

The Uncanny, The Abject, and The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Body Horror

By

Madison Farr

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Sponsor: Nathan Holmes
Second Reader: Paula Haplerin

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Uncanny Double Self vs. The Other.....	4
The Abjection: Crossing the Boundary.....	9
Metamorphic Horrors: The Terror of Becoming.....	16
Conclusion.....	20
The Creative Exploration.....	25
The Script: Perfecting Audrey.....	30

Introduction

Horror films have long been understood as a genre primarily addressing male audiences, often positioning women as objects of fear, desire, or victimization. However, beyond these traditional roles, horror provides a space to explore female subjectivity, agency, and resistance. Among its many tools, the genre employs body horror and the uncanny motif of doubling to navigate complex human experiences, particularly those tied to trauma and societal pressures. For female protagonists, these narratives often center on the tension between societal expectations, personal desire, and self-identity. In this thesis, I argue that horror films use the uncanny and body horror to externalize the societal pressures that uniquely shape women's experiences, focusing on female characters who confront psychological fragmentation and bodily transformation.

This thesis shifts the conversation surrounding horror by exploring how contemporary women-centered body horror films, particularly *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Substance* (2024), use the female body as a canvas upon which societal anxieties about identity, transformation, and repression are projected. These films do not simply depict women as victims of external terror; they explore how these women's psychological and bodily transformations reflect deeper social and cultural tensions.

Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) is a psychological horror film that follows Nina Sayers, a disciplined but fragile ballet dancer who lands the coveted dual role of Odette and Odile in *Swan Lake*. To embody both the innocent White Swan and the seductive Black Swan, Nina must abandon her rigid self-discipline and embrace her darker instincts. However, the more she attempts to reconcile these opposing identities, the more she unravels. Living under the suffocating control of her overprotective mother, Erica, Nina's repressed anxieties manifest in

increasingly disturbing ways. After earning the role through a mix of talent and Thomas Leroy's aggressive coaching, she becomes fixated on her understudy, Lily, a free-spirited dancer who effortlessly embodies the qualities Nina lacks. As rehearsals progress, Nina's paranoia escalates; she develops mysterious wounds, experiences vivid hallucinations, and begins losing control of her body.

Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* is a visceral body horror film that explores the violent consequences of society's obsession with youth and beauty. The film follows Elisabeth Sparkle, a once-revered Hollywood actress who, on her fiftieth birthday, is unceremoniously dismissed from her long-running aerobics TV show due to her age. Devastated, she stumbles upon *The Substance*, an illicit drug that promises a "younger, more beautiful, more perfect" version of herself. Injecting the serum, Elisabeth births Sue—an uncanny doppelgänger—a younger and seemingly ideal version of herself—from her back. However, the transformation comes with strict conditions: their consciousnesses must switch bodies every seven days, and Sue's survival depends on stabilizer fluid extracted from Elisabeth's aging form.

At first, Sue revels in her newfound stardom, effortlessly reclaiming Elisabeth's former glory, while Elisabeth sinks into self-loathing and isolation. However, as Sue begins to hoard the stabilizer fluid and deliberately delays their switching cycles, Elisabeth's body begins to deteriorate, revealing the horrifying cost of rejecting aging. Their relationship warps from symbiosis to rivalry, culminating in a brutal struggle for dominance. Elisabeth, desperate to reclaim control, attempts to destroy Sue, only to hesitate, still craving the admiration Sue commands. In a moment of fatal hesitation, Sue overpowers and kills Elisabeth, but her victory is short-lived. Without stabilizer fluid, her body rapidly collapses, and in desperation, she injects herself with another dose of the activator serum, despite the explicit warning that it is a

single-use process. The result is *Monstro Elisasue*, a grotesque fusion of Elisabeth and Sue, a hybrid abomination.

By engaging with three theoretical frameworks—the uncanny (Sigmund Freud), the abject (Julia Kristeva), and the monstrous feminine (Barbara Creed)—I argue that these films subvert traditional representations of femininity, revealing how the female body becomes a battleground for competing desires and societal expectations. This exploration uncovers how horror, rather than being a genre of simplistic thrills, offers a profound commentary on the struggles that women face in a world that often reduces their identities to narrow, prescriptive categories.

Through these theories, I will demonstrate how contemporary body horror films externalize the inner psychological and societal anxieties that women face, transforming internal struggles into tangible, often grotesque physical manifestations. I'm using the uncanny as a foundation, setting up a strong framework for exploring how the other theories shape the protagonists' experiences. The abject shows how the female body is both a site of transgression and a battleground for identity formation. The monstrous feminine, in turn, illuminates how women's bodies in horror function as sites of rebellion against patriarchal constraints. In the following pages, I will first examine Freud's theory of the uncanny and its role in body horror films, analyzing how the doubling effect within *Black Swan* and *The Substance* illustrates the conflict between the self and societal expectations. This analysis will show how these films create unease and disorientation through the protagonist's fragmented self-image, revealing the dissonance between how women are expected to behave and how they truly experience their own identities. Next, I will explore Kristeva's concept of the abject, focusing on how these films depict the female body as a site of horror and transgression, illustrating the disintegration of

identity under the weight of external pressures. Through the abject, I will explore the characters' physical and emotional transformations as they confront the impossibility of reconciling personal desires with societal demands. Finally, I will analyze how Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous feminine deepens our understanding of the female body in horror, highlighting how both *Black Swan* and *The Substance* challenge traditional representations of femininity by portraying women's bodies as sites of fear, agency, and subversion. Through this theoretical framework, I will show how contemporary body horror films externalize the psychological and societal anxieties surrounding female identity, offering a profound critique of the cultural forces that seek to define and confine women.

The Uncanny Double: Self vs. Other

Sigmund Freud's concept of *the uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*) is rooted in the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, a psychological experience that arises when something once known becomes disturbingly alien. As Freud explains, "The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to the home'; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (124-125). However, the uncanny is not simply the unknown—it is the return of something deeply repressed, a distortion of what was once intimate and secure. This unsettling phenomenon is particularly potent in the figure of the *doppelgänger*, a double that simultaneously embodies the self and its negation. In *Black Swan* and *The Substance*, the uncanny manifests through the collapse of stable identity, where the protagonists' doubles—both literal and psychological—serve as harbingers of self-dissolution.

In *Black Swan*, the uncanny is deeply embedded in Nina's interactions with Beth Macintyre and Lily, both of whom serve as distorted reflections of different aspects of her psyche. Freud's concept of the double is at play in both relationships, as Beth represents the terrifying possibility of failure and irrelevance, while Lily embodies the suppressed, uninhibited side of Nina's identity that she both desires and fears. The presence of these doubles—both real and imagined—blurs the lines between self and other, reality and delusion, ultimately leading to Nina's complete psychological collapse. As Freud notes, "a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self" (141-142), and Nina's descent into madness is marked by an increasing inability to distinguish between herself and the women she projects her anxieties onto.

Beth Macintyre is the living embodiment of what Nina fears becoming. As the former prima ballerina, Beth represents the harsh reality of aging in the ballet world and the dark side of perfectionism. She has been cast aside due to age and injury, a reminder that no matter how talented or dedicated Nina is, she too will eventually be replaced. This fear manifests in an uncanny way as Nina begins to hallucinate Beth's gruesome self-mutilation, particularly the moment in the hospital when Beth repeatedly stabs herself in the face. Nina's horror in witnessing this act reflects her own escalating paranoia and self-destruction in pursuit of artistic excellence. The moment she sees Beth's face reflected as her own as she stabs herself, Beth is not just a mentor or rival; she is Nina's potential future. Freud explains that the double is not merely an external figure but "all the possibilities which, had they been realized, might have shaped our destiny" (143). Beth serves as a projection of Nina's deepest anxieties—her downfall is not just tragic but an omen of what awaits Nina should she fail to achieve the impossible standard of perfection.

Lily, on the other hand, functions as Nina's uncanny double in a different way. She is the opposite of Nina in personality—sensual, carefree, and uninhibited—yet she physically resembles Nina just enough to blur the boundary between self and other. Throughout the film, the line between Lily and Nina becomes increasingly ambiguous, particularly during the drug-fueled night out that culminates in a sexual encounter. However, the next morning, Nina wakes up alone, unsure if the encounter even happened. Lily's presence constantly destabilizes Nina's sense of self, forcing her to confront the repressed aspects of her identity—her latent desires, her aggression, and her need to break free from the rigid discipline imposed upon her. Freud describes how the double can emerge from the psyche's conflicts, as "a special authority takes shape within the ego... performing the function of self-observing and self-criticism" (142). In this way, Lily represents both temptation and judgment—Nina's obsession with her stems from a subconscious battle between desire and repression.

Nina's hallucinations intensify as her paranoia about Lily grows, leading to the film's most overtly uncanny moment—when she seemingly kills Lily in a jealous rage, only to later discover that Lily is unharmed. In reality, Nina has stabbed herself, but in the moment, she projects her violent impulses onto Lily, turning her into the monstrous double that must be destroyed. Lily represents the path Nina never allowed herself to take—the dancer who can be both technically skilled and free-spirited, successful without self-destruction. By attempting to eliminate Lily, Nina is ultimately trying to destroy the parts of herself that she has spent years suppressing. Freud argues that the uncanny arises when something "novel and unfamiliar" is paired with a deeper psychological fear, stating that "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny" (124-125). Lily's resemblance to Nina and her ability to

embody everything Nina cannot be turns her into something more than just a rival—she becomes an externalized representation of Nina’s most unsettling fears.

Freud's theories on the double (the doppelgänger) and the uncanny can help us understand Elisabeth and Sue’s relationship, which becomes central to the story’s horror. Through Elisabeth's transformation into two distinct bodies, the uncanny emerges in both psychological and physical forms, capturing the essence of Freud's ideas. Freud writes that “they involve the idea of the ‘double’ (the Doppelgänger), in all its nuances and manifestations—that is to say, the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike” (141). This concept is vividly reflected in *The Substance* through the duality between Elisabeth and Sue. At the core of the narrative is the literal creation of a younger version of Elisabeth, an idealized “self” who appears to be identical but is, in fact, a separate entity with its own desires and actions. The two women, despite sharing a body, begin to feel increasingly separate from each other, symbolizing the emergence of the uncanny as they struggle with their co-ownership of consciousness and identity.

The unsettling nature of the double in *The Substance* is reinforced by how the two women inhabit the same body but operate as separate individuals, experiencing each other’s emotions, thoughts, and actions without fully aligning. Freud notes that “the spontaneous transmission of the mental processes from one of these persons to the other” intensifies the uncanny (141-142). This shared consciousness between Elisabeth and Sue, who diverge in their desires and actions, creates constant tension and unease. Elisabeth’s experience of aging and decay, contrasted with Sue’s youthful vitality, embodies the uncanny—not through mirrored appearances, but through their shared consciousness, which fractures as their identities and experiences diverge, unsettling the notion of a singular self.

Freud's notion that the uncanny arises from "all the strivings of the ego that were frustrated by adverse circumstances, all the suppressed acts of volition that fostered the illusion of free will" (143) aligns with Elisabeth's psychological journey throughout *The Substance*. Elisabeth's desperation to reclaim her youth and fame and her subsequent creation of Sue reflect an ego that has been thwarted by the passage of time and the cruel demands of the entertainment industry. The uncanny emerges as Elisabeth grapples with her idealized self—the youthful, beautiful Sue—whom she views as a vehicle to regain control over her fading celebrity status.

However, the more Sue gains autonomy, the more Elisabeth's ego is destabilized. Elisabeth's resentment of Sue's carefree lifestyle, juxtaposed with her own self-loathing, reveals how her suppressed desires manifest in Sue. Sue, representing the "strivings of the ego," becomes Elisabeth's worst enemy, a monstrous version of what Elisabeth once aspired to be. Freud suggests that the uncanny might also arise from the return of repressed or suppressed desires, and in Elisabeth's case, Sue is the embodiment of these repressed aspirations of beauty and success, which, once brought to life, become the very thing Elisabeth cannot control.

Freud argues that "the concept of the double need not disappear along with this primitive narcissism: it may acquire a new content from later stages in the evolution of the ego" (142). This evolution is reflected in how the relationship between Elisabeth and Sue shifts from admiration to animosity. At first, Sue is a reflection of Elisabeth's desire for youth, but as time passes, Sue evolves into a separate entity, taking on a life of her own. Sue's rebellion against the schedule of body switching, as well as her growing contempt for Elisabeth's self-destructive tendencies, symbolizes how the double shifts from being a narcissistic ideal to a destabilizing force.

Elisabeth's act of attempting to terminate Sue, only to reverse her decision out of a desire for admiration, is a pivotal moment in the evolution of their relationship. This illustrates Freud's idea that the double can evolve into something more complex, acquiring a new role as an adversary rather than a mere mirror. The violence that ensues after Elisabeth revives Sue reflects the shift in their dynamic, as Sue becomes a symbol of rebellion against Elisabeth's suffocating self-identity. Ultimately, the horror of the uncanny in *The Substance* is not just that Elisabeth is confronted with a mirror image of herself, but that her idealized self has become a separate, autonomous being that threatens her very existence.

The Subject: Crossing the Boundary

This chapter explores the application of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in contemporary body horror, particularly through the lens of *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Substance* (2024). I will incorporate Kristeva's concept of abjection to examine the shaping of the visual and psychological narratives of both films, particularly in how desire and fear are externalized through bodily transformation. Abjection is defined as the process by which the subject is confronted with what is simultaneously part of and alien to the self, what has been repressed or rejected, and its confrontation leads to a collapse of identity manifested through blood, snot, pus, and other bodily fluids. In both *Black Swan* and *The Substance*, this rupture of the self is realized through grotesque transformations, where the body becomes both the site and symbol of psychological fragmentation.

Kristeva's theory presents abjection as a violent rupture in the boundary between the self and the other, a breakdown that disturbs the familiar and calls into question the stability of identity. Abjection manifests when the body, once a stable vessel of the self, becomes a

grotesque and uncontrollable object, revealing the instability of the subject. As Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror* (1982), the abject is not merely disturbing but also profoundly alluring in its horror: "Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles..." (4). The transformation of the body into the abject challenges the boundary between the human and the non-human, between life and death, revealing the fundamental fragility of selfhood.

The abject is central to *Black Swan*'s narrative and thematic structure, providing a lens through which we can understand Nina's psychological and physical transformations. Kristeva's concept of the abject refers to that which is cast off, rejected, and yet cannot be fully excluded from the subject. It represents the boundary between self and other, between order and disorder, and is often depicted through bodily fluids, decay, and the disruption of the subject's identity. In *Black Swan*, Nina's descent into madness and her bodily deterioration illustrate these themes in unsettling and grotesque ways, as her identity becomes increasingly fragmented and consumed by the forces she tries to repress.

Nina's transformation is not merely a metaphorical collapse of self; it is a carefully constructed cinematic representation of the abject. Through visual and stylistic choices, the film externalizes her psychological turmoil, making it visible and visceral. As she struggles to embody both the White Swan's purity and the Black Swan's sensuality, her body becomes the site of this conflict. Her skin begins to betray her, sprouting feathers, and her nails bleed—signals of a body in rejection of transformation. These outward signs of abjection represent the breakdown of Nina's sense of control over herself. Her body is no longer her own; it is a vessel for the contradictory desires and forces within her. Kristeva asserts that "abjection...is what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). Nina's inability to control her body as it decays and distorts

embodies this disruption. She is unable to reconcile the purity and seduction that are demanded of her by her role, and her body becomes a grotesque battleground for these opposing forces. The abject, in this sense, is not just something external that Nina rejects, but something internal that she cannot fully contain.

Nina's hallucinations, in which she loses control over her reflection and is confronted by her dark doppelgänger, intensify the abjection. Her self-image is shattered, and she is forced to confront the impossibility of reconciling the two sides of her identity. This breakdown of self-recognition is at the heart of Kristeva's theory. She writes, "the subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being" (5). Nina's transformation into the Black Swan signifies this internal rupture; she cannot escape the abject forces within her that have always existed but which she has repressed. As she delves deeper into this transformation, her body's rapid degeneration into something monstrous becomes a literal definition of the abject. It is as if Nina is confronting the impossible within herself: the darkness that has always existed but was never allowed to surface until the performance demands it.

Nina's final performance as the Black Swan is not only a psychological and emotional unraveling but also a grotesque physical transformation, embodying Kristeva's notion of abjection. As Nina becomes increasingly consumed by her role, her body undergoes a disturbing and violent metamorphosis. The physicality of her transformation into the Black Swan is a visceral manifestation of her descent into the abject. Her body no longer conforms to its human limitations; her nails begin to bleed, her skin sprouts feathers, and her body shifts in ways that reflect her internal chaos. The once controlled, fragile figure of Nina becomes contorted and

monstrous, blurring the lines between human and animal, pure and corrupted. This transformation is not just symbolic—it is physical, and it is grotesque.

Nina's breakdown reflects this loss of self-cohesion. Her reflection no longer obeys her, her body is no longer her own, and even her mind betrays her with hallucinations. She attempts to reject the abject by embracing her transformation into the Black Swan, but in doing so, she loses her identity entirely; something that was originally controlled by her mother. Once Nina breaks away from her, she is like a puppet without strings, an agent of chaos. This crisis is most apparent in the film's climax, where Nina performs the final act of *Swan Lake* with unwavering intensity, despite her self-inflicted wound. As blood seeps into her white tutu, she completes the final leap off the stage, symbolizing Odette's tragic demise. Nina's final performance marks the complete dissolution of her selfhood. As she fully embodies the Black Swan, she experiences a moment of transcendence, whispering, "I was perfect," yet this perfection comes at the cost of her destruction. In the end, she has not conquered the abject but has been consumed by it. Her death signifies the ultimate collapse of identity, as she becomes neither Nina nor the Black Swan but something unrecognizable.

