

ON THE WING

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. REAR OF A BALTIMORE APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

An old building jammed right next to other old buildings. Scraggly backyard. Windows open onto a rusted fire escape.

A young black woman leans out of a window on the second floor. She's slender, dressed for work in neatly pressed office attire. This is MARIDEE HUTCHERSON -- 25 years old, but a grown-up since she was 13.

Maridee spreads birdseed on a metal tray clamped to her fire escape rail. She smiles as tiny finches and sparrows fly to the tray and peck at the seeds.

A much larger bird, a mourning dove, flutters over. The little birds scatter. Maridee waves at the mourning dove.

MARIDEE

Hey! Shoo. Go way.

The mourning dove flies off.

The finches return... but then so does the mourning dove.

Maridee frowns. She disappears from the window. Comes back holding a water pistol.

SPLOOSH! A jet of water blasts the mourning dove. It flies to a utility wire nearby.

Maridee grins. The mourning dove ruffles its feathers and gives Maridee a plaintive look.

MARIDEE

Don't be giving me that look. These seeds are for the little birds. Not your big ass. You scare 'em off.

She ducks back inside and--

INT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

--sets the water pistol down on a table.

She rubs her temples. Winces.

MARIDEE

Damn.

FOLLOW Maridee through her modest but tidy apartment... mail and bills precisely stacked in a stand-up file on a table... tote bag and shoes already set out by the door.

Her life feels like a well-choreographed routine...

Except for the headache, which is not part of the routine. Maridee winces again.

She hoists her tote bag, slips into her shoes. With a last glance over her shoulder, she heads out the door.

EXT. STREET IN WEST BALTIMORE - DAY - ESTABLISHING

Urban residential, near Bolton Hill. A peaceful neighborhood when it wants to be... but it doesn't always want to be. Still clearly a hot spot for drug dealing and crime.

And it's the street where we find Maridee's building--

EXT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Weathered brick, two stories above a garage. It's well kept but could use a new roof.

JEROME BISHOP, an 11-year old black kid, bounces a basketball on the front steps. Streetwise, skinny, small for his age. His eyes are too old for his face.

He makes way for Maridee hurrying down the steps.

MARIDEE

What are you doing out here,
Jerome?

JEROME

Taking care of business.

MARIDEE

Aren't you supposed to be in
school?

JEROME

National holiday.

MARIDEE

No it ain't.

Jerome gets up and tails after Maridee on her way to the garage.

JEROME

Hey, can you buy me a six pack?
I'll give you money.

MARIDEE

Hell no. You're what, ten?

JEROME
Eleven! And twelve in three months.
Or four.

MARIDEE
Where's your momma?

JEROME
(bouncing basketball)
Damn if I know.

MARIDEE
I meant the Russian lady--

JEROME
Missus Krasnicki. She ain't my
momma. And she ain't Russian. She's
Albanian. She kick your ass you
call her Russian.

MARIDEE
You know what I mean. Your foster
mother. She's supposed to be taking
care of you.

JEROME
Ha. Good one.

For some reason this response ticks Maridee off. She turns,
marches back up the steps and into the building.

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING - FIRST FLOOR CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Maridee charges over to the nearest apartment door. She
KNOCKS on it. No answer. She KNOCKS harder.

MARIDEE
Mrs. Krasnicki?

SOUND of a basketball bouncing on the floor behind Maridee.
She turns to see that Jerome has followed her inside.

MARIDEE
Where's she at?

Jerome gives Maridee a sullen shrug.

JEROME
Taking care of business.

Maridee raises her hands. *Fine*. Not her problem. She storms
past Jerome and out the front door.

EXT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

A sleek black SUV blocks the driveway from the garage.

DMITRI KRASNICKI (18) lounges next to the SUV, smoking a cigarette. Gaunt, skin like a mushroom that's never seen the sun. And he's got all the time in the world.

Maridee strides over to the young man.

MARIDEE

Dmitri. You're blocking me.

Dmitri flicks an ash from his cigarette.

MARIDEE

Could you please move your car?

DMITRI

Can't. Not now.

He looks Maridee up and down in a decidedly creepy way.

MARIDEE

(firm)

I'm late for work. You gotta move your car.

DMITRI

Can't move. Take Uber.

It's useless. Maridee storms back inside--

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING, FIRST FLOOR CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Jerome now sits on the hallway floor bouncing the ball between his legs. He eyes Maridee.

JEROME

Why ain't you at work?

MARIDEE

Dmitri's car is blocking me.

JEROME

Huh. You shit outta luck.

Maridee BANGS on Mrs. Krasnicki's door.

JEROME

She still ain't home.

Maridee starts up the stairs.

JEROME

And she still ain't Russian.

MARIDEE

Keep cutting school, Jerome. You'll
end up a useless piece of trash.
Just like Dmitri.

JEROME

(calls after her)
School didn't do nothin' for you.
You ain't so smart. Your boyfriend.
That guy Leonard?
(bounces his basketball)
He a player.

Maridee stops, pivots around to glare at Jerome. *The nerve of that kid!*

JEROME

Don't mean no disrespect but he
cheatin' on you. He come over when
you ain't here. Got a hot bitch
with him.
(off her shocked look)
Just sayin'.

MARIDEE

Jerome. I got a really bad
headache. I've had it for days. You
are not helping.

JEROME

I can't help it if your boyfriend
cheatin' on you. You give him the
keys.

Maridee stomps angrily up the steps.

MARIDEE

You better get your ass to school.

JEROME

(calls up the stairs)
Holiday!

TOP FLOOR CORRIDOR

By the last flight of stairs Maridee's boiling over. The top floor unit occupies the entire floor. The door has a bronze knocker. Maridee KNOCKS.

MARIDEE

Mister Grafton?

After a moment, SIMON GRAFTON, a slim and elegant black man in his late 60s, opens the door. Over his shoulder we see bookshelves lining the walls of his unit.

SIMON GRAFTON
It's Dr. Grafton, Maridee.

MARIDEE
Ah. Forgot. My bad.

SIMON GRAFTON
What's the problem?

MARIDEE
Dmitri's blocking the driveway again. I can't get out.

Simon takes in her frustration. He sighs, sympathetic.

MARIDEE
He's making me late for work.

SIMON GRAFTON
I'm sorry.

MARIDEE
Can't you do something?

SIMON GRAFTON
What?

MARIDEE
You own the building!

SIMON GRAFTON
What do you want me to do? Evict them? I've warned his mother--

MARIDEE
Oh by the way. You know she's Jerome's foster mother. And he's not in school today. She ain't even home.

SIMON GRAFTON
I understand your concern--

MARIDEE
No you don't.

Simon considers her, sighs again.

Maridee's voice grows portentous. Like she has something of great seriousness to impart--

MARIDEE

Dmitri is dealing drugs. Right out front.

SIMON GRAFTON

Quite possible. Among other things.

Maridee rubs her head. Now it's hurting more.

Simon speaks slowly, choosing his words with care.

SIMON GRAFTON

When my partner...

(smiles)

I mean, my husband and I bought this building, we thought we could do something for the neighborhood. Then Greg passed and...

Simon's voice trails off.

Maridee frowns, impatient. *What's his point?*

SIMON GRAFTON

You're a nice person, Maridee. You should know, I put the building up for sale. I don't know what a new owner will do about the tenants. Dmitri... maybe it'll get better?

And suddenly Maridee's headache is like a stabbing knife. She can barely breathe.

She stumbles back downstairs.

MARIDEE

I'll call an Uber.

INT. MARIDEE'S OFFICE - DAY

A large room divided into blocks of gray-walled cubicles. WORKERS hunch before computers.

Maridee enters and hurries over to her cubicle. She's intercepted by her supervisor, ALINE (mid-40s, white).

ALINE

Maridee. We had a meeting scheduled at eight-thirty.

Aline points a manicured fingernail at the clock, which shows 9:15. She fixes Maridee with an exasperated stare.

Maridee switches to her "office" voice, crisp and professional.

MARIDEE

I texted you. My car was blocked.
I'm so sorry--

But Aline has already turned away and is striding off through the sea of cubicles.

Maridee slips into her work station. Co-Workers on either side give her a cursory nod. She flicks on her computer.

The print on the screen in front of her dances and blurs. Maridee stares at it in consternation.

At the other end of the office is a water cooler. Maridee stands, picks up her glass. Starts toward the water cooler--

Now dizzy... wobbling. Maridee grabs hold of a Co-Worker's cubicle wall. He's on his phone. He turns to her. She shakes her head, it's nothing... continues toward the water cooler.

MARIDEE'S POV:

Moving in slow motion. As if the air were thick gelatin.

From either side -- FLASHES of bright light.

Co-Workers look up with concern as we move by. Stare. Stand up in their cubicles. Reach out--

BACK TO SCENE

The water glass falls from Maridee's hand and CRASHES to the floor.

Maridee lifts her hand to her face. Her nose is BLEEDING. Badly. Gushing. Blood, trickling from her ears, too.

Her Co-Workers cry out in alarm.

Maridee swoons and sinks to the floor.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. JOHNS HOPKINS MEDICAL CENTER - DAY - ESTABLISHING

A prestigious medical research center in a less than lovely part of town.

INT. ICU - DAY

Maridee lies in a bed surrounded by hospital equipment. An IV in her arm, lights blinking and beeping.

She stirs, opens her eyes. Slowly... Maridee takes in the unfamiliar world.

A NURSE hustles over to her bedside.

MARIDEE

What... ? Where am I?

NURSE

Hospital. You were brought--

MARIDEE

Hospi... how long have I been here?

NURSE

A few days. They induced a coma.
For your safety.

Maridee stares at the Nurse in confusion.

NURSE

The doctors will talk to you.

SAME - LATER

Three physicians enter and approach Maridee's bed. First is DR. BRADLEY (58), distinguished, balding. Then, two RESIDENTS who stand respectfully behind Dr. Bradley.

DR. BRADLEY

Hello Maridee. I'm Dr. Bradley,
Chief of Oncology. You met my two
residents earlier. How are you
doing?

MARIDEE

Oncology?

DR. BRADLEY

Let's talk.

Dr. Bradley gestures to one of the Residents. The Resident wheels over a monitor which Dr. Bradley connects to a laptop.

He pulls the monitor close to Maridee's bed, then sets a chair next to it. He sits.

Maridee watches as images of TWO CT SCANS appear on the brightly lit screen, side by side.

DR. BRADLEY
Can you see this okay?

Maridee nods. Swallows hard.

DR. BRADLEY
So. On the left you see the scan of
a typical, normal brain for a woman
your age. We show you that so you
can compare. And on the right, this
is your brain.

Using a light pointer, Dr. Bradley indicates the images on
the screen. Then he circles an opaque area in the scan on the
right.

DR. BRADLEY
This dark mass here--

MARIDEE
In my brain?

Dr. Bradley glances at Maridee. She's trying to process what
she's seeing.

DR. BRADLEY
Yes.

Maridee gapes at the images.

DR. BRADLEY
There are more tests we want to
run. However, at the rate we expect
this to grow--

MARIDEE
What's "this?"

DR. BRADLEY
The tumor.

The look of horror on Maridee's face...

Dr. Bradley sets down the pointer. He gestures for the
Residents to step back.

He pulls his chair closer to Maridee, leans forward. Speaks
softly. His eyes, serious.

DR. BRADLEY
Let's talk about your options. For
treatment.

Dr. Bradley continues talking but his voice goes MUTE, replaced by a droning BUZZ.

Maridee watches him. All she sees are his silent lips moving. White guy in a white coat telling her she's going to die.

INT. CLINICAL RESEARCH CENTER (CRC) - DAY - ESTABLISHING

A special unit inside the hospital. MEDICAL STAFF move through the open double doors with the overhead banner: CLINICAL RESEARCH CENTER.

INT. CRC DAY TREATMENT ROOM - DAY

Maridee sits in a recliner chair. The curtain that separates her from the patient in the next recliner chair is open.

DAVID (34) sits in the next chair. Pale, slender. He stares straight ahead. Unblinking.

Maridee glances over at him. He continues staring ahead.

DAVID
If you're here, it must be the
brain.

MARIDEE
Yeah.
(beat)
They told me about this new thing.
Immu... immuno--

DAVID
Immunotherapy. A clinical trial.

MARIDEE
Right. You doing that?

DAVID
I'm on one of the protocols.

MARIDEE
They want to put polio virus into--

DAVID
That's a salvage protocol.

MARIDEE
A what?

DAVID
Offered only to patients who have
no other options. They make the
best guinea pigs.

Maridee turns in her chair, stares at David.

DAVID
Where's your tumor located?

MARIDEE
Hip... hippa--

DAVID
Hippocampus. Intuition. Emotion.
The most mysterious part of the
brain. Scientists say it's beyond
science. It's where God lives.

MARIDEE
Not the heart?

DAVID
The heart is a pump.

MARIDEE
Where God lives. And I got cancer
there. Figures.

DAVID
Don't overthink it.

She blurts out a laugh. He laughs with her. And then a quiet
settles in.

DAVID
My name is David, by the way.

MARIDEE
Maridee.

DAVID
Pretty name.

MARIDEE
You got a brain tumor, too?

DAVID
Glioblastoma. Advanced. Hit just
when I was about to leave on my
dream trip to Nepal.

MARIDEE
That's some real bad luck.

DAVID
You know what they say. You wanna
make God laugh, make plans.

Maridee mulls this.

MARIDEE
Guess we should both pray.

DAVID
Pray? Why?

Maridee opens her mouth to respond, then realizes she doesn't have an answer.

A long, silent BEAT.

DAVID
What do you look like?

MARIDEE
Excuse me?

DAVID
I'm blind now. The tumor is
pressing on my optic nerve.

This rattles Maridee. *Will she...?*

DAVID
Never mind. I enjoy the sound of
your voice.

Maridee gets emotional. Tears well up, spill out.

MARIDEE
Doctor told me... odds are real
bad.

DAVID
(reciting)
When the odds are one in a million,
be that one.

MARIDEE
You sound like an ad for lottery
tickets.

David grins. They share a moment of bonding, buoyed by it.

But then the full weight of her situation hits Maridee--

MARIDEE
(small voice)
I'm going to die.

DAVID
We're all going to die.

That's no comfort to Maridee.

MARIDEE

I don't know if I should do that trial thing.

David stares straight ahead but he picks up on her distress. His voice softens--

DAVID

I guess, the question you have to ask yourself, what gives your life meaning? Work? Home? Family?

Maridee's full out crying now--

MARIDEE

I don't know. Do you think about what comes after this?

DAVID

I imagine this world is just another planet's hell.

Maridee coughs out a laugh through her tears.

DAVID

Funny. I'm blind now, but I see things clearly through my mind. And in my dreams. I see that everything is possible.

A moment passes. Then--

DAVID

You should do that clinical trial.

Maridee is about to respond when--

TYRONA GREGORY (48) bustles into the room. She's a heavy-set black woman dressed stylishly in a fuchsia blazer with lipstick to match, large gold earrings. The ensemble might have come from T.J.Maxx but Tyrone carries it like Gucci.

This is a woman who gets things done, and on top of that, she radiates warmth. She strides over to Maridee's recliner.

