to call everyone once in a while, right?

DAD

He's busy, he has his own life to worry about. You should call him first.

JEN

Why me? Why do I have to do it?
 "Call your brother, talk to Cat,
 don't quit your soul draining dead-
 end job."

Dad turns from the window to look at Jen.

JEN (CONT'D)

Sometimes I get jealous of how you and mom treat them. Like, I get it, he's the first born son and you and mom basically worship him. And Cat's the baby of the family so I get why you guys treat her like that too. But why are you and mom always so hard on me? Every time I tell you guys something, it just ends up in a lecture. And you never listen to people when they talk, you just want an excuse to tell people how right you are. You never listen to people because you think that you're always right. So when Cat tried killing herself-

DAD

Jen.

Jen takes a moment to gather herself.

JEN

(tearing up)

When I left for college, she was so lonely. And she couldn't even talk to you or mom because she also knew that it would just end up in a lecture. And after she almost overdosed, we never talked about it. If she died, it would have been like she never existed because we don't fucking talk about it and now this whole fucking house is suicide-proof too. I need a key every time I need to unlock the bleach and kitchen knives for fuck's sake. How come you didn't call David to come back home too.

(MORE)

JEN (CONT'D)

Is his life more important than mine that he can't put his on hold for us?

Jen wipes away her tears.

JEN (CONT'D)

There's so much pressure on me sometimes and I feel like I have to be perfect and I can't fuck up because if I do, everything's gonna fall apart. I had everything in California, dad. Everything I wanted. But you called me back home to fix Cat and it was all for nothing because we don't talk about what happened. We just ignore our family problems until it's too late. And now I have nothing and I'm gonna end up like those old fucks who come into the store I work at.

Jen clears her throat.

JEN (CONT'D)

I appreciate you and mom being tough on me because it made me a stronger person but sometimes I just want you two to tell me that I'm doing a good job.

There is a long silence.

DAD

Of all the women in my life, you will always be my number one girl. I'm so proud of you.

Jen moves in for a hug. Dad embraces her.

DAD (CONT'D)

Everything is going to be okay. You'll find a new job, Cat will be okay. Mom and I will always be here for you. Shh, don't cry.

Jen continues to cry in her dad's arms.

INT. CRAFT STORE - MORNING

A craft store, decorated with Christmas items. Jen and her dad seem to be the only ones in the store.

Jen is in the paint isle when she gets a phone call.

JEN

Dad? You done? Where you at?

Jen picks up and examines one of the higher quality, more expensive paints.

JEN (CONT'D)

'Kay. Meet you there.

Jen checks the very expensive price tag and puts the tube of paint down.

EXT. PARKING LOT OF A FAST FOOD RESTAURANT - MORNING

Jen and Dad eat a fast food version of fried catfish, fries, and a tub of coleslaw in their car, in the parking lot.

Supplies of wood, paint, and craft materials almost spill out of their respective bags in the backseats.

Nothing is said between them as they are too busy enjoying the greasy fried meal.

INT. CAFE - AFTERNOON

Jen is at a cafe with Cat.

The snow outside has piled up during the night and is melting away with the morning sun.

They are looking at the glass display of baked treats.

JEN

Do you think mom would like that?

Jen taps at the glass with her gloved hands.

CAT

Probably not, it's too sweet. Also dad texted me and he wants a Thai tea, no boba, extra ice, extra sweetness.

JEN

Wow. Bougie.

CAT

That's where you get it from.

Jen makes a face at Cat and then eyes something in the display.

JEN

If I order this, will you eat it with me?

Jen points to a layered circle sponge cake with whipped cream icing decorated with various sugar glazed fruits.

CAT

Yeah, totally.

JEN

You're still young, you can metabolize it easier.

CAT

And you just lost your job which means I'm paying for it.

JEN

Thanks, love ya.

CAT

Can we go shopping after? I need cucumber and tomato face masks.

JEN

Just put actual salad ingredients on your face, it's cheaper too probably.

CAT

Stop, it's good for my pores.

JEN

Okay whatever. I drive, you pay. It's a symbiotic relationship.

CAT

Good with me. I refuse to drive in the snow.

INT. BEAUTY DEPARTMENT OF A STORE - DAY

Jen and Cat are browsing the skin care isle. Cat has a handheld basket filled with beauty face masks.

TINA, 24, white, well-dressed even for the snowy weather, walks past the isle and does a double take.

TINA

Jen! Oh my God! Is that you? Hi!

Jen whips her head up from the skin product she was looking at.

JEN

No. No way.

A smile forms on Jen's face.

TINA

Hi-! Oh my God, is that little Catherine too?

CAT

It's just Cat now. I'm gonna get veggie straw chips. Call me when your voices drop down a few octaves.

TINA

You're still so funny- wow!

Cat leaves the isle, mildly annoyed.

JEN

Tina! How have you been?

TINA

I've been good! Look at you, I haven't seen you since summer after high school graduation- What, like 5 years ago? Hey I thought you were in California?

JEN

I moved back recently, yeah.

TINA

Oh okay! I'm just in town for the holidays and the family. I live in Vietnam now.

JEN

Holy shit. You? In Vietnam?

TINA

Yeah, take a look-

Tina pulls out her phone and shows Jen pictures of her on a beach resort, riding an elephant, and posing in a luxury brand store.

TINA (CONT'D)

I do some modeling and I'm an influencer. I was like you and I tried out Hollywood, but the people there are so fake. This guy that I was on a shoot with offered me a gig in Vietnam and I flew over like a month later.

JEN

Jesus. You could have been human-trafficked.

TINA

(laughing)

Wait, I totally could have been! But I was desperate so who cares, ya know?

JEN

Yeah, sure.

TINA

Well if you're ever in Vietnam, call me! Or DM me, but I respond to DM's quicker! "Tam biet!"

JEN

Huh?

TINA

It's Vietnamese for goodbye! The guys in Vietnam would absolutely love you! They're really into the whole sleep deprived, uneven pale complexion look that you're rocking right now.

JEN

Nice to see you too Tina.

Jen gathers her items and leaves Tina alone in the isle.

TINA

(to herself)

What? It's a look.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME, LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Jen and Cat are slouched on the sofa, sharing a blanket watching a bad made-for-TV-movie.

The spongecake that they bought earlier has been reduced to crumbs.

They sit in the dark, with soda cans, chip bags, and candy wrappers littered about.

A commercial about a local theme park comes on.

CAT
Can we go there?

JEN
Are you being serious?

CAT
Yeah, what's wrong with it?

JEN
(scoffing)
It's so trashy! And the rides are assembled and torn down in a day.

CAT
I dunno, it looks like fun. And there's literally nothing else to do in this town.

JEN
Sure. When I get paid, I'll take you.

CAT
Wait really?

JEN
I have the free time now, remember?

CAT
Yay!

The commercial ends and the movie resumes.

CAT (CONT'D)
I never liked her.

JEN
Who?

CAT
Tina.

JEN
Why?

CAT
She's so fake. And her boyfriend
looks too much like her. Narcissist
much?

JEN
Fake? What do you mean? Wait-

Jen gasps.

JEN (CONT'D)
Her and her boyfriend *do* look
alike.

CAT
Right? She basically just wanted to
date herself.

JEN
Oh my God, let me see, pull up her
most recent photo of them.

Jen reaches on the floor where her phone is to look up Tina's
social media.

JEN (CONT'D)
Ew, I can't unsee it.

CAT
I know!

They continue watching the movie for a bit.

JEN
I always thought she was nice.

CAT
No, you thought she was pretty.
Which made your stupid rodent brain
default to also thinking she was
nice.

