ERIE

Written by

J. Batzli
&
Alison-Eve Hammersley

TEXT OVER BLACK:

During the summer of 1999, the town of Erie, Pennsylvania experienced an unusually high number of suicide cases.

The following video cassettes were found by police in the possession of one of the deceased. They have been released for investigative purposes only.

WARNING: the following video contains depictions of self-harm and may be disturbing and traumatizing for some viewers.

The text fades.

In an upper corner appear the words **TAPE 1 OF 2.**

Then a flash of STATIC, followed by a BLUE SCREEN. The timestamp reads **03/17/1999.**

EXT. WOODS - DAY

A BLURRED IMAGE at first, the camera upside-down. It rights itself and the FOCUS ADJUSTS.

A dense forest, tall trees and thick underbrush. The sound of leaves rustling punctuates the stillness.

The camera continues through the forest further and further towards seemingly nothing. What feels like an eternity passes like this. *What the hell are we looking at?*

Until we finally hear the sound of RUNNING WATER. And the camera stops.

The voice of IRIS (28) hisses through the speakers.

IRIS (O.C.)
I think we finally found them.

The camera now shows her feet as she walks carefully, avoiding roots and rocks. She takes slow, deliberate steps, occasionally pausing to look around.

IRIS (O.C.) (CONT'D)
They should be near the water...

We see more of the forest around her. Sunlight filters through the trees, casting dappled shadows on the ground.

She stops, presumably listening for something.

IRIS (O.C.) (CONT'D)
This way...

Iris moves toward the noise, as it grows louder and louder. Until she reaches a small, clear brook.

IRIS (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Gotcha.

The camera crouches with Iris, focusing on the water's edge. Slender green leaves and vibrant blue/purple flowers come into view.

IRIS (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Blue flag irises...

Her hand reaches out and gently touches one of the flowers.

IRIS (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Or "blue flag me's" as dad would say. Get it? "Me's?" Iris?

Iris carefully picks one, holds it close to the camera, allowing the lens to examine it, before placing the camera down.

Out of focus, she crouches in front of the lens, and pulls a small container from her backpack. Then places the flower inside.

We linger on the other irises swaying gently in the breeze.

After the flower is packed away, Iris sits on the ground. She's quiet for a moment. Takes a deep breath.

A rustling in the distance suddenly breaks the silence.

Iris' eyes dart offscreen. Her face a mixture of curiosity and caution.

IRIS (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Hello?

But there's no response.

She continues to scan the tree line, carefully reaching into her bag.

Another RUSTLE.

Iris pulls a small can of BEAR MACE out of her pack.

But then... she sees something. And completely freezes.

Ever-so-slowly Iris' expression begins to change.

Her face twists, her mouth forming a question. Her eyes are locked on something just offscreen.

IRIS (CONT'D)
Wh--?

The sound disappears from her mouth, like she never even began speaking.

Her eyes suddenly start to water, unblinking. She trembles, paralyzed by fear as tears silently stream from her eyes.

Iris' face contorts, as if in horrible pain, but she doesn't make a sound.

Suddenly, she stands.

Iris takes a few steps back, revealing the trunk of a large oak behind her.

Slowly, her neck cranes back as she looks further and further up the tree.

Her spine bends at a near-inhuman angle towards the oak.

Then suddenly, she turns.

And climbs it.

Iris places her foot against the tree and reaches for a branch to hoist herself up.

She quickly disappears out of frame.

The FOCUS on the camera drifts to a flower in the foreground. The flower trembles in the light breeze.

We watch it flutter for several moments.

Several...

Long...

Moments...

Until *WHAM!* Something hits the ground behind it.

IRIS' BODY, blurry in the background.

Her thin frame shudders. Blood seeps from her mouth.

Iris lets out her breath in a low rasp. Her face is slack, eyes empty. Her gaze remains toward the camera.

Finally, she stops searching for breath and goes still.

Blood pools beneath Iris' head. The forest is silent aside from a single butterfly, which FLUTTERS around for a beat before landing on Iris's face.

The shot holds for an uncomfortably long time.

Finally--

Another flash of STATIC.

A BLUE SCREEN.

The timestamp now reads **10/02/1999.**

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

An average house. STELLA SCOTT (25), disheveled but focused, rummages through a box of old keepsakes, and sorts the items into "keep" and "junk" piles.

Meanwhile, OSCAR SCOTT (27), wearing a punk rock t-shirt steps in from behind camera. He holds a box of coco-puffs and tosses a few up in the air and into his mouth.

STELLA
You switched the tape?

Oscar launches another puff into his gullet.

OSCAR
Huh?

STELLA
The tape?

He catches another.

OSCAR
Yep, tape's in there.

Oscar sticks his hand back in the box.

STELLA
Hit me with it, bro.

He arcs a puff across the room towards Stella. To both of their surprise, she catches it with ease.

They lose their minds over it.

Until Stella's attention turns toward the lens.

STELLA (CONT'D)
The camera’s on.

OSCAR
No it’s not.

STELLA
Look at the light, dumbass.

He does.

OSCAR
Oops.

Oscar jogs over and the camera suddenly cuts.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Stella holds a corded phone to her ear, the cord coiled around her index finger. She gives a thumbs up to the camera, making sure it’s filming.

Then paces in the doorway as she turns her attention back to the phone.

STELLA
I have reason to believe that something strange is going on here. All four incidents are clearly connected.

Stella glances at the camera.

STELLA (CONT'D)
No, I’m not with Erie PD.

She pauses.

STELLA (CONT'D)
The police don’t necessarily think it’s related just yet, but--
(beat)
I’m an investigative journalist.