Similarly, in *The Substance*, Kristeva's abjection theory is exemplified through Elisabeth Sparkle's desperate attempt to fend off the inevitable effects of aging. Being fired by her sexist showrunner, Harvey (Dennis Quaid), she desires to get her job back. Because of the patriarchal society, it's a job that "belongs" to a hot younger woman. Elisabeth's creation of Sue, a younger version of herself born from her back through the illicit drug known as The Substance, represents an extreme form of bodily transformation driven by societal obsession with youth and beauty. The relationship between Elisabeth and Sue is initially symbiotic, but as Sue begins to hoard the stabilizer fluid required for their bodily switch, the relationship devolves into a horrific struggle

for dominance. Elisabeth's body begins to decay, revealing the terrifying cost of attempting to reject the natural course of aging. Elisabeth's decaying finger serves as a striking embodiment of abjection. Here, Elisabeth is forced into direct confrontation with the instability of her own body—her finger, a familiar and integral part of herself, suddenly becomes alien, grotesque, and repulsive. It is no longer a functioning limb but an object of horror, a reminder that she is losing control not just of her life but of her very physical form. This moment also reflects the deep psychological horror of bodily disintegration, a core element of abjection. As Sue crosses the boundary—indulging in excess and delaying the switch—Elisabeth's body becomes the site of punishment, reinforcing her lack of autonomy. The greying flesh is a visual and visceral rejection of her existence, reducing her to something *less than whole*. Her decayed finger signifies the breakdown of order, a literal and symbolic rot spreading through her identity as she is slowly erased from her own life. Abjection is also defined by the uncontrolled expulsion from the body, the violent ejection of that which should remain contained. This is further illustrated in Elisabeth's grotesque act of revenge. She deliberately consumes revolting food, an intentional violation of bodily norms. During a live taping of the show, a chicken bone grotesquely shifts beneath the skin of Sue's buttocks, a moment of visceral horror that makes her body seem foreign and uncontrollable. Panicked, Sue rushes to her dressing room for privacy, where she digs into her belly button and pulls the bone out. This moment epitomizes the horrifying penetrability of the body as the boundary between the internal and external is violently disrupted. The body, rather than remaining a sealed and autonomous entity, becomes an unstable, leaking vessel—an object of disgust and estrangement.

Sue, as the abject, represents everything Elisabeth seeks to expel—her aging, her imperfections, her fears of inadequacy. Yet, according to Kristeva, abjection does not simply

remove the unwanted; it exposes the illusion of a stable, unified self. Sue's existence as Elisabeth's discarded, unwanted double reflects Elisabeth's narcissism—her obsessive desire to maintain a flawless image of herself. However, as Kristeva suggests, “Abjection gives narcissism (the thing and the concept) its classification as ‘seeming,’” (14), meaning that narcissism is always an illusion, a fragile construct that can never be fully realized. The grotesque fusion of Elisabeth and Sue into *Monstro Elisasue* visualizes this collapse of narcissistic selfhood. Elisabeth's rejection of Sue fails because Sue is not truly separate from her—she is an extension of Elisabeth's own fears and desires. The monstrous hybrid, with its uncontrollable mutations and torrents of blood, illustrates the failure to maintain boundaries between self and other, just as abjection blurs the line between subject and object.

The film's grotesque finale serves as the ultimate expression of Kristeva's concept of abjection, where the body fully rebels against boundaries, identity collapses, and the distinction between self and other dissolves into pure, uncontrollable matter. Sue's desperate attempt to escape her own decay results in the creation of *Monstro Elisasue*, a horrifying fusion of both women—no longer separate entities but an abominable, mutating mass of flesh. In this fusion, the two women's identities collapse into the impossible, as they are neither fully themselves nor each other. The grotesque body of *Monstro Elisasue* reflects the abject's core—a complete dissolution of order, identity, and selfhood. Sue's decaying form, driven by the need to maintain control, turns into a monstrous spectacle of flesh, blood, and decay, a violent eruption of what was meant to be contained.

Monstro's final moments—her explosive disintegration—complete this cycle of abjection. The body that once symbolized beauty and perfection becomes a grotesque, uncontrollable mass, exposing the body's inherent instability. Her decaying form, with her

mutated faces and gushing bodily fluids, is an embodiment of Kristeva's notion of abjection. The audience's reaction of horror is not merely a rejection of the grotesque body but an acknowledgment of the impossibility of containing identity—an inevitable confrontation with the inevitable dissolution of self. As Elisabeth's fragmented face crawls toward her Hollywood star in the end, it serves as a haunting reflection of the system that demanded her transformation—a system of beauty, exploitation, and self-obliteration. Her final, grasping movement is not just a plea for recognition but a testament to the relentless pressures that compelled her to construct herself as a desirable body, only to be consumed by the very ideal she sought to embody. Yet, her final collapse into a puddle of blood, erased by a floor scrubber, signifies her complete expulsion from the realm of recognition and admiration. Through Elisabeth's tragic transformation, *The Substance* critiques a world that enforces rigid standards of desirability and perfection, exposing the monstrous consequences of a culture that equates a woman's worth with youth. Kristeva argues, "Desire, if it dawns, is only a substitute for adaptation to a social norm" (47), Elisabeth's longing for youth is not her own but an enforced ideal that ultimately consumes her. Her fate aligns with Kristeva's assertion that the abject "shatters the wall of repression and its judgments," revealing that the horror of selfhood is not merely aging but the terrifying realization that identity is unstable, built upon an illusion of control (15). Elisabeth's pursuit of an idealized self does not lead to renewal but obliteration—an irreversible descent into abjection where the boundary between subject and object, self and other, collapses entirely.

Both *Black Swan* and *The Substance* illustrate Kristeva's assertion that abjection involves the confrontation of repressed desires and fears through violent bodily transformations. The abject is not simply an external force but something internal, a part of the self that disrupts identity and forces a reckoning with the instability of the body. Kristeva's theory helps explain

how horror films can visualize this unsettling return of the repressed, turning the body into a site of both terror and desire. The grotesque imagery in both films forces the viewer to confront the fragility of identity and the inevitability of bodily decay, illustrating the terrifying consequences of repressing the abject.

Metamorphic Horrors: The Terror of Becoming

Barbara Creed's *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection*, featured in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, explores how horror films construct femininity as a site of fear, disgust, and abjection. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Creed argues that the horror genre often represents female monstrosity through bodily excess—vomit, blood, pus, shit, and oozing wounds—that signals a collapse between inside and outside, self and other, and mother and daughter. In Creed's framework, the female monster is not merely a victim but a grotesque source of horror, disruptive, unstable, and leaking from every orifice.

Black Swan focuses inward, turning the female body into a battleground for identity disintegration through transformation, hallucination, and mutation. Nina Sayers' metamorphosis into the Black Swan is marked by a brutal betrayal of her own flesh: bloodied toenails crack and fall off, goosebumps crawl up her arms, and her skin splits to reveal black feathers sprouting from beneath. These are not just metaphorical wings; her back literally ripples and expands, bones twisting as she gasps in pain. Her legs contort unnaturally into the crook of a bird's stance, skin stretching thin over deformed joints. Her face flakes and bleeds; her eyes redden like a predator's. These scenes embody Kristeva's theory of abjection: the body becomes alien and horrifying not because it dies, but because it transforms into something uncontrollable, animalistic, and grotesque.

The transformation culminates in a monstrous unveiling: Nina becomes the Black Swan, and in doing so, sheds not only her inhibitions but her skin—literally. The moment she pulls a bloody feather from her shoulder, her humanity is stripped. The mirror becomes a site of visceral horror; her reflection mocks and moves independently, her back cracks open, and her voice warps. Creed's monstrous feminine becomes a figure not of empowerment but of uncontainable excess, her very flesh rebelling against psychological repression. Here, bodily horror is inseparable from performance. Her artistic perfection demands blood sacrifice, and by the end, Nina is gashed open and bleeding out on stage—a corpse disguised as a swan.

Erica, Nina's mother, is another site of grotesque femininity, rendered monstrous not through transformation but stasis; her grip on Nina's body is suffocating, infantilizing, and unyielding. She controls Nina's meals, her sleep, and her physicality. Creed states, "According to Lacan, the self is constituted in a process which he called the 'mirror phase', in which the child perceives its own body as a unified whole in an image it receives from outside itself. Thus, the concept of identity is a structure which depends on identification with another. Identity is an imaginary construct, formed in a state of alienation, grounded in mis-recognition." (262). The horror of motherhood here is less aesthetic and more invasive: an overgrown child-woman controlled like a doll. The body Nina represses—its hunger, desire, and pain—erupts the moment she steps into the Black Swan's role. Her hallucinations—of peeling skin, of crushed wounds, of Lily licking a trail up her body—become increasingly soaked in bodily fluid, sex, and self-destruction. Sexual awakening and physical rupture are indistinguishable in Nina's mind. Her body is not her own; it is a site for trauma and transformation.

The film's climax literalizes Lacan's "mirror stage" in reverse: Nina shatters the mirror and, with it, any illusion of a coherent self. She kills her competitive double, Lily, only to realize

she has stabbed herself instead. The wound is deep and wet, her white tutu soaking in blood, as she dances on, eyes wide, skin pale. Her performance is a triumph only because it coincides with her bodily obliteration. The blood becomes glittery and sparkly under the spotlight. Her final words—"I was perfect"—collapse into the grotesque contradiction at the heart of horror's feminine ideal: to achieve perfection is to embrace annihilation.

Creed's framework is particularly important when analyzing the visceral body horror in *The Substance*, where femininity is not abstractly horrifying but physically ruptured. Elisabeth's descent into monstrosity is not only metaphorical—it is soaked in blood, bile, and ooze. Her skin peels. Her face bubbles. Flesh stretches, cracks, and collapses. The body literally splits open, a gaping wound through which societal ideals of beauty crawl in and out. Her transformation and eventual fusion with her younger doppelgänger, Sue, is a grotesque confrontation with the abject. Bodies melt into one another, fluids gush without restraint, and slick skin fuses with raw, blistered tissue. The resulting hybrid—"Monstro Elisae"—is a screaming mass of deformed limbs, breasts, rotted flesh, and Elisabeth's face stretching through its back, a creature that oozes the very substances Creed deems culturally horrific.

The horror here is not abstract; it drips, it festers. It hits you square in the face. The abject is made literal through images of spurting blood, oozing pus, and bodily fusions that repulse and seduce simultaneously. The body is no longer a stable boundary. Elisabeth's decayed smile at the climax—her face collapsing into a glutinous puddle of tissue and blood on her Star of Fame—embodies what Barbara Creed describes as the moment when horror "puts the viewing subject's sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too threatening or horrific to watch, when the abject threatens to draw the viewing subject to the place 'where meaning collapses', the place of death" (262). Here, the film

offers no relief, no safe distance; the monster is not destroyed, not banished—it liquefies into the street, unresolved and reeking, refusing narrative closure and denying the viewer the chance to “reconstitute the ‘self’ which is threatened with disintegration” through the comfort of a neat ending.

Beyond gore, *The Substance* critiques the grotesque demands of beauty culture, transforming femininity into a blood-soaked cycle of self-consumption. Sue, the fresh body initially seen as Elisabeth’s salvation and desire, is slowly pulled into the same fate—her teeth and nails fall out, her nose bleeds, and her ear drops in her hand. The abject is cyclical: beauty leads to rot, youth to decay, until the female body becomes a site of self-devouring collapse. Creed’s assertion that “images of blood, vomit, pus, shit” are central to horror’s construction of the feminine (256) resonates here in every sticky frame. This is horror as pure revulsion—chicken bones pushing against the skin, bodies collapsing into soupy masses, and breasts grotesquely sprouting from Elisasue’s back under the weight of societal ideals. One striking scene features the casting director casually commenting on the bodies of the women auditioning, focusing specifically on their breasts: “Everything sure is in the right place this time.” This line returns with cruel irony at the film’s climax, when Elisasue’s body violently betrays her—the breasts now bulging from her back, splitting through the skin and splattering across the stage. The horror is not just in what the body does, but what it is forced to become.

Both *Black Swan* and *The Substance* reject sanitized narratives of female empowerment. They confront us with leaking, disintegrating, transforming bodies, where feathers pierce flesh, faces collapse into slime, and beauty is indistinguishable from death. As Creed asserts, the horror of the monstrous feminine lies in its refusal to be contained. These films do not destroy their monsters—they let them fester, writhe, and stare back at us, eyes bleeding, skin splitting, wings

breaking through the surface. The grotesque body, soaked in blood and pus, feathers, and bile, becomes not only an object of horror but a challenge to the symbolic order itself. The monstrous feminine does not die.

Conclusion

Horror has always been a genre of contradictions, simultaneously a site of fear and fascination, repression and revelation, and punishment and empowerment. It is within these contradictions that the genre finds its most potent critiques of social structures, particularly in its depictions of female identity, transformation, and destruction. This thesis has examined how *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Substance* (2024) utilize horror's capacity to externalize both psychological and societal anxieties, turning internal struggles into tangible horrors that are enacted upon the female body. Through the frameworks of Freud's uncanny, Kristeva's abject, and Creed's monstrous feminine, I have demonstrated how these films challenge traditional representations of women, offering a profound exploration of the paradox of female desire and destruction.

At the heart of these films is a recurring theme: women who seek transformation and power, whether through artistic excellence, bodily reinvention, or self-definition, are ultimately punished for their desires. Nina Sayers dedicates her life to perfection, only to find herself unraveling under the pressure to reconcile her disciplined innocence with the uninhibited darkness demanded of her role. Her physical deterioration, hallucinations, and eventual death are not merely the results of her personal struggle but reflect a larger societal fear of women who break free from imposed constraints. Similarly, Elisabeth Sparkle's desperate attempt to retain her youth and celebrity status in *The Substance* leads to a grotesque cycle of bodily decay and

monstrous rebirth, culminating in her demise. In both cases, these women's ambitions mark them for destruction, reinforcing a cultural narrative that equates female success with self-destruction.

By applying Freud's concept of the uncanny, this thesis has explored how both films create horror through the destabilization of identity. The uncanny emerges through the doppelgänger, where the familiar becomes terrifyingly unfamiliar. Nina's relationship with Lily and her fractured reflection in *Black Swan* serve as haunting reminders of her fragmented self, illustrating the psychological toll of societal expectations. In *The Substance*, Elisabeth's younger double, Sue, at first embodies the ideal self she longs to reclaim, but as Sue gains autonomy, she becomes a source of terror rather than empowerment. Freud's theory helps to explain why these uncanny doubles provoke such unease—they embody the repressed fears and desires of their protagonists, making visible the internal fractures that were once hidden.

Kristeva's concept of the abject further enhances this analysis by illuminating how both films use bodily horror to reflect the breakdown of identity. The abject represents what society seeks to expel—bodily fluids, decay, transformation—yet it constantly threatens to return. Nina's grotesque bodily mutations, from her bleeding nails to her sprouting feathers, mirror her psychological unraveling as she loses control over her sense of self. Likewise, Elisabeth's decaying body, the grotesque emergence of Sue from her back, and the final monstrous fusion into Monstro Elisae in *The Substance* embody the horror of a body that refuses to remain contained. These films reject the idea of a stable, whole female identity, instead presenting the female body as a site of horror precisely because it defies the boundaries imposed upon it.

Creed's theory of the monstrous feminine ties these elements together, revealing how horror films have historically positioned female bodies as both desirable and terrifying. Women in horror are often monstrous, not because they are villains but because they refuse to be

controlled. The monstrous feminine is most apparent in *Black Swan* as Nina transforms into the Black Swan itself, her body contorting into something inhuman as she embraces her own darkness. Her final performance is both a moment of triumph and a moment of complete erasure—she has become what the role demanded, but in doing so, she has destroyed herself. In *The Substance*, Elisabeth's fate is even more grotesque, as her desperate attempt to reclaim youth leads to a horrifying cycle of consumption and bodily violation, culminating in her fusion with Sue into an abject monstrosity. These transformations are not just acts of horror; they are acts of rebellion—rebellions that ultimately fail, reinforcing the inescapable nature of patriarchal violence.

The central paradox explored in this thesis is the idea that female ambition in horror is indistinguishably linked to annihilation. This is a pattern seen across horror and psychological thrillers, where women who seek greatness, autonomy, or reinvention often face violent obliteration. From Nina and Elisabeth to countless other tragic female figures in the genre, horror continually reinforces the notion that women who push beyond their prescribed roles must be punished. This trope is deeply ingrained in cultural narratives outside of horror as well—women who seek power or independence in real life often face scrutiny, vilification, or erasure. *Black Swan* and *The Substance* expose this troubling pattern by making it literal: Nina and Elisabeth do not just fail; they are physically consumed by their ambitions.

By exploring these films through a theoretical lens, this thesis contributes to broader discussions about gender, identity, and the cultural policing of women's bodies. Horror has long been dismissed as a genre of pure spectacle, but *Black Swan* and *The Substance* demonstrate that it is also a space for critical engagement with societal fears. The grotesque imagery and unsettling transformations in these films force audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about

how female identity is constructed and controlled. These films do not offer easy resolutions—there is no moment of redemption, no escape from the horror. Instead, they leave viewers with a lingering sense of unease, a recognition that these narratives of destruction feel disturbingly familiar.

Yet, while these films reinforce the pattern of female annihilation, they also serve as critiques of the structures that make such endings feel inevitable. Nina and Elisabeth's fates are tragic, but their stories reveal the absurdity and cruelty of the expectations placed upon women. In exposing the horror of these demands, *Black Swan* and *The Substance* challenge audiences to question why female ambition is so often met with destruction. Must the pursuit of greatness always come at such a cost? Can horror, as a genre, imagine new possibilities—ones where women's transformations do not end in obliteration but in survival?