JEN
She *was* nice! She gave me rides
from school and helped me with the
FAFSA when mom and dad didn't
understand it.

CAT
(mouth full of candy)
Fuck the FAFSA.

Jen laughs at her remark and the two continue watching the
movie.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME - DAY

Jen is in her room, on the floor, rummaging through the storage boxes in her closet.

Mom knocks on the door and opens it.

MOM
You cleaning?

JEN
Yeah, just going through my old stuff.

MOM
Here, for you.

Mom sets down a bowl of rice with water, six bird's eye chilies, and a small plate of salt.

MOM (CONT'D)
From my garden.

JEN
Chilies grow in this weather?

MOM
Anything grows in this weather, you just have to know how.

Jen takes a chili, bites the tip off, dips the tip in the salt, and then takes another bite. She shovels a spoonful of rice with water into her mouth.

JEN
Wow, so spicy!

Mom nods in approval.

MOM
I used to eat this all the time when I was little.

Mom sits at Jen's desk chair and admires her half-completed miniature projects.

JEN
Look. It's Cat from when she was in fourth grade.

Jen holds up a picture of Cat at a petting zoo, wearing a straw cowboy hat, a blue bandana around her neck, and petting a little black goat.

MOM

Wah! So cute! Let me take a picture
on my phone.

Moms snaps a picture of the photo frame and sits back down at
Jen's desk to admire it on her phone.

The two sit in a comfortable silence for a moment.

MOM (CONT'D)

Your dad said you got fired.

JEN

Yup.

MOM

Why?

JEN

I- don't wanna talk about it.

MOM

Okay? What next?

Jen does not answer immediately.

MOM (CONT'D)

What about money? Me and your dad
still take care of you but what
about later?

JEN

I don't know.

MOM

You need to save. You eat out too
much, you buy Cat too many things,
you have too much clothes.

Mom gets up and runs her hands through the clothes hanging in
Jen's closet.

MOM (CONT'D)

No money, all gone.

JEN

I know.

MOM

You need to save-

Jen snaps at her mom.

JEN

I know! God, you tell me every chance you get. I buy a dress or shoes and instead of telling me how pretty I look, you ask how much I spent on it. I bring home dinner because I see how tired you are after work and I don't want you to cook, but you still tell me not to eat out so much.

Mom sighs.

MOM

I just want you to save for when I'm not here anymore.

Jen shakes her head in annoyance.

MOM (CONT'D)

Even if it's just a little at a time. Like me, put it away in the closet so you don't see it. It makes not wanting to spend it easier if you can't see the money. Do you know where my money is?

JEN

Yeah you showed me before.

Jen grips the photo frame of Cat while Mom flips through her clothes.

MOM

I think you look pretty in this one.

Mom fishes out a summery lilac dress with bead details. She examines it for a bit and then leaves the room.

Jen gets up to close the door after she's gone.

She grabs her phone which is charging, flops onto her bed, and scrolls through social media.

She sees the accomplishments of her friends, cousins, and fellow classmates.

They're all either, getting married, pregnant, just bought a house, or all three combined.

JEN

How the fuck does anyone afford a house nowadays.

She scrolls until she sees Tina's pictures in Vietnam. Tropical beach resort with a view, a beautiful breakfast spread served in the pool on a floating tray.

Tina looks happy. The men in her pictures change every other post, but Tina always looks beautiful and smiling.

Jen stops at a particular post of hers.

It's Tina on a beach cliffside road, in front of a sunset. She looks ethereal. Her arms are raised up above her head, her designer sunglasses pushed up on the crown of her hairline to frame her smiling sunkissed face.

Jen stares at the picture for a while then finally decides to private message Tina: "Hey."

Jen dozes off and naps the day away.

Sometime during the evening, Mom quietly comes back in. She gently pats Jen on the head and strokes her hair. Jen seems to be in a deep sleep and doesn't notice.

When she wakes up, it's nearly evening the next day.

Cat knocks on her door.

CAT

Yo. Mom told me to check up on you because she thought you were dead. You slept for like fourteen hours.

Jen rubs her eyes awake.

CAT (CONT'D)

When are you buying tickets to that place we saw on TV?

JEN

We're not going. I didn't get paid and I don't have the money.

CAT

Oh.

JEN

Yeah.

Cat goes into her room and picks something out of Jen's closet.

CAT

(annoyed)
I'm borrowing this.

JEN
No you're not.

CAT
You owe me. You promised me and now
you said we're not going. Liar.

Cat tries to walk out of Jen's room with her clothes.

JEN
Stop!

Jen moves to take the dress from Cat.

JEN (CONT'D)
You have your own stuff. Stop
taking mine.

Jen rips the clothes away from Cat.

JEN (CONT'D)
Spoiled brat.

CAT
Well sorry that I have more stuff
because I'm mom and dad's favorite.

Jen glares at Cat.

JEN
When mom and dad found out they
were having you, she didn't want
you. I didn't even want you. I
remember I cried when they told me
mom was pregnant. I didn't even
like you before you were born.

Cat's eyes start to water.

CAT
That's not true.

JEN
You ever ask them?

CAT
No.

JEN
That's what I thought.

CAT
Shut up!

JEN
Why were you even born?

CAT
Shut up! Get out!

JEN
This is my room!

CAT
I said get out!

Cat slams the door as she pushes Jen out.

CUT TO:

INT. SUBURBAN HOME, JEN'S PARENT'S CLOSET - NIGHT

Jen is in her parent's closet, staring at the old suitcase. She opens it. There's about \$28,000 in cash.

Jen takes half of the cash, stuffing it into her suitcase.

She is on a flight to Vietnam within the hour.

CUT TO:

TIME SKIP CARD: THREE YEARS LATER.

EXT. BIKE SHOP - DAY

A busy crossroad. It's cloudy and raining, but just a light drizzle.

Motorbikes and scooters zoom by street vendor stands aside the heavy traffic.

Merchants yell out their prices, show off their wares, tourists look but rarely buy, wanting to get out of the rain.

It is organized chaos.

Jen is seen sitting behind a bike rental shop.

It's a garage storefront with tables and chairs in the back. The rental bikes are neatly parked in front of the opened garage door.

Jen's hair is shorter, and she's lost some weight. Her skin is also more tan.

In large neon red letters, the sign above her reads "BEST HANOI BIKE RENTAL \$15 PER DAY."

Jen gets up from her plastic chair behind the checkout desk and hurries next door to the street food stand, trying not to get wet from the rain.

She points to an item on the menu, Vietnamese fried bread, and holds up four fingers to the vendor. Jen pays and walks back to her post, happily swinging the plastic bag of snacks.

Soon, Tina arrives on a loud, rickety motor bike. She joins Jen and pulls up a chair.

TINA

Hey you know that guy from yesterday?

JEN

Which guy?

TINA

The one who came in with his mom and brother.

JEN

Yeah what about him.

TINA

He's British, I asked for his number.

JEN

Stop.

TINA

I asked him how old he was and he said "I'm like 24."

JEN

"I'm like 24." Is he 24 or not?

Tina bursts out laughing.

TINA

That's what I was thinking!

JEN

Homeboy is definitely not 24.

Their conversation comes to a lull.

They watch the scooters past by as the rain starts to pick up.

JEN (CONT'D)

What's it like dating Vietnamese guys as a white girl.

TINA

Sucks. Men ain't shit. Doesn't matter what culture they come from.

JEN

Tina!-

TINA

They fetishize me. They think I'm easy.

JEN

Yeah they ain't shit.

MR. TRAN, Vietnamese, late 70's, skinny limbs but has a beer belly and a full head of slicked-back gray hair, arrives on his motorbike to the shop. He kicks the bike stand open with one leg.