Oscar snorts from behind camera. Stella shoots him a look.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Uh-- currently freelance, but-- no, wait, wait! I have footage of one of the deaths from last spring. Unobstructed, clear as day.

She waits. A smile creeps across her lips.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Absolutely. I'll send it along as soon as we wrap up our investigation!
(then)
And out of curiosity, do you happen to be hiring journalists right now--
(then)
Tape first. Got it.

Stella hangs up the phone.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Journalist? I thought you were a news researcher. "Were" being the operative word there.

STELLA
I was working on a few stories on my own time before I quit. I had this really crazy domestic abuse case I was following in Prospect. I think I really could've helped nail the guy if I'd been able to finish it.

OSCAR
One off-hours story doesn't make you a professional.

STELLA
It's called aspirational embellishment.

OSCAR
Well, I don't think you need to "embellish." You'll probably get further with truth.

STELLA
When you go on dates do you introduce yourself as a one-hour photo tech, or a future doctor?

OSCAR (O.C.)
Oh, I didn't realize you were trying to doink the tape acquisitions lady at WSEE-TV.

STELLA
You are a stupid moron.

STELLA (CONT'D)
A smoron.

OSCAR (O.C.)
A smoron. *

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
A smoron who’s going to save lives one day.

STELLA
Well, me too. But with... news.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Uh-huh.

A beat.

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
I don’t know if you should be leveraging Iris’ tape like that.

STELLA
What do you mean? It’s clearly the only thing that will get anyone to even take us a little seriously.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Yeah, but it’s a little... bleak.

Stella looks at Oscar through the lens, softening.

STELLA
I thought we agreed we wanted to get this out there. You know, it’s always only been for her. Don’t you want the world to know she didn’t actually kill herself?

OSCAR (O.C.)
If that’s true, then yes.

STELLA
So yes, then.

Oscar sighs.

Stella’s tone shifts. Her face softens, and there’s a vulnerability to her voice now. She seems suddenly small.

STELLA (CONT'D)
She deserves better.

A beat before Oscar places the camera down.

He steps into frame with Stella, then pulls her in for a hug. A tender, sincere moment between siblings.

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Back to Stella sitting at the desk.

STELLA
Recording?

OSCAR (O.C.)
Yep.

STELLA
Can you give me a signal or something from now on? I don’t want to have to cut all this out later.

OSCAR (O.C.)
A signal?

Oscar holds his middle finger in front of the camera.

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Like this?

Stella rolls her eyes.

STELLA
Perfect.

OSCAR (O.C.)
I’ll count you in. Ready? 3, 2, and...

Stella squares her shoulders and takes a beat.

STELLA
My name is Stella Scott. I was born and raised here in Erie, but lately this town has felt like something out of a nightmare.

She adjusts in her chair. Something about this persona Stella’s taken on feels in-control, magnetic.

STELLA (CONT'D)
My brother and I have taken it amongst ourselves to look into the recent mysterious happenings within the county.
(then)
In the last nine months, no less than four individuals have allegedly taken their own lives in the same bank of woods, on the northeastern edge of town.
(MORE)

STELLA (CONT'D)
We have in our possession a tape that contains footage taken live by one of the victims, showing the bizarre manner of death, which is consistent with--

OSCAR (O.C.)
Hang on. Cut.

STELLA
What are you doing? I was on a roll.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Do you think we should say who she was? If we're gonna do it, we should *really* do it.

Stella nods.

STELLA
We have in our possession a tape that contains footage taken live by one of the victims, our sister, Iris Scott.

She pauses, letting that hang. Saying it out loud hits her harder than she thought it would.

Then turns to Oscar, just behind camera.

OSCAR (O.C.)
(barely audible)
You got this.

Stella shakes it off, and continues.

STELLA
Her bizarre manner of death is consistent in its strangeness with the other instances, at least from what has been reported so far... although curiously, Erie law enforcement has been reluctant to connect the deaths to one another. That's why we have started our own independent investigation. As locals with knowledge of the area and a personal connection to the case, we hope to uncover the true nature of these disturbing deaths.

She pauses for a moment. Breaks character to look up at Oscar.

STELLA (CONT'D)
That one felt good. Right?

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY (LATER)

The camera adjusts, framing in on a large bulletin board covered in news clippings and photos related to the string of suicides.

OSCAR
Did you put all this together last night?

Oscar sits on a folding chair in the foreground, half of his body on camera.

STELLA (O.C.)
Can you move? You’re in the shot.

OSCAR
It’s my camera.

STELLA (O.C.)
It’s Dad’s camera.

OSCAR
He gave it to me.

STELLA (O.C.)
(under her breath)
Along with those monster eyebrows and a penchant for sleepwalking.

OSCAR
At least I have eyebrows.

STELLA (O.C.)
This is how Gwen Stefani wears them!

CUT TO:

Back on the bulletin board.

Stella steps into the shot and takes down one of the articles.

Oscar ZOOMS IN.

The article has a picture of a tall, lanky man with a beard and a crinkly smile.

STELLA (CONT'D)
This was the second victim, David Domfeh. He lit himself on fire. I don’t know anyone who would do something like that.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Monks. Protesters.

STELLA
Right. But not normal guys with a desk job and two kids at home.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Protestors have kids. Maybe some monks too actually, probably not Buddhist per se--

STELLA
He wasn’t a monk. And he wasn’t protesting in the middle of the woods on a family vacation.
(then)
My point is, usually when people want to kill themselves they try to choose the path of least resistance. The easiest, fastest, least painful option. But these people did the opposite. They chose horribly violent, sometimes excruciating methods. People don’t do that without cause.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Iris jumped out of the tree. We both saw it.