In bringing these ideas together, this thesis ultimately questions whether horror must always adhere to the pattern it so often reinforces. If horror is a genre that thrives on transgression, then perhaps it has the potential to break free from the cycle of female destruction it so frequently depicts. While *Black Swan* and *The Substance* offer no such escape for their protagonists, their very existence as films invites audiences to critically engage with the narratives they present. By unraveling the cycle of female ambition leading to destruction, these films compel us to question the societal forces that render such narratives unavoidable, challenging us to envision a world where women can pursue greatness without it demanding their ruin.

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The Creative Exploration

When I set out to write *Perfecting Audrey*, I didn't want to simply apply theory—I wanted to inhabit it. I had spent months immersed in texts by Freud, Kristeva, and Creed, examining the way horror gives shape to trauma through the body, through the double, and through the unruly forces that emerge when identity falters. But I didn't want to stop at analysis. I wanted to create something that lived in the grey space between grief and transformation. The script became both an extension of my thesis and a personal exploration of what it means to survive, to split, and to suppress parts of oneself in the name of healing.

The story began with an image: a woman, Audrey, in a bathtub, trying to sink beneath the water. It wasn't just a suicide attempt—it was an urge to disappear, to dissolve into stillness. That image felt powerful, not because it was dramatic, but because it quietly captured what so many people who experience trauma feel: the desire to stop existing as the person you are and become someone easier. That idea—of erasing pain by erasing the self—became the thematic backbone of the entire script. *Perfecting Audrey* is not a horror film about what grief does to you, but about what society demands you do with your grief in order to be acceptable again.

Audrey's arc mirrors the central argument of my thesis: that horror, and especially body horror, is uniquely positioned to visualize desire and the trauma of attempting to fit in the small box of societal standards, by literalizing its effects. The uncanny, the abject, and the monstrous feminine are not just analytical tools—I used them as architectural principles for the story. Audrey doesn't simply feel broken; she sees another version of herself, a decaying double with glassy eyes and sagging skin, watching her from the corners of her home. This is the uncanny double Freud describes: the return of the repressed, the horror of encountering oneself as other.

For Audrey, the double is everything she's been told to suppress—her sorrow, her anger, her physical imperfections, her memory of the child she lost.

This splitting of the self was deeply influenced by *Black Swan*, where Nina's hallucinations blur the line between ambition and self-destruction. Like Nina, Audrey is constantly performing—trying to be a good wife, trying to “heal,” trying to stay palatable and innocent. But perfection comes at a cost. And like Nina's final act of artistic transcendence that ends in death, Audrey's transformation threatens to consume her entirely. Unlike Nina, though, Audrey doesn't want to be brilliant or beautiful; she just wants to be normal again. And the horror is that “normal” means being someone she no longer recognizes.

I was also deeply inspired by *The Substance*, especially in how it presents bodily transformation as a seductive form of self-optimization that quickly turns grotesque. Elisabeth splits into two selves—herself, and Sue, the perfect, younger version of herself. In *Perfecting Audrey*, the treatment Audrey undergoes isn't framed as revolutionary or glamorous. It's clinical, underground, and vaguely exploitative. The clinic itself is located beneath a nightclub, signaling the collision between artificial beauty culture, with the dancing girls, and surgical erasure. The treatment promises lightness, relief, and control. But it requires her to cut out the “undesirable” parts of herself: grief, shame, and fear. And because those parts are what make her human, her body resists.

Kristeva's theory of the abject—the bodily fluids and borders that must be expelled for a subject to exist—plays out both literally and symbolically in Audrey's transformation. The black sludge she vomits after taking the pills is an abject material, evidence of something inside her trying to get out. Her nails fall off and regrow perfect, but too pointy. Her skin smooths unnaturally. Her stretch marks disappear. Her teeth sharpen. Her body is caught in a grotesque

cycle of purging and re-forming. These aren't just symptoms—they're metaphors for how femininity is policed. The body must be smooth, clean, orderly. But grief is messy. Rage is loud. And motherhood, especially when interrupted by loss, is treated as taboo. Audrey's body becomes the site of horror because it refuses to forget.

Writing Ben's character was emotionally difficult. I didn't want him to be evil, but I did want him to be truly unlikable and familiar. His pressure on Audrey is always couched in care—he wants her to “feel better,” to “get help,” to “try something.” But what he's really saying is: “You're making me uncomfortable. Please stop.” His inability to sit with her grief leads him to weaponize normalcy. When he says, “This depressive episode—whatever you want to call it—it's... it's not you. And honestly? It's really—really—unattractive” I wanted that line to land like a slap. Because women so often are told they are too emotional, too dramatic, too slow to recover. He cheats on her, but the affair isn't just a betrayal of fidelity—it's a betrayal of grief. He seeks emotional connection elsewhere because Audrey's sorrow makes her less sexually appealing. This dynamic felt important to explore, especially in a story where body horror is tethered to the pressure of being “fuckable” even while grieving.

Imani, Audrey's neighbor, serves as a counterpoint. She's warm, supportive, and kind—but she's also the one who introduces Audrey to the procedure. Like many women in real life, Imani has internalized the idea that fixing yourself (even if it means chemically erasing parts of you) is a virtue. She doesn't see herself as complicit—she believes she's helping. And she probably is, in her own way. But that's what makes it insidious. The normalization of “getting better” through transformation is part of the horror. It's not forced—it's suggested. It's friendly. It's just a card with a phone number.

The hallucinations Audrey experiences after her procedure escalate slowly. They begin as shadows and voices. She sees other versions of herself—pregnant again, smiling, or decayed and hostile. These moments allowed me to use the horror format to reflect how trauma distorts reality. I wanted the audience to feel as disoriented as she does. In one moment, she's at a diner with Ben; in the next, Laura appears in his seat. Flashbacks are stitched into the present, not as exposition, but as ruptures. Because trauma doesn't sit neatly in a timeline—it bleeds.

The structure of the script intentionally fragments Audrey's sense of reality. Flashbacks to her pregnancy are presented in warm, soft light, filled with hope and intimacy. But they are surrounded by cold, sharp present-day scenes where her body is dissolving and her support systems are collapsing. This juxtaposition allowed me to visualize how memory can be both a comfort and a trigger. Audrey clings to her past self because she doesn't know who she is anymore. And the more she tries to reclaim that identity through pills and procedures, the more monstrous she becomes.

The third act turns fully into body horror. Audrey wakes up naked, covered in blood, standing over Jason's corpse. She has no memory of the act. She hides it. Then she kills Ben, tearing him apart in the bathtub as the "monster" overcomes her. This violence is shocking, but it's not random. It's a culmination. These acts are the result of her repression exploding outward. The horror isn't just in the deaths—it's in the fact that these were the only people who saw her grief and demanded she fix it. They didn't want her to get better—they wanted her to go away. And in the end, she does.

The final image of Audrey—naked, blood-covered, walking the quiet suburban street—was one of the first images I had, even before I wrote the first scene. I didn't want a tidy ending. I didn't want her to be saved. I wanted her to be seen. She laughs and cries at the same

time. She's not whole. She's not healed. But she's no longer pretending. The horror has burned through her, and what's left is messy, grotesque, and honest. I wanted to explore the idea that Audrey reaches an ending that Nina (*Black Swan*) and Elisabeth (*The Substance*) never get. Unlike them, she doesn't die or disintegrate—she survives by fully merging with the monster. The procedure and the pills don't erase her; instead, they strip away the layers of suppression and allow her true self to emerge. The monstrous hybrid she becomes isn't an anomaly—it's her most honest form. She hurts those who threaten or silence her, not out of blind rage, but as a form of self-defense. While her pursuit of perfection doesn't lead to annihilation like the other characters I studied, it still doesn't make her perfect. She remains fractured, haunted, and dangerous—but finally, she is fully herself.

Writing *Perfecting Audrey* was my way of proving that theory can live in character. That horror isn't just spectacle—it's substance. This script let me embody the arguments I make in my thesis: that horror exposes the contradictions of femininity, that trauma lives in the body, and that the monstrous feminine is not a villain—but a symptom. Audrey is not redeemed. She is not punished. She is transformed. And in that transformation is something both terrifying and true.

PERFECTING AUDREY

Written by

Madison Farr

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - UPPER WEST SIDE - MORNING

A bright spring day in NYC. Green leaves swirl through bustling streets. Flowers bloom. Cars honk at other cars and pedestrians. The city feels vibrant yet tinged with the quiet melancholy of fall.

EXT. A STREET OF BROWNSTONE APARTMENTS - CONTINUOUS

A row of identical scruffy brownstone apartments lined up. Wind carries the leaves, brushing on the sidewalks. A rusty car stops in front of one of the apartments. A MAN rolls down his window and yells at a car in front of him.

MAN

Let's go, asshole!

He lays on the horn. BEEE-

INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

-EEEP!!!! The muffled horn carries inside the moving box-filled apartment. We hear the sound of water filling a tub.

The camera pans slowly through the apartment, capturing happy photos of AUDREY and BEN at various stages of their life together: a trip to the beach, a wedding photo, laughter at a dinner party. The images are warm, filled with joy.

The apartment is small but homey. It's littered with Audrey's children's books illustrations; fairy's, talking animals, magical woods.

WE PAN TO a small wire trash can overflowing with crumbled and scribbled drawings. One of the drawings is a small friendly cartoon child with their eyes scratched out multiple times.

We hear the sound of the bath tub knob squeaking off. Some rustling.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

AUDREY (30s), brunette, naturally gorgeous, and vulnerable, sits in the bathtub, her hair damp and unkempt, her eyes distant. A charcuterie board rests along the edge of the tub, next to a half-empty bottle of red wine. She takes a sip, closing her eyes, a brief escape in the taste.

The glass slips from her hand, drifting in the water, and Audrey sinks down, letting the water rise over her face.

Wine mixes with the water, like blood. Her features blur beneath the surface as she remains still, her hands resting against the sides of the tub.

Seconds pass in quiet suspension, her world drowned in silence.

Then, her body jolts with the instinct to breathe. Panic surges as she bursts up, gasping for air, water splashing over the edges of the tub. Her eyes are wide, filled with fear and sudden, raw realization.

CUT TO:

INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S APARTMENT - LATER

Soft instrumental music plays. The golden hour light spills through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor.

Audrey moves around the apartment, folding a blanket, stacking books, sealing a cardboard box. The place is half-empty. On a nearby table are a few of her illustrations—soft, surreal drawings of women in dreamlike landscapes.

She pauses to look at one, her fingers brushing the edge. A knock at the door.

She hesitates, then opens it. OLIVIA (30s), her friend and neighbor, stands there holding a houseplant.

OLIVIA

Got you something. But I don't think this little guy will survive the move.

Audrey offers a faint smile, stepping aside.

AUDREY

Come in.

Olivia enters, placing the plant down. She surveys the boxes.

OLIVIA

Fuck. It's really happening, huh?

AUDREY

Guess so.

Beat. Olivia nods toward the illustrations.

OLIVIA

You packing those too?

AUDREY
Some of them. The rest are going in
the trash.

A quiet beat. Olivia crosses her arms.

OLIVIA
You sure this is what you want?
Leaving the city? Running away from
all-

AUDREY
(sharply)
I'm not running. I'm going thirty
minutes away.

Silence. Audrey softens.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
I just... need quiet. Space.

OLIVIA
And Ben?

AUDREY
He's excited. Backyard. Grill.
Neighbors who wave.

She tries to smile but it doesn't quite land. Olivia studies her.

OLIVIA
Right.

They stand in the stillness of the half-packed room. The music continues, barely audible now, like it's coming from somewhere far away.

INT. OFFICE - MIDDAY

Rows of gray cubicles buzz with fluorescent lights and the quiet clatter of keyboards. The kind of place where time evaporates and nothing really lives.

BEN (30s), handsome with a light scruff, wearing a wrinkled button down, sits at his desk, eyes hollow, staring at lines of code on a monitor he's not really reading. His hair is unwashed, shirt wrinkled, fingers hovering above the keyboard but unmoving.

An untouched coffee cup sits beside him. Cold.

He blinks slowly, jaw clenched. His leg bounces beneath the desk, subtle but restless.

From the next cubicle, JACK (30s), easygoing, wearing a hoodie and eating chips, leans over the partition.

JACK

Hey man. You see that weird Slack thread about the product guy rage-quitting?

Ben doesn't react.

JACK (CONT'D)

(sits on the edge of the cubicle)

It's like the fourth meltdown this quarter. I swear if you're not breaking code here, you're breaking down.

Ben forces a polite noise – something between a chuckle and a grunt.

BEN

Yeah. Guess so.

Jack eyes him a moment, then gestures toward Ben's calendar on the screen.

JACK

So you're taking next few weeks off?

BEN

Yeah.

JACK

Good. I'm glad. You should've taken it sooner.

Ben keeps typing – nonsense, really.

BEN

I've been busy. Also, we need time to settle into the new place.

Jack nods, then lowers his voice slightly.

JACK

I mean... you should've used it when that thing happened, you know? I figured you were just powering through it or something. But...

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
I don't know. That's not always the
move, you know?

Ben stops typing. His back stiffens.

BEN
Jack.

JACK
Yeah?

BEN
I don't want to talk about it.

A beat. Jack raises his hands, backing off.

JACK
Got it. No worries.

He stands, gives Ben a half-smile.

JACK (CONT'D)
Just... don't let them take your
whole brain, man. You've only got
one.

Ben doesn't answer.

Jack walks away, the crinkle of chip bags following him.

Ben exhales. Slow. Hollow. Stares at the cursor.

His reflection in the screen, faint and gray, stares back.

INT. KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON - MONTAGE

Audrey stands in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, hair tied
back. She scrolls through a recipe on her phone with one
hand, stirring something on the stove with the other.

She moves mechanically, like she's going through the motions
of a person she used to be.

The oven timer goes off. She jolts, like she forgot it was
even on.

She opens the oven - smoke billows out. The baking dish is
charred. She mutters a curse and waves the smoke away.

INT. SUBWAY CAR - SAME TIME

Ben sits alone in a packed train, surrounded by strangers but deeply isolated. His headphones are in, but no music is playing. His eyes are heavy, shoulders slumped.

Outside the window, the city blurs past in dim, flickering streaks of light.

He scrolls through his phone. Stops on a photo – him and Audrey. She's smiling. He is too. It looks like a different life.

He locks the screen and stares at his reflection in the dark window.

INT. KITCHEN / LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Audrey sits on the living room floor in her oversized sweatshirt, cross-legged with a greasy pizza box open beside her. A slice hangs limply in her hand. Her face is blank. She chews like she's not even tasting it.

The kitchen behind her is a disaster – pans everywhere, burnt food congealing in a dish on the stove, a cloud of smoke residue still clinging to the air.

The front door opens.

Ben walks in, drops his bag by the door.

He sees the mess. The pizza. Her on the floor.

A long pause.

BEN

Hey.

AUDREY

Hey.

He walks in slowly, kicks off his shoes, and leans against the doorway.

BEN

What happened to cooking me a nice steak?

There's something in his voice, a slight microaggression.

AUDREY

Yeah, sorry. I burned it. It caught on fire.

Ben gives a tight smile.

BEN
It caught on fire...

AUDREY
Well, all our good shit is packed away, so I had to use the shitty pans that your mother got us.

BEN
Shit, from our wedding?! Surprised we still held onto those.

AUDREY
Not anymore. They're officially going in the trash.

BEN
So I don't get steak tonight?

AUDREY
Sorry. I didn't know what else to do. I ordered it right away so you'd have at least *something* when you got home.

BEN
...Right.

Audrey nervously takes another bite, not wanting to set Ben off.

AUDREY
Want a slice?

Ben hesitates, then walks over and lowers himself to the floor beside her.

He grabs a slice, bites into it. He grimaces.

BEN
This is awful.

He has a small smile, daring himself not to laugh at how bad the pizza is. Audrey relaxes.

AUDREY
It's completely inedible. I had them make it extra crispy, but they burnt the shit out of this.

They laugh, chewing bad pizza on the living room floor like teenagers.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

A U-Haul truck rattles down a sleepy residential block, sun beaming down. Neatly trimmed lawns. Mailboxes with last names. Nothing out of place.

Inside the car leading it, Audrey stares out the passenger window, sunglasses on, silent. Her fingers twist the hem of her sleeve.

Ben drives. One hand on the wheel, the other tapping a nervous rhythm against his knee.

Neither of them speaks.

The U-Haul follows behind them like a ghost.

EXT. NEW HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The U-Haul pulls into the driveway of a modest two-story home. Faded blue siding. A porch swing that creaks in the wind.

Ben gets out of the car first. Audrey steps out slower, shielding her eyes from the sun.

BEN

Well... there it is.

AUDREY

It's quiet.

BEN

That's a good thing, right?

Audrey shrugs. The moment is neutral. Empty.

INT. NEW HOUSE - BEDROOM - LATER

Boxes pile in every room. Labels: KITCHEN, BEDROOM, OFFICE, ~~BABY STUFF~~ (crossed out).

Audrey opens a box marked LINENS and pulls out a pillowcase. She smells it. Home, but not.

Ben starts pushing a heavy dresser against the wall with a grunt.

BEN

Can you- fuck! Can you help me?
You're just standing there.

Audrey forces a tight smile and walks to help him push the dressers.

INT. KITCHEN - A LITTLE LATER

Audrey opens cupboards, arranging plates and mugs like puzzle pieces. She keeps rearranging them, not satisfied with any configuration.

Ben walks in, sweaty, hands on hips.

BEN
I'm gonna order pizza.

AUDREY
I just went out and brought groceries. We had pizza last night.

BEN
Who's fault was that?

He walks off before she answers.

Audrey stares at the plates again, then places them back exactly how she first had them.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - AFTERNOON

The sound of a car pulling up. Audrey, kneeling to unbox a planter, looks up.

EMILY (early 20s), bright and full of life, Audrey's sister, bounds out of her car, waving.

EMILY
Hellooo, homeowners!