MR. TRAN

(in Vietnamese)

Tina, you're here so much, I should just hire you too.

TINA

Hi Mr. Tran!

Jen gets up to hand Mr. Tran some keys.

MR. TRAN

Busy today?

JEN

Not really, the rain.

Jen looks up, prompting the other two to look aswell.

MR. TRAN

Hmm, I don't like it. Bad for business.

Mr. Tran waves them off and heads to the back office.

TINA

Should we still go? I don't think it's gonna let up.

JEN

Fuck it, we already made reservations. Lemme get my stuff first.

INT. PASSENGER TRAIN - DAY

A crowded passenger train passing through the rainy urban landscape.

Everything looks darker when it's soaked in rain; the black asphalt, the concrete, the rich brown dirt.

Jen and Tina sit beside each other. Tina dozing off, ready for a nap, and Jen staring out the window at the buildings blurring by.

A young mother and her son board the train. She motions her son to sit across from Jen and Tina.

Jen smiles politely at them and adjusts in her seat to make room for them. She elbows Tina awake.

TINA

Huh?

Tina groggily looks at the young mother and then the boy.

TINA (CONT'D)

(in Vietnamese)

Oh, sorry ma'am.

Tina sits up and lets them through. The two sit and Jen continues to stare out the window.

The little boy looks out too, pointing stuff out to his mom who is trying to get situated.

Jen is trying to mind her own business, but feels a strange fondness for them. She looks at their interactions softly.

INT. MODERN RESTAURANT - EVENING

An upscale restaurant. The rain has stopped.

It's dimly lit with very few people dining.

Jen and Tina are led by a waitress, wearing what seem to be very uncomfortable high heels, to their table.

Jen and Tina take a seat.

JEN

What's the cheapest thing on their menu?

TINA

Don't worry, I got you.

Jen looks over the menu, see's the prices and puts the menu down for a second. She pinches the area between her eyes, stressed out.

A WAITER walks by with a platter of a pretentious looking appetizer. It's a pink cube of meat with a smear of green sauce on the side.

It catches Tina's attention and she calls the waiter over.

TINA (CONT'D)

(in Vietnamese)

Excuse me, what is that?

WAITER

(in perfect English)

Seared veal cooked in duck fat served with an experimental chilled fusion pesto-hollandaise sauce.

Tina beams at Jen. Jen rolls her eyes and nods.

TINA

Can we order two please!

The waiter nods in approval.

JEN

This place is a joke.

TINA

Relax, it's on my company card.

Tina takes out her shiny credit card and waves it around, giggling.

EXT. JEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

An apartment unit with three floors.

Motorbikes line the entrance of the building. It's not a new building, but it's not falling apart either.

There is a courtyard with a fountain where all the neighbors doors face each other.

A pair of girls around 15 years old hang up clothes on their balcony.

Jen gets to her door on the second floor, holding a plastic bag of her real dinner: spicy beef noodle soup. A little bit has leaked out, staining the bag orange.

Her porch light is off. When she opens her door, she turns it on immediately and then her indoor lights after.

It's a small unit with just the essentials.

Jen does not have a lot of furniture, just the basics that came with the apartment and a few personal items like her favorite perfume sitting on the windowsill and a harmonica almost squished between the couch cushions.

She sits at her little dinner table by the open window and eats her noodle soup. It's starting to rain again.

Jen scrolls through her phone, her social media apps telling her that there's no more new content and that she's all caught up.

Jen finishes eating and then takes a nap.

When she wakes up, she takes the trash out in the rain.

After, Jen goes to her bedroom. Under her bed is the suitcase of money that she stole from her mom. She pulls it out and opens it.

It's nearly empty. Only a few thousand dollars left.

Jen stares blankly at it, shuts it close, and then slides it back under her bed.

EXT. BIKE SHOP - DAY

The rain has cleared up. It's sunny skies and the tourists are out and about.

The bike stand is busy.

Mr. Tran works alongside Jen. They don't say much to each other.

He tries to fix up what he can around the shop. Jen holds the flashlight for him so he can see what he's working on.

He yells at her when she doesn't hold it still. She gets upset and leaves, putting up with none of his attitude.

Mr. Tran continues to work on his side project, without Jen's help.

Jen returns later with pho cuan, rolled rice paper stuffed with meat and veggies. The two eat in silence as the neon bike shop sign blinks above them.

Mr. Tran picks up the last rice roll with his chopsticks and plops it onto Jen's plate. Jen politely nods and picks it up to eat it.

Motorists zoom by, sometimes whole families are packed onto a single bike, sometimes a full blown TV strapped to the motorist's back. A collection of individuals just going about their day.

Mr Tran works the register.

Jen has to show a pair of newcomers, German tourists, how the motorbikes work.

Mr. Tran and Jen get a kick out of watching them leave the shop, clumsily trying to integrate into the chaotic Hanoi traffic.

EXT. JEN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Jen arrives home. The porch light is off. She eats dinner alone in the dark because the full moon lights up her living area just enough.

After, she cleans up and counts the rest of her mom's money in the suitcase.

EXT. JEN'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Jen goes outside to lean on her balcony.

It's a hot, humid morning.

Neighbors are seen outside on their balconies too, eating breakfast and fanning themselves.

Jen puts on athletic shoes, a hat, and goes for a walk.

She expertly navigates through her neighborhood and out to a more open, rural area.

Jen walks on a dirt road raised above miles of rice paddy fields.

She passes by a structured hut made out of straw. It is the only house around.

An elderly couple is seen outside in their full sun gear-hat, neck cowl, long sleeve shirt, gloves. They laugh with each other and plant rice.

Jen stops in her tracks and looks at them. They look like her parents.

INT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

A professional commercial shoot inside a warehouse. The set is brightly lit.

Tina stands in the middle of the white backdrop, holding up a product while a director shouts instructions at her.

She's doing a commercial for a skin-whitening cream.

Jen arrives, catching the end of the shoot.

Tina lights up when she sees her.

TINA

Jen! Finally! I want you to meet someone. He's perfect. You'll love him.

JEN

Hi, okay?

Tina grabs her hand and leads her to her personal changing room.

Tina swings the door open, announcing to whoever's inside:

TINA

(in Vietnamese)

Dao, this is Jen. Come and meet her.

DAO, Vietnamese, early 30's with an expensive haircut, is caught messily making out with another girl, pinning her to Tina's wall mirror.

They stop in their tracks, caught red-handed.

Jen slaps her hand over her opened mouth in shock.

Tina lets out a blood-curdling scream.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Jen and Tina whoop and cheer as their drinks arrive at the bar.

It's loud with the DJ's bass booming. Strobe lights make movement look like it's in slow motion.

The two dance with each other on the dance floor, in their own little bubble.

Eventually, Jen goes back to the bar to order more shots.

She gets the bartender's attention, orders, then checks her wallet.

She flips through the loose bills and places a few on the counter.

The shots arrive, Jen takes both shots, then orders two more.

Tina joins her at the bar, taking her respective shot. She starts climbing on the bar stools.

Jen attempts to stop her.

JEN

What are you doing?

TINA

Getting on the bar, what's it look like?

JEN

Stop, you'll slip.

Jen is a little too tipsy to fully stop her.

Tina slips, slamming her chin on the counter.

TINA

Ooowwww!

The crowd around the bar exclaims in unison, feeling her pain.

JEN

(yelling over the music)
Bitch stop, you don't have life insurance!

TINA

(slurring)
Fuck it! Hahaha!

Jen apologizes to the bartender and guides Tina out of the club.