TYRONA

Hi, baby girl. How you doing?

Tyrone leans over and kisses Maridee. She yanks shut the privacy curtain between the recliner chairs.

On the other side, David sits quietly, listening.

TYRONA
Brought you a few things.

She hands Maridee a bulging Walgreens bag.

TYRONA
Knew this place wouldn't have no
hair product.

MARIDEE
Thanks. But I won't be needing no--

TYRONA
Don't you dare! Don't you dare let
negative words like that outta your
mouth. Uh *unh*! You gonna be just
fine. Good doctors here. Best in
the country. I Googled all of them.

Maridee smiles faintly.

In the next recliner chair, David grins.

Tyrona pulls up a chair close to Maridee's recliner.

TYRONA
Got it all set with HR at your job.
Disability checks go direct
deposit. I went by your place,
talked to the landlord. Oooh, he's
a good lookin'--

MARIDEE
He's gay. And you didn't have to--

TYRONA
I needed to talk to Mrs. Krasnicki
anyway. Jerome's on a wait list for
adoption.

MARIDEE
Really? How come?

TYRONA
Didn't you know? His momma passed a
few months ago.

MARIDEE
Oh good Lord.

TYRONA
Overdose. So sad. Poor Jerome.

MARIDEE

You tell him?

TYRONA

Of course. I talked to him right after it happened. Got him a counselor. Mrs. Krasnicki, she talked to him--

MARIDEE

She lets that boy run wild.

TYRONA

Well that's why I gotta get him into a home. See if we can get him adopted.

Maridee's lips set in a firm, skeptical line. Bitterness tinged her voice.

MARIDEE

Who's gonna adopt an eleven year old black boy?

Tyrona starts to speak, then stops. She shakes her head. Maridee is right -- she knows this world as well as Tyrone.

Tyrona changes the subject.

TYRONA

You talk to anyone? Friends?

MARIDEE

Me and Desi been talking. She called a few times.

TYRONA

(carefully)

I contacted Grace.

At the name, Maridee stiffens.

TYRONA

She's down in Miami now. Managing a restaurant. She's worried about you.

MARIDEE

Oh hell no she ain't.

TYRONA

Maridee.

MARIDEE

Worried. But not so much to call.
Or lift a finger to write.

TYRONA

She's afraid. After all these
years.

That gets a contemptuous snort from Maridee.

TYRONA

I wrote down her address and phone
number. Here.

She hands it to Maridee, who doesn't take it. Tyrone leaves
the paper on the table next to the recliner.

TYRONA

She does care about you, Maridee. I
know that for a fact.

MARIDEE

You know more 'bout it than I do
then.

An awkward silence. At last, Tyrone stands.

TYRONA

Gotta go do a home visit. Let me
know if you need anything.

MARIDEE

I won't be needing noth--
(off Tyrone's stern look)
Thanks.

TYRONA

Well. You just pray on getting
better. That's your full-time job
now. You and the good Lord.

Tyrone walks out.

A long moment passes. David reaches over, blindly, drags the
curtain open. Then--

DAVID

I didn't realize you were black.

MARIDEE

What?

DAVID
Until I heard you talking to that
woman who was just here.

Maridee huffs up, fixing to get angry--

DAVID
You talk differently to me. Than to
her.

BEAT. Maridee considers that.

MARIDEE
Yeah. Don't know why. I suppose I
do that code switching thing
without thinking. Reflex, I guess.

DAVID
Maybe we talk differently with
people we feel close to.

Maridee opens the Walgreens bag, pulls out items.

DAVID
That woman--

MARIDEE
Tyrona.

DAVID
She's your mother?

MARIDEE
Oh no. Tyrona's a social worker.
She ran a group home where I lived
when I was young.
(beat)
Hospital wanted a contact name of
nearest kin. I gave 'em Tyrona's.

DAVID
She watches out for you.

Maridee tears up. Whispers--

MARIDEE
Yeah. That's her all the time.
(then)
How she do.

David smiles.

SERIES OF SHOTS: MARIDEE UNDERGOES TREATMENT IN THE HOSPITAL

--A thick sheaf of consent forms. Maridee signs them.

--A nurse administers an IV to Maridee.

--Maridee is wheeled into the OR, placed in an upright position for brain surgery. Her head is swathed, a small exposed patch, shaved.

--Then ICU. Surrounded by beeping equipment, blinking lights.

--Dr. Bradley and residents scrutinize CT scans.

--Maridee, miserable, vomiting and sweating. Suffering violent seizures. Nurses run in to hold her down.

--Tyrona, sitting by Maridee's bedside, tapping on her phone while a gaunt Maridee dozes.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

A standard double room. Maridee's bed is by the window. The shaved patch of hair and the scar are still there, but otherwise she looks surprisingly well.

She's sitting up in bed eating a plate of scrambled eggs when Dr. Bradley and the two Residents enter. The Residents wheel in the display monitor.

And then more RESIDENTS and INTERNS crowd inside. They're excited. Almost giddy.

Maridee stops wolfing down the eggs.

DR. BRADLEY
No, keep eating. Please. Finish
your breakfast.

But clearly Dr. Bradley is eager to tell her something. Maridee eyes the Medical Staff cramming into her room.

MARIDEE
What's going on?

DR. BRADLEY
We have some news.

Dr. Bradley gestures to the Residents who set up the monitor next to Maridee's bed. She wipes a crumb of egg from her lip.

A CT IMAGE of Maridee's brain appears on the screen.

DR. BRADLEY
Your tumor.

MARIDEE
(squints at the image)
Where is it?

DR. BRADLEY
It was there. And now it's shrunk
to almost nothing. Remarkable.

Dr. Bradley is beside himself.

MARIDEE
You mean, I'm cured?

DR. BRADLEY
No, no. We can't say that. Not yet.
We'll continue treatment. But the
cancer is in remission, for now.

Maridee stares at the CT SCAN, a world of emotions flying
across her face.

DR. BRADLEY
We want to see you up, walking
around. Getting stronger.

Dr. Bradley looks back at the Medical Team. They're beaming.

HOSPITAL CORRIDOR

Wearing her hospital robe, Maridee strolls slowly past the
rooms. She finds David's room and peeks inside.

He's sleeping. An anxious, sweaty sleep. His arms and legs
twitch convulsively.

She watches him a long moment, then backs out and continues
walking.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dimly lit, as if in a twilight haze. Maridee lies in her bed.
She's awake.

Her eyes drift up to the ceiling.

What looks like a giant MOTH hangs there, right above her
head.

Maridee sighs. She slips out of bed, leaves the room. She returns with a broom. She reaches up and SMACKS the moth, knocking it down.

But when Maridee bends down to pick up the moth from her bed... it's the MOURNING DOVE.

And Maridee's blow has gravely injured the bird.

She gathers up the dove in her hands and sets it down gently on the carpet. She runs out of the room. Returns with a bowl of water.

She places the water bowl next to the mourning dove.

The frightened bird just looks up at her. A plaintive and helpless look.

And then it dies.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Maridee wakes up sobbing.

She looks around. She's in her hospital room. Through the window slivers of dawn appear on the horizon.

Maridee slips out of bed and puts on her hospital robe.

HOSPITAL CORRIDOR

The hallway is hushed. Maridee moves soundlessly down the corridor to David's room. The door is open a crack. She taps lightly, then tiptoes inside.

David's bed lies empty, stripped of linens.

Maridee stares at it.

She steps back into the corridor.

A NIGHT NURSE writes in a chart. Maridee approaches her.

MARIDEE

Excuse me. What happened to David,
the blind man? He was in that room.

The Night Nurse glances up.

NIGHT NURSE

Are you a family member?

MARIDEE

Friend.

NIGHT NURSE

You should speak to a family mem--

MARIDEE

He's dead, isn't he?

The Night Nurse looks at her, unable to comment.

Maridee backs away and returns to her own

HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

She walks in slowly. She sits down on the edge of the bed and gazes out the window. A rosy dawn lightens the sky.

Maridee stands, steps over to the closet. She opens the door and takes out her clothes.

MOMENTS LATER

Fully dressed. Maridee is about to leave. At the door, a thought occurs to her.

She turns and goes over to the bedside table, picks up a piece of paper there.

It's the paper that Tyrone gave her, with a phone number and address. She shoves it into her purse and walks out of the room.

INT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

LEONARD, late 20s, lounges on the couch watching TV and eating a bowl of cereal. The key turns in the lock, Maridee enters.

Leonard bolts up. He stares, mouth open--

MARIDEE

Leonard. What are you doing here?

LEONARD

Whoa. Maridee. I thought you was--

MARIDEE

Dying?

Her voice is calm. No rancor. Leonard doesn't know what to say. He sets the cereal bowl down.

Maridee reaches out her hand.

MARIDEE

Gimme your keys.

LEONARD

What?

MARIDEE

The keys. To my apartment.

LEONARD

This 'cause I didn't come see you
in the hospital that much? You know
I can't deal with hospitals. Sick
people...

Maridee keeps her hand outstretched. *The keys.*

LEONARD

It's cool, baby. I been here.
Taking care of all your shit.

Maridee looks around.

Mail scattered on the floor, bills torn open. Dead plants.
Beer cans and garbage littering every surface.

She picks up a glass... soiled with a cherry-red lipstick
stain. *That little shit Jerome was right.*

Leonard watches her examining the glass. *Uh oh.*

He moves toward her, arms outstretched. She deflects him.

LEONARD

That's how you gonna be? No
forgiveness. No chance to explain--

MARIDEE

I'm not angry, Leonard. It's all
good. We friends.

She plants herself in front of him, hand still held out.

He reaches into his pocket and hands her the keys.

BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Maridee pulls the sheets off the unmade bed and dumps them on
the floor. She spies the jar of birdseed on the table.

She leans out the window and fills the tray on the fire
escape with fresh seeds.

In seconds, a little finch flies over. Maridee smiles,
gratified. *I'm back.*

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING - TOP FLOOR CORRIDOR - DAY

Maridee knocks on Simon Grafton's door. He opens up--

SIMON GRAFTON

Maridee!

MARIDEE

Can I talk to you, Dr. Grafton?

SIMON GRAFTON

Of course, come in. I heard you were very ill.

INT. SIMON GRAFTON'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maridee steps inside. The apartment is as elegant as the man. Tasteful furnishings, art, books.

Maridee's eyes go to the window lined with hanging plants. It opens onto Simon's fire escape. She points to it--

MARIDEE

On my fire escape, I feed birds.
Little birds. But I shoo away the
mourning dove.

(beat)

When I was in the hospital, I had
this dream...

Simon looks at her. It's awkward, standing there like that.

SIMON GRAFTON

Would you like to sit down?

Maridee nods. They move to chairs, sit.

As Maridee begins to relate her dream to Simon, WE SHIFT
OUTSIDE the apartment building to--

EXT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - SAME

Angry shouting and yelling in an Eastern European language.

Dmitri is in a shoving match with two big, SCARY DUDES. The argument grows more heated. More shoving and yelling--

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING - FIRST FLOOR CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

BAM! The front door SLAMS shut. Dmitri POUNDS down the corridor. A bundle concealed in his jacket.

He bursts into his apartment and SLAMS the door behind him.

The Scary Dudes YELL from outside, BANG on the front door.

INT. SIMON GRAFTON'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - SAME

Simon listens, thoughtful, as Maridee finishes telling him her dream.

MARIDEE

... It looked up at me, so sad. And then it just... it just died.

(beat)

The same mourning dove I shoo away from my feeder.

Simon's face -- *Why is she telling him this?*

Maridee stares at him, her eyes demanding answers.

Sounds of SHOUTING, YELLING filter up from the street. Not unusual for this neighborhood.

The stillness in the room lingers. Simon clears his throat.

SIMON GRAFTON

Maridee, I'm a gastroenterologist. Not a psychiatrist. I don't know what dreams mean.

Maridee continues to gaze at Simon. Unblinking.

He takes a breath.

SIMON GRAFTON

Maybe... you shouldn't be pushing away creatures that need your help?

From the street, the NOISE of a car angrily REVVING its engine and SCREECHING away.

Maridee doesn't budge.

Simon's eyes drift to a PHOTO on the bookshelf, a photo of himself and his late husband. We get the feeling he turns to that photo often. And each time it causes him pain.

SIMON GRAFTON

The bird of time has but a little way to flutter, and the bird is on the wing.

(off Maridee's confused expression)

It's from a poem.

Maridee stands, moves toward the door.

SIMON GRAFTON
Maridee?

She turns.

SIMON GRAFTON
I sold the building. The new owner
plans to renovate and--

MARIDEE
Evict the tenants?

SIMON GRAFTON
(sad sigh)
Gentrification.

INT. MARIDEE'S OFFICE - DAY

Maridee enters. Co-Workers gape at her as if seeing a ghost.

She proceeds to her cubicle and finds another woman sitting there: the NEW HIRE.

Confused, Maridee stares at the New Hire. She's about to speak when--

Aline strides out of her office and comes up to Maridee.

ALINE
Maridee! How good to see you.

MARIDEE
(re: the New Hire)
What's going on?

The other Co-Workers strain to hear the conversation. Aline gently guides Maridee away from her cubicle.

ALINE
Let's go talk to Victoria in HR.

DISSOLVE TO:

ANOTHER OFFICE

VICTORIA sits behind a desk. Maridee sits across from her.

VICTORIA
You got put on permanent disability
'cause we were told you weren't...

Victoria doesn't know how to say it. She swallows, uncomfortable.

MARIDEE
I'm still in treatment.

VICTORIA
(relieved)
Well. If you're in treatment then
disability would still be--

MARIDEE
It's okay. I'll go.

Maridee stands, moves to the door. Victoria calls after her--

VICTORIA
Hope you feel better!

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING - FIRST FLOOR CORRIDOR - DAY

Jerome blusters in and lets himself into his apartment with his key.

INT. KRASNICKI APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

At the sound of Jerome entering, MRS. KRASNICKI calls from the kitchen--

MRS. KRASNICKI (O.S.)
Take shoes off!

Jerome rolls his eyes. He pulls off his high top sneakers and dumps them, along with his backpack, just inside the door.

A TV blares a soccer game. Dmitri sprawls on the couch, watching the game. He looks stoned.

He flips a bird at Jerome as Jerome walks past. Jerome grabs his crotch at him.

JEROME'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

A tiny room. Barely big enough for the bed which is shoved next to the window opening onto the fire escape.

Jerome enters, flops onto the bed. He pulls out a comic book.

EXT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - SAME

A car drives up soundlessly and parks.

The two Scary Dudes who had argued with Dmitri jump out.

They run up to the front door--

INT. JEROME'S BEDROOM - A MOMENT LATER

BLAM! Jerome hears the SOUND of the front door of the building bursting open... FEET POUNDING down the hall. Right up to the Krasnicki apartment...

Jerome sits up straight in his bed.

GUNSHOTS... then SCREAMS from the living room.... SHOUTS... BANG! BANG! More GUNFIRE. RUNNING FEET... doors flinging open... BANG BANG! More SCREAMS... BANG!

Jerome drops his comic book and leaps out of his open window to the fire escape--

EXT. REAR OF APARTMENT BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Where he flattens himself against the wall... out of range of the window.