Audrey grins - a real, tired, slightly crooked grin.

AUDREY
I thought you had work.

EMILY
I told them my sister was moving into a haunted house and needed my support. They asked no follow-up questions.

They hug. Audrey melts a little into her.

EMILY (CONT'D)

You look... tired. But like, cute tired. Instagram tired. Give me a pout.

AUDREY

You're ridiculous.

EMILY

Seriously though, this place has potential. Porch swing? Big yard? Definitely murder basement vibes, but I can work with it.

BEN (O.S.)

Hey, Emily.

She turns. Ben waves from the doorway, box in hand.

EMILY

Benjamin.

BEN

How's...

(snaps his fingers)

Marlene?

EMILY

Stacy.

BEN

Wasn't there a Marlene?

Ben looks at the two sisters confused.

AUDREY

You're thinking of *Mary*.

BEN

Right... Which one was Mary?

AUDREY

Before Cassie.

BEN

Who the fuck is Cassie?

EMILY

The one before Stacy. Keep up!

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

They sit on unpacked furniture. Emily scrolls through her phone. Audrey eyes unopened boxes.

AUDREY

Fuck. We still got all the wall
shit.

EMILY

Want help hanging stuff? I have a
very specific opinion about where
your mirror should go.

AUDREY

I bet you do.

BEN

I was gonna start with the art.

EMILY

That's adorable, but Audrey has
taste.

Ben smirks but looks away.

Audrey chuckles, curling her legs under her.

For a moment – the three of them – it feels like a real home.

But Audrey's smile falters as she glances at a box in the
corner labeled BABY STUFF. Still sealed. Still waiting.

She looks away quickly, brushing a piece of hair behind her
ear.

EMILY (CONT'D)

You okay?

Audrey nods.

AUDREY

Yeah. Just a lot to take in.

Emily leans against her shoulder.

EMILY

One box at a time.

EXT. HOUSE - EVENING

The porch light flickers on. The U-Haul sits empty now.

Inside, laughter echoes faintly.

Through the window, we glimpse Audrey – laughing at something Emily said, shoulders relaxed.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

The light outside dims. The once-playful music from earlier is gone. Empty boxes are scattered. Audrey folds blankets into a basket.

Ben pulls items from a box labeled MISC. PERSONAL. He unwraps a small wooden frame and freezes.

It's a photo: him and Audrey. She's visibly pregnant, laughing, mid-spin, sunlight behind her.

He holds it up.

BEN

Why do you still have this?

Audrey glances at it, then continues folding.

AUDREY

It was a good time. I wanted to remember the good parts. Not just how it ended.

BEN

You think this helps?

AUDREY

It helps me.

Ben sets the photo down, carefully. His voice is low, controlled.

BEN

We could try again, you know. We have space now. Quiet. Time.

Audrey stiffens. Beat.

AUDREY

You want to replace her.

BEN

That's not what I said.

AUDREY

That's what it sounds like.

BEN
I'm trying to move forward, Audrey.
You keep—clinging. To ashes.

AUDREY
(sharply)
Because forgetting her would be
like she never existed. You can
live with that?

BEN
It's not about forgetting. It's
about not drowning in it every day.

AUDREY
I'm not drowning.

BEN
(quietly)
You are. And you're dragging me
with you.

She turns away. He steps closer.

BEN (CONT'D)
This depressive episode—whatever
you want to call it—it's... it's
not you. And honestly? It's
really—really—unattractive.

Silence. Audrey slowly turns back to him. Her expression
hardens.

AUDREY
Say that again.

BEN
I didn't mean—

AUDREY
Yes, you did.

Her voice cracks—not out of weakness, but anger held too
long.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
You think I chose this? You think I
like being hollowed out? Like I
enjoy waking up every day
pretending to be someone I used to
be?

Ben looks away, jaw tight.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
You didn't lose her the way I did.

BEN
She was mine too.

AUDREY
Then why do you act like forgetting
her is the only way to survive?

BEN
Because remembering her this way is
killing us.

They stare at each other—tears unshed, words unfinished.

A long beat. Audrey picks up the photo, quietly walks into the other room, and shuts the door.

Ben is left alone, surrounded by half-open boxes and things that used to mean something.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dim. A bedside lamp casts a soft glow across the sheets.

Ben moves on top of Audrey. Aggressively thrusting. His breath is heavy, focused, trying to connect. Her T-shirt is pulled up just enough. Her body is still.

Audrey stares at the lamp beside the bed. The light buzzes faintly.

Her eyes don't blink. She breathes quietly through her nose, her hands limp at her sides. She shifts slightly, uncomfortable, not with pain—but with presence.

Ben doesn't notice. Audrey's gaze stays locked on the lamp. The shade is tilted. Dust on the bulb. That's where her mind is. Anywhere but here.

Ben stills and groans loudly. That pulls Audrey back to reality. He's finished. He rolls off of her, and she stays still.

The room goes quiet.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dark, soft moonlight bleeding in through the curtains.

Audrey sleeps on her side, curled in on herself, her face peaceful but pale.

From the other room, the faint rustling of cardboard boxes.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ben kneels beside an open box, slowly unpacking.

He pulls out a small stuffed animal – soft, worn, meant for the baby they lost.

Ben stares at it, frozen. His fingers trace the seams.

Then, he squeezes it tightly to his chest.

Tears break from him before he can stop them.

His shoulders shake as the grief pours out.

The overhead light flickers, casting frantic, erratic shadows that seem to ripple across the walls like waves.

The flickering grows more intense—strobe-like—until—

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. LAURA'S HOME OFFICE - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

The room glows with the low, restless flicker of a fireplace. Shadows dance across Ben's face, mirroring the light that had surrounded him just moments ago.

He sits stiffly on the couch, eyes red, hands clenched between his knees.

Across from him, LAURA (30s) sultry, proactive, a therapist, watches. Composed. Calm. A glass of wine resting by her side.

BEN

(voice cracking)

It's like... every second I'm awake,
it's there.

(lowers his head)

This thing inside me that won't let
go. I can't breathe through it.

Silence. The fire pops in the grate.

LAURA

I know how that feels.

She stands, slow, deliberate – crosses to him. Her gaze steady.

She kneels between his legs, hands sliding up his thighs, firm but gentle.

LAURA (CONT'D)

You want to feel something else.
Don't you?

Ben's breath hitches. He doesn't respond, but he doesn't pull away.

Laura leans in – kisses him. Soft at first, then deeper. She guides him backward, pressing him into the couch cushions.

She remains in control – steering the rhythm, the pace, the intensity. Her hands pin his wrists above his head as the firelight dances across their bodies.

Ben's tears haven't fully dried, but he surrenders to the touch.

The fire flickers wildly – the flames bright, erratic.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Soft sunlight creeps through the half-open blinds.

Audrey stirs awake, eyes blinking open.

CLANG. CLATTER.

The sharp noise of a pot hitting the floor echoes from downstairs.

She sits up, groggy. Listens.

A faint sizzle follows.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Audrey pads down the stairs, still in her pajamas. She pauses at the doorway.

Ben stands at the stove, back to her.

There's smoke curling from a pan – toast scorched black. A bowl of eggs sits nearby, lumpy and curdled.

He fumbles with the spatula, muttering under his breath as he tries (and fails) to salvage it.

AUDREY
(soft, amused)
Morning.

Ben jolts – caught.

BEN
(shrugging, sheepish)
I was... gonna surprise you with
breakfast.

Audrey steps closer, surveys the disaster on the stovetop.

She smiles, tired but touched.

AUDREY
That's really sweet.

Ben sighs, frustrated with himself. He picks up a piece of the charred toast, gives it a skeptical look, then drops it back onto the plate with a sigh.

BEN
...How about we go into town?

INT. DINER – MORNING

The place is half-empty. Sunlight leaks through the blinds, casting soft stripes across the table where Audrey picks at her breakfast. Across from her, Ben sips his coffee, watching her.

The air between them feels thick – neither of them sure how to start.

BEN
(soft)
I'm glad you agreed to leave the
house.

Audrey offers a faint nod, still staring down at her plate. She moves the eggs around with her fork but doesn't eat.

AUDREY
Why wouldn't I?

BEN
You know. I mean...

Silence. The faint clatter of dishes from the kitchen. A WAITRESS refills their coffee without a word.

BEN (CONT'D)
Let's not talk about that. We can
talk about... whatever.

Audrey finally looks up at him – her eyes dull, but searching for something.

A beat.

AUDREY
I don't know how to be normal after
all this. I keep thinking I'm
supposed to just... do things. Like
this. Eat. Sit here. Smile.
Pretend.

Suddenly –

QUICK CUT:

Ben's sit his taken by someone else.

In his place: Laura. Sitting exactly where Ben was, looking back at Audrey.

Audrey's breath catches. A flicker of panic in her eyes.

LAURA
Audrey.

BACK TO:

Ben's there again. Watching her.

BEN
(quiet)
Audrey...

She blinks hard, shakes it off.

BEN (CONT'D)
I think... I think maybe you should
try something.
(small shrug)
Anything, really. Something that
helps. Go back therapy. Journal. A
hobby. I don't know.

Audrey looks away, jaw clenched.

AUDREY
(knowingly)
Remember the last time I went to
therapy?

BEN
Fuck, I- Let's not talk about that
right now. Look, I'm not saying
getting a hobby or whatever fixes
anything. But it's... it's something
to do. Other than sitting in the
hurt all day. You do it to
yourself. I mean, really.

Audrey's eyes glass over, but she fights the urge to cry. A
long pause.

She picks up her fork again. Slowly takes a bite.

AUDREY
(quiet)
Okay.

They sit there, the weight of it all still between them.

EXT. HOUSE - LATE MORNING

Ben fumbles with the keys at the front door. Audrey lags
behind, arms crossed tight across her chest, eyes on the
ground.

A screen door creaks open from the house next to them.

JASON (30s), friendly, wearing a band tee and cargo shorts,
waves.

JASON
Hey there - you must be the new
neighbors!

Ben forces a polite smile. Audrey doesn't look up.

BEN
Yeah, uh- Ben. This is Audrey.
Audrey say hi.

He pinches her arm. She jumps and waves at Jason.

AUDREY
Hi.

Jason steps onto the porch, holding the hand of his son,
CALEB (5), who peeks out shyly from behind his leg.

JASON

This is Caleb. And my wife, Imani's
inside.

IMANI (30s) pokes her head out the door – radiant smile,
sharp eyes that clock Audrey's vacant stare immediately.

IMANI

Hi! Are you the new neighbors? So
great! That house had been on the
market for months.

AUDREY

Yeah, hi.

JASON

You guys settling in okay?

BEN

Getting there.

JASON

If you need anything, we're right
here. Imani makes a mean lasagna.

Ben chuckles politely. Audrey barely nods. Ben gets the door
open and lightly pushes Audrey inside.

INT. FOYER – CONTINUOUS

BEN

Why did you fucking say "hi"?

AUDREY

I said "hi".

BEN

I made you.

AUDREY

You pinched me!

BEN

Where are your manners? I mean,
what the fuck are you so upset
about? You've been in a shitty mood
all morning.

AUDREY

Fuck, sorry, okay?! I just- I'm
having a hard time-

BEN

Oh here we go with the bitching.
That's all you do! You're so
negative-

AUDREY

Did you just call me a bitch?

BEN

No! What the fuck! What are you- Oh
my God, obviously not! I said you
were "bitch-ing". Complaining. Get
it? Jesus. You know what I'm trying
to say and you're making me into
the bad guy. Jesus Christ.

AUDREY

No, I'm not. Sorry, I just- I
didn't...fuck. I'm sorry.

Ben takes a deep breath.

BEN

It's fine. I forgive you.

He stands in front of her, rubbing her shoulders.

BEN (CONT'D)

You know I love you.

AUDREY

Yeah. I love you too.

They kiss. Ben gives her a fake look of apology.

BEN

I forgot to tell you. I may have
used all of eggs and bread this
morning when I was trying to...you
know. We also need a few more
things. Do you think you could go-

CUT TO:

INT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

The cold fluorescent lighting flickers faintly overhead.
Audrey pushes a half-full cart slowly down an aisle, her eyes
scanning the shelves but clearly not registering anything.

There's a disoriented rhythm to her movement - picking
something up, turning it over in her hand, then putting it
back.

She stops in front the baby aisle.

Formula. Diapers. Bibs with smiling whales. Tiny shoes that could fit in her palm.

Audrey freezes.

A BABY giggles somewhere close by. A MOTHER brushes by her with her carrier without looking up, heading down the aisle.

MOTHER

'Scuse me.

Audrey's hand moves to her stomach instinctively.

Her chest tightens.

She blinks fast, tears threatening to rise – right here, under these unforgiving lights, between clearance wipes and burp cloths.

IMANI (O.S.)

Audrey, right?

Audrey flinches.

She turns – Imani is there, holding a basket, looking surprised and warmly curious.

IMANI (CONT'D)

Sorry! I didn't mean to startle you. I didn't expect to see you here. Thought you'd be at home with your beau.

Audrey quickly wipes her eye, recovering.

AUDREY

Hey... yeah. Just needed to get out of the house. Ben used up all the eggs and whatnot trying to make breakfast. I had to grab a few another things too.

Imani smiles, then clocks her red-rimmed eyes.

IMANI

You okay?

Audrey offers a tight smile.

AUDREY

Yeah. Just... allergies.

Imani glances down the aisle they stand at the end of. Her smile softens.

IMANI

Sorry – are you and Ben... trying?

Audrey lowers her gaze. Her throat tightens again.

AUDREY

No.

(beat)

We actually...

(trying to find the words)

...lost one. Not that long ago.

A silence falls between them – respectful, thick with understanding.

AUDREY (CONT'D)

That's... part of why we moved. Just needed to not be surrounded by... reminders. Ben had the nurse's already set at our old place. He didn't want to redo it, so he just picked somewhere else for us to go.

Imani's face changes – concern, tenderness, guilt, empathy.

She sets her basket down and steps closer, gently placing a hand on Audrey's arm.

IMANI

Audrey, I had no idea. I'm so sorry.

Audrey gives a faint, sad nod. Her eyes glisten, but she holds it together.

IMANI (CONT'D)

You didn't have to say anything. But I'm really glad you did.

They stand in silence for a beat.

Audrey exhales.

AUDREY

It's weird... I keep expecting to feel different. Better. Lighter. Ben doesn't like to see me upset. I try so hard to make him happy. I pretend for him.

Imani squeezes her arm gently.

IMANI

You don't have to pretend around me.

A pause.

IMANI (CONT'D)

And for the record? That doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. Grief's not a staircase. It's... fog. You don't climb out. You move through it.

Audrey lets the tears come this time – just a few, but enough to clear her vision a little.

AUDREY

You're really good at saying the exact right thing, you know that? Now I'm crying in the middle of a grocery store.

Imani smiles.

IMANI

I say a lot of bullshit. But that one I meant.

They share a soft laugh – a quiet, shared weight between them.

IMANI (CONT'D)

Want to get together tonight? My place or yours. We can just guzzle wine until our heads spin and watch trash TV.

AUDREY

Yeah. I'd like that.

They exchange a final look – gentle, steady – then part ways down separate aisles, Audrey taking one last glance at the baby aisle before turning her cart toward the checkout.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Boxes stacked high, dishes still wrapped in newspaper. Audrey stands awkwardly at the counter as Imani flips through takeout menus, chatting easily.

IMANI

—when we moved in, I swear it took me two months just to find the box with my good knives.

(glances at Audrey)

You ever just stare at the mess and think, “Yeah... not today”?

Audrey half-smiles, eyes distant.

AUDREY

Something like that.

Imani watches her for a beat, reading between the lines.

IMANI

I know that look.

(she softens)

I was like you, once.

Audrey blinks, caught off guard.

IMANI (CONT'D)

Couldn't get out of bed. Everything felt like it weighed twice as much as it should. Even the air.

Audrey's lips press together. She fidgets with the hem of her sleeve.

IMANI (CONT'D)

Then... someone gave me a name. A place. They don't exactly advertise. It's kinda invite-only.

Imani reaches into her purse and pulls out a small, simple business card. Just a phone number and an address. No logo. No name.

She slides it across the counter to Audrey.

IMANI (CONT'D)

I'm not saying it's for everyone. But it helped me. More than I can explain.

Audrey stares at the card. Doesn't touch it.

AUDREY

What... what is it?

Imani just gives her a knowing smile — warm, but almost too rehearsed.

IMANI
If you're ready to feel like
yourself again... give them a call.

Audrey glances down at the card one more time, her face unreadable.

FLASHBACK - INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Soft yellow lamplight. The apartment is cozy but cluttered - books stacked on the coffee table, an unfinished puzzle off to the side.

Ben is on the couch, half-watching some nature documentary, feet up, totally relaxed.

Audrey stands near the hallway, practically vibrating with nervous energy, holding something behind her back.

AUDREY
Hey, babe?

Ben turns, lazily.

BEN
Yeah?

She's grinning - trying to hide it, failing.

AUDREY
Can you, um... close your eyes for a second?

Ben raises an eyebrow but humors her. Shuts his eyes.

BEN
Okay. Eyes closed. Is this the part where you hit me with a pillow?

AUDREY
No.

She walks over, takes his hand, and places something into it.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
Okay - open.

Ben opens his eyes. In his hand: a tiny pair of baby socks.

He stares at them, confused for half a second - then his eyes widen.

BEN
Wait... is this—?

Audrey nods, eyes already welling up.

AUDREY
I'm pregnant.

Ben's whole face softens, lips parting like he might cry – but instead, he laughs, wide and full of shock and joy.

He jumps up and scoops her into a hug, spinning her around.

BEN
Oh my god – are you serious?!
You're serious. Holy shit—!

Audrey's laughing now, clinging to him.

AUDREY
I'm serious!

Ben pulls back just enough to look at her face, hands on either side of her cheeks.