EXT. STREET FOOD STALLS - NIGHT

Tina throws up on the street while Jen holds her hair back and a bag of ice in her other hand.

The other patrons avoid the pair as they make their way around the nightlife.

Jen hands Tina the bag of ice and Tina rests it on her chin.

JEN

Girl, get it together.

TINA

(belligerent)

I hate him!

JEN

Yes, yes. Let it all out.

Tina pauses to throw up again. This time, she doesn't stand up fully, instead crawling to a nearby bench and hauling herself up to sit.

Jen joins her and Tina leans her head on Jen's shoulder.

TINA

I asked him if he wanted to go to that new cute little pho place with me and he said I wasn't even worth a twelve dollar meal.

JEN

He said that?

TINA

(on the verge of tears)

No but he implied it!

JEN

And who is this dude again?

TINA

Some rich guy's son.

JEN

Wait did you just say twelve dollar pho?

TINA

Mmhmm.

JEN

Okay now I gotta see what this place is about. Fuck him. I'll take you to that new place.

TINA

Kay, thanks.

Jen stroke's Tina's hair.

TINA (CONT'D)

Can I ask you a question.

JEN

What?

TINA

Am I your only friend?

Jen ponders for a moment.

JEN

Yeah I think so.

TINA

Why?

JEN

Because you're nice to me.

TINA

I'm not a nice person.

JEN

Me neither.

TINA

But you are!

JEN

I stole money from my own mom because I was a depressed loser who wanted to run away.

TINA

Oh. Right.

Hanoi's nightlife is starting to dissipate as the sun comes up.

TINA (CONT'D)

I think you're a good person.
You're my only friend here.

JEN

You're my only friend too.

TINA

Do you think that's why? Because we
only have each other?

JEN

Maybe. I dunno. And I'm too drunk.

Their conversation comes to a lull.

JEN (CONT'D)

I don't think I can hang out with
you anymore.

TINA

Why not?

JEN

Because I'm running out of money
and you're expensive to be around.

Tina sits up to look at Jen in the eyes.

TINA

You're running out of money?

JEN

Yup.

TINA

But... your mom's money. And your
job?

JEN

It's not enough. I just spend too
much. Bad habits die hard.

TINA

What are you going to do?

JEN

No idea, babes.

Jen shuts her eyes and leans back on the bench.

TINA

I'm broke too. Not broke, but lots
of debt.

JEN

Shit.

TINA

Are you going to go back home?

JEN

No. God. I'd rather die on the spot than see my parents again. Plus I don't think they wanna see me.

TINA

You don't know that.

Jen smiles to herself, trying to put up a strong face.

JEN

Yep. I do. And I honestly really don't wanna see them either.

TINA

(quietly)

Don't you miss them?

JEN

Tina.

TINA

Don't you miss Cat?

JEN

Drop it. Now.

TINA

It's been over three years, Jen.

Jen lets out a frustrated sigh and hauls herself up.

JEN

Aaaand just like that, you've ruined the night.

TINA

You can't keep ignoring it. Wait-

Jen storms off. She pauses and looks back at Tina.

JEN

Don't talk about them. And don't start giving me life lessons when you live the way that you do.

TINA

What the fuck's that supposed to mean.

Jen annoying shakes her head. She walks away but comes back to tell Tina one last thing.

JEN

Also, I don't think you're a bad person, I think you're a bad judge of character. And stop fucking random losers. You're worth more than a one night stand, dumbass.

Tina is extremely upset as she watches Jen leave.

EXT. JEN'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Jen flicks the porch light on as she enters her apartment.

She immediately plops onto her bed. Her morning alarm rings and she gets right back up.

EXT. BIKE SHOP - MORNING

Mr. Tran mixes up a murky drink and hands it to Jen, who's wearing opaque black sunglasses to cover up her hangover.

JEN

(in Vietnamese)

Thank you.

He shakes his head in disapproval.

MR TRAN

I come back later. Don't die.

Jen gives him a tight lipped smile and waves him off as he starts his bike.

Business goes on as usual for the day.

The streets seemed to be more packed, as the weather outside gets a bit nicer.

A DRUNKEN WHITE MAN and a very, very young girl approach the shop.

The man is flushed red, either from alcohol or a bad sunburn. The girl looks no older than sixteen.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN

English?

Jen lowers her sunglasses and gives him a look up and down. She's already disgusted with him.

JEN

Ya, what can I help you with?

The man looks pleased.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN

Wow! Very good English. Good. American?

JEN

Unfortunately.

The man bellows out a deep laugh.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN

How much for a day?

JEN

Read the sign.

Jen points up. The man looks up.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN

Kind of expensive. Can I get a fellow patriot discount?

JEN

No.

There's a pause.

JEN (CONT'D)

Sorry.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN

(playfully drunk)

Well that's no way to treat a customer. Back in the states, I'd probably call corporate on you.

JEN

Good thing we're not in the states.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN

That's why I like it here more. I get to do whatever I was as long as I got a pretty penny on me.

The man pulls the young girl closer to him, by her waist. She smiles and trying to push him away and play it off, but she is obviously uncomfortable.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN (CONT'D)
Mmm pretty penny for a pretty penny.

The man moves his hand up to the girl's chest.

Jen shoots up out of her chair.

JEN
Don't fucking touch her like that.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN
Woah hey, it's all fun. Relax, lil' lady.

Jen flicks off her sunglasses. Her eyes are bloodshot and sunken in from lack of sleep.

JEN
I'm not renting to you. Go somewhere else.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN
Geez, you look like shit.

The man's smile drops.

JEN.
Leave. Now.

The man turns to leave, grabbing the young girl by her butt.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN
(muttering)
Drugged up bitch.

JEN
What?

The man turns back around to look at Jen.

DRUNKEN WHITE MAN
I just called you a-

JEN
Say that one more time. I didn't hear you.

Jen rushes the man and uppercuts his chin.

CUT TO:

EXT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

A police station on a crowded nightlife street. Tina waits outside on the curb while Jen signs some paper work inside.

Tina also hands the policemen a few dollar bills. The policemen take it and slip it into their pockets.

Tina meets Jen outside the station.

Jen struggles to put her shoe on. Tina turns around and looks up at her.

JEN

You shoulda seen that pig fuck. I looked at him and I wanted to puke.

TINA

Sit down, just put your shoe on correctly.

Jen sits by Tina.

JEN

The girl he was with had to be no older than sixteen.

TINA

Yeah that's how it is.

JEN

What do you mean "that's how it is." You crazy?

TINA

It's a third world country Jen. Get real. You really think all the little girls over here get to go to school and make their own money?

JEN

Fuuuuuuuck.

Jen and Tina watch a group of kids run by, each holding sparklers, shrieking and chasing each other.

TINA

Do you remember when you broke your arm jumping off my couch because I was chasing you with a dead lizard?

Jen stretches both arms out in front of her. They are asymmetrical, her left elbow is crooked, bending upward at an awkward angle.

JEN

Yeap. Got the deformity to prove it.

TINA

David glued your detached doll head to the lizard's body.

JEN

Oh right!

TINA

Why did he always break my things?

JEN

I dunno. Little brat.

Jen kicks at the dirt.

JEN (CONT'D)

I haven't called him in years.

TINA

What if he has a wife? And kids?

JEN

I can finally be the cool, mysterious aunt at the family function.

Tina leans forward and rests her elbows on her knees.

TINA

I always wanted siblings. I wanna be a cool aunt.

JEN

Me too. But my family tree dies with me. I ain't havin no kids.

TINA

Wait me too!

The two laugh and their conversation comes to a lull.

JEN
Are you mad at me?

TINA
Are you stupid? I literally used
all my money to bail you out of
overnight jail for assault.