STELLA
But there’s something we didn’t see.

OSCAR (O.C.)
What?

STELLA
I don’t know, I didn’t see it... or them. But she did. And that’s when she started acting different. Weird.

OSCAR (O.C.)
You think someone made her do it?

STELLA
There was that string of murders in Allentown a few years back. Maybe there’s more to that story.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Weren’t those all sex workers? Unless you’re telling me there’s something I didn’t know about Iris...

STELLA
Well, what about this?

Stella grabs another article off the board and shows it to the camera. It features a photo of a LUSH JAPANESE FOREST.

STELLA (CONT'D)
This is Aokigahara, near Mount Fuji in Japan. Also known as the Suicide Forest. In fact, so many suicides have been committed there that local officials in the area have stopped reporting the actual numbers in an effort to distance their public image from the ongoing phenomena.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Yeah, I’ve heard of it.

Stella takes another article down.

STELLA
And a few years ago outside of Cincinnati, ten teenagers from one high school all took their own lives over the course of a single school year. Same thing in Nebraska, 1986. Six people in six weeks. They all worked at the same manufacturing plant.

OSCAR (O.C.)
That’s weird...

STELLA
It *is* weird.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Well, what did it end up being in those cases?

STELLA
Officially, nothing.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Great reporting.

STELLA
But that doesn't mean that there isn't something more sinister. The best tragedies have great mysteries behind them.

OSCAR (O.C.)
The "best" tragedies?

STELLA
(embarrassed)
Well not "best" just-- okay, turn it off. We'll redo that.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Stella sits in bed cross-legged, a mug of coffee in one hand, camera set on the nightstand.

STELLA
(low voice, to camera)
It's the middle of the night. Oscar's asleep upstairs. And I'm in what was my and Iris' bedroom, which then became just Iris' room when she inherited this place from our dad, and is now nobody's room... I guess.
(then)
But more importantly, this...

She grabs the camera, aims it at the screen.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
...is a chatroom for locals in northwestern Pennsylvania.

ON COMPUTER SCREEN

The chat is flooded with porn bots and creepy men trying to "make friends in their area".

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
As you can see, it's not exactly official.

Stella types a message into the send box:

“Anyone heard of this? A bunch of suicides in Erie County. The most recent was Brenda Patterson a couple weeks ago”

She pastes a link about the death into the box and hits SEND. Her words are quickly lost under the ongoing spam.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
I usually just sit here for a while sending messages, just to see if anyone will bite.

She types into the box again:

“Four suicides in three months, something seems fishy here.”

She pastes the link again.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Someone has to give a shit eventually, right?

Again, the link is quickly buried.

Stella sighs.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Or maybe not.

What feels like minutes pass as we watch new spam messages fill the box.

Each one popping up.

One.

After.

Another.

Only as our eyes adjust to the screen’s brightness do we begin to see the silhouette that’s been standing in the far corner of the room behind the laptop screen.

Stella doesn’t notice.

The camera’s autofocus struggles to rack to it. Shifting in and out of clarity.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
What’s happening with this thing?

She turns the camera on herself as she examines the lens.

When she flips it back around, we see OSCAR scamper towards the door and out into the hallway.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Fuck.

Stella gets up and carefully makes her way into the hall.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Stella pans the camera in either direction and stops when she sees the shape of Oscar sitting all the way at the end of the corridor.

STELLA (O.C.)
Oz.

But he doesn’t move.

Very carefully, Stella makes her way down the hall toward Oscar.

He stays completely still.

Eventually, she comes upon him. He’s facing away from her with his legs spread wide.

She can see a puddle that’s pooled just beneath him.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Oscar, wake up.

Slowly, Stella reaches a hand out, and gently places it on Oscar’s shoulder.

Oscar immediately freaks out at the touch. He screams as he comes to.

After a stunned moment, he looks around the space and up at Stella.

OSCAR
Was I sleep walking?

STELLA (O.C.)
Yeah.

He clocks the camera.

OSCAR
(annoyed)
Why are you filming this?

Then he looks down at his wet pants.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
Oh fuck. Turn that thing off.

Embarrassed, Oscar quickly gets up and hurries off to the bathroom.

BLOOP! From the other room.

Stella quickly pans back to the bedroom. She jogs over:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Stella moves to the laptop screen. A message request has appeared.

STELLA (O.C.)
(excited)
Oh shit.

She quickly moves the camera back to the nightstand and sits up straight.

She clicks on the request, leaning in to read it. Her eyes are wide.

She frantically types back. BLOOP - another message.

INT. HOME OFFICE - NIGHT

The camera sits on a desk, framed close on a bulky printer. It WHIRS with effort as it spits out a document.

CHK-CHK-CHK-CHK.

The document slides into view as it prints, revealing a copy of the messages Stella's just exchanged. One line in particular stands out:

"Brenda Patterson was my girlfriend."

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The next morning. Oscar chomps coco-puffs at the breakfast table while Stella adjusts the camera's focus.

OSCAR
You realize meeting people from the Internet is like the number one way to get killed these days.

STELLA (O.C.)
Says who?

OSCAR
60 Minutes.

STELLA (O.C.)
Since when do you watch 60 Minutes?

OSCAR
Since Connie Chung left, basically. Dan Rather's the man.

STELLA
Dan Rather isn't on 60 Minutes anymore.

OSCAR
(caught)
Okay, so I don't watch it. But the number one way to die thing is still true.

STELLA
Not if you live in Erie.

OSCAR
That's... pretty dark.

STELLA
Oh, come on, I'm kidding.

OSCAR
(teasing / brushing off)
Okay.

STELLA
I'm kidding!

OSCAR
I heard you.