BEN
You're gonna be such a good mom.

Audrey's eyes shine. She presses her forehead to his, smiling through the tears.

AUDREY
You're gonna be the best dad.

They hold each other, swaying slightly, wrapped in this small, perfect moment.

The TV in the background keeps playing; a baby elephant stumbling after its mother. It tumbles to the ground.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

The mirror is fogged from the shower. Audrey sits on the closed toilet seat, wearing an oversized T-shirt, damp hair clinging to her face. She's holding Imani's business card between her fingers, turning it over and over.

Across the counter: bottles of expensive skincare, vitamins, self-help books stacked beside the sink – quiet evidence of trying.

She stares at the card. Exhales shakily.

From the bedroom, BEN'S MUFFLED VOICE drifts in.

BEN (O.S.)
You coming to bed?

Audrey quickly wipes at her eyes, forcing steadiness into her voice.

AUDREY
Yeah – just a minute.

Silence again.

She looks up at her reflection. Red eyes. Pale skin. Hollow.

Audrey leans closer to the mirror, as if searching for some trace of the person she used to be.

AUDREY (SOFT) (CONT'D)
You can do this.
(beat)
It'll make things easier. For him.

Her fingers tighten around the card until it bends.

A long pause.

She places the card down on the counter – but doesn't let go right away. She squeezes her eyes shut. Breath shaky.

BEN (O.S.)
Audrey?

Audrey stands quickly, scrubbing her face with her hands. She forces on a smile – fake, but practiced – and heads toward the bedroom.

The business card sits alone on the counter.

FLASHBACK – INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – DAY

The lights are soft, the air humming faintly with the sound of machines.

Audrey lies back on the exam table, her shirt pulled up over her belly, gel smeared across her skin. Ben sits close, holding her hand tightly, eyes glued to the monitor.

The TECHNICIAN moves the wand gently across Audrey's stomach. The screen flickers with grainy black-and-white.

TECHNICIAN
There they are.

A tiny flicker – the baby's heartbeat.

Audrey lets out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. Ben squeezes her hand, eyes glassy.

AUDREY

That's... that's really them?

The technician nods with a smile, pointing out the small shape on the screen.

Audrey turns her head toward Ben, both of them beaming through tears.

FLASHBACK – INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S APARTMENT – LATER THAT DAY

Sunlight pours through the windows. The place is cozy but a bit cluttered with baby essentials.

On the floor, Emily sits cross-legged with a sketchpad in her lap. She's drawing a quick, goofy portrait of Ben, who's lounging on the couch, smirking.

EMILY

Hold still. You're messing up your chin.

BEN

What, this chin?

He pulls a weird face, double chin out. Emily laughs and throws a pillow at him.

Audrey stands nearby, watching them with soft affection, her hand resting instinctively on her stomach. A small bump hidden by an oversized hoodie.

BEN (CONT'D)

(gesturing toward Audrey)

Hey – your sister's got something to tell you.

Audrey's smile falters for a second. She tugs at the sleeve of her hoodie, nervous.

AUDREY

So... um. There's a reason we asked you to come by.

Emily looks up, expectant.

Audrey lets out a breath. She lifts up her hoodie, showing off her growing baby bump.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
I'm pregnant.

Emily blinks – then her whole face lights up.

EMILY
Wait – seriously?! Oh my god!!

She jumps up, rushes over, and hugs Audrey tightly.

EMILY (CONT'D)
I'm gonna be an aunt! Holy shit!!

Audrey laughs, a little teary.

Emily pulls back, still grinning.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Have you told Mom yet?

Audrey's smile dims.

AUDREY
...No. Not yet.

Emily raises an eyebrow.

EMILY
When's the last time you even
talked to her?

A pause. Audrey avoids her eyes.

AUDREY
A few months. Don't act like you
don't talk to her too. Why?

Emily crosses her arms, understanding.

EMILY
Same reason as you.
(beat)
She's a bitch.

Audrey lets out a sharp, surprised laugh, almost embarrassed by the truth of it.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Still, you should really tell her.

The tension hangs heavy for a second until Ben waves a hand.

BEN
Alright, alright, let's keep the
vibe good.
(smiles)
Show her the ultrasound.

Audrey reaches into her bag, pulling out the little black-and-white printout. She hands it to Emily, who takes it gently, as if it's made of glass.

Emily stares down at it, eyes wide, softening.

EMILY
Whoa. That's really them?

Audrey nods, watching her sister's face.

Emily's grin returns, eyes misty.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Damn. I'm really gonna be the cool
aunt.

Audrey laughs, wiping at her eyes.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

The sun's starting to dip. Ben stands out front, fiddling with something on his car.

From the side yard, Jason waves a beer in the air.

JASON
Hey, man! You drink?

Ben looks up, surprised but grateful for the distraction.

BEN
...Yeah.

JASON
C'mon - I'm watching the game in
the garage.

Ben hesitates for half a beat and heads over.

INT. JASON'S GARAGE - A LITTLE LATER

It's got the usual suburban setup: dartboard, folding chairs, a small TV mounted crookedly in the corner. A cooler sits between two lawn chairs.

Jason cracks open another beer and hands it to Ben.

JASON
Cheers, neighbor.

BEN
Cheers.

They clink bottles. The sound of the football game hums low in the background.

JASON
So, how's the neighborhood treating you so far?

BEN
Good, yeah. Still getting settled.

Jason nods, takes a sip.

JASON
I know how it is. Moving's stressful as hell.
(beat)
Especially with everything you two have been through.

Ben stiffens slightly. Doesn't respond right away.

JASON (CONT'D)
Imani told me a little. About... y'know. The loss.

Ben swallows hard. Nods.

BEN
Yeah.

Jason leans back in his chair, studies Ben for a moment.

JASON
You know, she was in a bad place too. A few years back. Worse than she'd like to admit.

Ben looks over, curious despite himself.

JASON (CONT'D)
Not gonna get into why, but...Couldn't sleep. Couldn't focus.
(beat)
Then someone told me about this place. Referral-only kinda thing.

BEN

We already did the therapy shit. It didn't really-

JASON

It's not therapy. Not really medicine either. But it... clears you out. Makes it quiet in your head. Like flipping a switch.

Jason taps the side of his skull, then takes another drink.

Ben's brow furrows, listening.

BEN

You're talking about a lobotomy.

Jason howls.

JASON

Nah, c'mon man. It's not like that. Listen... It changed my life, man. She's better now.

Ben looks down at his bottle, turning it in his hands.

BEN

How does it work?

Jason just gives him this easy, lopsided smile.

JASON

Hard to explain. But I'll tell you this - after, it's like she was able breathe again. Like all that heavy shit you carry around... gone.

A long pause.

Ben doesn't answer. He just stares at the TV, jaw clenched, eyes far away.

Jason lets the silence sit, not pushing.

JASON (CONT'D)

I don't think you necessarily need it. But, your chick...?

A beat.

JASON (CONT'D)

Just something to think about.

The crowd on the TV roars as someone scores. Neither of them looks up.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is quiet except for the faint creak of the ceiling fan and the soft rustle of sheets. Audrey sleeps on her side, curled toward the wall. Ben is beside her, snoring lightly, one hand resting near her back.

Moonlight slips through the gap in the curtains.

Audrey's brow furrows. She stirs, restless. Eyes fluttering beneath closed lids. A soft, shaky breath.

Her eyes open.

She blinks, dazed, staring at the wall directly in front of her.

A FIGURE stands there, motionless. Just a few feet away.

At first, it looks like a person-shaped shadow, swallowed in darkness. But as Audrey's eyes adjust, she catches faint glimpses of the face - pale, sagging, withering flesh where her own features should be.

The hair hangs thin and stringy. The mouth droops open slightly, like it's too heavy to close.

It's her.

A grotesque, decaying reflection. Staring back at her.

Audrey's breath catches in her throat. Her eyes widen, frozen in place.

The figure tilts its head - slow, deliberate.

Moonlight brushes across its face, just enough to catch the glint of dead, glassy eyes.

Audrey's scream tears out of her.

AUDREY
(screaming)
Ben! Ben!

Ben jolts awake, heart racing.

BEN
Audrey--! What--what's wrong?!

Audrey's gasping, clutching the blanket to her chest, eyes locked on the spot where the figure stood.

But now—there's nothing.

Just the soft pattern of light on the wall.

Ben scrambles closer, putting his arms around her.

BEN (CONT'D)
Hey, hey, it's okay - I'm here -
what happened?

Audrey shakes her head, trembling, trying to catch her breath, but the tears come hard and fast.

AUDREY
(whispers)
It was there! I saw it! Right
there!

Ben pulls her tighter, hand cradling the back of her head as she sobs into his chest.

BEN
It's okay, baby. I've got you. I've
got you.

She cries harder, clutching him like a lifeline, both of them sinking into the darkness of the room.

Outside the window, the moon hangs cold and bright.

FLASHBACK - INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The place is dim, quiet except for the faint hum of the fridge. Audrey stands near the window.. Her face is stiff, holding back tears.

Ben stands across the room, pacing - restless, desperate.

BEN
Audrey, please. Please look at me.
Baby.

She doesn't. Her eyes stay fixed on some distant point outside the window.

BEN (CONT'D)
It was a mistake. I swear to you -
it was stupid and it didn't mean
anything. She didn't mean anything.
I was-

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)
(he fumbles for the words)
I was just... lost. We both were.

Audrey's jaw clenches, her hand pressing harder against her stomach.

AUDREY
(small, tight)
Have you seen her since?

Ben freezes.

BEN
No. No, I haven't.
(steps toward her, voice
softening)
You can ask her yourself if you
want.

Audrey finally turns to face him. Her eyes shine, but her expression stays hard.

AUDREY
Ok. I believe you.

Ben exhales, some tiny bit of hope creeping back into his face.

But Audrey's lip quivers. She swallows it down.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
I'm giving you another chance.
Because we just lost our baby. You
messed up. But I can't do this
without you.

Her voice cracks at the end, and she quickly wipes at her eyes.

Ben nods, stepping closer, cautiously.

BEN
I'm so sorry. I'm not gonna give up
on this. On us.

He reaches out, his hand hovering near her shoulder, waiting for permission.

After a long beat, Audrey leans into him, letting him pull her into his arms. But her body stays stiff, guarded.

Ben presses a kiss into her hair, eyes closing tight.

Audrey stares past him, over his shoulder – her face blank, exhausted.

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

The TV is on but muted, casting soft flickers of light across the room. Ben sits on the edge of the couch, elbows on his knees. Audrey is curled up in the opposite corner, small, arms wrapped around herself.

The business card from Imani sits on the coffee table between them – the number and address catching the light.

A long, heavy silence.

BEN

I just... I think it could really help you.

Audrey doesn't respond right away. She keeps her gaze low, staring at the card like it might bite.

AUDREY

I don't know.

(beat)

It feels... extreme.

Ben leans forward, trying to soften his voice, but there's a sharpness underneath.

BEN

Audrey, come on. You're not sleeping. You barely eat. I never know which version of you I'm gonna get when I walk in the door.

She flinches at that, eyes tightening.

AUDREY

I'm trying.

BEN

I know.

(quiet, but pointed)

But trying hasn't exactly been working, has it?

Audrey's throat bobs as she swallows. She pulls her knees tighter to her chest.

BEN (CONT'D)

It's not about blame. I'm not trying to blame you. I just...

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

(he sighs)

I miss who you were. Before all
this. Before things got so... heavy.

Audrey blinks hard, trying not to cry.

AUDREY

I'm not a problem you can fix, Ben.

BEN

That's not what I'm saying.

(beat)

But I can't keep walking on
eggshells, wondering if you're
gonna spend the whole day crying or
if I'm gonna come home and find you
shut down again. It's—

(he hesitates)

It's a lot. You're... a lot, Audrey.

Audrey's face twists like she's been slapped. She looks away,
blinking back tears.

AUDREY

So what — I'm just supposed to cut
out the parts of me that hurt to
make it easier for you?

Ben shakes his head, frustrated.

BEN

It's not just for me. It's for us.
For the baby girl that we were
supposed to be raising. Don't you
want to be better for them?

Audrey closes her eyes, breath shaky.

BEN (CONT'D)

(softer)

I just think... if there's a way to
make this easier — to make you
normal again — why wouldn't you at
least try?

The word normal hangs heavy in the air.

Audrey doesn't answer. She just stares down at the business
card on the table. Silent.

Ben leans back, sighs, and rubs his hands over his face.

INT. NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Bass thrums through the floor, making Audrey's chest vibrate with each beat.

Neon lights pulse along the walls - electric pinks, sickly greens, searing blues - casting the crowd in shifting colors.

The club is packed. Sweaty bodies grind against each other, mostly beautiful GIRLS in strappy dresses and smudged eyeliner, laughing, shouting, moving like the music is stitched into their skin.

Audrey stands near the entrance, shrinking into herself. Her clothes - jeans, a blouse - make her stand out like a sore thumb. She tugs at the sleeves nervously, trying not to make eye contact.

The air reeks of sweat, alcohol, and perfume.

She edges toward the bar, trying to move without drawing attention - but she can feel the side glances, the judgment, the indifference.

INT. BAR AREA - CONTINUOUS

The bar is slick and mirrored, reflecting the shifting neon all around. Bottles glow like artifacts on glass shelves.

The BARTENDER, young, sharp-jawed, tattooed arms, leans over to take an order, shouting to be heard over the music.

Audrey hesitates, then steps forward.

The bartender notices her - the lost sheep in the crowd - and smirks.

BARTENDER
(leaning in)
You look like you took a wrong turn
somewhere, sweetheart.

Audrey forces a tight smile, voice barely audible over the music.

AUDREY
I'm.. I'm looking for something.

She cocks an eyebrow, still wiping a glass casually.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
I was told... to come here. About...
(whispers)
...the procedure.

The bartender's smirk fades into something cooler, more serious.

She leans across the bar, speaking just loud enough for her to hear.

BARTENDER
Third booth to the left. Guy in the
leather jacket.

She jerks her chin toward the back of the club, where booths nestle into dark alcoves beneath low-hanging red lights.

Audrey follows his gaze.

Through the haze of bodies, she spots him: a MAN slouched in a booth, alone, wearing a worn leather jacket, a drink sweating in his hand.

He watches the crowd with detached amusement, like a king surveying his court.

AUDREY
(quiet)
Thanks.

The bartender gives her a curt nod and turns away.

Audrey stands there for a moment, gathering herself. Her heart pounds harder than the bass. Everything inside her screams to leave, but she presses forward.

INT. CLUB FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

She weaves through the sea of dancers, getting jostled and brushed against at every turn.

GIRLS laugh against each other's necks. GUYS lean in close, whispering to them. Someone grabs her arm by accident - sticky, insistent - and she yanks it free, heart hammering.

Finally, she reaches the booth.

The MAN IN THE LEATHER JACKET looks up at her. Late 40s. Handsome, but in a worn-out, dangerous way. His eyes gleam in the low light.

For a moment, he says nothing. Just studies her – like he already knows everything he needs to.

MAN

You're here about the procedure.

It's not a question.

Audrey hesitates, then nods.

AUDREY

How did you–

MAN

Sit.

Audrey lowers herself into the booth across from him, hands clenched tightly in her lap.

The man leans in, smiling a slow, lazy smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

MAN (CONT'D)

Relax. You're exactly where you're supposed to be.

Audrey tries to smile back, but it flickers and dies.

Around them, the club roars and pulses, but it's like they're in a separate bubble, the world tilting around her, closing in.

INT. UNDERGROUND LAB - NIGHT

The pounding bass from upstairs is still audible – a dull, distant heartbeat under the floor – but down here, the air is cold and sterile.

Audrey follows the man through a narrow hallway. Harsh fluorescent lights buzz overhead. The walls are smooth, metallic, almost futuristic, but the seams show: exposed wires, a flickering security camera in the corner.

The corridor opens into a small lab.

The space is spotless but unsettling – a mix of surgical sterility and something cheaper, seedier. Stainless steel counters line the walls. A reclining medical chair sits in the center of the room, straps dangling loosely from the sides.

On a nearby tray: a sealed vial, a sleek pill bottle, a few syringes.

Audrey slows her steps, nerves crawling up her spine.

The man turns to her, businesslike now. He gives her a nod and returns back upstairs.

A DOCTOR – early 40s, scrubbed clean but with dark circles under his eyes – stands nearby, clipboard in hand.

DOCTOR
You understand this is voluntary.

Audrey nods weakly.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
There are side effects.

He hands her the clipboard.

Audrey stares down at the sheet – pages of tiny, cramped text. She skims:

- Visual hallucinations
- Auditory hallucinations
- Paranoia
- Emotional disassociation
- Sleep disturbances
- Temporary or permanent memory loss
- Psychosomatic symptoms
- Severe identity confusion

Her hands tighten around the clipboard.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
Most of it's rare.
(beat)
The important thing is the medication.

He holds up the small white pill bottle between two fingers, tapping it once with his thumb.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
One pill a day. No more, no less.
(beat)
The drug alters perception, opening you mind to other versions of yourself.

Audrey's breath is shallow.

AUDREY

What happens if... if I take more
than one a day?

The doctor's mouth curls slightly – not quite a smile.

DOCTOR

You don't want to find out. The
surgery helps your brain to
properly react to the medication.
If you override your system with-
...just don't do that.

He places the pill bottle gently on the counter, like setting
down a loaded weapon.

AUDREY

What? How do-

DOCTOR

You don't get a refill. Too many
lawsuits if we gave them out like
candy.

Audrey stares at the bottle. Then at the medical chair.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

(softening)

We're not fixing you.

(beat)

We're setting you free. Letting you
become your true self. The one you
want.

He gestures to the clipboard.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Sign when you're ready.

Audrey's hands tremble slightly as she takes the pen. She
hesitates, the pen hovering over the signature line.

Above them, the bass from the club kicks harder for a second,
vibrating through the ceiling.