JEN
Yeah, thanks again. But still. I
said some mean things the other
night.

TINA
You were drunk, it doesn't really
count.

JEN
Still. You deserve better.

Tina hugs Jen.

TINA
Let's go home.

The two get up and continue walking down the busy street.

Heavy monsoon rain slowly creeps up on the nightlife crowd.

Shopkeepers and patrons quickly grab their mini plastic
chairs and move them under the buildings' awnings to avoid
getting wet by the rain.

Tina notices first and looks behind her.

TINA (CONT'D)
Jen! Oh my god! Run!

Tina and Jen try to outrun the rain but fail. A slow but
heavy rainfall drenches them both. They stand in the middle
of the street giggling at each other, drenched in rain.

INT. JEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jen hands Tina the towel she was using to dry her hair.

Tina dries her hair next.

TINA
Does Mr. Tran know?

Jen sighs.

JEN
Mr. Tran.

TINA
You're getting fired this week for
sure.

JEN
(imitating Mr. Tran)
Bad girl! Very expensive!

Tina follows along.

TINA
Lazy! Like a pig!

The two burst into laughter.

JEN
Now say it in Vietnamese!

Tina repeats what she said but in Vietnamese. They're both hysterical.

EXT. BIKE SHOP - DAY

Jen watches in disgust as Mr. Tran comedically stands over a trash can, slurping down balut, a boiled fertilized duck egg.

She winces as he crunches down on the baby bird bones and nearly gags when he spits out a small feather.

He slurps down the rest of the dark runny liquid and lets out a satisfied burp.

MR. TRAN
Yummy. Good for your gut. Eat this
and healthy like me.

Mr. Tran pats his stomach and sits down next to Jen.

She nervously plays with her hands.

A customer comes up, wanting to rent a bike and Jen rings him up.

When she sits back down, she looks over at Mr. Tran.

JEN
Are you going to fire me?

MR. TRAN
Fire? What for?

JEN
For going hitting a customer.

MR. TRAN
Ah, American. Doesn't count.

Jen scoffs.

JEN
What?

MR. TRAN
That not my business. That between
you Americans.

JEN
Oh.

Jen sits there, slightly dumbfounded.

JEN (CONT'D)
What if he comes back?

MR. TRAN
If he come back, I fight him myself
because you my only girl. And he's
not coming back. He's bad guy.
Don't want more trouble.

Jen nods.

JEN
Sooooo I'm okay?

MR. TRAN
You okay. For now.

Mr. Tran shrugs and puts on his sunglasses as he watches the
motorbikes zoom by.

JEN
Nice.

EXT. MALL - DAY

An indoor mall with large sun roofs. Jen shops alone, weaving
in and out the outlets, bags in both hands.

A display case catches her eye. She double takes.

It's a miniature home craft kit of a deep purple Victorian house with a wrap around porch. The roof is green.

Jen looks at the price. Its \$400 USD.

JEN
(to herself)
I can make that myself.

INT. JEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jen is starting to paint the roof of her new miniature house project.

Jen texts Tina a photo.

JEN
Thoughts?

Tina sends back two side-eye emojis.

TINA
Cute but the color combo is ugly.

Followed by a blowing-kiss emoji.

JEN
Girl bye.

Jen clicks her phone off and continues painting the house.

She has her desk set up like she used to at her parent's house.

Jen works into the night, paying attention to every detail in the intricate miniature woodwork.

Her phone buzzes.

She checks it.

It's an incoming call from Cat.

The white phone number blinks over Cat's contact photo. It's a picture of the two of them smiling and posing in front of their house during the summer.

Jen stares at it in disbelief.

JEN (CONT'D)
Cat?

Jen watches it ring until it stops.

She flips her phone over and rushes out her apartment, needing fresh air.

INT. UPSCALE PHO SHOP - DAY

A trendy, modern restaurant. Quiet, with very few people sparsely spread throughout the establishment.

Jen stares off into the distance. The sound of her phone ringing vibrating through her head.

TINA

Jen? You okay?

JEN

Yeah. Good.

Jen and Tina are seated near tall floor-to-ceiling windows.

TINA

Jesus, why's it so expensive? Even for my taste-

JEN

Didn't we *just* tell each other how broke we were the other night?

TINA

I made the reservation *before* our collective mental breakdown okay? We might as well, ya know?

TINA (CONT'D)

Lemme calculate this into USD.

Tina pulls out her phone and fidgets with it.

TINA (CONT'D)

Wow it really is twelve American dollars for a bowl of pho-

JEN

We can go get cheaper pho down the street. I think I saw a place.

Tina actually thinks about for a moment.

TINA

Get the bread sticks. Let's go.

JEN

This isn't Olive Garden!

TINA

Well then stuff the bean sprouts
into your purse, lets get out of
here! Before they charge us for the
water!

Jen does as Tina's asked, a trail of loose bean sprouts following them out as they flee the restaurant.

EXT. MINH'S PHO SHOP - DAY

A humble little pho shop. This place looks more like a residential area than the usual busy street food stalls.

Next to the restaurant is stairs going up to a residence. The overgrown vines cover up the peeling orange paint.

Jen and Tina sit on tiny plastic stools. They snack on purse-flavored bean sprouts.

The other patrons consist of an old man reading the newspaper and smoking a cigar, two old ladies chatting and eating their bowls of pho, and a middle aged man drinking an espresso. His dog is sleeping by his feet.

Jen flicks a half eaten bean sprout onto the street.

JEN

(annoyed)

Where's the service?

Tina's scrolling on her phone.

TINA

Probably busy in the back.

The ambience of the place is nice, but it's ruined by Jen's growling stomach.

Finally, a waiter emerges from the back.

This is MINH. Vietnamese, handsome, tall, and has aged well into his late 40's. He wears a dirty apron around his waist.

Minh carries two coffee jelly desserts over to the older ladies' table. They thank him and Minh nods, turning on his heel to walk towards Jen and Tina's table.

Minh greets them in Vietnamese. Tina orders basic beef pho bowls for the two of them.

JEN

Finally. Hopefully the food isn't
as shitty as the service.

TINA

(whispering)
Shut up!

Tina kicks Jen's feet. Tina nervously looks at Minh.

TINA (CONT'D)

(in Vietnamese)
Sorry sir, my friend is really
hungry.

Minh chuckles.

MINH

(in perfect English)
That's okay. We have the best pho
in Hanoi. Our broth is cooked from
scratch and our noodles are house-
made. I hope you can leave happier
and fuller than when you arrived.

Jen and Tina stare at each other in shock.

JEN

Thank you... we're really excited
to try it.

MINH

You guys new here?

Jen smiles sheepishly at Minh and then pans to Tina who is
trying to contain her laughter.

JEN

Yes. Thank you.

MINH

Hmm. We don't really get new
customers around here.

Minh leaves the table.

JEN

They're gonna spit in our food.
They're definitely gonna spit in
our food.

TINA

I wouldn't mind if he spat in my
food.

Tina admires Minh as he walks away. Jen turns to look as well.

JEN
Honestly, same.

Tina flicks her crumpled up straw casing at Jen.

The old man at the other table has finished his cigarette and gets ready to leave.

Soon, Minh brings out their bowls of pho.

MINH
Enjoy.

Tina exclaims as the presentation of the dish is simple yet sophisticated.

Tina starts taking pictures of the food with her phone.

JEN
All right, it doesn't look too bad.

TINA
Shh, I'm doing a live photo!

Jen scans the restaurant for Minh.

Tina's talking about her social media numbers but Jen drowns her out.

Jen sees Minh behind the bar.

A young man is with him now.