She rolls her eyes.

STELLA
You're so judgmental.

OSCAR
What was that?

STELLA
What, you didn't hear that one?

A beat, then he teasingly leaps after Stella for a tackle. She sprints away, bumping the table, which accidentally knocks the camera over.

INT. CAR - DAY (TRAVELING)

Stella aims the camera towards the dashboard. She has one Converse-clad foot propped up on it.

They drive down a fairly remote street, more trees than houses.

We hear STATIC. Voices crack through, indistinct, until the static wins out.

Stella swings the camera around to reveal Oscar fiddling with the car's radio.

STELLA (O.C.)
I think you've searched the whole dial at this point.

OSCAR
Couldn't we meet this guy somewhere more, uh, public?

STELLA (O.C.)
His car's in the shop.

He gives her a look.

OSCAR
This is so incredibly dumb, Stella.

STELLA (O.C.)
(not disagreeing...)
He's our only lead.

OSCAR
(sotto)
Yeah, you said that...

Stella points the camera out her passenger side window.

Trees.

Trees.

Trees.

She angles it down to follow the curve of the pavement.

The camera catches a DEAD RACCOON on the side of the road as the car passes it. Stella zooms in a bit.

As the car continues, another DEAD ANIMAL passes the lens.

Then another.

STELLA
(sotto)
What?

Suddenly, the car JOSTLES up and down as if it's running over dozens and dozens of potholes.

Stella points the camera at Oscar who looks back at her with a stunned and horrified look.

Then she pans toward the rear window.

DOZENS more DEAD ANIMALS, all seemingly hit by cars, lay in the road behind them.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
What the fu--

They hit a big BUMP, and the scene cuts abruptly in a FLASH OF STATIC.

INT. CAR - DAY (TRAVELING)

Stella again films out the windshield.

This area is even more sparse, dark with tree cover, the road windy and narrow.

STELLA (O.C.)
We're getting close.

OSCAR (O.C.)
(sarcastic)
Awesome.

They drive for another few moments.

STELLA (O.C.)
Up here.

The car approaches an even more narrow turn off, up to an unexpectedly bougie cabin, well-hidden in the trees.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Nice house.

STELLA (O.C.)
Maybe we won’t end up on 60 Minutes after all.

Oscar pulls the car off and drives towards the house.

He parks behind a beat up SUV at the edge of the yard.

OSCAR
Thought you said his car was in the shop.

STELLA (O.C.)
Maybe it was ready early.

Oscar shoots Stella a look.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
What? He wouldn’t be able to tell us if we were already on the road by the time he got it.

She opens the car door.

EXT. CABIN - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

The two of them get out and approach the house.

Stella confidently strides up the steps and raps on the door.

No answer.

Oscar knocks this time, trying “Shave and a Haircut”.

Again, no signs of reply.

Stella steps along the porch, aiming the camera’s view into the house’s windows.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

The house seems eerily normal. Like it was designed to look intentionally as medium as possible.

Stella pans the camera across the space. It’s suspiciously quiet.

OSCAR
I thought he was supposed to meet us here.

STELLA (O.C.)
Me too...

They circle around to the side of the house. No sign of anyone there either.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Should we wait?

OSCAR
Something doesn’t feel right about this. I think we should go.

STELLA (O.C.)
Ugh, I don’t know.

Stella follows Oscar back into their car. Oscar, clearly on edge, takes one last look at the house.

OSCAR
No, Stella, fuck this.

He throws the car into gear and hits the gas.

But instead of going forward the car lurches back and halts with a CRASH.

STELLA (O.C.)
What happened?

OSCAR
Are you okay?

STELLA (O.C.)
Did you put it in reverse?

OSCAR
Yes, I obviously fucked up.

The two climb back out of the car to inspect the damage.

STELLA (O.C.)
You hit his car.

OSCAR
I can see that.

STELLA (O.C.)
What should we do? We definitely can’t leave now.

OSCAR
Why not? He’s not here.

STELLA (O.C.)
That’s a crime!

OSCAR
It’s not a felony!

STELLA (O.C.)
Oscar!

OSCAR
I’ll at least leave a note with my info.

Stella turns back to the car when suddenly A MAN BLOCKS HER VIEW.

Startled, Stella stumbles back.

STELLA (O.C.)
Shit!

A TALL MAN (30s) stands opposite Stella, looking down at her. He looks pissed. This is RED.

RED
You hit my car.

OSCAR
We’re so sorry. It was completely my fault.

STELLA (O.C.)
My brother’s a real klutz sometimes.
(then)
My name’s Stella. I think we talked the other night? S_Scott74?

The man makes casual steps over to the SUV and inspects the damage.

He juts his chin at the lens.

RED
What’s with the camera?

STELLA (O.C.)
We’re researching the deaths in town. Keeping track of things.

Red stares her down, unimpressed.

Then he lets out a BARK of a laugh and turns to one side.

RED
Just make sure you’re getting my good side, alright?

Stella forces a nervous laugh.

STELLA (O.C.)
Of course.

She glances over at Oscar, who looks petrified.

RED
You can call me Red.

Red gestures to the cabin.

RED (CONT'D)
Come on in, I’ll take down your insurance information. I’ve got some beer in the fridge too if you want.

OSCAR
Can’t we talk out here?

RED
I insist. There’s nothing more important than hospitality. Even when your guests have damaged your personal property.
(then)
Or we can let the local boys in blue handle it.

Oscar’s face sinks.

STELLA (O.C.)
(hesitant)
I guess I could take a beer.

Oscar throws her an unsure look before they follow Red toward the house.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Stella and Oscar follow Red into the kitchen.