THROUGH THE WINDOW WE SEE the two Scary Dudes burst through Jerome's door, look around... fling open the closet door... lift up the bed... throw over the dresser...

One of the Scary Dudes steps toward the window...

Jerome, terrified, shaking, heart pounding through his chest...

A SIREN shrills in the distance...

The other Dude yells to his pal... they both run out.

Jerome ducks... crawls along the fire escape until he can...

reach out to the next fire escape... and grab onto the metal tray Maridee lashed there to hold bird seeds...

From the street we hear the SOUND OF A CAR SCREECHING AWAY...

Jerome uses every ounce of strength in his skinny-chicken arms to swing himself over to Maridee's fire escape.

He pushes her window open and hoists himself through--

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - TWILIGHT - DRIVING

Maridee drives home from her now-former workplace. A bag of groceries sits on the front seat next to her.

As she turns the corner to her street she SEES:

EXT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Police cars, media vans, flashing lights, ambulance. The entrance to the building is roped off with yellow tape.

Maridee drives up, gets out of her car with her bag.

Simon Grafton runs over to her.

SIMON GRAFTON
Thank God you're safe!

MARIDEE
What happened?

SIMON GRAFTON
Dmitri... his mother. Shot...
killed. Horrible--

MARIDEE
Oh my God. What about Jerome?

Simon just shakes his head. Too upset to continue.

Maridee runs toward the building entrance. A POLICE OFFICER stops her.

MARIDEE
I live here!

Simon comes up behind her.

SIMON GRAFTON
It's okay, Officer. She's the other
tenant. The apartment next to the
Krasnickis.

Maridee stands there in shock. She spots Tyrone talking with a DETECTIVE.

MARIDEE
Tyrone!

Tyrone turns, sees Maridee and gives a shriek of joy.

She runs over and hugs her.

TYRONE
Child, what you doing out of the
hospital!

MARIDEE
I'm... better.

TYRONA
(stunned)
Better?

MARIDEE
Did they shoot Jerome, too?

TYRONA
Thank the Lord Jesus no.

SIMON GRAFTON
My front security camera filmed the
killers. They didn't have Jerome
with them when they ran out.

TYRONA
He must've not been home. Or maybe
he ran off in time. If you see him,
you gotta call me. Cops want to
talk to him. See what he knows.

Maridee, overwhelmed--

MARIDEE
Can I get into my place?

SIMON GRAFTON
Yes. The police say the killers
only entered the Krasnickis'. They
got in and out quickly.

TYRONA
Oh sweet Jesus in heaven.

SIMON GRAFTON
I'm having a locksmith fix the
front door right now.

TYRONA
Maridee, you can't stay here. Maybe
I can get you a motel--

MARIDEE
No. No, I want to be home. I want
to sleep in my own bed.

SIMON GRAFTON
I'll be right upstairs. Cops will
be patrolling the street all night--

Tyrona's phone BEEPS. She glances at it, irritated.

TYRONA

(to Maridee)

I got to go. You call me if you change your mind. I don't care what time. And if Jerome turns up, you call me right away, you hear?

Maridee nods, hugs Tyrone. Through the open front door of the building she sees more Police Officers duck under the yellow tape and walk out.

The ambulance and media vans, the squad cars pull away.

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING - FIRST FLOOR CORRIDOR - TWILIGHT

Maridee tiptoes past the first apartment. A big yellow "X" is taped over the doorway. The door, open a crack, is riddled with bullet holes, a jagged hole where the doorknob was.

Bloody footprints mark the threshold. Maridee spies them and gasps.

Sounds of detectives and forensics still moving around inside, packing up to go.

With a shudder Maridee hurries past. She opens the door to her apartment, darts inside--

INT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

--And closes the door behind her. Locks the dead bolt. She carefully sets down the bag of groceries... then lurches forward, catching herself against a chair back.

Deep breath, steadied, Maridee picks up the bag of groceries and brings it into the kitchen. She moves to the--

BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

And tosses her purse on the bed.

Suddenly it hits her full on. Inescapable. Her life, this craziness, spinning like a top, out of control.

She stands in the middle of the floor, rotates around a panicky 360 degrees.

She is so frighteningly, desperately alone.

On the bed, she notices a PIECE OF PAPER. It fell out of her purse when she tossed it.

The address and phone number in Tyrone's bold handwriting stares up at her.

And just like that, determination and purpose take over.

Maridee kneels down and pulls a large suitcase out from under the bed. She flips it open.

She takes clothes from her drawers, packs them into the suitcase. She strides out to the--

KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

And reaches up to a cupboard, takes down a tea cannister decorated with birds.

She opens it and removes a wad of TWENTY DOLLAR BILLS. Then back to the--

BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Where she carefully tucks the bills into her wallet.

Maridee disappears into the bathroom, returns with a toilet article bag. THUMP. That gets tossed into the suitcase.

A brief pause in the packing as Maridee takes her phone and sends a text message:

Yo Desi. I'm driving south. OK if I stay tomorrow nite yr place?

The answer arrives in seconds:

Sure! ;o)

The suitcase is almost full when Maridee glances out at the fire escape--

She freezes.

The window is pushed open. The tray for the birdseed is twisted to the side.

A SHUFFLING NOISE FROM THE CLOSET. Something's in there.

Maridee picks up a closed umbrella and raises it like a club. Holding her breath, she tiptoes... inch by inch... over to the closet and... YANKS the door open.

She yelps--

Jerome sits huddled on the closet floor. Shivering. Covered with birdseed. His lips dry and parched.

MARIDEE

Jerome! Oh dear Lord. Are you all right?

He barely nods. Tearful and shaking.

Maridee picks up her phone.

JEROME

No! Don't! Don't tell no one!

MARIDEE

I got to call Tyrone. I promised--

JEROME

Them guys. They gonna kill me!

MARIDEE

Did you see it happen?

Jerome shakes his head vigorously.

JEROME

(stuttering, sobbing)

No! Didn't see nothin'! Nothin'! I swear. I was in my room. I heard shootin'. Please, you gotta do something for me. Please.

MARIDEE

What?

JEROME

You gotta go get my shoes. My pack. They're right inside the door.

MARIDEE

Are you outta your--

JEROME

Pleeeeeease! I need them.

MARIDEE

Jerome. I can't go in there. They got yellow tape over the door.

JEROME

You don't need to go in. Just reach your hand in. You gotta do this for me. Please!

The way he looks up at her. Still crumpled on the floor of the closet, shaking, helpless. His eyes, plaintive, pleading--

Something breaks inside Maridee.

MARIDEE
Stay there. Don't move.

JEROME
You can't call no one!

MARIDEE
I'm not calling.

She leaves, returns seconds later with a glass of water.

Jerome gulps it down while Maridee watches.

INT. MARIDEE'S BUILDING - FIRST FLOOR CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Maridee tiptoes out of her apartment and down the hall to the Krasnickis'.

It's quiet. The forensic detectives have gone. She reaches under the yellow tape and gingerly pushes open the door.

Just as Jerome said: his shoes and pack, right by the door.

She snatches them up and hurries back inside her own unit.

INT. MARIDEE'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maridee hands Jerome his backpack and shoes.

MARIDEE
What are you gonna do?

JEROME
Lemme stay here.

MARIDEE
You can't. I'm leaving town. First thing in the morning.

JEROME
Just for tonight. 'Kay?

Those plaintive eyes again. Maridee, bewildered, thinks for a long moment.

MARIDEE
You can sleep on my couch.

LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Maridee gives Jerome a sandwich. He scarfs it down.

MARIDEE
Tomorrow morning, I'm taking you
over to Tyrona's.

Jerome nods.

MARIDEE
Here's a pillow and a blanket.

Maridee goes to turn off the lamp. Jerome waves wildly.

JEROME
No! Leave it on.

Maridee sighs, goes into her bedroom.

BEDROOM - (NEXT) MORNING

An alarm RINGS. Barely dawn and Maridee doesn't look like she got a minute of sleep. She pulls herself out of bed.

LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maridee walks in--

MARIDEE
Jerome? You up?

The couch is empty. The pillow and blanket askew.

MARIDEE
Jerome!

He's disappeared.

MARIDEE
Shit.

She pulls out her phone, taps a contact. Waits--

MARIDEE
(into phone)
Hi Tyrona. Wanted to leave you a
message. I saw Jerome but he ran
off. He knows you're looking for
him. Bye.

Maridee taps the call off. Shakes her head.

INT. GARAGE OF MARIDEE'S BUILDING - EARLY MORNING

Maridee lugs her bulging suitcase and tote bag to her car. She pops open the trunk. After several tries she heaves everything inside.

She gets into the car and drives out of the garage.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - DAY - DRIVING

Maridee's phone is attached to the dash with the GPS on. She takes the entrance for I-95 South.

DISSOLVE TO:

SAME - TWO HOURS LATER

Maridee drives. The radio reception goes in and out.

Suddenly, a little voice from the floor of the back seat--

JEROME (O.S.)

Can we stop so I can take a pee?

Jerome's head peeks up from the back. Maridee nearly slams on the brakes in the middle of the freeway.

She yanks the wheel, pulls over onto the shoulder, stops.

MARIDEE

The fuck!

Furious, she cranes her neck around, glares at Jerome.

MARIDEE

How'd you get in my car?

JEROME

I waited in the garage. When you put the trunk up I got in the back.

MARIDEE

You little sneak!

Maridee disconnects her phone from the dashboard.

JEROME

Please let me go with you! Please please please--

MARIDEE

Hell no!

JEROME

They gonna kill me! I know it. If I go back. They find me. Please I be real good. I won't be no trouble.

The child is truly terrified.

Maridee draws a deep breath. Tries to calm herself. Everything in her head is screaming *no, no, no, don't do this!* But her heart...

She looks at Jerome. Weighing the possibilities...

MARIDEE

If I take you with me, and I ain't saying I will, I'm saying if. You gotta promise to go back in no more than two days. Or before, if they catch the killers.

JEROME

I swear. On my shoes.

MARIDEE

(this is a bad idea)
Get in front.

Jerome clambers over the seat back and squeezes into the front seat.

Maridee throws him a stern look, harsh enough to peel paint.

MARIDEE

Do your seat belt.

JEROME

I still need to pee.

MARIDEE

We'll take the next exit.

Before she pulls back out into traffic, Maridee mutters--

MARIDEE

This is wack. I should have my head examined.

Then thinks about what she just said and blurts out a laugh.

EXT. STREET OFF THE FREEWAY - DAY

A gas station. Maridee's car heads toward it.

JEROME (V.O.)

Where we goin' after this?

MARIDEE (V.O.)

What do you care? So long as it ain't back to Baltimore.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - DAY - TRAVELING

Jerome looks small and anxious, bony knees pulled to his chest in the seat. Maridee, remorseful--

MARIDEE

First we going to a friend of mine.
She lives in South Carolina. Then
tomorrow we going to Miami.

JEROME

Miami! That's dope. I'm gonna be
hangin' like Jay Z. Hoo yah!

MARIDEE

(sideways look)

Huh. You sure forgot about those
killers fast.

That shuts Jerome up in a hurry. Maridee pulls into the gas station.

JEROME

They got snacks here?

MARIDEE

I'll get something soon as I fill
up the car. Go use the rest room.

Jerome jumps out of the car.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Maridee gets out and hooks up the pump hose to her tank.

MINUTES LATER

She exits the Ladies Room at the side of the station and goes into the Gas Station Store to pay.

INT. GAS STATION STORE - DAY

Jerome flips through the rack of comic books. Maridee pays cash for the gas, then takes drinks and snacks to the counter. She turns to Jerome--

MARIDEE

Hey. What kinda chips you want?

JEROME

Barbecue. If they got em.

MARIDEE

You want one of them comics?

JEROME
Naah. Read 'em all while I was
waitin' on you.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - DAY - TRAVELING

Jerome shoves his hand into the bag of chips.

MARIDEE
Hope you washed that hand after you
went to the toilet.

JEROME
(crunching chips)
Damn, girl. You worse than Mrs.
Krasnicki.

MARIDEE
You better have washed it. Cause I
don't need your kooties. Just got
out of the hospital--

JEROME
What was wrong with you anyway?

MARIDEE
(snorts)
I needed to have my head examined.

JEROME
Huh. Didn't fix much.

MARIDEE
Bruh, you fixing to get sent right
back home.

Jerome eyes the close-cropped patch on the side of Maridee's
head, barely covering her scar.

JEROME
They cut your head open?

MARIDEE
Yep. Just like a honeydew melon.

JEROME
You sure you okay to drive?

MARIDEE
No one told me I couldn't.

JEROME
Lemme drive. I can do it--

MARIDEE

You wish! And don't be getting those chip crumbs all over my car.

JEROME

What you get to drink?

MARIDEE

Water. Bottles in the bag.

JEROME

No Coke?

MARIDEE

Coke is bad for you. Full of sugar.

Jerome heaves a sigh.

JEROME

What kinda name is Mary Dee?

MARIDEE

It's Maridee. And it's the name got put on me when I was born. Can you go two minutes without asking a stupid question?

Jerome pulls a candy bar out of his pocket, chomps into it.

Maridee spies it out of the corner of her eye and--

MARIDEE

Where'd you get that candy?

JEROME

Back at the store.

MARIDEE

I didn't see you pay for it.

Jerome shrugs.

MARIDEE

You *stole* it? Damn!

JEROME

Chill. Just a fuckin' candy bar.

MARIDEE

That's it. You getting on a bus back to Baltimore. You and your fresh ass mouth.

JEROME

You got anger management issues.
You need to talk to Dr. Phil.

MARIDEE

Cutting school got you talking like
a TV fool. But that don't change
the fact that you're nothing but a
stinking little thief!

JEROME

Oh girl smell yourself. You got a
bad stank.

MARIDEE

I'm done.

She turns the wheel hard right, pulls into the exit lane.

Jerome drops his tough-kid facade. His eyes grow wide.

JEROME

No! No I can't go back. Those guys
gonna shoot me like they done
Dmitri--

MARIDEE

Serves you right for stealing.
(off Jerome's panic)
Don't worry. You'll be protected.

JEROME

(crying)
Who?! Who gonna protect me? Cops?

She won't look at him.

JEROME

Who?!

MARIDEE

The government has people to--

JEROME

Government? What, you dreamin'?
Like we *matter*?

Mouth set in a hard line, Maridee keeps driving. The exit's
coming up quickly--

JEROME

(desperate little boy
voice)
Please Maridee. I'm beggin'.

MARIDEE

I made a mistake. This ain't working.

She takes the exit, drives onto the street.

Jerome wipes his tears and runny nose with the palm of his hand. His mind is going a mile a minute and his mouth is running to keep up--

JEROME

You so smart about government protectin' me? 'Kay. How come D.C. ain't a state? It got more people than Wyoming, all them punk ass states in the middle of fuckin' nowheres where only white folks live. How come black folks in D.C. ain't got no senator? Cause we don't matter none, that's why. No one's gonna protect me.

Maridee's caught off guard. She's impressed by Jerome's rant.

MARIDEE

Jerome. I'm thinking maybe you learned something those few days you showed up at school.