Her heart pounds.

She signs.

The doctor takes the clipboard back, flipping it over without
looking.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Lie back.

Audrey walks stiffly toward the medical chair, every step mechanical. She lowers herself onto it, the cold leather biting through her clothes.

The doctor straps her in – gentle but firm.

Audrey flinches when he tightens the one around her wrist.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Standard. Just so you don't jerk around.

He preps a syringe at the tray. The liquid inside glows faintly under the fluorescents – something not entirely natural.

Audrey stares at the ceiling, breathing shallow, trying not to panic.

The doctor approaches, syringe in hand.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Deep breath.

Audrey obeys, squeezing her eyes shut.

A sharp prick at the crook of her arm. He pushes the white liquid into her.

Within seconds, the room starts to tilt. The cold, the buzzing lights, the pulsing bass from above – it all stretches thin, growing distant.

Her limbs feel heavy. Her mouth can't form words.

The last thing she sees before slipping under is the man's face hovering above her – calm, clinical.

Then...blackness.

INT. UNDERGROUND LAB - LATER

The buzzing fluorescents are even louder now, drilling into Audrey's skull.

She blinks awake in the medical chair, groggy, her head feeling stuffed with cotton. Her body feels wrong – heavy and sluggish – like she's wearing someone else's skin.

The doctor's ASSISTANT, younger, with a cold, efficient smile, moves closer with a small handheld mirror. The doctor comes in.

DOCTOR
You're awake. Good.

The assistant holds the mirror out to her.

ASSISTANT
Take a look.

Audrey, dazed, fumbles for the mirror. She lifts it, staring at her reflection.

At first, she just sees herself – pale, a little sweat-damp, but otherwise... normal.

AUDREY
(hoarse)
I don't see anything.

The doctor steps closer, tapping lightly near her left temple.

DOCTOR
Right there.

Audrey leans in, squinting.

There – almost invisible unless you knew where to look – a thin, faint scar curves just under her hairline.

She reaches up, fingertips brushing the spot. It stings slightly.

AUDREY
(softly)
It's small.

DOCTOR
It'll fade with time.

The assistant sets the mirror down, already moving through the next steps.

ASSISTANT
You'll start the medication tomorrow morning. One pill per day.

DOCTOR
(serious)
Only one pill. No more. No less.

Audrey nods sluggishly, brain still swimming.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Keep a daily log of your emotions
and any physical symptoms.
Nightmares, hallucinations,
paranoia – these are normal, to a
degree.

(beat)

If symptoms worsen... come back.

The assistant places a small white prescription bottle into her hand.

Audrey looks through the faded white bottle. Big horse pills.

ASSISTANT

Do not stop taking the pills unless
instructed.

Audrey's mouth is dry.

AUDREY

How will I know when I'm my... "true
self"?

The doctor smiles thinly.

DOCTOR

You'll know.

(beat)

When the weight's gone, and you can
breathe again.

Audrey clutches the pill bottle tighter.

ASSISTANT

You're clear to leave. You can
drive yourself home.

Audrey swings her legs off the chair. The doctor and
assistant simply watch, detached. No warmth. No
congratulations.

Audrey clutches the pill bottle and walks toward the exit –
the fluorescent lights buzzing louder in her ears with every
step.

The dull thud of the nightclub bass above still vibrates
faintly through the walls, distant and hollow.

INT. LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN - NIGHT

The place is quiet, dimly lit by the soft glow of a table lamp. A leftover takeout container sits abandoned on the coffee table. A muted show plays on the TV - colorful images flashing across the screen without sound.

Audrey stands in the kitchen, staring blankly into the open refrigerator. Her hand rests lightly on the door, but she doesn't move.

Everything feels too bright, too sharp, like the world has been tuned a half-step off.

Behind her, Ben leans against the back of the couch, watching her carefully.

BEN

(soft)

You okay?

Audrey blinks, slowly closing the fridge. She turns to him, forcing a small, brittle smile.

AUDREY

Yeah. Just tired.

Ben nods, seeming to buy it - or at least wanting to.

He walks over and gently wraps his arms around her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder.

BEN

I'm proud of you.

Audrey stiffens slightly at the contact, but doesn't pull away. She closes her eyes, willing herself to feel something.

Anything.

BEN (CONT'D)

This is gonna be good for us.

You'll see.

Audrey forces another smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

AUDREY

Yeah.

(whispered)

Good for us.

Ben kisses her temple - right near the faint, hidden scar.

Audrey flinches, so small he doesn't seem to notice.

BEN

You wanna watch something? Order
dessert? Just... hang out?

Audrey nods, mute.

Ben releases her and moves back toward the couch, grabbing
the remote.

Audrey lingers in the kitchen a second longer, one hand
drifting up to her temple, fingers ghosting over the tender
spot.

The pill bottle sits on the counter, waiting.

She glances at it, then back at Ben, now absorbed in
scrolling through endless streaming options.

Her world feels hollow, echoing – like she's trapped behind
glass, watching her own life from a distance.

Audrey walks slowly toward the couch, the television's colors
washing over her blank face.

For a moment, a flicker at the edge of her vision – a figure
– watching her from the hallway.

She jerks her head toward it – but there's nothing there.

Ben doesn't notice. He just pats the spot next to him,
smiling.

BEN (CONT'D)

C'mere.

Audrey hesitates – then goes, sitting stiffly beside him.

Ben presses play on a movie. The screen bathes them in
flickering, shifting light.

Audrey stares straight ahead, eyes wide, feeling the slow,
creeping sense that she's already disappearing.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dark and still. Audrey lies in bed beside Ben,
who sleeps soundly, his chest rising and falling in a slow,
steady rhythm.

A faint breeze hums through the cracked window. The house
settles with the occasional creak.

CREEEEEK...

Audrey's eyes snap open.

She turns her head slowly toward the bedroom door, which now hangs slightly ajar.

Her breath catches. She sits up, listening.

WHISPERS – soft, fragmented, barely there. Just on the edge of hearing.

She glances at Ben. He hasn't moved.

AUDREY
(whispers)
Ben?

No response. Still sleeping.

She swings her legs out of bed and stands, her body tense.

The door creaks again as she pushes it open wider.

INT. HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Dark. Silent. The whispers are gone.

She tiptoes down the hall, careful not to make a sound.

A distant click, like a door unlatching.

Then a low, rhythmic thud from somewhere outside.

Audrey creeps down the stairs, one step at a time.

INT. FOYER / FRONT DOOR – MOMENTS LATER

She peers through the small window beside the door. Shadows ripple across the front lawn under the pale glow of a streetlight.

Something moves outside – just a flicker.

Audrey opens the door and steps out into the cold.

EXT. FRONT YARD – CONTINUOUS

She walks barefoot onto the grass, arms wrapped around herself.

The wind rustles the trees. The thudding noise is gone.

She turns to walk back in the house, but something catches her eye in the second floor window.

A FIGURE stands there. Still. Pale. Watching.

It's familiar.

Same frame. Same long hair. Same blank expression. But withered. Hollow. A little more decayed. It's...her. The figure turns and leaves her view.

Audrey's breath leaves her in a sharp gasp.

AUDREY

Ben!

She bolts back inside.

INT. STAIRCASE / HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

She flies up the stairs, heart pounding, not even trying to be quiet now.

AUDREY

Ben!?

She reaches the upstairs hallway – the bedroom door open, light spilling out from the bathroom.

She steps inside –

Ben suddenly appears in the doorway.

BEN

Whoa—what's going on?

Audrey gasps, startled, stumbling back a step.

AUDREY

(shaken)

I—I thought I saw something. I thought you were—

(beat)

Sorry. I'm fine. It was nothing.

Ben raises an eyebrow.

BEN

You sure?

Audrey nods, but her eyes dart back toward the bedroom.

AUDREY
Yeah. Just tired.

Ben goes in the bedroom.

Audrey turns, heart still racing, and walks back to bed.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

She slips under the covers slowly, lying back down on her side, facing the wall.

The shadows stretch long across the floor.

Her eyes flick toward the window.

It's empty now.

She pulls the blanket tighter.

But even with her eyes closed, she can still feel it watching her.

FLASHBACK - APARTMENT LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

The golden light of late day filters through the curtains. Audrey sits on the couch in a sweatshirt and joggers, curled up with a blanket. Her fingers clutch a mug of tea.

Emily flops down beside her with a bag of sour candy.

EMILY
You always used to pick through and steal the green ones. I separated them this time. You're welcome.

She tosses a few onto Audrey's lap. Audrey catches them before they roll off. She offers a faint smile.

AUDREY
You're a brat.

EMILY
Rude. I'm a thoughtful brat.

They sit in easy silence for a beat. Emily chews obnoxiously, looking around the living room.

EMILY (CONT'D)
This place is weirdly clean. Are you okay?

AUDREY
What? I can't be organized?

EMILY
Since when do you stay organized?

Audrey shrugs.

AUDREY
I've been trying to keep busy. It's just a habit I picked up. It helps me not think about...

Emily nods – sees the heaviness behind Audrey's eyes but doesn't push. Not yet.

EMILY
You still drawing?

AUDREY
Not really. Not since the publishing company let me go.

EMILY
Fuck, yeah. Sorry. You should keep drawing though. They were beautiful. Best illustrator ever!

Emily playfully punches Audrey's shoulder, trying to get a smile out of her. Audrey looks at her, touched – then quickly looks away.

AUDREY
Thanks. I guess.

Emily leans over, grabs the remote and hands it to Audrey.

EMILY
Okay. Pick something. Movie night rules apply: no sad crap, no war, and if it has a 10-minute monologue in a field, I'm out.

AUDREY
So you hate all my favorite films.

EMILY
Correct.

A quiet beat. Emily glances around.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Where's Ben? Is he still-

AUDREY

Out. I think he's avoiding me.

Emily raises an eyebrow.

EMILY

You guys still... in the rebuilding phase?

AUDREY

Something like that.

She takes a sip of tea, eyes avoiding Emily's. There's a weight behind her casual tone.

EMILY

You know, Mom would say people don't change.

AUDREY

That's because Mom gave up on everyone after the age of thirty.

A beat.

EMILY

But you didn't. You always believed people could get better. Even after they—

She stops herself.

Audrey looks at her sharply. Emily backs off.

EMILY (CONT'D)

Sorry.

AUDREY

It's fine.

(beat)

You're not wrong.

Emily's expression softens. She tosses another piece of candy into her mouth and shifts the energy.

EMILY

Now queue up something dumb. We're doing a full reset.

Audrey scrolls, pauses over a familiar film title — one they both loved as kids — then selects it.

They settle in. Audrey leans her head on Emily's shoulder.

INT. BATHROOM - MORNING

Audrey stands in front of the mirror, shirt pulled up. Her stomach is smooth now – no stretch marks, no blemishes. Her skin looks airbrushed.

She touches it gently, like she's not convinced it's real.

Behind her, the shower curtain rustles slightly.

She slowly turns her head. The curtain's still.

She reaches forward – hand trembling – and pulls it open.

Nothing.

But when she looks back at the mirror – for a split second, her reflection is pregnant again. Bloated belly, tear-streaked cheeks, bruises beneath her eyes.

Something starts to protrude from under her stomach. Like a baby kicking.

She gasps and looks down at her stomach.

Gone. Just her. Smooth, flat, pristine, and empty.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

The carpet is covered in crayons, sketchpads, and cookie crumbs. Audrey sits cross-legged on the floor, barefoot in sweatpants, drawing beside Caleb.

They're both focused on their pictures, tongues poking slightly from the corners of their mouths as they concentrate.

CALEB

Mine has wings and claws. It can fly and dig tunnels.

He holds up his drawing: a wide-eyed creature with blue feathers and sharp green arms.

AUDREY

Wow! You're inventing a whole new species.

CALEB

Yup. It's called a Clawbird. It protects people when they're sad.

Audrey smiles.

AUDREY

That's very thoughtful. Does it protect you?

CALEB

Sometimes. But mostly Mommy. Daddy yells at her a lot.

He colors for a beat. Then:

CALEB (CONT'D)

You used to have a baby, right?

Audrey's hand pauses on her page. She doesn't look up.

AUDREY

Yeah. I did.

CALEB

I told my teacher you did. She said it's hard. Like when people don't come back.

Audrey nods softly. Her mouth opens like she wants to say something, but Caleb keeps going.

CALEB (CONT'D)

But I think your baby's with the Clawbirds. They make sure it's not scared.

Audrey blinks quickly. A quiet breath escapes her.

AUDREY

That's a nice thought.

CALEB

It's true. I asked them.

He shrugs – simple, childlike certainty – then starts digging through the crayons again.

CALEB (CONT'D)

Do you want to make one together?
I'll draw the claws, you do the wings.

Audrey looks at him for a long moment and her expression softens into something like peace.

AUDREY

Yeah. I'd like that.

They lean in together, two heads bent over the page.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dim, lit only by the soft amber glow of a bedside lamp. The bed is turned down. A glass of water sweats on the nightstand.

Ben enters first, already changed into a T-shirt and boxers. He's brushing through some texts on his phone.

Audrey walks in behind him, slower. She's in an old hoodie and loose cotton shorts.

Ben climbs into bed, placing his phone face down.

BEN
Did Caleb wear you out?

AUDREY
(grabbing her pillow)
He's surprisingly intense for
someone his age.

Ben smiles faintly.

She crawls into bed beside him.

BEN
You okay?

AUDREY
Yeah.

A beat.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
He said something weird. Sweet,
but... weird.

BEN
That's Caleb.

Audrey nods. She turns off the lamp. The room falls into soft darkness.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

The yard is dark, lit only by a bluish wash of moonlight. The grass sways gently in the breeze. It's quiet.

Then—

A BABY'S CRY.

Distant. Muffled.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Audrey jolts up. She listens closely. She shakes Ben.

AUDREY

Ben. Ben.

He snores.

Audrey lays back down and closes her eyes.

A BABY'S CRY.

Audrey's eyes SNAP open.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Audrey, barefoot in her robe, stands frozen on the back porch, staring out into the night.

The CRY comes again. Faint, but unmistakable.

She steps off the porch into the grass, scanning the shadows.

AUDREY

(whispers)

Hello?

The crying grows louder—but it's coming from beneath the ground.

Her eyes widen. Her breath trembles.

She slowly drops to her knees.

She places her ear to the earth.

A wet, newborn WAIL rises up from under the soil.

Audrey gasps and scrambles to her feet.

She grabs a nearby shovel and starts digging, hard, dirt flying behind her.

AUDREY (CONT'D)

Stop. Stop. Stop it—!

She sobs as she stabs the shovel into the ground over and over, hitting the earth with frantic desperation. The crying won't stop. It echoes through her body, her bones, her teeth.

She throws the shovel aside and grabs a nearby axe. Swings at the dirt. Her robe falls open. Her hands bleed from the splinters of the wooden handle. She claws at the earth with her nails now, trembling, moaning.

And then—

Silence.

The crying stops.

Audrey sits in the dirt, breathless, face streaked with mud and tears. She stares at the hole. Waiting for something.

Nothing comes.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAWN

The back door creaks open. Ben steps out. He freezes when he sees it:

A large, messy hole in the middle of the yard. Dirt and tools scattered everywhere — a shovel, a rusted axe, even a gardening fork.

He stares, confused, alarmed.

Then he sees her.

Audrey, sitting in the grass, caked in soil, hair wild, her robe hanging loose. Her eyes look burned out, but her body is still—exhausted, wrecked.

She turns to him, slowly.

A pause.

AUDREY

(softly)

I wanted to make a garden.

Ben doesn't respond at first. His eyes move to the tools... then to the blood on her hands... then to the hole.

His jaw tenses. He says nothing. Just nods.

BEN

Alright get up.

He turns back toward the house.

Audrey stays seated in the dirt, staring down into the pit she made.

The wind picks up again.

From somewhere deep in the earth...

A faint sound. Almost a cry.

INT. IMANI AND JASON'S KITCHEN - DAY

A modern kitchen, sleek and spotless – all white marble counters, brushed gold hardware, and a faint citrus candle burning somewhere. Imani moves with effortless grace, chopping fruit with a perfectly manicured hand.

Audrey sits at the island, cradling a mug of untouched tea, her eyes flicking subtly around the space – admiring it, maybe, but mostly just trying to stay present.

IMANI

So Jason basically tore out the whole back wall. I told him, "If you want a window, don't half-ass it." And of course, now we've got that massive sliding glass door – opens up the whole space. It's like living in one of those fancy hotels, except you can leave dishes in the sink and nobody yells at you.

She laughs at her own joke. Audrey gives a weak smile, nodding politely.

AUDREY

It's beautiful.

IMANI

Thank you! I'm obsessed with light. Gotta have light. Makes everything feel clean. Real.

She slices a mango with perfect efficiency and drops the slices onto a plate between them.

IMANI (CONT'D)

How are you feeling, by the way?
After everything?

Audrey hesitates, brushing a finger along the rim of her mug.

AUDREY
I'm.. adjusting.

IMANI
Mm. Yeah, it's weird at first. Like
your brain has to catch up with how
quiet it is.

Audrey glances up, cautiously.

AUDREY
Did you ever see things? Hear
things? Afterward?

Imani raises an eyebrow, thoughtful.

IMANI
Oh, sure. I'd see my grandmother
sometimes. But she was always
smiling. Or I'd hear music that
wasn't playing. Like little
memories floating up. Sweet stuff.
It goes away after awhile. What are
you seeing?

Audrey presses her lips together and nods slowly.

AUDREY
Same. Yeah...nice stuff.

A quiet beat.

IMANI
Ben told me he was the one that
suggested you come hang out today.
Said something about last night.
Said you've been in your head a
lot. More than usual.

Audrey smiles, brittle.

AUDREY
He's probably right.

IMANI
It's good, you know? Being around
someone who listens. It's hard to
find people that listen these days.