Red gestures for them to sit at a homey wooden table.

Red grabs three beers from the fridge, pops each cap. He hands one to Stella and one to Oscar.

RED
You’re old enough, right?

OSCAR
Um, yeah.

Oscar sets the beer down and slides it a few inches away from him.

RED
What, you don’t want it?

OSCAR
It’s a little early for me. Sorry.

RED
You don’t trust me?

OSCAR
Oh, I don’t know.

RED
(re: Oscar’s beer)
You know, if I wanted to kill you, there are much easier ways than poison. I mean, there’s nobody around here for miles. I could chop you up with a machete, Jason-style.
(winking at camera)
If I wanted to.

Red laughs heartily at his joke. Stella hems politely.

STELLA
(hushed to Oscar)
That’s easier?

Red takes a long swig from his beer.

OSCAR
It’s not that. I’m just driving so.

RED
Lot of difference being sober did for you before.

STELLA (O.C.)
Do you have a notepad so you can take down our insurance--

RED
Sure, sure in a minute. But since you're here, why don't we get more comfortable and get to what you drove all the way up here for.

OSCAR
That's okay, really. We don't want to bother you any more than we already have--

RED
It's no bother. You'll be helping me as much as I'll be helping you.

STELLA (O.C.)
Hard to argue with that.

Oscar looks at her, wide-eyed.

INT. RED'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Stella sets the camera on the coffee table so we can see all three of them sitting on the couch.

RED
So. Tell me about what happened with your sister. Iris, right?

Oscar turns to Stella expectantly.

OSCAR
(quietly)
Did you mention Iris?

STELLA
I didn't tell him anything.

RED
Not like it was hard to figure out. S_Scott, Iris Scott.

STELLA
But her name wasn't even in the article. How did you--?

RED
I tracked down the police report.
(off her shock)
It's easier than you'd think.

A beat.

RED (CONT'D)
I've been connecting these dots for weeks already. Let me show you.

He grabs Oscar's untouched beer and takes a swig. Then takes it with him as he exits.

Stella and Oscar share a nervous glance before she picks up the camera and follows him.

INT. RED'S OFFICE - DAY

A dark office with a single window, blinds pulled.

A large wall is covered with news clippings, maps, articles, horrific crime scene pictures - like Stella's bulletin board on steroids.

OSCAR
Holy shit.

RED
(proudly)
You're gonna want to film all this.

Stella moves the camera along the wall, an attempt to get a record of everything.

RED (CONT'D)
What are you gonna do with it?

STELLA
Oh, I'm a journalist.

RED
For who?

STELLA
I'm... not sure yet. Right now nobody thinks there's a story here. They think our personal connection is muddying our objectivity.

RED
Figures. You should tell them to eat shit.

Stella's shot lands on a smiling photo of Iris, wavy hair down around her shoulders.

STELLA (O.C.)
I just want people to know what happened to her.

Stella reaches out to touch the photo.

RED
Your sister was beautiful.

STELLA (O.C.)
(weirded out)
...yeah.

Red takes another picture off the wall and hands it to Oscar.

RED
This is my Brenda. My whole world.

Stella zooms in on the picture over Oscar's shoulder.

STELLA (O.C.)
What happened to her?

RED
She...

He takes a shaky breath.

RED (CONT'D)
They found her with an axe in her head. Self-inflicted. I know how it sounds. But police did all their due diligence, questioned me and everything, gave me hell for a few months if I'm being honest. But no matter what anyone else thinks, there was no evidence tying me to it. Of course not.
(then)
She had sixteen wounds total, all over her body. Looked like someone just attacked her in a rage, except the someone was apparently herself.

STELLA (O.C.)
How did they determine it was self inflicted?

Oscar elbows Stella. The camera swings toward him.

OSCAR
She's also sorry for your loss.

Red's face sinks.

RED
You don't believe me?

STELLA (O.C.)
No, of course I do.

RED
Because it sounded like you were accusing me of something. And if the police didn’t find anything, I don’t think you and your little camera are going to either.

OSCAR
No! She wasn’t. She was just--

Red laughs.

RED
I’m just messing with you. Relax.
(then)
I don’t know how they knew she did it. The angle of the blade, I suppose. You can never really be 100% sure with that stuff, though. It’s just your best guess.

He goes quiet for a moment before he continues.

RED (CONT'D)
She really was the love of my life though. My treasure. I met her at a mutual acquaintance’s birthday party. I always hated those sort of things. Not sure why I went in the first place. But then I saw her. She was of course there with someone else.

As Red speaks, the camera drifts in Stella’s hands back toward the murder board.

RED (CONT'D)
I ended up staying the whole night just to have another chance to look at her.

Stella slowly zooms in on the photo of Brenda.

RED (CONT'D)
And when we eventually got together, it was like someone finally turned the lights on. She was just like that. Had that thing about her that made the whole world feel brighter.

Brenda’s photo now fills nearly the entire frame.

And we just look at her.

For a long.

Long.

Time.

Stella doesn’t even realize that Red has stopped talking.

Until suddenly...

RED (CONT'D)
HEY!

Red JUMPS in front of the camera, purposely startling Stella.

RED (CONT'D)
You want to hear the rest, or just film my dead girlfriend?

STELLA
Sorry.

She zooms out and pans back to Red.

RED
That’s okay. That’s probably enough about Brenda anyway.

Red takes a beat to compose himself.

RED (CONT'D)
Now, the juicy stuff -- the first victim, Joy Ritter, she drowned herself. A 50-year-old lady. No bricks on her feet, nothing dramatic like that. Just laid facedown in a stream on her morning walk, less than a mile from home. She bashed her face into the rocks a few times for good measure beforehand, broke her own nose, some of her teeth. No drugs in her system. No sign of heart attack. You know how much willpower that takes, to lay there and die in a few inches of water?