JEROME

Yeah. I learned that the teacher, he don't know shit. All he do is tell me to sit down and shut the fuck up.

MARIDEE

He said that?

JEROME

Maybe not those exact words. But that's what he meant.

Maridee pulls the car over to the side of the road and stops. She takes a deep breath.

Jerome, encouraged, turns his teary face to her.

JEROME

Didn't mean what I said about you stankin'. Just fell outta my mouth.

She looks at Jerome, shakes her head.

JEROME

Fact is, you always smell real nice. That's what I meant to say.

Jerome flashes his charmer smile. Working it. Scheming his little head off. Maridee gives a cynical snort.

MARIDEE

Jerome. You ought to be a lawyer.

JEROME

We good now?

Maridee turns, just stares straight ahead.

JEROME

I swear I'm sorry. I'm bein' real.
(raises his right hand)
Pledge allegiance to the flag.

Still no response. Maridee is pissed off. And she wants Jerome to know it.

It works. Her silence freaks him out.

Maridee pulls her phone from the dash, considers it. Now Jerome's anxiety shoots off the charts.

JEROME

Whatchoo lookin at your phone for?
Talk to me. I'm sittin' right here.

Still the freeze treatment--

JEROME

What am I? Black hole in *space*?!

At that Maridee blurts out a quick laugh, then swallows it. But Jerome catches it. He exhales in relief.

Maridee puts the phone back on the dash. A BEAT.

MARIDEE

What in hell am I gonna do with you.

JEROME

(wicked grin)
Want some of my candy?

MARIDEE

Oh hell no don't be making me your buddy in crime.
(MORE)

MARIDEE (CONT'D)

It ain't okay that you stole. We should go back to the store. Pay for it.

JEROME

They got cameras. You callin' attention to yourself. Those killers might see it and come after the both of us.

MARIDEE

You watch too much TV.

Maridee turns to Jerome, her voice serious.

MARIDEE

I need you to promise me. No more of this Bonnie and Clyde bullshit.

JEROME

Who's Bonnie and Clyde?

MARIDEE

Like... Tupac and Biggie.

JEROME

I swear. Won't take no more stuff.

MARIDEE

You better mean that.

She starts the car, drives out, muttering under her breath--

MARIDEE

Yeah, you gangsta all right. But not the good kind.

Almost at the freeway entrance, at a crosswalk in front of them TWO OLD WHITE LADIES inch their way across the street... against the light. And taking their sweet time.

Jerome, giddy with his reprieve, mouth full of candy, sings:

JEROME

Get outta my way, bitches! Get outta my way, ho's! Wakanda forever, muthafukka! Oh lookit that one. She ain't got no teeth. She Queen Noteefah!

MARIDEE

Settle down.

Maridee waits patiently for them to cross. Then--

JEROME
Honk your damn horn.

He reaches his hand over to the horn and Maridee explodes, angrily yanks his arm back.

MARIDEE
Don't you ever do that while I'm driving!

JEROME
You ain't driving. You standin' still. And look, now the light done changed. Thought you was in a hurry to get to your friend's.

MARIDEE
I planned to get there before dark. But that's not gonna happen now. With all these interruptions.

EXT. FREEWAY - DAY - ON MARIDEE'S CAR - TRAVELING

Maridee's car pulls back onto I-95.

MARIDEE (V.O.)
We'll be in Columbia by tonight. If you make a fuss at my friend Desi's, I swear to Jesus you going back and I don't care if those guys meet you at the bus station, locked and loaded.

EXT. FREEWAY - NIGHT - ON MARIDEE'S CAR - TRAVELING

Freeway exit signs say COLUMBIA. Maridee's car takes an exit off of I-95.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - NIGHT - TRAVELING

Maridee drives down a Columbia street. She checks the GPS on her phone. Jerome yawns. He's tired and cranky.

JEROME
Ain't we there yet? My booty is sore.

MARIDEE
That's what you get, having such a bony-ass little booty.

Up ahead, a Ford pickup truck drives slowly. Emblazoned with Confederate flag decals and MAGA bumper stickers.

Maridee stiffens when she sees it. She abruptly turns off onto a parallel street--

Uh oh. That was a mistake.

She's pulled right into an angry protest. Black people, young people, march down the street carrying signs: JUSTICE FOR MARCUS! Chants of "Stop killing our children!"

Uniformed Police line the street, also Tactical Squad with shields and batons.

Grabbing her phone off the dash, Maridee checks the news.

MARIDEE

Looks like we got caught in some
kinda--

Jerome scowls out the window, blasé.

JEROME

Looks like Baltimore, ya ask me.

MARIDEE

I gotta get us outta here.

She tries to back out but the protest catches up to them. The car is wedged in. Marchers flow all around them...

And then, in a flash, what probably started as a peaceful demonstration turns UGLY.

Rocks are thrown. Windows SHATTER.

Like a match to a fuse, all hell breaks loose.

The tactical squad advances. SIRENS scream.

Now Jerome doesn't look so blasé. His voice rises, scared--

JEROME

Maridee!

She needs to get out of there now. She waves out the window to a BLACK POLICE OFFICER standing on the curb.

He sees her, BLOWS his whistle. But he can't do anything to help her.

The Tactical Squad PUSHES the marchers back, violently, hitting them with clubs.

As the protestors flood around and past them--

FISTS POUND on the trunk of Maridee's car. It's terrifying.

At last Maridee's car little by little makes it to the corner and turns off the main street into an alley.

Maridee drives down the alley, then pulls over and parks.

JEROME

Why we stoppin'? Don't stop. Drive.

MARIDEE

Gimme a minute.

JEROME

The fuck--

MARIDEE

A minute, Jerome!

He shuts up. Maridee wipes her sweaty face with her sleeve.

INT. DESI'S FLAT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

DESI MORAN (27), plump, Latina, swings open the door. She's holding an infant. The shabby living room is cluttered with baby stuff.

Maridee and Jerome fall in, exhausted. Desi hugs Maridee.

DESI

I thought you was coming earlier. I was getting worried--

MARIDEE

We got caught in the protest.

DESI

Omigod.

MARIDEE

This is Jerome.

JEROME

Hi.

Desi exchanges a look with Maridee. *Who the hell is Jerome?* Maridee ignores the look.

Desi shrugs. *Whatever.*

DESI

Everything's a mess. The baby--

MARIDEE
Oh, little Eduardo!

Jerome stands by uncomfortably while Maridee takes the baby from Desi and fusses and coos over him.

Jerome leans forward, curious. Maridee turns toward Jerome.

MARIDEE
You wanna hold him?

That fragile squirming little thing!? Jerome quickly shakes his head no. He takes a step back.

DESI
(to Maridee)
I set up the bed in the back room for you. Jerome, we got a futon in here you can use. That okay?

He nods.

DESI
Hector had to go to Newark. Glad he ain't here. He'd be out in the street hollering his head off.

MARIDEE
What's the protest for?

DESI
You didn't hear? Cops shot a black kid. Marcus Wynton. Twelve years old, so sad. You guys hungry? I made dinner.

Desi takes the baby from Maridee. She goes over to the couch and sits, bouncing the baby.

JEROME
(tiny voice)
Why'd they shoot him?

DESI
Stupid thing. Cops said they told him, "Hands up." So he holds his hands up like he was told. But he was holding a phone in his hand.

MARIDEE
Probably calling for help--

DESI
They said they thought it was a
gun. His poor momma.

The baby starts to cry. As Desi shushes and soothes the baby--
Maridee and Jerome stand there, thinking their own thoughts.
Jerome, very quiet. He seems to have shrunk in size.

SAME - LATER

The three of them sit around a fold-up table. Desi has a
platter of food set out. Jerome, the big eater, barely
touches his dinner. Desi turns to Maridee.

DESI
Why you going to Miami?

MARIDEE
(beat)
Grace lives there.

DESI
Grace! Isn't that--

MARIDEE
My mother. Yeah.

Jerome looks at Maridee, shocked. First he's hearing this.

DESI
Girl, you must be one desperate
bitch.

DESI'S SPARE ROOM - LATE NIGHT

Reading lamp on. Maridee lies in the bed, unable to sleep.
She's scrolling through news reports on her phone: all about
Marcus Wynton's killing. Poignant PHOTOS of the child.

She sets the phone down. Her eyes travel to the crucifix on
the wall... the Day of the Dead skull ornaments on the shelf.

She lifts the phone again and sends a TEXT TO TYRONA:

Jerome is with me. He's safe.

Almost instantly, Tyrone's response comes back:

!!!!!!!

Maridee hesitates. Before she can type a response, another
text comes from Tyrone:

Where R U!!!!?

Maridee sends a response:

Will explain later. He's SAFE.

She shuts off the phone and turns out the reading lamp.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE DESI'S FLAT - EARLY MORNING

Maridee hugs Desi goodbye, cuddles the baby.

Jerome stands there, watching, saying nothing. They get into the car.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - DAY - TRAVELING

Back on I-95. Maridee driving.

MARIDEE

Glad we got an early start. We'll
be in Miami by late afternoon.

She looks over at Jerome. He's barely said a word since the night before. It's unlike him.

Maridee, tenderly--

MARIDEE

You doing all right, boo?

Jerome looks straight ahead, gives a quick nod.

MARIDEE

Just chillin'?

He shrugs. Maridee flicks on the car radio. Al Green's "Love and Happiness" flows out.

Feeling the music, Maridee smiles. Throws a quick look at Jerome from the corner of her eye--

He relaxes a little. Rests his head on the window.

Maridee hums with the music. Then--

JEROME

How you know Desi?

MARIDEE

We were in the same group home.
Roommates.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Jerome stays in the car playing with his cheap handheld game while Maridee pumps the gas.

She finishes filling up and walks over to the Gas Station Office to pay.

INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - DAY

Maridee hands the STATION ATTENDANT three twenty dollar bills. As he counts out change, her eye is caught by the TV SCREEN mounted on the wall behind him. CNN PLAYS.

The HEADLINE STORY: the two men who killed the Krasnickis in Baltimore, CAUGHT. Led away in handcuffs.

Maridee is riveted on the TV Screen.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Lost in thought, Maridee exits the Station Office.

Jerome sits inside the car, still intent on his toy.

Maridee watches him for a moment. She pulls out her phone. Finds the same CNN NEWS STORY about the Krasnicki killers.

She stares at it, then clicks it off and heads to the car.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - DAY - TRAVELING

From the drink cups and food wrappers it's clear they've been on the road a while. Jerome, still in a downbeat mood. Then--

JEROME

How long since you seen your momma?

MARIDEE

Last time? I was six years old. No, seven. I was seven.

JEROME

She know you comin' to see her?

MARIDEE

Nope.

JEROME

Then how you know she wanna see you?

MARIDEE

I don't.

JEROME
Then why we goin'?

MARIDEE
I don't know.

JEROME
That's messed up.

Maridee shrugs. A moment goes by, then--

JEROME
What happens we get to her place
and she tells us to beat it?

MARIDEE
Then we leave.

JEROME
Where we gonna go then?

MARIDEE
Guess I'll make up my mind about
that when I have to.

JEROME
That's fuckin' messed up. You don't
even know why you goin'. Do you?

MARIDEE
(he's getting on her
nerves)
It ain't your business--

JEROME
Uh hunh. Not my fault you don't got
a plan. Maybe she got a reason she
ain't seen you in so long. Maybe
she got other kids now.

Maridee stares straight ahead.

JEROME
You call her?

MARIDEE
No.

JEROME
Damn, bitch! Why we drivin' all
this way?

MARIDEE

Coming with me was your idea, not mine.

A BEAT. Jerome, struggling, frowns out the window.

JEROME

Why you wanna pick up and go there anyways? Not like you a lovin' family.

And now Jerome has really scratched a wound.

MARIDEE

I told you, I don't know. I don't fucking know why I do anything. But at least now I'm the one that's doing. Not letting someone else do the doing to me all the time, okay?

Jerome, chastened for a moment by Maridee's outburst. Then--

JEROME

That don't make sense.

MARIDEE

Whole lot in this world don't make sense, Jerome.

(mutters)

Phones don't look like damn guns.

He's about to speak but instead he lowers his eyes and slumps in his seat.

The dark cloud that hung over him in Columbia returns.

Maridee notices it, regrets yelling at him. She flips the RADIO back ON. But some country western shit is all she can pick up. She turns the radio OFF.

They drive in silence for a few minutes. Finally--

JEROME

Where's your daddy at?

MARIDEE

(imitating Jerome)

Damn if I know.

Jerome narrows his eyes. Doesn't like getting his own attitude tossed back at him. After a moment--

MARIDEE

I hardly remember him. He was... tall. Smoked a lot. Left when I was three or four. Then I got put in foster. When I got out, there was some new guy with my momma. He didn't like her having a kid, so back I went in foster.

JEROME

Foster is shit.

Maridee sticks with her thoughts. Doesn't comment.

JEROME

When my momma comes back, I won't have to be in foster no more.

Maridee goes still. She slowly tilts her head, looks sideways at Jerome.

He's pulled himself straight up in his seat.

Maridee's unsure how to play this. She knows that Jerome's been told his mother died. She chooses her words carefully.

MARIDEE

Where you think your momma is now?

JEROME

Oh she someplace. Probably with a guy don't want kids. Tyrone 'n Mrs. Krasnicki told me all this shit about her I don't believe one word 'cause them bitches just want to keep gettin' checks from Social Services.

Something about his voice, his forced certainty...

Maridee nods. Her heart going out to the boy, with all his fast-talking bravado. And then--

JEROME

(tearful)

But my momma ain't gonna do like your momma. Soon as she get her shit straight, she gonna come get me. And we gonna go live in a nice place.

MARIDEE

How she gonna find you?

WHUP. That hits Jerome like a thunder bolt. He hadn't thought of that.

He goes quiet. Then he erupts, unleashing a temper storm. POUNDING on the dashboard. Out of control.

Maridee quickly pulls off the highway onto the shoulder. She understands this. Quietly, calmly--

MARIDEE

I'm putting you on a Greyhound bus soon as we get to Miami. Tyrone will meet you at the station--

JEROME

You fuckin' stupid? I told you before. I get killt if I go--

MARIDEE

No you won't. They arrested the men who shot Dmitri and his momma--

JEROME

You lyin'--

MARIDEE

Look.

She pulls her phone from the dashboard, pulls up the news story, shows it to Jerome.

He stares at it. His lip quivers.

MARIDEE

See. They're in jail.

JEROME

Don't mean shit. I don't believe none of it. Fake news.

MARIDEE

It's not fake. It's on CNN. Those men are locked up.

Jerome, trembling head to toe.

It's hitting him now, all at once. Nearly getting shot along with the Krasnickis. The scary protest march. His mother dying and... God knows what other buried pain, boiling up.

Maridee sees it. On impulse, she reaches out her hand.

Resting the backs of her fingers on Jerome's shoulder, she makes one stroke down his arm. It's a soothing gesture -- and a unique one.

MARIDEE

Folks will take care of you,
Jerome. You will be protected when
you go back--

JEROME

To what? Nothin' gets better. Ever.
Fuck you. Fuck you, Mary Dee.