The young man bows his head as he speaks to Minh. He is wearing his school book bag, a wrinkled white dress shirt, and his hands are stiff at his sides. He's gripping a black dress tie.

Their conversation is unheard because they are too far away.

Jen watches the whole ordeal closely though.

Minh looks like he is listening to the kid, truly understanding whatever he's saying.

Minh pats the kid on the shoulder, takes the tie from his hands, and ties it for him around his neck.

When he's done, he takes a step back, flattens out the boy's wrinkled shirt and says something inaudible for Jen to hear.

The kid nods, wipes away his tears, and heads into the kitchen.

TINA (CONT'D)

-so if I don't post everyday, the algorithm suddenly thinks my content isn't-

JEN

What? Yeah?

Jen snaps out of her trance to look at Tina.

Tina looks over to Minh, who's now wiping down the bar.

She gives a sly smile to Jen.

TINA

Are you- are you actually checking him out? Is that what it is? You like older guys- Oh my god, it makes so much sense now. That's why you never like the guys I pick for you.

Jen glares at Tina as she snaps her wooden chopsticks.

JEN

I don't like the guys you pick for me because they're all assholes.

TINA

(nodding, mouth full of noodles)

Okay. Fair point.

Jen finally takes a sip of the pho broth. Her eyes shoot up in surprise.

TINA (CONT'D)

Pretty good right?

JEN

It's okay.

TINA

You're such a hater!

JEN

All right, it's good. It's good.

The two finish their meal and pay.

Jen steals another look at Minh before they leave. He's cleaning up their table.

He catches her eyes as well and holds the gaze. Jen averts her eyes immediately.

Tina teases her as they leave the establishment.

INT. JEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jen finishes her shower.

She looks at her face in the mirror, raising her chin to the side, angling it to see her features.

She turns and twists her body, examining her womanly shape.

Jen sighs in disappointment and starts brushing her teeth.

Her phone, which is on the bathroom counter, buzzes-

Cat is calling her again.

Jen grabs the phone and rushes to her bedroom. She scrambles for the suitcase, pulling it out, flipping it open, and throwing the phone into the suitcase.

Jen takes what money is left and splays it out on the floor. Jen gently grabs her phone again and caresses the picture of her and Cat.

Tears roll down her face.

Jen puts the phone on silent and then chucks it into the suitcase, closing it without putting back the money.

EXT. BEACH - SUNSET

Tina lays on a beach towel while Jen lathers herself up with sunscreen. This beach is empty, as it's more a fishing boat send-off point than a normal beach.

The night fishermen prep their nets and boats in front of the orange setting sun.

JEN

Want some?

TINA

The sun's going down.

JEN

Which means it's still up.

Tina sure shrugs.

TINA

Sure, on my back please?

Jen kneels to squeeze sunscreen on Tina's back but it splatters everywhere.

TINA (CONT'D)

Ugh! I hate it here!

JEN

Well this is the only *free* activity to do around here okay? So unless you got money, don't be complainin' about nothin'.

Tina pouts at Jen. Tina sits up, trying to smear it off.

JEN (CONT'D)

Come here.

Jen uses her towel to clean the mess off Tina's back.

TINA

I think I'm gonna go home.

JEN

We just got here.

TINA

No, like *home* home. And I think you should too.

Jen doesn't reply.

TINA (CONT'D)

I dunno. I mean, I just know. I see it in your eyes, the way you look at people. Like you see people back at home in them. I think I notice it because a part of me wants to see as well.

Tina hands Jen her towel back.

TINA (CONT'D)

Thanks. I miss my mom. My dog. I miss the Superbowl! We've had our fun Tina, but it's time to go back.

Jen avoids eye contact with Tina.

JEN

I don't have a home. I don't have a country. I don't have people.

TINA

That means you can make any place you want your home. But this place? This place is beautiful but you don't belong here. You're running and I know that you're tired.

Tina rests her head on Jen's shoulder.

TINA (CONT'D)

Your mom doesn't care about the money. She just wants you to come back to her.

Jen shuts her eyes and lets out a deep breath.

INT. MINH'S PHO SHOP - EVENING

Jen arrives to Minh's pho shop, alone. It's empty.

Minh spots her by the door, softly smiling as he approaches her with a bundle of dirty rags in his hand.

MINH

Hey! Look-

Minh looks at around at the empty restaurant. He places the rags on the nearby table and holds his hands up.

MINH (CONT'D)

Empty. I'm all yours. Five star special VIP service. Just for you.

JEN

Very funny.

Jen fixes her hair.

JEN (CONT'D)

The food was really good and I just wanted to say sorry for what I said. I wasn't thinking and I didn't mean it.

MINH

It's okay. I'm just teasing.

JEN
Okay. Thanks.

Jen lets out a sigh of relief.

MINH
Are you American?

Minh picks up his rags and walks over to the bar to toss them in a bin.

JEN
Yes. Yes I am.

Minh motions for her to have a seat. She sits and he joins her.

MINH
Me too.

JEN
Yeah I could tell.

MINH
How so?

JEN
You walk like an American.

MINH
(chuckling)
What does that mean?

JEN
You walk like you own the place.

MINH
I *do* own the place.

JEN
You're messing with me.

MINH
I'm not. I live up there.

Minh points to the house above the restaurant.

Jen steps back for a bit.

JEN
Well in that case, I'm really super sorry for what I said about your service.

Minh looks down, laughing at her comment.

MINH
That's okay. I'm just glad your
back.

Jen blushes.

JEN
So uh, is it usually this empty?

MINH
Yes, we're closed. A lot of our
customers are older. They're
probably asleep by now.

Minh checks his watch.

JEN
Doesn't that mean it's *your* bedtime
too?

MINH
(playfully offended)
Hey! Don't speak to your elders
like that.

MINH (CONT'D)
Why? You hungry?

Jen shrugs.

INT. MINH'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Minh's place is a perfect blend of man-made and all-natural. His kitchen stools are handmade out of wood, but they sit at a modern industrial style kitchen.

The vines from outside have managed to creep in through his large kitchen window.

Jen sits at the counter. She closely watches Minh make her braised pork belly from scratch.

His knife skills are impressive, albeit he's putting on a show for her.

When the dish is ready, he clicks the stove off and plates it for Jen.

He watches Jen takes her first bite, eyes tracking the slice of sweet and salty caramelized pork belly from the plate into her mouth.

He subtly licks his bottom lip, eyes flicking between the food, her eyes, and her lips.

She smiles and nods in approval, mouth too full of food to say anything.

Minh looks pleased with himself.

EXT. MINH'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jen and Minh hangout on the balcony. It's hot and humid and the monsoon is starting to come in.

Two little boys cover themselves under a white laundry basket, shrieking and trying to rush inside to beat the rain.

Minh leans over and whispers something to Jen.

Jen pulls back and slyly smiles at Minh. She shakes her head.

The rain picks up, making their conversation inaudible.

Then, Minh leans in to tentatively kiss Jen. She kisses him back with a little more fervor.

He grazes her elbow, pulling her in. They both break the from kiss, Minh chasing her lips.

Jen lets out a flustered sigh. She tells Minh something and then turns to leave. He watches her go.

EXT. JEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jen is giddy with excitement, fallen head over heels for Minh.

She reaches her apartment, her neighbors have already set up the karaoke machine and are blasting late 90's popular hits for the whole apartment complex to hear.

A family is having a barbecue on the first floor. They are loud, laughing and arguing and enjoying each other's company.

Jen looks up and sees that her porch light is on. She stops dead in her tracks.

She hides behind a bush, trying to see who's in her apartment. A dark silhouette passes by the window.

Jen's eyes widen.