Audrey stiffens – just a flicker – eyes rising slowly to
Imani's face.

The words echo in her head, louder now.

LAURA (V.O.)
It's hard to find people that
listen these days.

Audrey blinks – and suddenly IMANI ISN'T THERE.

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – NIGHT – FLASHBACK

Same framing. Same posture. But now it's Laura, sitting across from Audrey in her home office, the fire crackling behind her.

She's mid-conversation – calm, composed – her eyes full of something harder to read.

LAURA
And how is Ben handling the loss?

Audrey's breath catches.

The edges of the room begin to flicker, like film burning at the corners.

FLASHBACK – INT. DINER – NEW YORK CITY – DAY

A cozy, slightly run-down diner in Manhattan. Rain taps against the large front windows. Neon glows faintly in the puddles outside.

Inside, Audrey sits in a booth across from Laura. A cup of coffee sits untouched in front of Audrey. Laura's hands are clasped tightly on the table – she's trying to stay composed, but her guilt hangs heavy.

The murmur of clinking plates, the hiss of coffee refills – distant, muffled.

LAURA
Audrey, I'm so sorry. I crossed a
line. A serious line. And I know
that.
(beat)
What I did was wrong.
Unprofessional. I violated your
trust, and you have every right to
be angry. To press charges. To tell
the board. Any of it.

Audrey's eyes are locked on a crack in the salt shaker glass. Her expression is blank, unreadable.

AUDREY

I'm not going to press charges.

Laura exhales – relief and shame tangled together.

LAURA

Still. I need you to know that I'm sorry. Not just for what happened – but for what it meant. For how it made you feel. You didn't deserve any of this.

Audrey finally looks up, and for a moment, Laura's voice fades under the sound of something else – a low, whispering buzz, like static.

Laura's lips are still moving.

But the words coming out are different.

LAURA (DISTORTED) (CONT'D)

Ben loves me more than you. He told me. After you cried yourself to sleep. You were always just a placeholder.

Audrey flinches, blinking hard. Her breath shallows.

LAURA (DISTORTED) (CONT'D)

He blames you, you know. For the baby. He told me that too.

Laura's face seems to warp slightly – smiling now, too wide, too sharp. The lights overhead pulse dimly, casting her in a sickly hue.

AUDREY

(softly)

What did you just say?

CUT BACK TO REALITY – The diner is normal again. Laura is leaning forward, earnest, eyes full of regret.

LAURA

I said I'm trying to apologize.

Audrey stares at her, pale, suddenly unsure of what's real.

Laura notices the shift.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Audrey?

Audrey looks away, quickly grabs her coffee with trembling hands. She takes a sip, even though it's gone cold.

Her eyes flicker toward the window. Her own reflection stares back at her in the rain-smearred glass.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Audrey stands at the sink, tears streaming silently down her cheeks. Her shoulders shake, breath catching in short, uneven gasps.

The overhead light flickers faintly.

She grips the edge of the counter with one hand. In the other, she holds the pill bottle.

Her fingers tremble as she unscrews the cap.

She shakes one big, smooth pill into her palm.

A beat.

She stares at it.

Then she pops it into her mouth, grabs a glass of water, and swallows.

She leans forward, placing the glass down, her breath ragged.

Her red-rimmed eyes rise slowly to meet her reflection in the mirror.

Still crying.

But then...

A smile creeps across her face.

Too wide. Too calm. The kind of smile that doesn't belong beside tears.

Her lips part, revealing clenched teeth.

The tears continue to fall, but the smile stays - frozen, unsettling.

INT. IMANI AND JASON'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Warm light. A long dining table covered with half-finished plates, empty wine glasses, and a few fancy serving bowls.

Laughter and music filter in from a Bluetooth speaker tucked in the corner.

Jason, Imani, Ben, and Audrey sit around the table. Imani pours more wine for them.

IMANI

(laughing)

No, no, I swear – he tried to re-tile the kitchen with no grout. Just glue and hope.

JASON

It looked fine!

BEN

You didn't YouTube it first?

JASON

I'm a hands-on guy. Trial and error.

IMANI

Emphasis on error.

The table laughs.

BEN

(to Imani)

Still, the place looks great. You've clearly been putting in the work.

JASON

Yeah, she's obsessed with making it Instagram-perfect. I keep telling her no one cares if the curtains match the chairs.

IMANI

It's called cohesion, Jason.

JASON

It's called spending two hours looking at beige swatches.

BEN

Hey, it's better than Audrey – she'll obsess for weeks and then still go with the first one she saw.

Audrey's smile falters just slightly.

AUDREY
It's called intuition.

BEN
(sips wine, smirks)
It's called being indecisive until
someone else makes the decision for
you.

There's a beat of silence – subtle, but present. Imani notices. Audrey doesn't answer. She lifts her wine glass.

IMANI
I say take all the time you need.
Honestly, I still think about those
cookies Caleb brought home that you
made.

AUDREY
Oh – the almond flour ones?

IMANI
Yes! Caleb went feral over them.
But he's with a sitter tonight,
thank God. I needed a break.

BEN
He's a cute kid. Loud as hell
though.

JASON
Gets that from his mom.

Imani's smile flickers, but she brushes it off with a sip of wine.

Jason laughs a little too loud.

Audrey and Imani exchange a quiet look – one of those female glances that holds a thousand tiny messages: I see you.

Jason leans back and takes another sip of wine, blissfully unaware.

JASON (CONT'D)
We should do this more often.

BEN
As long as Audrey doesn't bring
another existential documentary to
movie night. Last time I felt like
I needed therapy after.

AUDREY

Maybe that's not the worst thing.

Ben smirks. Jason laughs again.

INT. BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

The light through the curtains is pale and cold.

Audrey jolts awake with a gasp, clutching her stomach. Her skin is slick with sweat, her breathing sharp and shallow.

She stumbles out of bed, nearly tripping over the blanket as she races down the hall.

INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Audrey throws herself at the toilet, dropping to her knees.

She heaves - once, twice - then suddenly vomits.

A thick, black sludge splatters into the bowl. It's viscous, tar-like, reeking of rot and chemicals. Strings of it hang from her mouth as she gags again, coughing hard, body convulsing.

AUDREY

(choked)

What the hell-?

She grabs the edge of the toilet, trembling. Her hands are slick with sweat. Her arms shake as she steadies herself and spits the last of it out, retching.

She gasps for air, eyes wide with terror.

She looks down.

More sludge clings to the porcelain. Something about it seems... alive. It shimmers faintly, like oil in water.

Audrey scrambles back, crawling away from the toilet, until her back hits the vanity.

Her body trembles. Her face is pale and streaked with tears.

She catches her reflection in the bathroom mirror across from her.

For a split second - it's not her.

It's the withered version of herself, watching with a calm, empty stare.

Audrey blinks and it's gone. Just her. Shaking. Broken.

She clutches her stomach, staring down at the dark mess in the toilet, horror rising in her throat again.

INT. UNDERGROUND LAB - NIGHT

The pounding music from the club above is muffled now – just a distant, rhythmic throb through the walls.

Audrey pushes through the sliding metal door, breath ragged, clutching the pill bottle in one hand. Her skin is pale and clammy, her eyes wide with panic. Stray hairs cling to her sweat-damp face.

The same doctor and assistant from before stand behind the central table, waiting – unnervingly still, like they expected her.

No greeting. No surprise.

AUDREY

(sharply)

I threw up something. It was black.
Thick. Like tar or oil.

(beat)

It felt alive.

The assistant calmly jots a note on her clipboard. No reaction.

AUDREY (CONT'D)

What the hell is happening to me?

DOCTOR

You're experiencing standard side effects. Physical and psychological release.

AUDREY

That didn't feel like a side effect. That felt like... something left me.

The doctor folds his hands.

DOCTOR

Each pill isolates and expels negative parts of the self – a trait, a burden, a flaw.

(MORE)

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

The body processes it however it can.

(beat)

Hallucinations, discharge, nausea – these are common. Some clients experience temporary identity displacement.

AUDREY

Displacement?

ASSISTANT

You may not recognize certain emotions as your own. That is expected.

Audrey takes a step back, confused and angry.

AUDREY

You never said it would be like this.

DOCTOR

You were informed that the pills are not to be doubled, skipped, or mixed. One per day. Consistency ensures stability.

AUDREY

What happens if I stop?

The doctor's expression doesn't change.

DOCTOR

Without weaning off of them, you risk withdrawal. Brain damage, death...

Audrey's grip on the pill bottle tightens. Her voice cracks.

AUDREY

This isn't what I wanted. I'm not getting better – I'm coming apart.

The doctor stares at her for a moment, then asks, calm and practiced:

DOCTOR

Are you accepting of the changes?

She blinks. The question doesn't make sense.

AUDREY

What?

DOCTOR
Are you accepting of the changes?

Same tone. Same rhythm. Like a recording.

AUDREY
I don't know what that means.

ASSISTANT
Acceptance allows for full
integration. Resistance creates
conflict.

AUDREY
(quietly, desperate)
I don't know. How does it now if
I'm accepting...

The doctor taps her light scar where she had the surgery.

DOCTOR
This knows.

The assistant marks something on the clipboard. The doctor
turns, already walking toward the back of the lab.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
Return only if symptoms escalate.

Audrey doesn't move.

The bottle in her hand feels heavier now.

Above her, the fluorescent lights buzz, harsh and cold.

Somewhere above, the music pulses on.

INT. BATHROOM - MORNING

Audrey sits on the closed toilet lid in her robe, clutching a
nail clipper. The bathroom light above flickers softly. She's
pale, exhausted, but trying to stay composed.

She lifts one hand, positioning the clipper to trim her
pinky.

SNAP.

She winces.

The nail doesn't trim - it splinters, a jagged vertical line
cracking deep into the bed. A thin line of blood wells up at
the base.

AUDREY
(sharp inhale)
Shit.

She sets down the clipper, sucking in a breath through her teeth. One by one, her nails begin to loosen, some peeling like wet paper, others just falling off, brittle and yellowed.

Her breathing quickens. She wraps her hands in gauze, tight and trembling.

INT. SHOWER - NIGHT

Steam clouds the room. Audrey stands under the hot water, washing her hair.

Her hands catch on a patch of scalp – something loose.

She pulls – and a chunk of hair comes free, along with a strip of peeling skin beneath her fingernail.

She gasps, staring at the bloody clump in her palm.

She stumbles back against the tile, heart racing.

The steam begins to clear.

In the foggy glass of the shower door – a silhouette stands just outside.

Same height. Same shape. Head tilted. Watching.

AUDREY
Ben...?

No response.

She slowly slides the door open.

No one's there.

But a dripping handprint is smeared across the outside of the glass.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dim, lit only by the warm glow of the bedside lamp. Ben is already in bed, scrolling through his phone.

Audrey stands in front of the mirror near the closet, her back to him. She's in her robe, arms wrapped around herself.

Her hair is thinning, limp and lifeless. The tips of her fingers still wrapped in the gauze.

She slowly unties the robe and lets it fall open. She lifts up her shirt. Her stomach is smooth and unblemished. Her stretch marks are gone – but so is the softness. She looks... artificial. Like a wax replica of herself.

Her ribs show a little more than they used to.

Her face, reflected in the mirror, is pale, the skin under her eyes darkening again. Her eyes look sunken, sharper.

She stares at herself, jaw clenched.

BEN
(softly, from bed)
You coming to bed?

Audrey freezes.

She pulls the robe shut quickly and cinches it tight.

AUDREY
Yeah. Just... give me a minute.

She opens her drawer and pulls out a headband to hide the thinning spot on her scalp. She slides on thin cotton gloves – a poor excuse for warmth, in the middle of summer.

BEN (O.S.)
You okay?

AUDREY
Mm-hmm.

BEN
Why are you wearing a robe? Wait-
are you wearing gloves?

AUDREY
I like it. And my hands get cold.
You know this.

She forces a small smile as she turns toward him, entering the warm light beside the bed.

Ben puts his phone down, pats the space beside him.

Audrey hesitates.

BEN
Come on. I miss you.

She climbs into bed, turning off the lamp on her side before she gets too close. She stays on her side, facing the wall.

Ben shifts beside her.

BEN (CONT'D)
You're quiet tonight.

AUDREY
Just tired.

He reaches for her hand under the blanket.

She pulls it back instinctively – then catches herself.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
Cold hands. You don't want them.

BEN
I don't care.
(beat)
Let me see you.

AUDREY
You see me all the time.

BEN
I mean really.

She squeezes her eyes shut, holding back a wave of emotion. She's quiet for a long moment, breathing steady, even as her lips tremble.

AUDREY
Not tonight.

Ben hesitates, then nods.

BEN
Fine.

He pulls her a little closer anyway, resting his forehead against her shoulder.

She lets him.

But her eyes stay wide open, staring into the dark.

A single long, clear nail pokes out from under the glove's frayed fingertip.

FLASHBACK - INT. APARTMENT KITCHEN - NIGHT

The house is quiet. Too quiet.

A faint TV murmurs from the other room. Audrey stands at the kitchen counter, drying a glass, her movements careful and slow.

Ben enters, stiff, wound tight. He sees a takeout bag and rips it open a little too hard. Audrey flinches slightly.

BEN

You said you were going to cook tonight.

AUDREY

I'm sorry. I just- I didn't have the energy.

Ben says nothing. He pulls out a container, opens it. Takes a bite.

BEN

You could've at least texted.

AUDREY

I was going to, but I-

BEN

You always "were going to." But somehow, you never do.

Audrey sets down the glass, still damp, and carefully folds the dish towel.

AUDREY

Ben. I'm trying. I really am.

BEN

Try harder.

(beat)

You think you're the only one who's hurting? Jesus.

He picks up the same glass Audrey had just dried. Looks at it like it personally offended him.

BEN (CONT'D)

You left it wet.

AUDREY

I didn't mean to.

BEN

Everything with you is "I didn't mean to." You don't mean anything and nothing ever changes.

He raises the glass – and SMASHES IT against the wall.

Shards fly. Audrey gasps and stumbles back.

BEN (CONT'D)

(voice raised)

I come home to this?! To you moping and staring at nothing while I do everything?!

AUDREY

(voice shaking)

Please stop–

He takes a sharp step toward her. She instinctively raises her arms – not to fight, but to shield.

That stops him.

He sees the fear in her face.

BEN

(scoffs)

Really? You think I'm going to hit you now?

Audrey doesn't answer. She's still trembling.

Ben takes a breath, like he's about to apologize – but instead turns away.

BEN (CONT'D)

Give me a fucking break. You're exhausting.

He walks out of the kitchen.

Audrey stands frozen, staring at the broken pieces on the floor. Then she lowers herself slowly, kneeling.

She begins to pick up the shards with her bare hands, not even noticing when one of them slices into her palm.

INT. BEDROOM – MORNING

Audrey slowly unwraps the gauze from her fingers.

Her new nails have grown in – overnight.

They're flawless. Manicured, shaped, clean and glossy as glass. Too perfect to be real. But they're sharp.

She flexes her fingers.

She grabs a nail file and curves the points of her nails.

INT. UNDERGROUND LAB - NIGHT

The door hisses open, and Audrey steps inside.

She's almost unrecognizable.

Her body is swaddled in layers – a trench coat, scarf, sunglasses, bandages wrapped around her face, and gloves pulled tight over her hands. She looks like a patient from another era. Something out of a hospital for the forgotten.

The Doctor and Assistant look up from a console, surprised by her appearance – and her silence.

She closes the door behind her.

DOCTOR

We weren't expecting you again so soon.

Audrey doesn't answer. She's trembling.

She raises one hand and slowly peels back the scarf, the bandages around her face unraveling with soft crackles.

Layer by layer, the truth beneath is revealed:

Her cheekbones sharper, like they're pushing out from under her skin.

Her lips cracked and dry, stretched thin over unnaturally white teeth.

Her hair thinning, plastered to her scalp.

Her eyes sunken, surrounded by purple-black shadows.

Her skin almost translucent in the sterile lighting.

The assistant instinctively takes half a step back.

Audrey's voice cracks as she speaks.

AUDREY

What's happening to me?

The doctor stares at her with professional calm, though there's a brief flicker of unease in his eyes.

DOCTOR

We've never seen this extreme of progression before.

AUDREY

Progressing? No, no. This- this didn't happen to my friend. This isn't what I wanted. I thought I'd feel better. I thought I'd be... fixed.

DOCTOR

You are being refined. Extracted. Your negative aspects are being purged. It's what your body needs.

AUDREY

I don't need this. Look at me! I'm falling apart.

ASSISTANT

Discomfort is normal. Temporary.

Audrey's voice rises.

AUDREY

Temporary?! My hair is gone. My skin-my teeth-look at me!

A pause.

The doctor steps closer, lowering his voice.

DOCTOR

If you stop taking the pills now, your system may collapse under the weight of reabsorption. You'd go into psychological and physiological withdrawal.

Audrey's eyes shimmer with tears. She shakes her head, almost childlike.

AUDREY

I don't want to be this. I just wanted to be better.

ASSISTANT

Then you'll need to finish. This is temporary.

DOCTOR

The dosage must continue.

AUDREY

I'm out of pills. How am I-

DOCTOR

Look, we don't do refills. But-

AUDREY

So I'm stuck like this? You say I have to keep going, but my pills are gone!

He reaches toward the counter and slides a fresh bottle toward her.

DOCTOR

We'll make an exception. But you can not take more than one a day or your body will collapse in on itself. The only way is forward. Light will shine through. Your true self will be revealed.

Audrey looks down at it like it's poison. But her hand - shaking, twitching - slowly takes it.

Her bandages lie coiled on the floor.

INT. IMANI'S KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON

Audrey stands in the doorway.

She's not bandaged this time.

Her face is thinner, almost hollow. Her skin pulled tight, teeth white, lips dry and cracked. Her hair is slowly growing back, but still slicked back to hide the worst of it, but patches of bare scalp glint under the light.