MARIDEE

You better start saying my name
right. It's Maridee. And you say
bitch or fuck you to me one more
time and I will call Tyrone right
now and have her come get you. You
and your port-a-potty mouth.

JEROME

I hate you. They gonna put you in
jail. For kidnapping--

Maridee shakes her head, at the end of her rope--

MARIDEE

Doctors must've cut out the part of
my brain that makes sense of you.

An angry silence. Maridee glances over at Jerome. He's sullen now, wiping at his face with the palm of his hand.

She starts the car, pulls back out into traffic.

SAME - LATER

The sky turns purple. Then raindrops hammer the windshield.

Maridee drives through the downpour. The landscape looks more tropical. You can almost smell the humidity.

Maridee's temper has cooled.

MARIDEE

(brightly)

We gonna be in Miami soon.

Jerome, still in his blue mood--

JEROME

Then what?

Maridee doesn't know. But she wants to shake Jerome out of his funk.

MARIDEE

We take it one day at a time.
The bird... the bird of time...

Jerome looks at her, frowns.

MARIDEE

The bird is on the wing...

JEROME

Huh?

MARIDEE

The bird is on the wing and--

JEROME

What you talkin' about? The wing is on the bird. Not the other way 'round.

MARIDEE

Oh hell. I forgot it.

JEROME

Whatever it was, don't make no sense.

MARIDEE

It's a poem. Poems ain't supposed to make sense. Let's stop for a while, okay? It's raining too hard.

Jerome shrugs. All the same to him.

They pull over. Rain really coming down now, the kind of whipping sheets of rain typical for Florida.

MARIDEE

It's all gonna work out, Jerome.

Jerome, choked up, hides his face in his shirt collar.

JEROME

How you know that?

MARIDEE

You gonna have to trust my intuition.

JEROME

What's that?

MARIDEE
My sixth sense.

JEROME
You see dead people?

Rain continues to beat down. They sit in the parked car.
Watching pellets of water crash onto the windshield.

JEROME
How long you spend in that group
home you got put in?

MARIDEE
Five years. Age thirteen to
eighteen. Wasn't so bad.

JEROME
Your momma ain't dead. How come you
wasn't with a foster family?

MARIDEE
I was. Couple of them. A few were
okay. But one I got put in when I
was thirteen... well. That one...

Maridee exhales, stares into the distance. Doesn't want to
revisit the memory.

JEROME
Oh you got one of them pervs.

Maridee shakes her head. *Fuck. That Jerome is so smart.*

JEROME
Then what happened?

MARIDEE
I got put in the group home. Tyrone
was running it. She was the only
person to give two shits about me.
(softly)
Now I got no more job. No more roof
over my head. I need to find out
just what I got left in my life.

Jerome gives her a piercing look.

JEROME
What happens if you got nothin'
left?

Maridee doesn't respond. It's clear she's wondering the same
thing. A BEAT.

MARIDEE

Rain's letting up. Let's go.

INT./EXT. MARIDEE'S CAR - DRIVING - LATE DAY

The sky has cleared. They're driving along the southernmost end of South Miami Beach, the Biscayne Bay side near the MacArthur Causeway. More industrial here -- not like the posh area near Ocean Drive.

Maridee checks the slip of paper with the address. Jerome gapes out the window. They pull off Alton Road--

EXT. PARKING LOT OF GRACE'S RESTAURANT - LATE DAY

A Denny's-like chain restaurant, family friendly, burgers and pancakes. Big picture windows. You can see booths inside and formica-topped tables. Bright orange décor.

Maridee's car pulls into the lot and parks near the entrance.

INT. GRACE'S RESTAURANT - LATE DAY

Jerome and Maridee go in and slide into a booth. Jerome whispers--

JEROME

She work here?

Maridee nods.

JEROME

She here now? You see her?

Again, Maridee nods.

Jerome looks around. A few AFRICAN-AMERICAN SERVERS, but none are old enough to be Maridee's mother. Jerome frowns.

JEROME

Where she at?

MARIDEE

She's standing at the cash register. In the red jacket.

Jerome cranes his neck around--

GRACE HUTCHERSON, pleasant-looking, late 40s, white, takes cash from a customer. Tall and slender like Maridee but starting to thicken a little around the middle. Sandy-colored hair, pale skin.

Jerome turns back around to Maridee.

JEROME
Her?!

MARIDEE
Yes.

JEROME
The *white* lady?

MARIDEE
Yes.

JEROME
You shittin' me. No way.

Maridee doesn't respond.

JEROME
No way you come outta that white
bitch's hoo-hoo.

Maridee heaves an irritated sigh. Not even willing to tell
Jerome to clean up his potty mouth.

Jerome cranes around again, eyes Grace with suspicion.

JEROME
She give you up 'cause you ain't
white?

MARIDEE
Not sure it would have mattered.

JEROME
Damn. Yo momma got it on with a
brother. Yay her.

That does it. Maridee stands.

MARIDEE
C'mon. We're going.

JEROME
What? We just got here.

Maridee gets up and strides out of the restaurant without a
backward glance.

EXT. PARKING LOT OF RESTAURANT - CONTINUOUS

Jerome runs after Maridee. She's already at the car.

Maridee gets in, Jerome gets in next to her. He doesn't know
what to make of this.

JEROME

We come all this way and now--

MARIDEE

I'm calling Tyrone. You're going--

Jerome jumps out of the car, runs back into the restaurant.
Maridee calls after him--

MARIDEE

Jerome! Oh damn it.

Too late. Through the glass picture window of the restaurant
Maridee SEES Jerome at the register talking to Grace.

Maridee whips her face around. She closes her eyes and rests
her head on the steering wheel.

Seconds later, a TAP on the window jolts her.

It's Grace, staring at her.

GRACE

(voice breaking)

Maridee?

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GRACE'S RESTAURANT - LATE AFTERNOON

Maridee and Jerome sit in a booth. Jerome tucks into a huge
burger and a mountain of fries. Maridee nurses a cup of black
coffee.

Grace bustles over. Jittery and tearful, eager to please.

GRACE

(to Maridee, re: coffee)

You sure that's all you want?

MARIDEE

I'm fine with coffee. Black.

GRACE

It's the slow season. I have over
three weeks vacation owed me. My
boss said no problem, he can cover--

MARIDEE

We're going back to Baltimore.

GRACE

No, not yet. You just got here.

JEROME
(mouth full)
Thank you, Miss Grace. We been
drivin' since forever. My booty is
wore out from sittin'.

Maridee gives him a dirty look, about to make a comment about
his bony little ass, when--

GRACE
I live a few blocks away. I have
plenty of room. For both of you.

JEROME
You got a swimming pool?

GRACE
The building does, yes.

Maridee reacts badly to this. Not willing to make this so
easy. She shakes her head, stands... Grace grabs her arm.

GRACE
(emotional)
Please... please, don't go.

Maridee slowly sits back down. She stares into her coffee
cup. Refuses to make eye contact with Grace.

MARIDEE
You don't owe me nothing, Grace. No
need to put us up.

GRACE
Tyrona called me--

JEROME
(spits out a mouthful of
burger)
Don't tell her I'm here!

Grace turns to Jerome, stunned at the outburst.

GRACE
What?

MARIDEE
He ran away. He's supposed to be in
foster.

JEROME
I told you. I ain't goin' back.

GRACE
Why'd you run away, Jerome?

JEROME
Ain't goin' back to that
motherfuckin' shit-hole. People
gettin' fuckin' shot up and killt.

Grace's jaw drops. Shocked at the words coming out of a
skinny little kid's mouth.

Maridee smiles at Grace for the first time. An evil little *so
there* smile.

She sits back and sips her coffee.

GRACE
Jerome. My goodness, where did you
learn to talk like that?

JEROME
Like what?

Maridee snorts.

MARIDEE
Don't act so pure, Grace.

GRACE
I...

MARIDEE
How many low-life men did you bring
home when I was a child? Talking
worse trash in front of me?

Blood seeps a little from Grace's face. She looks like she
might already be regretting her offer of hospitality.

Maridee picks up on it--

MARIDEE
Well I can see you're having second
thoughts. Jerome and I will go--

JEROME
No! I wanna stay. I wanna check
stuff out. Like that swimmin' pool.

Jerome grabs a french fry and stuffs it into his mouth,
loudly sucks a mouthful of Coke through the straw.

JEROME
We ain't leavin'. And that's final.

EXT. GRACE'S BUILDING - EARLY EVENING - ESTABLISHING

One of those highrise condos built during the boom, aimed at low and middle income buyers. Some crashed and some thrived. This one is somewhere in between. More functional than deluxe, as evidenced by the minimal landscaping.

Grace's car pulls into the lot, then Maridee's. They park.

EXT. GRACE'S BUILDING - PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Jerome climbs out of Maridee's car. He hurries over to Grace. They walk up to the building entrance.

Maridee gets out of the car. She pops open the trunk. Grace calls to her--

GRACE

We can get your bags later.

Maridee shuts the trunk. She takes a deep breath, then moves toward where Grace and Jerome are waiting... Maridee's discomfort growing with each step... until finally...

She can't do it. She just can't.

She stops. Shakes her head.

MARIDEE

No. We can't stay here.

JEROME

What?!

He gestures at Grace, standing next to him at the entrance. A stricken expression on her face.

JEROME

But... she said we could.

MARIDEE

We going to a motel.

(firm)

C'mon, Jerome.

A BEAT.

Jerome looks back and forth between Maridee and Grace. He hesitates. Torn.

MARIDEE

Jerome! I'm leaving now.

Maridee strides back to her car.

With a helpless look at Grace, Jerome trudges after Maridee.

JEROME
(mutters)
Swimming pool.

MARIDEE
Oh hush up. Motels got 'em, too.

EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT - ESTABLISHING

A motel on the crappy end of Biscayne Boulevard. The neon "vacancy" sign is lit. Maridee's car drives into the lot.

INT. MOTEL OFFICE - NIGHT

Maridee and a sullen Jerome stand before the counter. A MOTEL CLERK slides Maridee's credit card through his reader. He frowns, slides it through again.

A long, awkward MOMENT...

The Motel Clerk hands Maridee back her credit card.

MOTEL CLERK
Your card's declined. You have
another one?

MARIDEE
My... *what?!*

MOTEL CLERK
Card's no good. Sorry.

He averts his eyes. Embarrassed for her and the kid.

MARIDEE
That's impossible. I paid it off.
Months ago. I haven't used it
since, it should be--

MOTEL CLERK
Says it's maxed out. Overspent.

Maridee stares at the Clerk. Not believing this.

Jerome watches Maridee, taking it all in.

Then, the realization hits Maridee--

MARIDEE
(hisses under her breath)
Leonard.

JEROME

Told you. Told you 'bout him.

Maridee exhales. Furious. She looks in her wallet. A single twenty dollar bill and some change.

She stares off at nothing--

JEROME

You went and give him the keys.
That's what I told--

MARIDEE

(wants to throttle him)
Yes, Jerome. *Thank you* for
reminding me.

JEROME

Well. Can't say I didn't tell--

MARIDEE

You better hush.

Maridee wipes sweat from her face. Thinks.

JEROME

What are we gonna do now?
(off Maridee's silence)
Can't go back to Baltimore. No
money for gas.

Maridee holds up her hand. *She told him to hush.*

The Motel Clerk waits patiently.

A RUMBLE OF THUNDER sounds in the distance.

JEROME

Gonna rain again too. I say we go
back to your momma's place.
(to the Motel Clerk)
Her momma got a swimming pool.

Maridee rolls her eyes.

With a finger snap, Jerome turns and saunters out of the motel office.

Maridee watches him through the picture window as he heads back to her car. A triumphant swagger in his step.

MARIDEE

(under her breath)
Little shit.

EXT. GRACE'S BUILDING - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Pouring rain now. Maridee's car pulls in and parks.

INT. MARIDEE'S CAR - NIGHT

Maridee and Jerome sit in the parked car, motor off. Rain lashes the windshield. Jerome watches Maridee, who doesn't make a move. After a moment--

JEROME

We just gonna sit here?

Apparently so. Jerome heaves a sigh.

JEROME

I got to pee.

Maridee snatches up her purse, yanks out the slip of paper with Grace's phone number and address. She lifts her phone--

DISSOLVE TO:

SAME - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

A HAND presses the passenger window, a FACE peeks in and smiles. Grace stands outside the car holding an umbrella.

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Grace opens the door and leads Maridee and Jerome inside. Everything is beige and pale blue. She shakes out the umbrella and stashes it in a pail by the door.

GRACE

Well. Here we are. See, rain's already stopping. Should be sunny tomorrow.

Maridee lugs in her suitcase. Won't let Grace help.

A frisky SPANIEL MIX greets them at the door.

Jerome immediately shrinks back from the Dog.

JEROME

Whoa.

GRACE

That's Otis. He's very friendly.

JEROME

Don't he bite?

GRACE
Otis? Oh no. He's a total
sweetheart.

CLUNK. Maridee drops her suitcase down.

MARIDEE
Wasn't Otis the name of one of your
boyfriends?

GRACE
(ignores the comment)
I'll go set up the guest room for
Maridee. And Jerome, there's a
foldout couch in the patio room
over there. You can close the
sliding door for privacy. You both
must be exhausted.

Grace hurries off.

Jerome looks around, curious. He peeks into the patio room--

JEROME
Wide screen TV. That's dope.

He wanders into the--

KITCHEN

Simple and modern. An alcove with washer and dryer. Maridee follows Jerome, keeping an eye on him.

Jerome opens the fridge and peers inside: Kale, apples, yogurt. He grimaces, looks back at Maridee.

JEROME
All she got is white people food.

MARIDEE
Food is food, Jerome.

INT./EXT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - BALCONY - NIGHT

Jerome and Maridee step out onto the balcony.

Deck chairs, a small table. A rack for drying swimsuits. And a view of Biscayne Bay. LIGHTS from the bayside buildings dance on the water's surface.

The breeze lifts Maridee's hair. Jerome steps to the rail and gapes in awe at the view.

The condo is not at all luxurious. But for Jerome it's grand.

JEROME

Wow. Your momma got a nice place.

Maridee sets her mouth in a firm line. Not awed at all. In fact everything that's impressing Jerome is pissing her off.

MARIDEE

Yeah. Well. It's all gonna be under water in a few years thanks to nobody doing shit about climate change.

Jerome leans his elbows on the rail.

JEROME

Better than bein' back where we was.

Maridee tries to keep a calm surface but we can see that a rip tide is roiling inside her. Just being there with Grace. She doesn't know why she came, what she wants to do...

JEROME

You could feed birds out here.

With that Maridee turns on her heel and goes back inside.

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Grace and Maridee stand outside the guest room door. Grace, anxious, solicitous--

GRACE

Here's more towels. And a magazine you might like. Kerry Washington is on the cover.

Maridee gives her mother a baleful look. She takes the towels and magazine without a word. She backs into the guest room and shuts the door.

GRACE

(to the shut door)
Good night. Sleep well.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - (NEXT) MORNING

Maridee sits on the couch, flipping through the magazine. Jerome plays with Otis. Grace comes out from her bedroom.

JEROME

We goin' to the store?