OSCAR
And the guy who set himself on fire.

RED
Domfeh. Committed the act in front of his loved ones on a camping trip. His wife said in the police statement that it was “as if he was possessed by a force beyond him”.

STELLA (O.C.)
Same with Iris. It was like something came over her.

RED
How do you know? The report didn’t mention anyone else there.

STELLA (O.C.)
She was studying botany and filmed her hikes sometimes for flower identification. The camera was found near her body.

RED
You mean you have your sister’s death on video? Every news station in Northwestern Pennsylvania must be clamoring for it.
(then)
Can I see it?

OSCAR
What the fuck? No.

RED
I don’t mean any disrespect. With Brenda, I couldn’t understand what would’ve happened to make her do that. We had our fights, obviously. Sometimes we were on, sometimes off, but things had been good. She seemed happy. It didn’t make any sense. And then I found out about the others. Eight suicides in an area of ten thousand--

STELLA (O.C.)
Sorry, *eight?*

RED
Well, the press only reported those four.

OSCAR
Why not the others?

RED
Two were vagrants, heard about them from my buddy at the station. Not druggies, just down on their luck guys who wandered into the woods for shelter. Then there's two other missing persons in the area, both last seen near or in the woods. But I know they're dead. Couldn't be more certain if I'd killed them myself.

He chuckles.

RED (CONT'D)
Sorry. Morbid humor.

Oscar feigns a laugh, then looks to camera.

STELLA (O.C.)
What do you know about the dead animals on the road out there?

RED
Freaky, right?
(then)
They all just seem to wander right out in front of the cars. They only pick them up once a week now because it was too much to keep up with. The stink alone is enough to make you want to -- well you can ask Brenda.

Yikes.

OSCAR
Where are they going?

RED
Straight to Hell if you ask me.

Crickets.

RED (CONT'D)
But really, nobody knows. Could be running to something... or from something.

He says that last bit into camera.

STELLA (O.C.)
(to Oscar)
I told you this wasn't normal.

OSCAR
Are you trying to “I told you so” with dead people right now?

STELLA (O.C.)
No. ...animals.

Red chuckles.

RED
You two remind me of me and my brother. Always razzing each other.
(pointed)
So much you forget how irritating it is to other people.

That hangs in the air like a lead balloon.

STELLA (O.C.)
Sorry. Tensions have been... high lately.

RED
If anyone understands that, I suppose it’s me.
(then)
Anyway.

Red grabs a large ROLLED UP CANVAS and throws it down on his desk like a gauntlet.

OSCAR
What is it?

RED
Two words: heavy metal.

OSCAR
Undertow is my favorite album.

RED
Not that kind of metal.
(then)
And Tool is really more art rock.

Oscar, embarrassed, spreads the piece of canvas flat.

It rolls out into a LARGE TERRAIN MAP of the East Erie woods. Bold **X**’s mark the map, with a large red circle somewhere in the middle.

Red places his finger on a few of the x’s.

RED (CONT'D)
These are the places where the bodies have been found. All within a thousand meters of this.

He moves to the red circle.

RED (CONT'D)
This... is the location of Ion Labs.

STELLA (O.C.)
You mean the old battery factory? I noticed that too, but it shut down years ago, there's nothing left but the building.

Red nods.

RED
But there is. In the ground.

Oscar gives a "this guy's fucking nuts" look to Stella.

OSCAR
I've lived here all my life and never heard of any battery factory.

RED
You gotta do some reading outside of the mainstream, brother. Ion Labs used to own this town. Every man in a 2-mile radius worked for Ion, my grandfather and his brother both, before the company folded in 1954. They all just showed up one day and it was chained up. A month later the city shut it down, cleared it out, and gave it all back to Mother Nature. They paid the workers off to keep quiet about the abrupt departure, completely erased all trace of it.

STELLA (O.C.)
What does that have to do with the suicides?

RED
There were rumors at the time that Ion was shut down for improperly disposing of their chemicals. And that maybe some of those chemicals even had nuclear properties.
(MORE)

RED (CONT'D)
(then)
See, this is the kind of stuff the news doesn't want you to know about.

He looks to Oscar.

RED (CONT'D)
You've probably heard of chem trails, right?

Oscar glances at the camera, hesitant.

OSCAR
Um, yeah... is that what you think this is?

Red laughs.

RED
No. I'm not a lunatic.

OSCAR
(barely relieved)
Okay.

RED
But the same concept applies. We're talking about widespread public contamination. Where does all the waste go? Maybe instead of being properly disposed, it leaks into the ground. Over time, the ground gets contaminated with dozens of poisonous chemicals. If it's deep enough, maybe it takes a while to reach the surface.

Oscar stares blankly back at him.

Red seems frustrated that he has to explain all of this, like it should be obvious.

RED (CONT'D)
Mad Hatter's Disease? Chronic mercury poisoning that leads to extreme emotions, loss of faculties, mental degradation, depression... You see where I'm going with this.

STELLA (O.C.)
So you’re saying there are toxic metals permeating the ground in this area, and that those toxins could be causing people to inflict extreme violence on themselves?

RED
Exactly. Yes.

OSCAR
I gotta tell you, Red, doesn’t sound much more likely than chem trails.

Now Red seems offended.

RED
Why? Love Canal, New York 1970s. Residents experienced severe health problems, miscarriages, neurological issues, due to chemical waste buried by the Hooker Chemical Company two decades prior.

OSCAR
Right. But that pollution was documented. What actual, hard proof do you have that Ion Labs did any of this?