A little boy walks by Jen's bush that she's hiding in. His mouth and chin are stained with red candy stains.

JEN

Hey! Psst!

The little boy blankly looks at her.

Jen dangles a coin in front of him. She points to her door, makes a knocking motion, then dangles the coin again.

He is uninterested and turns to walk away.

Jen yanks him back. She dangles three coins in front of him.

The boy slowly shakes his head.

Jen rolls her eyes.

CUT TO:

The little boy is now near Jen's door, holding a skewer of sugar glazed strawberries that Jen bought for him as a bribe. He inches towards Jen's door.

Jen watches in anticipation.

The boy knocks on Jen's door and then sprints away. There's a pause, and then-

Cat answers the door.

INT. JEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cat sits on the couch. Jen stands opposite of her. They stare at each other.

Cat's no longer the little girl that Jen remembers. She looks like a woman now.

JEN

How'd you get in here?

CAT

Your landlord thought we were the same person and let me in. She kept calling me Jen.

Jen smooths a hand over her face then places it on her hip.

JEN

Sorry I didn't pick up.

CAT
I thought you were dead.

JEN
I'm sorry. I was scared. I didn't
want you to be disappointed in me.

There's a long pause.

JEN (CONT'D)
I'm sorry about what I said to you
before I left.

CAT
It's okay.

JEN
I used to be so angry.

CAT
(chuckling)
Yeah, I kinda put that together.

Jen shifts on the couch, then pulls out Jen's harmonica.

CAT (CONT'D)
You play?

Jen chuckles, then goes to sit beside Cat. She holds Cat's
hands in hers as she takes the harmonica.

JEN
No. I bought it when I first got
here.

CAT
Why?

JEN
It reminded me of mom. This was
before you were born, but I
remember that Mom took a train with
David to go visit grandpa. David
was, I dunno, eight at the time? I
just remembered they were gone for
so long. When mom came back, she
brought back harmonicas for both of
us. I think I lost mine and I would
try to use David's. But David only
wanted to play with it when I
wanted to play with it. So when I
saw it at the souvenir store, I
just bought it because I wanted it.

Jen hands it back to Cat.

JEN (CONT'D)
Are you going to college?

CAT
Yeah.

JEN
Still studying fashion?

CAT
Yeah, I got in to everywhere I
applied.

JEN
Wow. I'm proud of you.

CAT
Thanks. I have to make my decision
this week.

JEN
Oh? How long are you staying? I can
show you around.

CAT
I leave tomorrow.

Jen looks sad.

JEN
Ah, okay.

CAT
I just wanted to see for my own
eyes that you weren't dead. I don't
trust Tina.

JEN
You're talking to Tina?

CAT
She came back home.

JEN
What?!?!

CAT
See, you didn't even know. She
didn't even tell you.

JEN
What the fuck?

CAT
She came back like a week ago.

Jen shakes her head.

JEN
She told me she wanted to go home
but I didn't believe her.

Cat scoffs.

JEN (CONT'D)
I remember when I told mom that I
wanted to switch from computer
science to film studies, she
literally straight up told me "no."
Like end of story, "no."

CAT
She *would* say that. But she was
more chill about it with me.

JEN
Of course she was.

There's a lull in the conversation.

CAT
I'm actually here about mom.

Jen takes a deep breath.

JEN
What is it?

CAT
She had a stroke.

Jen looks defeated. She starts to cry. Cat holds her and
strokes her head.

JEN
Is she okay?

CAT
She's okay.

Cat starts to cry too.

CAT (CONT'D)
It's just kind of hard for her to
talk and hold stuff.

JEN

What happened? Tell me everything.

Cat pulls back from the hug.

CAT

I remember being scared as fuck.
And being mad at dad.

JEN

Mad at dad? Why?

CAT

He was drinking with David for some
stupid celebration.

JEN

David came home?

CAT

Yeah for a short while, just to
visit. He got married.

JEN

Damn... poor girl, marrying into
our family.

CAT

Bless her soul. Anyways, dad
couldn't drive mom to the hospital
because he was buzzed. But I wasn't
mad at the drinking, I was mad at
what he said to her in the car.

JEN

What'd he say?

CAT

He told mom, in Hmong, word for
word: "It's because you listen to
all those Hmong horror folklore
stories." I love dad, but I have
never wanted to slap him the shit
outta him more than ever in that
moment.

Jen lets out a burst of laughter.

JEN

What did mom say?

CAT

It was the first time I actually
felt bad for her.

(MORE)

CAT (CONT'D)

She just said to him in a weak voice: "Don't say that right now."

JEN

Dang, that's really sad.

CAT

We got her to the hospital but I had to wait in the car because the waiting room was too crowded. Dad called me and told me they were going to do some tests, so I could just head home for now and if anything happens he'll give me a call. I went home and the house just felt so quiet and empty. Sure it was around 2am and it was only me, but the house felt so lifeless. I pulled into the garage and wanted to cry so fucking bad. I felt so helpless but I had to be strong. I needed to keep busy, so I cleaned the house. I took out the trash, I cleared the dishes. While alone in the kitchen after I cleaned I thought about the fact that if mom died tonight, would I be able to take care of dad.

Jen wipes the tears away forming on her eyes.

CAT (CONT'D)

All I remember was that the next day, I got Thai takeout for dinner. I remember that I was nervous to drive dad's old car to go pick it up. But I didn't care, I just needed to get out of the house. I got boba too, but there were a group of guys at the boba shop who kept looking at me and I couldn't hear or understand them, but I knew they were talking about me. I wanted to cuss them out, ask what the fuck their problem was. But I didn't have the patience or time or energy. I drove home. I ate in the kitchen. Dad came home soon after and ate as well. I remember feeling so relieved seeing him pull into the driveway. He ate at the kitchen counter while I sat at the kitchen table on my phone.

(MORE)

CAT (CONT'D)

I stayed after I ate because I didn't want him to eat alone.

Cat pauses to wipe her tears.

CAT (CONT'D)

He told me that mom could come home tomorrow. The next day mom came home and I asked her how she felt. All she said was she felt better and then she told me not to throw away the Thai takeout container because she wanted to reuse it.

Cat lets out a laugh. Jen laughs too.

CAT (CONT'D)

And that's when I knew she was her same old typical cheap self and that she was still my mom. That night I came downstairs to do the dishes and she was in the dining room, watching something on her phone and snacking on something. She asked me to bring her a mug of hot water. I did and when I handed it to her, she said in to me in Hmong "now its time for you to take care of me" I laughed it off and let her eat in peace, but I went into the kitchen and cried silently while doing the dishes because I knew that I couldn't do it.

JEN

You can! Look at you! God! You're so strong. Stronger than I'll ever be.

CAT

I still need your help.

Jen holds Cat tightly.

CAT.

Mom doesn't care about the money, she just wants you to come home.

Jen comforts Cat.

Later that night, Jen tucks Cat into bed, takes a shower, and then sleeps besides her.

EXT. AIRPORT - DAY

A busy airport. Jen waves Cat off. Cat didn't even bring a change of clothes.

JEN

Call me when you land!

Cat nods and waves goodbye.

Jen strolls around the airport for a bit. She takes in the smell, the natural light, the ambience.

Jen's admiring the airport fountain when suddenly, a young girl runs her.

She has a long straight hair, covered up with a black cap and an overstuffed black backpack tightly strapped on to her chest.

She looks like Jen. Jen is baffled at the resemblance.

The young girl bows apologetically and runs off.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

A Buddhist temple full of tourists and monks in orange robes.

Jen and Minh stroll through the temple, navigating the crowd.

MINH

How long have you been here?

JEN

A little over three years?