GRACE

Yes. We'll go to Publix first. You can show me what you like to eat. And then we can go for ice cream.

JEROME

Can Otis come?

GRACE

Absolutely.

MARIDEE

I'll stay here.

Grace forces a smile.

GRACE

Just a minute...

Grace goes into her bedroom. She returns with a large cardboard box, the kind used for storing boots.

She holds out the box to Maridee. With a nervous smile--

GRACE

I kept these. They're for you.

Grace sets the box on the couch next to Maridee. She rounds up Jerome and Otis and hustles them out the door.

After they leave, Maridee opens the box.

Stacks of envelopes. Stamped but never sent. ALL addressed to her. From decades ago to just a few days before.

Maridee starts to open them.

Birthday cards, Christmas cards, graduation, long letters...

INT./EXT. BAYSIDE SHOPPING CENTER - GELATO CAFE - DAY

Grace and Jerome sit at a table on the waterfront terrace. Jerome licks at a huge cone, Grace nibbles a scoop in a bowl.

Otis sits patiently under the table. Jerome reaches down to pet him.

Otis licks the ice cream from Jerome's fingers. Jerome giggles.

JEROME

I never met a dog like Otis before.

GRACE

He was a rescue. I got him at the shelter. We took to each other right away.

JEROME

Huh.

(and then)

How come you give up Maridee?

GRACE

(caught off guard)

I... I didn't. She was in foster care.

JEROME

But you never come got her. How come?

Grace shifts her eyes away. Tries to figure out how to give a simple answer, can't find one.

GRACE

I was having problems. At the time.

JEROME

Not any more?

GRACE

No. Now I'm good. Real good. But then I was... uh...

A painful MOMENT. Grace struggles.

JEROME

You was gettin' high?

Grace reacts, startled. *Wow. Smart kid.*

GRACE

It was a difficult time, Jerome.
I, uh...

She swallows. Falls silent.

Silently licking his cone, Jerome watches Grace. His eyes narrow. Judging her.

Grace catches his look. And she sees the judgement there. He's not buying it. She wants to change the subject.

GRACE

You're in foster care now, too.

JEROME

Was. Foster mom got shot. Killt.

GRACE

Oh no! How awful.

JEROME

Anyways my momma's gonna come get me. We got plans. Her and me. My momma, she's real cool.

Jerome's eyes light up as he talks--

JEROME

She one of them models in music videos. Flies to Rome and Italy. Places like that. She probably come to Miami, too. I'm gonna get hooked up. Go work for Jay Z. Or Puffy.

GRACE

That sounds exciting.

JEROME

Yeah. They gimme respect, know what I'm sayin'? I mean, I know I'm a kid and all. But I still been around. I know things.

(ceremoniously, points his finger in the air)

I represent myself at the most supreme level. I got...

(thinks)

... intuition. My momma and me, we gonna go live in a nice place. Like yours, only bigger. With a big ass balcony.

Grace smiles and nods, encouraging.

Jerome concentrates on his cone. An awkward gap in the conversation. Then--

GRACE

Did you and Maridee see any interesting sights on the way down?

JEROME

South Carolina, boy got shot.

GRACE

Oh my God.

JEROME

Black boy. Cops shot him. They said he had a gun but it was a phone. He had a phone in his hand. And they shot him. Boom.

GRACE

You saw this?

JEROME

Naw. We got there after. When they was all protestin' about it. Hollerin' and breakin' windows and shit. Me and Maridee, we had to drive through it to get to her friend's place.

Jerome takes a breath. Ice cream melting over his hand.

GRACE

That must have been very upsetting for you. Very scary. First your foster mother then--

JEROME

(breaks in)

Naw.

Jerome looks down. His shield of bluster slips for a minute. He looks very much like the child he is.

Grace reaches out her hand, places the backs of her fingers on his shoulder. She runs her fingers in one gentle stroke down his arm.

GRACE

Still. I bet it was.

The gesture is identical to when Maridee placed her hand on Jerome's arm in the car. That one soothing, maternal stroke.

The similarity is not lost on Jerome.

He looks up at Grace, questioning.

Something about the way Grace did that, her voice, her concern, connects with him. It just *clicks*.

They share a moment of surprising closeness.

JEROME

My birfday's in a few days. I'm gonna be twelve.

GRACE
That's wonderful. We'll celebrate.
The three of us--

JEROME
Same age as him. That boy that got
shot.

Grace doesn't know what to say. She just takes in Jerome, her gaze lingering.

So young. So much going on behind those eyes.

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Grace and Jerome come back from shopping and ice cream.

Maridee still sits on the couch. She's opened and read four or five of the cards. The rest remain in the box, unopened.

GRACE
Jerome, why don't you take Otis in
the kitchen and make sure he has
water.

JEROME
'Kay. C'mon, Otis.

Grace spies the few opened cards. She approaches Maridee, nervous. Not sure what to expect. Hoping that Maridee will be pleased. Maybe even forgiving.

But the look Maridee throws at Grace is anything but.

Maridee's nearly breathless with pent-up fury. She holds up a random card.

MARIDEE
Do you know... do you have any idea
what getting even one of these
cards would have meant to me? Just
one little card or letter. No? You
don't know. You can't. You...

Grace stands there. Riveted by Maridee's rage.

Jerome runs out from the kitchen.

JEROME
Can I go watch TV?

GRACE
(off balance)
Um--

JEROME

There's a game on. Please?

GRACE

Oh. Of course. Go ahead.

JEROME

C'mon, Otis. Go Warriors!

Jerome and Otis head for the patio. He slides the door shut. Muffled SOUNDS of the game float into the living room.

GRACE

I did a lot of bad things, Maridee. Half of them... more than half I don't even remember. When I got cleaned up, went back to school, I couldn't stop thinking, Maridee will remember. That little girl, she'll remember each and every horrible, thoughtless thing I did that I forgot.

Maridee eyes her. Her gaze hard, unmoving.

GRACE

That's a bad excuse, I know. It's no excuse really. But...

(exhales)

I don't know what more to say.

That gets an amazed head shake from Maridee. *She doesn't know what more to say?!*

MARIDEE

So. Am I supposed to feel good about you now?

(holds up a card)

Like everything's all flowers and butterflies? All *fine*?

GRACE

Maridee--

MARIDEE

Well it ain't fine.

Grace, breathing hard, upset, stuttering--

GRACE

Did you ever think what it was like for *me*? Teenage mom. Alone, struggling... white... with a black baby. You think that was easy?

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

You think it was just a walk in the park?

MARIDEE

The mother of Barack Obama managed to do it.

That lands hard. Then--

MARIDEE

Of course, she cared about her child.

Lets that sink in.

MARIDEE

She did more than write a shitload of cards she never sent.

Maridee flings the box of unopened cards on the floor. They scatter wherever.

She stands, grabs her magazine and stomps off to the guest bedroom.

Grace bends down and with trembling hands gathers up all the cards. She puts them neatly back in the box.

KITCHEN - LATER

Maridee goes over to the recycle bin to throw out the magazine.

When she opens it she sees Grace's box of cards.

She takes out all the cards and letters. Puts them carefully into a Macy's shopping bag.

GUEST BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maridee stashes the Macy's shopping bag with the cards next to her bed.

KITCHEN - NIGHT

Grace and Maridee stand at the counter, silently chopping lettuce and tomatoes.

Jerome runs back and forth to the dining room with plates and silverware, his new best friend Otis at his heels. He appears to be relishing the domestic routine of setting a table and sitting down to a meal.

JEROME

Grace. Which side you said the
forks go?

GRACE

That would be on the left.

A look of concentration on Jerome's face. He places his right
hand over his heart.

JEROME

I pledge allegiance... Okay. Other
hand.

He waves his left hand.

The DOORBELL RINGS.

GRACE

Ah. The pizza. Jerome, here's
money. Go buzz the guy in. Pay him.
Let him keep the change. Then you
can put the pizza on the table.

JEROME

'Kay.

He runs out of the kitchen.

Grace smiles after him. She puts the salad in the bowl.
Maridee slices an avocado.

GRACE

When Jerome and I went for ice
cream, he couldn't stop talking
about his mother.

MARIDEE

(looks up)

Really? What did he say?

GRACE

All about how she's a famous model
and how she's going to take him
with her to Europe and--

MARIDEE

She's dead. Drug overdose.

Grace freezes--

GRACE

Oh good God. Does he know?

MARIDEE

Yes. His foster mother told him. So did Social Services. He knows. He's been counseled. If you haven't figured it out by now, Jerome is a little bullshitter.

GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT

Maridee sits up in bed, looking at her phone. Another text from Tyrone:

Girl would you please tell me what's going on?!!!!

Maridee sighs. She types in:

Let me know soon as you find a place for Jerome.

She sends the text.

A gentle TAP at the door.

GRACE (O.S.)

Maridee? I'm putting in a load of wash. You have anything?

KITCHEN - NIGHT

Grace and Maridee busy themselves sorting clothes, putting them into the washing machine.

GRACE

This washer is noisy. I hope it doesn't wake Jerome.

MARIDEE

He's had to sleep through worse in his life.

The meaning comes through with Maridee's every word. Another icicle dagger of guilt thrust at Grace.

The silence stretches out between them. Then--

GRACE

I'm glad that you're here, Maridee. You and Jerome.

MARIDEE

We ain't gonna stay long. Don't wanna put you out.

GRACE

Please stop saying that.

Maridee pauses, looks up at Grace.

GRACE

You know, I'm trying. I'm...

Grace stops. She heaves a sigh.

MARIDEE

What?

GRACE

Why did you come all the way down here? Why now?

Maridee swallows, struggles to keep her voice even--

MARIDEE

I did a lot of thinking when I was in the hospital, Grace. I thought for sure I was gonna die. But turns out, I didn't die. And what I realized is, there's this thing I had to do. I had to show you, I needed to show you.

GRACE

Show me what?

MARIDEE

That I lived. I lived. Without you. Without you ever picking up the phone once to call. To see if I was alive or dead. But it don't matter. 'Cause I didn't need you to. I had everything in order. My life was in order. See, I grew up just fine without you. Without your damn cards and letters. Just. Fine.

A hot tear escapes down Maridee's cheek.

Grace steps back as if stung.

MARIDEE

You see that? You see how I didn't need you at all?

Long BEAT. Then--

GRACE

(quietly)

I'm not the ogre you made me out to be.

MARIDEE

What I made you out to be?

Maridee chokes out a bitter laugh.

MARIDEE

I sure didn't think you'd end up
assistant manager of a coffee shop.

GRACE

It's a nice restaurant--

MARIDEE

Like Jerome, I imagined my momma
went on to a life so glamorous and
fine she forgot all about me.

GRACE

I never forgot about you. Not for a
second. I wanted what was best for
you. And I knew I wasn't it. Better
for you to hate me than for me to
hurt you.

Grace turns on the washing machine and walks out.

EXT. POOL AREA OF GRACE'S BUILDING - DAY

A modest-sized pool. PALM TREES on either side of the deck
area.

Jerome dog-paddles, hanging onto a foam tube. Maridee floats
on her back near him. She gazes up at the palm trees.

Grace watches them both from a lounge chair pulled close to
the pool edge.

GRACE

Jerome, would you like to learn a
new swimming stroke? So you can let
go of that tube?

JEROME

(can't swim but won't
admit it)
Naw. I'm cool. This is dope.

GRACE

Maybe we'll try swimming in the
ocean tomorrow. If it's not rough.

JEROME

Ocean? No way. They got sharks.
They got Jaws in the ocean.

Maridee dives underwater and grabs Jerome's foot.

He yelps. She pops to the surface, laughing.

MARIDEE

You better watch it, bruh. They got sharks in the pool, too.

The three of them laugh together.

If you didn't know better, you'd think they were one big happy family.

EXT. PARK NEAR MACARTHUR CAUSEWAY - DAY

Maridee leads Otis on his leash. Jerome walks alongside, bouncing a basketball.

MARIDEE

Grace buy you that ball?

JEROME

Yeah. It's a pre-birfday gift. We havin' a party tomorrow.

MARIDEE

Hmmf. That a fact.

JEROME

She ever give you a birfday party?

MARIDEE

(lies)

Not that I recall.

JEROME

Well, she givin' me one.

They walk on. Jerome appears troubled about something.

JEROME

What's gonna happen when Grace goes back to work?

MARIDEE

What do you care? You be back in Baltimore by then. In a group home. Tyrone's working on it right now.

Jerome stops in his tracks. His idyllic little world, suddenly crashing around him. He hyperventilates--

JEROME

Don't. Wanna. Go back.

MARIDEE

Well, you can't stay here.

JEROME

Why not?

MARIDEE

Jerome. You living in a fantasy world. Grace ain't interested in keeping you here.

JEROME

That ain't true!

And now he's breathing harder, working up to full blown agitation.

Maridee sees it. But she keeps going.

MARIDEE

She don't care about her own blood.
Why would she care about you?

Jerome glares at Maridee.

MARIDEE

She'll break your heart in little pieces, throw it away like trash. That's how she is. Don't be counting on anyone but yourself. You got to be independent. I learned that a long time ago.

JEROME

I hate you. Stanky lyin' bitch.

From somewhere inside Maridee a hot molten anger erupts. It's not about Jerome. She doesn't know what it is.

She finds herself yelling--

MARIDEE

You think I give a fuck?

Jerome grabs Otis's leash and strides off, dragging the poor dog with him.

Oh shit. Maridee realizes what she's done.

MARIDEE

Hey! C'mere. Wait up.

JEROME

Lemme alone!

MARIDEE

Jerome. Hey. Didn't mean what I said. You're gonna get a good home. With good people. You be fine.

JEROME

I get killt. Everybody gets killt. They shoot up and die. Or get shot up--

MARIDEE

You won't get killed--

Jerome twists away from Maridee.

Otis is going crazy, barking, upset that Jerome is upset. Jumping up on Jerome, on Maridee.

MARIDEE

Hey. Look at me. Look. At. Me.

She grabs Jerome by his skinny shoulders.

MARIDEE

I got a brain tumor. And I'm still here.

JEROME

I don't got no brain tumor.

MARIDEE

That's right. So you already one hundred percent ahead of me.

Jerome huffs up, angry--

JEROME

I'll run away. Me and Otis.

MARIDEE

That's bullshit and you know it. You're a child. You gotta be in a place where you get taken care of by grown-ups. And Otis ain't even your dog.

Jerome lunges down and wraps his arms around Otis.

The poor, patient dog puts up with it. Licks Jerome's face.

JEROME

(whines)

Otis. Otis.

Maridee sighs. She looks off, at the cruise ships docked in the Bay. About to head out on Caribbean vacations.

MARIDEE

Look at all those big boats. Full
of happy people. Goin' on a cruise.

The unspoken thought: *Why can't they have a life like them?*

MARIDEE

(tenderly)

C'mon now. Otis did his business.
Let's go back.

JEROME

Otis is my only friend.

This isn't about Otis. Maridee knows it.

MARIDEE

That's not true. I'm your friend.
You're my little bruh.

She bends over and gives his shoulder a gentle rub.

He snorts but doesn't shake off her hand.