Her nails, long and pristine, tap anxiously against her side.

Imani, pouring sparkling water into a glass, turns with a smile - but it drops the second she gets a full look at Audrey.

IMANI

Oh my god.

She sets the glass down hard. It wobbles.

IMANI (CONT'D)

Audrey... what—what happened to you?

Audrey's breath hitches.

AUDREY

I've been taking the pills. Like they said. Every day.

IMANI

They did this to you?

Audrey nods slowly, eyes pleading.

AUDREY

I thought I was just purging the bad stuff. That it would stop eventually. That I'd come out clean. They said this is just the bad stuff coming out. Once this is gone, light will shine through—whatever that fuck that means.

Imani takes a step back. Her hand comes up slightly – not aggressive, but guarded. Scared.

IMANI

This isn't normal, Audrey. This is... this is wrong.

AUDREY

You said it helped you. You said it worked.

IMANI

(whispers)

Mine didn't look like this.

A beat.

Audrey's lips quiver. She takes a shaky step closer.

AUDREY

I told them that! I thought— fuck. I'm having— it's not just my body, it's my mind. I'm having these...thoughts.

Imani's voice breaks, eyes full of fear and guilt.

IMANI

Audrey. Stop. Stop taking them.

Audrey blinks – shocked.

IMANI (CONT'D)

Please. I don't know what they're doing to you, but this – this isn't healing. This is erasing. This isn't light.

Silence.

Audrey stares at the floor, swallowing hard. Her hand slips into her coat pocket.

She clutches the pill bottle, hidden from view.

AUDREY

I think I'm too far in. If I stop, then I'm stuck like this.

Imani steps forward, softer now.

IMANI

It's never too far. Please.

A long pause.

Then – Audrey turns and walks out.

Imani stands frozen in her kitchen, breath shaky, eyes wet.

EXT. JASON AND IMANI'S HOUSE – CONTINUOUS

Audrey starts to walk down the porch steps, but hearing her name stops her.

She listens closely.

JASON (O.S.)

–She's a mess, Imani. You don't have to babysit every broken woman that walks through our neighborhood.

Audrey freezes.

IMANI (O.S.)

She's not a mess. She's grieving. She's trying.

JASON (O.S.)

Trying? Have you seen her? She's got that haunted house look in her eyes. Like if you say "boo," she'll dissolve into smoke.

Audrey's breathing shifts.

INT. IMANI AND JASON'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

IMANI

You don't know what she's been through.

JASON

And I don't want to. I'm not running a charity. This whole "support group through wine night" thing you do - it's exhausting. You get off on feeling needed.

A pause.

JASON (CONT'D)

And don't think I haven't noticed how much time you've been spending on your hair lately. Or how you hide your stomach when you laugh. You don't look like you used to, Imani. You think I don't see that, too?

Imani grips the dish tighter. Her knuckles go white.

IMANI

(stiffly)

You're cruel.

JASON

I'm honest. Maybe if more people were honest with Audrey, she wouldn't be such a goddamn project.

EXT. JASON AND IMANI'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Audrey turns. She walks down the steps - quietly, carefully.

But her face is hard now. Her hands shake.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. AUDREY'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Audrey opens the pill bottle. One capsule rolls out onto her palm. The two.

She stares at them.

And stares.

And stares.

INT. JASON AND IMANI'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is still. Silent.

Audrey stands naked, her body pale and damp with sweat and covered in blood. Her chest rises and falls in shallow breaths. Her hair is longer and thicker than before. Her skin smooth. Strangely beautiful, but littered with bruises.

Jason lies sprawled across the floor at her feet – or rather, what's left of him. His throat is torn open, chunks of flesh missing from his face and chest. His eyes frozen wide in terror.

Audrey blinks rapidly, shaking, trying to wake up.

But she's already awake.

Her mouth is smeared with blood, dark and tacky. Bits of skin and tissue are caught between her teeth. Her hands drip red.

She begins to tremble. Then a scream – a quiet, muffled, hoarse sound, like it's getting choked halfway up her throat.

She staggers back, nearly slips in the blood.

AUDREY

Oh god—oh god—

She stumbles toward the hallway, crashing into the wall, catching herself with shaking hands.

INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Audrey throws herself into the shower and turns the knob full blast.

Cold water slams into her skin.

She scrubs at her body with bare hands – vicious, panicked – smearing the blood into streaks. It takes forever to stop seeing red.

She looks down at the drain.

Flesh clogs it. Hair. Blood.

She starts to gag.

INT. JASON AND IMANI'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

Audrey walks back into the living room, now wrapped in a towel. Cleaned, but trembling.

Jason's body is still there.

She stares at it for a long time, her face blank. Numb.

No tears. No screams this time.

She just... walks past him.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Audrey steps out into the cool night air, hair dripping, eyes wide and glassy.

She walks into the dark.

Behind her, Jason's house sits still and silent. A warm yellow glow from the kitchen light.

Inside, he bleeds out across his tile.

Audrey doesn't look back.

INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

The pale morning light creeps through the blinds.

A SCREAM from outside.

Audrey sits upright in bed, wrapped in a blanket. She hasn't slept. Her eyes are wide, glassy. Her hands tremble, clutched together in her lap. She stares straight ahead, unmoving.

From outside, there's another sudden, piercing scream.

IMANI (O.S.)
(offscreen, distant)
JASON!! OH MY GOD!! JASON!!!

Audrey flinches. Her mouth opens slightly, but she doesn't move. Her breath starts to quicken.

AUDREY
(whispers)
No, no, no, no...

Tears spill over. Silent. She quietly sobs, rocking ever so slightly, the guilt eating her alive.

Ben jolts awake beside her.

BEN
What the hell—?

He hears the scream again.

IMANI (O.S.)
HELP! SOMEBODY PLEASE!!

Ben leaps out of bed, grabbing his phone.

BEN
Fuck!

He pulls on his shirt as he bolts out of the room.

Audrey doesn't move. She sits frozen in place, her crying turning into a whimper.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ben throws open the front door.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - CONTINUOUS

Imani stands just outside her front door, screaming, crumpled against the doorframe, her hands covered in blood.

BEN
Imani—what happened?!

He rushes inside. Audrey watches through the window.

INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

From her vantage point, Audrey sees through the blinds. Ben stumbles back outside, hands on his knees, and vomits violently onto the lawn.

He looks up—sees her watching through the window.

Their eyes lock.

Ben's expression shifts — panic, horror, confusion.

He runs back across the yard.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The door swings open and Ben rushes in. Audrey's moved to the top of the stairs.

He's ashen, breathless, hands shaking.

BEN

Call 911.

Audrey blinks slowly, as if the words take a moment to register.

BEN (CONT'D)

Audrey—now!

She nods numbly. Gets up. Moves toward her phone like she's in a dream.

As Ben paces behind her, she dials with trembling fingers.

The sound of Imani's wails still echoes from next door.

Audrey stares down at the numbers on the phone, her eyes unfocused, still hearing the wet, violent, animalistic sounds from the night before.

EXT. STREET - LATE MORNING

A light gray overcast hangs in the sky. The street is lined with NEIGHBORS — some in robes, some filming on their phones, all murmuring in hushed, stunned voices.

Audrey stands at her front window, eyes hollow, face pale. She's changed into fresh clothes, hair pulled back tight, but her hands tremble slightly against the windowsill.

Across the street, Imani is slumped on the curb, wrapped in a blanket. Caleb sits next to her. Imani holds him close. A FEMALE OFFICER kneels beside her, murmuring gently.

In front of the house, the ambulance doors swing open, and JASON'S BODY — zipped up in a black bag — is rolled out on a stretcher by TWO PARAMEDICS. The gurney rattles softly as it hits the uneven sidewalk.

The crowd goes silent as the bag disappears into the ambulance.

FLASH CUT —

Blood on the floor.

Jason's wide, glassy eyes.

Audrey's teeth sinking into flesh. The SQUELCHING.

BACK TO PRESENT.

Audrey closes her eyes. She doesn't cry. She just leans her forehead against the glass, her breath fogging the surface in small, shallow puffs.

Behind her, Ben enters the room slowly, watching her in silence.

BEN
They're taking him now.

Audrey doesn't respond.

BEN (CONT'D)
You okay?

Still nothing.

He approaches her cautiously, placing a hand on her shoulder. She flinches slightly but doesn't move away.

Outside, the ambulance pulls off, red lights flashing silently, no siren.

The street remains still. The moment lingers.

Ben pulls her into a hesitant hug – and she lets him, eyes still fixed on the space where the ambulance had been.

INT. DINING ROOM – NIGHT

The overhead light casts a soft yellow glow. The table is set simply – two plates, half-eaten food, untouched wine.

Audrey sits rigid in her chair, wearing a long-sleeved turtleneck, gloves, and high-waisted pants. Her skin is completely covered. Even her neck is hidden beneath a scarf.

Ben sits across from her, chewing slowly, watching her over the rim of his glass.

BEN
(small laugh)
You going somewhere after this? Or
are we dressing like we're hiding
from the sun now?

Audrey's fork pauses mid-air. She lowers it.

AUDREY
It's comfortable.

BEN
Just saying... it's not exactly
summer-friendly.

She doesn't respond. She takes another bite, chewing slowly.

BEN (CONT'D)
I mean, we've lived together how
long? You don't have to be modest
around me. Not unless there's a
reason.

AUDREY
Why is it a big deal?

BEN
It's not.
(beat)
It's just a little... dramatic,
don't you think?

Audrey stiffens. The room falls quiet except for the clink of
Ben's fork against the plate.

AUDREY
I don't like how I look right now.
That's all.

Ben shrugs, trying to act casual but his tone sharpens.

BEN
Well, you were the one who wanted
to change things.

Another silence.

BEN (CONT'D)
I didn't ask you to go this far.
You wanted to be better. Easier.
(beat)
I miss when you were just... you.

Audrey's hand tightens around her glass.

AUDREY
I'm still me.

BEN
Yeah?
(beat)
(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)
Because it's starting to feel like
I'm having dinner with someone I
don't recognize.

She sets her glass down slowly.

AUDREY
If it bothers you so much, maybe
don't look at me.

Ben gives a short laugh – cold, tired.

BEN
Don't worry. It's getting easier.

The words hit like a slap.

Audrey looks away, jaw clenched, blinking rapidly.

They eat the rest of the meal in silence, save for the faint
buzz of the refrigerator and the occasional creak of Ben's
chair.

Outside, the wind picks up.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dim, lit only by the streetlights outside
filtering through the blinds. Ben lies in bed shirtless,
scrolling his phone. Audrey sits at the edge, still fully
dressed – long sleeves, leggings, socks. Her body hidden.

BEN
(softly, nudging her)
C'mere.

She glances back at him, hesitant.

BEN (CONT'D)
I miss you.

He puts the phone down and reaches out for her hand. She lets
him take it, but doesn't move closer.

BEN (CONT'D)
We don't have to make a big deal of
it. Lights off, like usual.

Audrey pulls her hand away gently.

AUDREY
I'm not in the mood.

Ben pauses. Then tries again, lightly teasing.

BEN

You've been "not in the mood" for days.

She stiffens.

BEN (CONT'D)

Is it the clothes thing? You can keep them on, I don't care. Or I can turn the lights off. Honestly, I never liked look at your stretch marks anyway.

Silence.

Audrey slowly turns to him.

AUDREY

What?

BEN

What? I'm being honest. It's not like it stopped us before.

Her face twists – not with embarrassment, but rage.

AUDREY

You really think you're helping right now?

BEN

I'm trying. You're the one acting like your body is some kind of crime scene. I'm just trying to feel normal again.

AUDREY

Normal? You think I want this? You think I like hiding myself?

Ben sits up, defensive.

BEN

I didn't say that.

AUDREY

You didn't have to. You're disgusted by me.

BEN

You're the one who changed, Audrey.
You're the one who decided you
needed to be "fixed."

AUDREY

I can get better.
(beat)
I can still be something you want.

BEN

Jesus—

He throws the covers back and stands.

BEN (CONT'D)

I'm taking a bath.

AUDREY

I'm never going to be enough for
you, am I?

Ben freezes for a moment, then grabs a towel and walks out
without another word.

Audrey sits in the silence, breathing hard, eyes burning —
not with tears, but humiliation.

She lies back slowly, staring at the ceiling.

From the bathroom, the sound of running water begins.

She turns away from the door, curls into herself, and tugs
the blanket up over her fully clothed body.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door clicks shut after Ben. The sound of bathwater
running echoes faintly from the bathroom.

Audrey sits alone on the bed, her body tense, eyes locked on
the nightstand.

Her breath trembles. Her hands curl into fists.

She stares at the pill bottle like it's taunting her.

She grabs the bottle and unscrews the lid with shaking
fingers. A handful of small, pale capsules spill into her
palm.

She hesitates only a moment.

Then, shoves them into her mouth, all at once.

She swallows them dry, choking slightly, eyes wild.

For a moment—nothing.

Then—

A sharp, blinding pain rips through her stomach.

She doubles over, clutching her gut, falling to the floor.

Her body jerks, spasming violently. She tries to scream—

—but no sound comes out. Just a choked breath and a gurgling rasp.

Her eyes go wide with panic.

Veins darken beneath her skin, pulsing like they're full of ink. Her hands claw at her own throat. Her jaw trembles open unnaturally wide, teeth sharpening as her face contorts.

The muscles in her back seize, bones shifting just beneath the surface. Her spine arches.

She crawls to the edge of the bed, dragging herself up in front of the full-length mirror.

She sees herself changing.

Skin peeling in patches. Lips splitting at the corners. Fingers elongating, nails black and curved.

Audrey reaches out, pressing her trembling fingers to the mirror.

AUDREY

(hoarse whisper)

Make it stop.

Her knees give out. She collapses to the floor, convulsing silently, body seizing in waves.

The last thing she sees before the darkness takes her...

—is her reflection.

No looking back.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Candlelight flickers against the tiles. Ben sinks deeper into the hot water, his arms resting along the sides of the tub. Steam curls around him. The water laps quietly against porcelain.

His eyes are closed. His breathing slows.

Silence, save for the faint splash of water. A single droplet falls from the ceiling into the bath.

Drip.

Ben's brow furrows.

Another drop. He opens his eyes slowly.

And looks up.

Something is there.

Clinging to the ceiling.

It's pale, bald, and wrongly human – long limbs folded, back arched unnaturally like a spider, its fingers curled around the molding with razor-sharp black nails.

Its face is gaunt, hollow-eyed, with a too-wide mouth stretched in a grotesque, wet grin.

For a second, Ben can't breathe.

He tries to move, to scream – but his voice won't come. His body won't move.

He just stares in frozen horror as it begins to unfold itself, slow and deliberate.

The creature crawls along the ceiling with jerking movements, head rotating slightly, watching him with deep, black, knowing eyes.

Its mouth twitches.

And then –

It drops.

SPLASH.

The monster lands in the tub with him, water exploding upward, candles blowing out, plunging the room into darkness.

Ben thrashes – finally able to move – but it's too late.

A blur of claws and limbs. Flesh tearing. The water turns deep red in seconds.

He screams, but it's wet, gargled.

His hand reaches out of the tub – fingers spasming – then falls limp over the edge.

In the flicker of dying candlelight, the creature crouches over him.

Blood drips from its mouth, sharp teeth glinting.

As it lifts its head, we see it clearly now.

It's Audrey.

Or something that used to be her.

She crawls from the tub on all fours, leaving behind ribbons of shredded skin and steaming red water.

INT. AUDREY AND BEN'S HOUSE – NIGHT

FLASHING LIGHTS paint the inside of the house in harsh bursts – red, blue, red, blue. The sirens scream outside. DOGS bark in the distance.

The front door is blown open. The walls are soaked with blood. Something has torn through the house like a storm.

COPS enter with rifles raised, stepping carefully over shredded furniture, the remains of a human hand, a broken mirror. The air is thick with smoke, wet copper, and something darker – the scent of something rotted and no longer human.

OFFICER #1

Be advised – it's probably an animal.

OFFICER #2

Jesus Christ...

They move forward as a low growl echoes through the walls.

From the far end of the hallway, something shifts.

A silhouette – tall, lean, twitching with strange, fluid movements – steps into view.

Its skin is pale, veins black and webbed.

OFFICER #3

Freeze! Hands where we can see
them!

The creature doesn't stop. It moves forward – deliberate.
Confident. Almost graceful.

OFFICER #2

Shoot it!

GUNFIRE ERUPTS.

Muzzle flashes strobe the hallway – illuminating the creature
as it rushes forward on all fours, shrieking. It pounces on
them.

CUT TO BLACK.

Silence.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET – DAWN

BIRDSONG begins to return to the world.

The early morning sun hangs low, casting everything in soft
gold.

Audrey walks barefoot down the center of the road – naked,
streaked with drying blood, flecks of flesh stuck to her
legs, her chest, her hair.

Her posture is different now. Relaxed. Shoulders unburdened.
She moves like someone lightened. Liberated.

Her body is whole again – smooth, strong, beautiful in a way
that feels almost unnatural. Her hair is thick and shiny.
Rosy cheeks. But, there are traces of the monster still
clinging to her: her eyes just slightly too black around the
edges, her teeth a little pointy.

She stares straight ahead, unfazed as she passes abandoned
bikes, trash cans, police tape blowing gently in the breeze.

She begins to laugh.

It's sudden – a broken, manic sound. Then it breaks into
sobbing, then laughter again. She wipes her face with a
bloody hand, smearing her cheek red.

AUDREY
(whispering to herself)
I'm free.

She slows. Stops in the middle of the street.

Tilts her head to the sky – her expression torn between
ecstasy and grief.

A TEAR rolls down her cheek. Then another.

She begins to walk again – toward the horizon.

Behind her, the quiet returns. No more sirens. No more
shouting.

Only BIRDSONG.

Only her.

THE END