RED
That’s why we need to go out there and see for ourselves. Run some tests. I’m hiking out there tomorrow--

OSCAR
Come on, Stella, this is a waste of time now.

RED
You know it’s not impossible. Chemicals, they can mutate things. Brain chemistry. Body chemistry too.

Red looks right at Stella, making his plea.

RED (CONT'D)
Look. If I’m a conspiracy theorist, so are you. You aren’t willing to accept the idea that your sister simply ended her own life.
(MORE)

RED (CONT'D)
You think there's something more to it. So do I. The only difference is, you don't like my theory. Maybe I'm right and maybe I'm wrong. But either way, uncovering such a thing sure would be great for your little movie. Don't you think?

He smiles at the camera.

STELLA (O.C.)
It's not a movie.

RED
Wait here. I've got so much more I've been homing in on.

Red steps towards the door.

RED (CONT'D)
I'll be right back.

He exits.

STELLA (O.C.)
I thought it was "hone" in.

OSCAR
(glib)
I'm starting to think this guy killed Brenda and is using the other deaths to cover it up.

STELLA (O.C.)
But if this was all true, he's not wrong, it would really get people's attention...

OSCAR
We should just give him our info and fuck off.

STELLA (O.C.)
He's got a weird vibe, but you don't actually think we're in danger here, right? He seems probably harmless.

OSCAR
Based on what?

STELLA (O.C.)
The fact that we're not "chopped up Jason style" yet?

OSCAR
How do you know he’s not getting his axe right now?

They both go quiet for a moment, listening for Red’s footsteps.

But it’s completely silent.

STELLA (O.C.)
(calling out)
Red?

Nothing.

Stella walks the camera out of the room and into the dark hallway.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

Stella steps along the wood floor. The floorboards CREAK under her feet.

STELLA (O.C.)
Red? You need help getting your...

OSCAR
(sotto)
Hatchet.

STELLA (O.C.)
...research?

She reaches another door off the hallway. It’s slightly ajar, but Stella can see someone sitting inside. A WOMAN.

She gestures for Oscar to stop. He tries to wave her off, but she carefully pushes the door further open.

INT. RED’S BEDROOM - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

Oscar reluctantly leads Stella as they step into the bedroom. The woman sits very still, facing away from them.

STELLA (O.C.)
Hello?

But the woman doesn’t respond.

Oscar takes a hesitant step toward her.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Miss? Do you mind if we ask you a couple questions?

Still nothing.

Finally, Oscar reaches a hand out and places it on the woman’s shoulder.

Suddenly, the woman’s chair spins around and reveals a LIFE-SIZED STUFFED DOLL wearing a wig and what appear to be Brenda’s clothes from her picture on the bulletin board.

Stella and Oscar leap back, startled.

OSCAR
What the hell is that?

RED (O.C.)
It’s Brenda.

Stella yelps as she turns around to find Red standing in the doorway.

RED (CONT'D)
You’re snooping.

OSCAR
You think... that’s Brenda?

RED
Brenda 2.0. Big step down from the original. But we all grieve in our own way. And now it’s almost like she’s still here.

STELLA (O.C.)
...but you know she isn’t, right?

Red just laughs. Stella cautiously pans the camera toward the weird doll.

RED
Now, you should really apologize for wandering into a private area where you weren’t invited.

OSCAR
We should go.

RED
What do you mean? This didn’t scare you away did it?

OSCAR
No, we just... need to hit the road.

Red grabs Oscar's arm. Hard.

RED
I can't let you leave now. We're just getting started.

STELLA (O.C.)
Don't touch him!

Red grips him tighter.

OSCAR
You're hurting me!

RED
(sinister)
Come on, I haven't even shown you the best part.

OSCAR
Let go!

Oscar yanks himself away and pushes Stella out of the room.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

The camera shakes as Stella and Oscar rush back to their car.

Red comes down the porch steps after them.

RED
Come on, guys. What about that insurance information?

OSCAR
Have the cops find us.

RED
You're gonna credit me though, right? It's Russell Hampton. H-A-M-P-T--

Stella and Oscar slam their car doors.

EXT. GAS STATION/INT. CAR - DAY

The camera is set on the dashboard facing Stella and Oscar. They sit parked in a lot.

Oscar examines his now BRUISED ARM.

A long silence. Stella sips a coffee, face lost in thought.

STELLA
(sotto)
Okay.

Finally, she looks into the lens.

STELLA (CONT'D)
We've just gotten our hands on a very exciting piece of evidence that we believe has the potential to break this story wide open.

Stella pulls a folded up roll of canvas out of her jacket and unrolls it on the dash.

Somehow, she escaped with Red's map.

OSCAR
Wait, stop. You stole his shit?
(with a grin)
He's gonna be so pissed.

Stella breaks character and turns to Oscar.

STELLA
So, I was thinking tomorrow maybe we try to find this spot. We can take a few samples, maybe--

OSCAR
Hang on. You're not buying any of this bullshit.

STELLA
A lead is a lead. We have nothing else to go on.

OSCAR
The theory barely holds together.

STELLA
Well, it sounded like more legitimate of a theory than the people saying it's the Squonk or Bigfoot.

OSCAR
(incredulous)
People are not saying that.

STELLA
I'm just saying, I don't believe in monsters or ghosts or whatever. But I believe in patterns of human behavior. And moral disengagement and institutional corruption are two pretty big ones.

She plays that last line to camera. Oscar notices.

OSCAR
You sound like a douche.

STELLA
There's more to investigate here. Lots of conspiracies have some seed of truth to them, don't they?