MINH

Wow. How'd you manage to get a job in Vietnam without speaking any Vietnamese as a Vietnamese girl?

JEN

I'm not Vietnamese.

MINH

Oh?

JEN

I'm Hmong. My parents are from Laos. I'm only here because some crazy ass white girl decided to get on a one way flight to Hanoi a long time ago.

MINH

The girl you were with at the restaurant?

JEN

That's her. That's my Tina.

MINH

So what's your story? You got stranded here with her?

JEN

Ah no. More like I needed a far away place to run to and she was my only option.

MINH

Dark mysterious past. I like it.

JEN

How about you? How long?

MINH

Maybe 30 years? I've been here longer than you've probably been alive.

JEN

Fuck-

MINH

I came here as soon as I was eighteen.

JEN

Can I ask why?

MINH

Came here looking for my birth parents.

JEN

Oh.

Jen stops in her tracks.

JEN (CONT'D)

Sorry, I don't know what to say.

MINH

Me neither. Not really first date conversation, huh?

The two continue walking.

JEN

What's the earliest memory you have of them?

MINH

Nothing, I was an infant. They put me and three thousand other Vietnamese kids on a plane and called it Operation: Babylift.

JEN

Is that a real thing?

MINH

Mmhm you can look it up.

They eventually find a street vendor and buy two cold drinks.

JEN

Were your adoptive parents nice at least?

MINH

Mmm, when they needed to be.

MINH (CONT'D)

I remember they used to leave me outside the casino while they went in to gamble. There were other kids there too. Waiting outside for their parents to come out. It's an 80's thing, you wouldn't get it.

Jen laughs at his sarcastic remark.

JEN

Aren't you mad at them? Your birth parents for giving you up?

MINH

I never knew them to begin with. I don't blame them. I didn't know their situation. All I know is that they were probably desperate.

Jen nods.

JEN

Sometimes I get mad at my mom for the way she raised me. And then I realized that she probably had it worse and that she's just trying her best. Still.

(MORE)

JEN (CONT'D)

It hurts when you don't get into a competitive camp program, but your cousins did, and instead of comforting you, she asks why you can't be as good as them.

MINH

Mommy issues. Hell yeah.

Minh holds out a fist. Jen bumps it.

JEN

Did you ever find them?

MINH

No. I stopped looking a long time ago. It hurt too much every time I had some hope.

Jen holds Minh's hand.

MINH (CONT'D)

You still have a chance. To make it right, whatever you did. As long as you didn't kill anyone, you still have a chance. They're still here. And best part, you know where they are.

Jen gives him a half smile.

INT. MINH'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

They end up at Minh's apartment, making love with the windows open during the hot humid monsoon.

EXT. MINH'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Jen and Minh are out on his balcony. They sit on the stairs.

The sun hasn't come up yet, so it's still cool.

Resting by their feet is a drip coffee device making their cafe sua da.

JEN

Can I ask you a tacky question.

MINH

Shoot.

JEN

What's the first thing you noticed about me?

He takes a moment to think about Jen's question.

MINH

Your eyes.

He turns to look at her.

Minh brings his right hand up to caress the left side of Jen's face. He smooths his thumbs over her eyelid and then across her brow bone.

MING

They look so sad.

Jen slowly opens her eyes to look at him.

MINH

And your nose bridge. So flat.

Minh softly traces his finger up and down Jen's nose bridge.

JEN

Stop, it tickles!

MINH

My turn. What about me?

He's tracing a circle around a bruise on her forearm. Jen leans back on the stairs and thinks for a moment.

JEN

How you treat people.

Minh stops tracing the bruise and looks at Jen's face.

JEN (CONT'D)

The first time I saw you, you were at the bar and you helped that boy put on his tie. You stepped back and looked at him like you were so proud of him, even though he looked like he just told you that he did something wrong.

MINH

Ah, right. It was his first day on the job and he was late because he had to return some gardening pots that his mom bought.

(MORE)

MINH (CONT'D)

But on the way to return them, they broke, so they couldn't accept the return. He had to drive here with them so that's why he was late. She was gonna start a fruit tree nursery but she got sick. He didn't want to get fired on his first day, so he drove her super fast, which is why his shirt was wrinkled.

JEN

(pouting)

Aww.

MINH

I bought his broken pots and now they're being used in the restaurant's garden.

Jen's lips start quivering, moved by Minh's kindness.

JEN

That's so sweet.

MINH

(teasing)

You cry so easily.

He wipes the tear from her face.

MINH (CONT'D)

I can show you one day. The garden.

JEN

Yeah. I'd like that.

EXT. BIKE SHOP - DAY

Jen and Mr. Tran sit together, fanning themselves behind the counter.

Their shirt necklines are drenched in sweat. The hot humid rain is starting to drizzle in.

Monsoon season is in full effect.

MR. TRAN

What day you go home?

JEN

(in Vietnamese)

Friday, next week.

MR. TRAN
Ah good. Good. You happy?

JEN
I don't know.

MR. TRAN
Hmm. Your parents will be happy.

Mr. Tran gets up, goes to the shop's back room, and returns with two beer bottles.

He expertly cracks both open at the same time and hands one to Jen.

JEN
(in Vietnamese)
Ah, thank you.

Jen receives the bottle and then takes a big swig.

JEN (CONT'D)
I don't know how they're gonna be when I see them. What if they're still mad at me?

Mr. Tran takes his seat next to Jen. He doesn't say anything for a moment.

MR. TRAN
(in Vietnamese)
The money isn't the problem, it's that you went away without saying anything.

Mr. Tran points off into the distance.

MR. TRAN (CONT'D)
(in Vietnamese)
It was raining like this the day my brother left. It was early in the morning. One of the fishmongers came to our house and told us that he stole a boat from the pier and was sailing to America. My brother was scared of war. He was scared of what men could do to men. It seems like so long ago because I look around and people act like nothing happened. They wake up, go shopping, go eat, go gamble, drink beer. Like it never happened. But I remember what war did to this country. I wonder what he's doing.
(MORE)

MR. TRAN (CONT'D)

I wonder if he thinks about me. I think about him everyday.

Mr. Tran nods to himself.

EXT. MINH'S ROOFTOP GARDEN - DAY

A lush garden with an assortment of fruits and vegetables.

Minh digs at a large pot, it used to be broken, but has been glued back together.

Bundles of green onion, cilantro, and mint sprout out of the pot.

Jen watches him garden.

MINH

When I first arrived, I remember everything tasted so clean. Food in the states has so much preservatives and additives. And the portions were so big. In Hanoi, smaller and cheaper. Since they're so cheap, you can just buy another bowl of you're still hungry.

Minh straightens up to wipe sweat from his brow.

JEN

Do you miss America?

MINH

Nah, there's nothing for me over there. Here-

Minh plants his shovel into the planter.

MINH (CONT'D)

Home is where you plant your roots.

He glances at his garden.

MINH (CONT'D)

Literally.

Minh takes off his gloves.

MINH (CONT'D)

Where are your roots Jen?

EXT. HIGHWAY - MORNING

Jen speeds through a highway built over a shallow body of water.

She expertly bobs and weaves through the markings on the concrete road. She drives fast into the sunrise.

EXT. AIRPORT - MORNING

An overhead announcement is heard on the PA system.

Jen looks up at her flight info. The light from the airport's sun roofs shine in her face.

She looks behind her.

Minh waves goodbye. She waves back.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - NIGHT

It's snowing tonight.

Jen arrives in front of her parent's home.

She steps out of the cab and hesitates for a moment to go inside.

She stands across the yard of her parent's home. Her home.

The porch light is on for her.

FADE OUT.

THE END

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