MARIDEE

Right? We friends? I mean,
sometimes we get riled up and
holler, but we still friends.
That's just how friends do.

He snorts again. She keeps her hand on his shoulder.

Slowly, he stands up.

They walk together back the way they came.

EXT. TERRACE OF A BEACHSIDE RESTAURANT - SUNSET

South Miami Beach. A waterfront restaurant. The sun is a blazing orange ball, starting to sink toward the horizon.

Grace, Maridee and Jerome sit at a table facing the ocean. They've just finished dinner when the surprise arrives--

A BIRTHDAY CAKE with twelve lit candles.

The glow of delight on Jerome's face shines even brighter than the candles.

JEROME

A birfday cake!

He tries to pretend he's all cool about it but clearly he's thrilled.

MARIDEE

Go ahead. Blow out the candles.

GRACE

You got twelve there.

Jerome inhales and exhales a mighty gust. The candles smoke out, Maridee and Grace applaud.

GRACE

It's strawberry, Jerome. You said it was your favorite.

He nods, can't stop grinning. Grace beams. So does Maridee.

GRACE

I remember Maridee's fifth birthday party. We had a cake with cherry icing. Her favorite. All her little kindergarten friends came.

Jerome gives Maridee a surprised look. And then--

GRACE

It's too bad your mother isn't here to share your birthday with you. But I know she's smiling down at you from heaven.

Jerome goes still. All the joy drains from his face.

Uh oh.

An animal CRY OF GRIEF rises from his gut... and then the boy explodes to his feet and RUNS AWAY FROM THE TABLE.

Grace watches, stunned, as Jerome vaults down from the terrace and runs to the beach.

She turns to Maridee.

GRACE

You told me he knew!

MARIDEE

He knows. But children believe what they want to believe. They make up their own story. To survive.

Maridee fixes Grace with a pointed look.

Distraught, Grace jumps up from the table. She runs down the terrace steps after Jerome.

Maridee gulps her glass of wine, then follows after them.

EXT. BEACH - SUNSET

Jerome paces along the sand, at the water's edge.

Ranting, hysterical. Incoherent. Furious. Waving his arms.

He turns, sees Grace and Maridee coming toward him--

JEROME

I hate you! I hate you. All you
bitches...

Grace, beside herself, at a loss. She doesn't know what to say to make this better.

And anyway Jerome's too furious to listen.

Grace looks back at Maridee for help.

Maridee stands there. A devastated look on her face: *That's what it looks like. What it felt like. All those years.*

Grace meets Maridee's eyes. She gets it.

Grace turns and hurries toward Jerome.

He charges away from her, right into the ocean. Splashing all the way up to his knees. Shoes and all.

GRACE

Jerome. I thought your foster
mother told you--

JEROME

Missus Krasnicki... nothing but a
lyin' bitch! Every word outta her
mouth... a motherfuckin' lie.

(turning his fury on
Maridee)

You lie about never havin' no
birfday party! All them lyin'
bitches think they so smart...

GRACE

But your social worker, Tyrone--

Jerome holds his hands over his ears and SCREAMS.

He runs further into the water, up to his waist. Crying his head off.

GRACE

Oh my God, Jerome. Please. Get out of the water. Here--

He ignores her, flounders around in the surf.

She looks back at Maridee, watching this, stricken... then back at Jerome.

GRACE

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to...

And then, as she takes in Jerome flailing pathetically in the ocean, suddenly Grace is hit full on by a sense of loss.

For the mess she's made of her life. For what she did to Maridee. For what poor Jerome is going through.

And then to Grace's complete surprise, her heart breaks.

GRACE

I'm sorry your mother died. She shouldn't have died, Jerome. She shouldn't have left you! She should have been there for you. It wasn't fair. It wasn't--

Grace is now weeping, wrecked, sobbing uncontrollably.

She steps down to the water's edge, extends her hands out to Jerome.

He turns and glares at her through raging tears.

She wades out into the water where he is, in her linen slacks. Up to her thighs. It's unbelievable.

GRACE

Forgive me, Jerome. Forgive me. I am so sorry.

And then Jerome does something even more unbelievable.

He flings himself at Grace, hugging her fiercely around the waist.

Grace hugs back. And they're both hugging each other. Crying, rocking back and forth in the water.

Maridee stands at the water's edge. Rooted to the spot. Watching in astonishment as Grace and Jerome hug each other.

Maridee feels something warm and wet on her face.

She reaches her hand up, pulls it back...

HER NOSE IS BLEEDING.

EXT. MIAMI JACKSON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL - DAY - ESTABLISHING

A large, municipal hospital. Palm trees on either side of the entrance doors.

INT. MIAMI JACKSON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL - INPATIENT ROOM - DAY

Maridee lies in bed. Staring at nothing.

DR. YANG, late 50s, enters.

DR. YANG
Maridee? I'm Dr. Yang, Chief
Oncologist.

She gives a resigned nod. Knows what "oncologist" means.

DR. YANG
We reviewed your CT scan and--

MARIDEE
The tumor is back.

DR. YANG
Yes.

He pauses to let the news sink in. But Maridee is not surprised. This is the story of her life.

DR. YANG
We talked to your oncologist at
Johns Hopkins. You know, we have a
research center here. We can
continue you on the same trial.
With your consent, of course.

A half smile on Maridee's face. She says nothing.

DR. YANG
You interrupted your treatment.
That can cause a rebound effect.
But the tumor is smaller. And we
might be able to get you on a new
clinical trial, using CRISPR--

MARIDEE
Crispy.

DR. YANG

No, CRISPR. It's gene editing. To make the T-cell membrane permeable. The odds for a successful outcome are promising.

MARIDEE

(reciting)

When the odds are one in a million, be that...

Her voice fades away. Dr. Yang waits, awkwardly, for her to finish the sentence. Finally--

DR. YANG

It's not a miracle cure. But it can't work unless you give it a chance. You shouldn't lose hope.

MARIDEE

Hope?

Maridee turns and gives him an intense look. Demanding more than hope.

He opens his mouth to say something, then stops. He glances out the door. With a grateful sigh--

DR. YANG

Ah. Your mother and... little brother?

And now it's Maridee's turn to almost speak and then stop herself.

Grace and Jerome tiptoe in, carrying a bouquet of flowers.

DISSOLVE TO:

SAME - LATER

Jerome naps, curled up in a chair. Grace still sits at Maridee's bedside. Maridee glances over at him.

MARIDEE

Look at him. Snoring away.

GRACE

Poor little guy. He's wrung out, so worried about you. So afraid.

Grace's voice quivers. She's not only talking about Jerome.

This touches Maridee. Her eyes fill up. She turns her head toward the window to hide her tears from Grace.

Then--

MARIDEE
Could you bring me something?

GRACE
Of course.

MARIDEE
There's a Macy's shopping bag. Next
to my bed in your apartment. I'd
like to have it.

EXT. MIAMI JACKSON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Grace and Jerome walk toward the car. Jerome is anxious.

JEROME
She ain't comin' home with us?

GRACE
Not tonight. But soon. The doctor
said soon.
(beat)
After the surgery she can be
treated as an outpatient.

Jerome lowers his eyes. He looks small and fragile.

GRACE
Wow. Otis must think we forgot all
about him.

Jerome looks up in alarm.

GRACE
He'll forgive us.

She places her arm lightly around Jerome's shoulders.

GRACE
I have an idea. Tomorrow afternoon,
why don't we work on new swimming
strokes in the pool?

JEROME
'Kay.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Grace hands Maridee the shopping bag with the cards. A puzzled look on her face. Maridee takes the bag from her.

MARIDEE

I took them out of the recycle bin.

Grace, too moved to speak. She holds her gaze on Maridee, trembling--

A YOUNG NURSE enters with a wheelchair.

YOUNG NURSE

Hi Maridee. I need to bring you down to x-ray.

(glances at Grace)

Hope I'm not interrupting...

MARIDEE

It's all right.

Maridee sits up.

GRACE

(reluctant)

I should go. I promised... to show Jerome how to do something other than the dog paddle. We'll both come by later.

EXT. POOL AREA OF GRACE'S BUILDING - DAY

The sun is high overhead. The palm fronds throw spiky shadows onto the pool deck.

Grace and Jerome are in the shallow end. Otis sits near the edge of the pool, watching them.

GRACE

This is called the breaststroke.

Grace demonstrates, swimming across the short width of the pool. She's a competent swimmer.

Jerome watches her with a worried expression.

Grace reaches the other side, swims back to Jerome.

GRACE

Now you try it.

JEROME
(really wants to)
Don't wanna.

GRACE
Why not?

JEROME
I ain't no fish. Wasn't meant to
act like one.

GRACE
But you like being in the water,
don't you?

Jerome bites his lip. He shifts his eyes away, then looks back at Grace. Somehow he's comfortable with her. Being there with her. His voice, hesitant--

JEROME
I can't.

GRACE
Sure you can.

JEROME
No. Puttin' my face down under the
water like that. I'll drown.

GRACE
You won't drown. Here--

Jerome shakes his head. He splashes toward the steps.

JEROME
No.

GRACE
Jerome--

JEROME
I'm gonna sink to the bottom!

Grace swims over to him. She sees it in his eyes -- he wants to learn. But doesn't believe he can.

GRACE
(patiently, slowly)
I won't let you sink. I promise.

She takes Jerome's hands and gently draws him away from the security of the steps.

She places one arm under his mid-section and the other under his chest.

GRACE

See. All you have to do is move your arms the way I did. And do your feet, the way you do with the rubber tube. There you go.

JEROME

(less anxious)
I'm gonna sink.

GRACE

No, you're going to swim. That's right. Just like that.

And just like that, Jerome is doing some version of the breaststroke. Held up by Grace, but he's still doing it.

Back and forth across the pool, Otis running alongside on the pool's edge. Jerome, more assured more with each lap. He doesn't know what's happening, but he knows he likes it.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Settled in her room, Maridee opens all the cards and the letters.

One by one, she begins to read them. Some of the letters, several pages long.

Her bed, covered with a blanket of cards.

SAME - LATER

Maridee has put all the cards and letters neatly back in the bag and set it on the floor next to her bed.

Grace enters. Maridee looks up at her.

MARIDEE

How'd Jerome do in the pool?

GRACE

He did great. Soon as he got the hang of it. He's watching the ball game on the lobby TV downstairs.

A quiet settles in. Full of unspoken questions. Finally--

MARIDEE

I just decided. I'm going to continue with the clinical trial.

Grace heaves a happy sigh. She melts into a chair.

MARIDEE

I always wanted to know. Where'd
the name Maridee come from?

GRACE

You'll laugh at me.

MARIDEE

Why?

GRACE

Believe it or not. It came to me in
a dream.

MARIDEE

(beat)

Funny the things that come to us in
dreams.

GRACE

It was the prettiest name I'd ever
heard. And you were the prettiest
baby.

A long, very quiet BEAT. Grace holds Maridee's eyes.

GRACE

What will happen to Jerome?

MARIDEE

He'll get put back in foster. Wait
to get adopted. Which won't happen.

Maridee pulls her eyes from Grace, stares out the window,
lost in her thoughts.

Her memories, taking her away from this room--

MARIDEE

He'll get in trouble, run away.
Then he'll run away again. And
again. Then one day he'll get in
bad trouble, like stealing food
from a Seven Eleven... day-old
chicken sandwich and a can of
cherry soda... and he'll get put in
juvee. Maybe if he's lucky they'll
find a place in a decent group
home. At eighteen he'll age out of
the system and Social Services will
dump him out on the street. On his
own. Ready or not.

The expression on Grace's face as she listens... and realizes that Maridee is describing the events of her own life.

For Grace, this cuts deeply. No words of comfort possible.

INT./EXT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - BALCONY - DAY

Grace and Jerome sit at the patio table. Grace pulls school workbooks out from a dusty magazine rack behind the TV. She spreads them out on the table.

GRACE

I had to learn all this stuff for my high school equivalency test. I kept the workbooks--

JEROME

I'm no good in maf.

GRACE

Excuse me. I saw you totaling up all those items in your head when we were in Publix. You could tell right away which was a good deal and which was a rip-off. You're *smart*.

JEROME

That's different. It ain't like school. It ain't real maf.

GRACE

Well, that's what real math is. Give it a try. It'll be fun. Like learning the breaststroke.

He looks up at Grace. In her eyes he sees it -- she believes in him. Believes he's smart.

Jerome gives the books a dubious once-over.

He shrugs, takes a deep breath and bends over the workbooks.

INT. HOSPITAL LOUNGE - DAY

Maridee, in her hospital robe, sits with Grace and Jerome. Jerome plays with his hand-held game.

GRACE

(to Maridee)

Let's take a walk. Jerome, you okay staying here for a few minutes?

JEROME
(concentrating on his toy)
Uh huh.

HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - FEW MINUTES LATER

Grace and Maridee walk together. They're deep in conversation. Maridee shakes her head.

MARIDEE
You can ask Tyrone. I sincerely doubt she's gonna say yes.

GRACE
Well. I'm going to ask her.

MARIDEE
You have no idea what you're doing. Whole lot harder than you think.

GRACE
I'm up for the challenge.

Maridee gives her a sideways look.

GRACE
(pained)
I'm sorry I wasn't--

MARIDEE
Up for the challenge for me?

They walk on a few steps in awkward silence. Finally--

MARIDEE
When you asked me why I come all the way down here, I lied to you.

Grace stops. Maridee turns and looks at her mother.

MARIDEE
Actually, part of what I said was true. I did think I was gonna die.
(then)
In the hospital up North, a blind man told me I had to decide what gives my life meaning.

Grace focuses on her daughter's face as she speaks. As if wanting to memorize every angle.

MARIDEE
I needed to find out. Is family part of that?
(MORE)

MARIDEE (CONT'D)

'Cause I never had the family part.
Like, what would it mean... to have
a mother?

Maridee starts to walk again. Alongside her, Grace, feeling like she's been punched in the gut.

They reach the end of the corridor. Neither speaks.

GRACE

I... I'm...

Maridee turns to her, questioning. Grace sucks in a deep, shuddering breath.

A MOMENT that goes on for a lifetime.

GRACE

You have every right to hate me.

Maridee considers Grace, standing before her.

And she realizes that she's not angry anymore. All that molten anger has just flowed right on out of her.

MARIDEE

I don't hate you.
(and for the first time)
Mom.

Grace, overcome. Eyes filling with tears.

Maridee sees it, looks off--

MARIDEE

What do y'all do in Miami at
Christmas?

GRACE

We... hang lights... from the palm
trees.

Maridee laughs. Grace joins her.

GRACE

It's very festive.

INT. TYRONA'S OFFICE - DAY

Tyrone sits behind a desk stacked with files. Another three-foot mountain of files on the floor next to her.

She's on her phone, balanced at her ear while she types on her computer--

TYRONA

I hear you getting ready for surgery. I'm coming down Thursday to get Jerome. Finally got a group home lined up. Took forever. Could have had Social Services in Miami pick him up right away but I knew he was safe with you and Grace. Least I didn't have to worry about him running off again--

A long BEAT while Tyrone listens. Her expression changes. She blurts out a grunt of disbelief--

TYRONA

What?!... You gotta be kidding me.
No way that's gonna happen.
(beat, listens)
Well. We'll just see about that.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - PATIO ROOM - DAY

Tyrone sits at the patio table, a folder of papers in front of her. Grace sits across from her.

Sunlight blazes through the windows.

Tyrone does not look pleased. In fact she looks overheated and annoyed as hell. She dabs at her damp neck with a tissue.

We find the two women in the midst of a testy discussion--

TYRONA

The short answer is no. The long answer is no, no, hell no.

GRACE

Just hear me out--

TYRONA

I came down here to take Jerome back with me. And that's what I'm gonna do.

GRACE

But he doesn't want--

TYRONA

That child is only eleven years old. He doesn't know what's best for--

GRACE

Twelve.

(off Tyrona's startled
look)

He's twelve now.

Tyrona flips through her file, squints at a page, frowns.

TYRONA

Well. Just barely. And he's small
for his age.

GRACE

Why can't you at least consider--

TYRONA

'Cause you don't know your ass from
tin cups about taking care of a
child. That's why.

A tense moment. Then--

GRACE

Whatever I don't know, I will
learn.

TYRONA

I'm supposed to believe that? How
many times did you tell me you were
gonna come get Maridee, and then
you didn't show? I stopped telling
that child to expect you. So she
would stop crying her eyes out.

Grace looks down, mortified.

Tyrona's stern gaze holds on Grace. Drilling into her.

TYRONA

I do not trust it, Grace.

GRACE

You mean, trust me?

A BEAT. Tyrona decides, she might as well say it--

TYRONA

I am not a believer in the great
white savior and even if I was, you
would not qualify.

Grace's back stiffens. She stares back at Tyrona.

TYRONA
You hear what I'm sayin'?

GRACE
I'm not "rescuing" him.

TYRONA
Hell no. He ain't a puppy. I'm afraid you trying to rescue yourself. And a child is no way to do it.

A flush rises in Grace's face--

TYRONA
I know you wanna be a mother and I respect that. I do. I just don't believe you're capable.

GRACE
On what basis are you making--

TYRONA
(sharp)
I know your history. You been to some real bad places.

Grace rises to her feet--

GRACE
And I'm never going back there. I'm clean. For years now. No drugs. No booze. I can take care of a child.

Tyrona stands. She leans forward across the table. Glares at Grace.

TYRONA
You clean "For years now?" And all that time you didn't take one little minute to call your own daughter? Not one?

Grace swallows hard, but does not sit back down. Neither does Tyrona.

It's a high noon showdown.

TYRONA
What am I seeing in front of me? I see a woman working out some kinda sorry-ass guilt.

GRACE

You just want to prove you're right about me, don't you? That's more important to you than Jerome.

Tyrone scrubs at her neck again with the tissue. She glances at her watch. She gathers up her papers with an air of finality.

TYRONE

I'm going to the hospital to see Maridee. Have Jerome packed and ready to go when I get back.

And with that she sweeps out of the room.

Grace sinks into her chair and drops her head into her hands.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

A bed near the window. Maridee lies there. Tyrone sits in a chair pulled close to the bed.

TYRONE

I can't believe I'm hearing those words coming out of your mouth. You, of all people.

MARIDEE

You don't know what I know.

TYRONE

About Grace? Girl, I know plenty.

Maridee leans over the bed and pulls up the Macy's bag. She takes out one letter at random, opens it.

MARIDEE

(reads from the letter)

Tyrone tells me you have a job. And your own apartment. I can see you going to work each day in one of those shiny skyscrapers. Looking like one of those business gals in Vogue Magazine. I bet you have a special boyfriend. Maybe a brilliant young lawyer. You go see plays together, and concerts. I think of you every minute of every day and I try to picture you. I am so proud of my amazing daughter.

Maridee looks over at Tyrone.

Tyrona, confused. *What?*

Maridee sets the letter down with a sad smile.

MARIDEE

All these cards and letters...
every single word is about me. Not
one word about her.

Tyrona, still not following--

MARIDEE

See. The whole time I was imagining
Grace having this wonderful life
without me, she was thinking the
same thing about my life. And she
didn't want to spoil it.

TYRONA

Spoil *your* life?

MARIDEE

No. Her fantasy of it. Her fantasy
of my exciting, successful life.

Maridee folds up the letter and puts it away.

MARIDEE

Did you know, Jerome was pretending
his momma didn't die? Telling
himself and everyone else she just
gone off to some fancy new place.
One day she was gonna come back and
get him. And everything would be
ice cream cones and video games.

Tyrona watches Maridee. She reaches out her hand and takes
Maridee's hand in hers.

MARIDEE

But you see. We all got to come
down and face real life. And real
life ain't always so pretty.
Jerome's momma ain't coming back.
She's gone. What he needs is a real
live momma so he can stop
pretending about the dead one.

TYRONA

Well. Grace does seem to care for
the child but--

MARIDEE

She loves him.

Maridee turns her face to the window.

MARIDEE

Life is stupid short. Fragile as a little bird. Knocks you on your ass with a punch outta nowhere. Yeah, you're right, Jerome, he's a fighter. That little bullshitter, he'll survive. Maybe. But why not give him a better chance? A chance to spread his wings? And Grace. Sure, she's gonna make mistakes. Plenty of 'em. But she won't fail. Not now. She's gonna be there for him. Every minute.

Maridee turns her face back to Tyrone.

Tyrone is crying.

MARIDEE

That's what it's about, right? What gives life meaning.

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - DAY

Grace opens the door for Tyrone.

Jerome sits curled up on the couch, a tiny bundle of boy. Otis cuddled in his lap.

Jerome's head is down and his face is buried in Otis's fur.

His backpack and basketball sit on the floor next to the couch.

Tyrone walks over to the couch. She crosses her arms.

TYRONE

Jerome!

He doesn't look up.

TYRONE

You packed?

He nods his head, still hugging Otis.

A BEAT.

TYRONE

Well get yourself unpacked. You ain't going nowhere.

Jerome's head snaps up. He meets Tyrona's eyes. She's serious.

He lets out a whoop of joy and springs off the couch. Running over to hug Grace, then back over to hug Otis.

Grace gapes at Tyrona in happy surprise. Tyrona points to the patio room.

TYRONA

Let's go in there. Jerome, you stay out here 'til I call you in.

JEROME

'Kay. I'll go unpack my stuff.
C'mon, Otis!

PATIO ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Grace and Tyrona sit facing each other, as before. But the mood is totally different.

GRACE

What happened, what changed your--

TYRONA

Hush up and let me talk. That child can be a mess of mischief. You have no idea what he can get up to. There be days you wanna kick him in the butt.

Grace nods, happily. She sits back with a glowing smile.

Tyrona takes out a tissue and scrubs the perspiration from her neck.

TYRONA

Jesus in heaven, don't your air conditioner work?

GRACE

It's on high. But we're on the patio so the sun makes it hotter.
(sweetly)
Would you like a cold drink?

Tyrona gives her a sideways look.

TYRONA

Don't be trying to butter me up. I'm having second thoughts about this already.
(opens her files)
(MORE)

TYRONA (CONT'D)

This is a process, starting with foster. But once it's final, ain't no returns. Not like taking a toaster back to Costco.

GRACE

I accept that. We're going to be one family. With Maridee. We'll all be togeth...

She can't finish. She chokes up. Tyrone watches her closely.

TYRONA

You know, this is the first time Jerome told me what he wants, instead of what he doesn't want.

GRACE

He gets a home. And it just might work.

TYRONA

(jumps on it)
Might?

GRACE

Will.

TYRONA

You sure about that? 'Cause before I put my good name on these papers you better be sure--

GRACE

I am. More than anything.

She locks eyes with Tyrone. Unwavering.

Tyrone, flustered, shakes her head.

She looks down at her papers. She taps a pen on the table.

TYRONA

(can't believe I'm doing this)
Well. We all gonna have to take it one day at a time.

Tyrone spies Jerome peeking in a crack of the patio door.

TYRONA

Jerome. Get your nosy butt in here.

Jerome enters and sits down at the table.

JEROME
This really happening?

Tyrona skewers him with a sharp look.

TYRONA
That depends.

JEROME
On what?

TYRONA
You mean on who. And the who is
you, mister smarty-mouth. You gonna
behave yourself?

Jerome nods vigorously.

TYRONA
You gonna mind Grace?

He nods.

TYRONA
I got to hear you say it out loud.

JEROME
Yes, ma'am.

TYRONA
(really I can't believe
I'm doing this)
I got to go make a call.

Tyrona gets up and goes into the kitchen.

Jerome, trying to act all cool about this development but his
eyes are dancing. He knows what this means. He sits down.

Grace faces Jerome. She turns serious. Takes a deep breath.

GRACE
Jerome, I need to tell you
something.
(nervous)
I wasn't good at being a mother.

JEROME
That's okay. You givin' it another
try.

Grace looks at Jerome. Something about his open face,
trusting. Willing her to be strong. Pulling her up.

Grace, barely holding back tears--

GRACE

What I'm saying is, I made a real mess of it. I can't believe how awful I...

She stops, tries to gather herself. Jerome, now panicky--

JEROME

You ain't gonna send me back if I fuck up?

GRACE

Oh no, no! I would never do that.
 (chokes out a laugh)
 How could you even think that? I'm just saying, I'm going to need your help. I know it's asking a lot from a twelve year old, but I know how great you are, how strong, inside.
 (taps her chest)
 Here. Where it counts. I know you, Jerome. You...
 (lifts her forefinger)
 ...Represent yourself at the most supreme level.

Jerome looks into Grace's eyes. Sees the love, flowing back toward him. He heaves a happy sigh.

GRACE

We're both going to be learning--

JEROME

Like when we did the maf.

GRACE

So, I can count on you? To help?

With all his heart Jerome wants this to work.

JEROME

Yeah, that's what we do.

GRACE

Always.

Grace nods. She and Jerome take a moment just to be there, together.

Then Jerome, with a wicked grin--

JEROME
But I won't be eatin' no kale.

GRACE
What if I put bacon in it?

JEROME
I might make an exception.

They beam at each other.

EXT. FLAMINGO PARK BASKETBALL COURTS - DAY

Maridee sits on a bench at courtside, Otis at her feet. One side of her head is bandaged. She watches Jerome shoot hoops.

He keeps his back to her while shooting.

JEROME
Grace says you ain't gonna die.

MARIDEE
We're all gonna die.

Maridee watches the back of Jerome's neck stiffen. He stops shooting. Just bounces the ball rhythmically in front of him.

Her voice softens.

MARIDEE
But I ain't planning to die soon.

Jerome relaxes. He bounces the ball and shoots.

He pivots around, dribbles the ball over to her. Fancy dribbling, showing off.

MARIDEE
You and Grace. You getting along pretty good.

JEROME
Uh huh.

MARIDEE
What do think of her?

JEROME
(means a lot more than
he's saying)
She okay. Better than any foster
mother I been with.

MARIDEE

You okay with staying down here in Miami?

JEROME

(thinks)

You goin' back to Baltimore?

MARIDEE

Nothing to go back to. I dumped my boyfriend's cheatin' ass. Some new bitch is sitting at my desk at work. And the apartment got sold.

JEROME

Didn't like that place anyway.

MARIDEE

Me neither. I just like feeding the birds.

JEROME

Them birds was dope. I used to watch 'em fly over to your place.

Jerome spins around, more fancy dribbling and footwork.

MARIDEE

Who taught you to do that?

JEROME

Steph Curry. He gimme lessons.

Maridee laughs.

JEROME

We friends. Him and me.

MARIDEE

You little bullshitter.

JEROME

So my stayin' here with Grace... Does that make me and you related?

MARIDEE

Kinda.

JEROME

Cool. I never had a sister.

Maridee glances at her phone. She struggles to her feet, helped by a cane. She hands Otis' leash to Jerome.

MARIDEE
C'mon. Grace says she's making her
special chicken for supper.

JEROME
(hopeful)
Fried?

MARIDEE
I don't think so. She mentioned
olives.

Jerome makes a face.

JEROME
What's special about that?

MARIDEE
We'll find out.

JEROME
Hope it ain't that healthy shit.

FOLLOW them from the back as they walk off--

Maridee drapes an arm over Jerome's shoulder.

MARIDEE
Damn you got skinny shoulders. They
so bony they pointed.

JEROME
No they ain't.

MARIDEE
Ow. Just cut myself on your bony
shoulder. You need to eat more of
that healthy stuff.

JEROME
You first.

EXT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - BALCONY - EVENING

Grace and Maridee sit on the balcony together after dinner.

MARIDEE
The end won't be pretty. I've seen
it. Another patient--

GRACE
(firm)
No. This time it's going to work.
The doctor is very hopeful.

Maridee throws her a look. *Let's be realistic.*

Grace looks down, away, anywhere but at Maridee. She feels what Maridee is thinking, doesn't want to accept it. Because it crushes her. Finally--

GRACE

I kept saying, tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll go get Maridee. Tomorrow I'll be clean. No need to call her, 'cause I'll be there. Tomorrow. No point in mailing that card. I'll get there before the mail does. We have time. Plenty of time.

Grace chokes back a sob.

Maridee, about to speak, Grace reaches out and places her hand on Maridee's arm, shushing her.

She traces the backs of her fingers down Maridee's forearm, one sad stroke.

They sit there like that a while.

And then the unbearable unfairness of it all hits Grace, like an angry slap in the face. She cries out--

GRACE

I wish I had that cancer instead of you!

MARIDEE

Don't say that.

(gently)

I can't wait to see those palm trees lit up at Christmas.

Grace musters a smile.

GRACE

We'll have a good time.

MARIDEE

The bird of time...

She stops, looks off. Laughs, shakes her head.

GRACE

Bird?

Maridee points--

MARIDEE

Ah! Look.

A SEAGULL soars over Biscayne Bay.

EXT. POOL AREA OF GRACE'S BUILDING - DAY

Jerome is in the pool with Grace. She's teaching him the Australian crawl. He's picking it up like a pro.

Maridee sits at the edge of the pool, dangling her feet in the water. The cane is propped on a lounge chair.

Otis lies next to her, along with a paperback copy of The Rubaiyat.

Maridee's head is no longer bandaged. A shaved patch still shows, the hair not yet grown back.

JEROME

Hey, Maridee! Watch me do the breaststroke. I can go real fast.

Maridee watches Jerome swim across the entire length of the pool. His skinny arms flail crazily but he gets the job done.

Maridee and Grace applaud.

Jerome, totally pleased with himself. He flings his arms in the air.

JEROME

Yo! I am Michael "The Brotha" Phelps!

Grace laughs. Impossible not to love this kid.

Jerome waves at Maridee. Grace waves, too.

Maridee nods, smiles.

She tilts her head back, looks up at--

BLAZING SUNLIGHT shining through the fronds of the palm trees. Filling the sky.

Al Green's "Love and Happiness" PLAYS as we see

DISSOLVE TO:

SAME - NIGHT

Those palm trees against the dark night sky...

and all at once they EXPLODE TO STARRY BRILLIANCE, the fronds emblazoned with hundreds of holiday LIGHTS.

Al Green continues to SING as we

FADE OUT.