OSCAR
No, they don't. People make shit like this up all the time. I bet his grandpa didn't even work there.

STELLA
I told you, in any case like this one, where things repeat, there has to be a "why". That's what we're here to find. Why did Iris do it? She was happy, healthy--

OSCAR
Or maybe she wasn't.

STELLA
Whatever. She was the golden child, we all knew it.

OSCAR
That doesn't mean she had a perfect life.

STELLA
Tell me one thing that went wrong for Iris, ever.

OSCAR
The eviction?
(off Stella's shock)
You didn't know?

STELLA
Uh, no.

OSCAR
Maybe we should stop recording--

STELLA
No! This is part of it.

OSCAR
Okay...
(then)
Well, why did you think Iris was living with dad before he died?

STELLA
Because he was obsessed with her?s

OSCAR
She couldn’t afford her place after getting laid off in ‘97. She was sleeping in her car before he finally told her to move back home.

STELLA
(ashamed)
No one told me.

OSCAR
She probably thought you wouldn’t be interested.

STELLA
I was her sister.

THE CAMERA’S DISPLAY INDICATES THAT THE TAPE IS RUNNING OUT.

OSCAR
Yeah, but you get kind of a one track mind sometimes. We all know that.

STELLA
I didn’t.

OSCAR
It’s not a big deal. Iris loved you. She was super proud of you, and how ambitious and focused you are. I think she just didn’t want to bother you.

STELLA
That’s... shitty.

OSCAR
It’s all good.

Oscar puts an arm around Stella. They share a quiet moment together.

THE WARNING FLICKERS: **LOW TAPE. LOW TAPE.**

And after a minute of this...

OSCAR (CONT'D)
You're still thinking about the map aren't you?

STELLA
(can't hold it in)
If there's even a one percent chance that something else led her to it, led *them all* to it... wouldn't you want to know?

OSCAR
Yeah, sure. But it's not gonna bring her ba--

A FLICKER OF STATIC, THEN -

IRIS' DEAD EYES. The footage of her death they've been recording over flashes on screen for just a beat.

Long enough to see ants crawling over her face.

BLUE SCREEN.

BLACK.

Then, in the corner: **TAPE 2 OF 2**

Another flash of STATIC, followed by another BLUE SCREEN. The timestamp reads **10/31/1979.**

INT. FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

Two YOUNG GIRLS (8 and 10) parade around a living room while the camera follows them.

A male voice behind the camera calls to them.

DAD (O.C.)
Iris, Stella, show off your costumes for the camera!

The younger girl shows off her pumpkin costume, and is quickly joined by the older girl.

The older of the two shows her costume off; a white sheet with cut out eye holes.

DAD (O.C.) (CONT'D)
What are you, Iris?

YOUNG IRIS
Boo! I'm a ghost, Daddy!

STATIC FLICKERS AGAIN, THEN--

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Stella sits at the desk, shoulders squared. She talks fast.

STELLA
A very interesting update in this case: After speaking to locals in the area, our team has discovered that each of the lost hikers was within a certain radius of the old Ion Labs battery factory, and that there may be more victims than previously thought. Local legend claims Ion may be the source of toxic chemicals that could've contributed to the recent deaths. If true, this could be a groundbreaking story.

The slightest smile of excitement crosses Stella's face.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The camera is set up on the table, where Stella and Oscar sit with the map laid out in front of them. Oscar has his head in his hands.

Stella speaks to the camera.

STELLA
(indicating a path on the map)
We'll begin our search at this entry point here, which will eventually put us right across from where the gates of Ion Labs used to be. We'll follow this stream, and collect some of the water to test on our way--

OSCAR
I think we should wait. There isn't enough here yet, Stells.

She tries to ignore him and stay in character.

STELLA
It's all we have.

OSCAR
Then maybe now isn't the time to do this. It's okay to take it slow. Do it right.

Finally she turns to him.

STELLA
If we wait too long, someone else will get there first.

Oscar is taken aback by this.

OSCAR
What do you mean? The story?

STELLA
(guilty)
No, I-- no.

OSCAR
Tell me that was a Freudian slip, and you didn't actually mean your priority here is getting a scoop.

STELLA
I didn't mean it.
(then)
I just have a really good feeling about this.

Off his silence.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Please trust me. And if we don't find anything, I'll let it go and we can do it at your pace.

Oscar moves to stand. Stella takes Oscar's arm.

STELLA (CONT'D)
The right pace. Please.

Her eyes plead with him. He sighs.

OSCAR
For Iris?

STELLA
Always.

Stella now seems to remember the camera is there. She grabs it. For a brief moment, she's close enough for us to see tears in her eyes.

Stella CUTS.

INT. CAR, ON ROAD - DAY (TRAVELING)

Trees whip by the frame.

Stella video tapes out the window from the passenger seat.

She aims the camera at the side mirror to her right and ZOOMS IN on her reflection.

Stella ZOOMS OUT and turns the camera to Oscar in the driver's seat.

He seems to have a hard time focusing on the road, knowing he's on camera.

OSCAR
Can you not just film me like that while I'm driving?

STELLA
Why not? I want to get a record of every single step.

OSCAR
I'm trying to focus.

STELLA
But the camera just looooves you--

OSCAR
Seriously--

Oscar reaches out a hand to block her view.

They wrestle for a moment before it CUTS.

EXT. CAR, HIGHWAY TURNOFF - DAY

Stella films while Oscar stands in front of the open trunk. He organizes his bag.

Stella takes the camera around the turnoff. Then aims it towards the woods.

STELLA (O.C.)
Seems like we're parking not too far from where we want to be.

She ZOOMS IN on the trees until they're just one big, green, out-of-focus mass.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
In there. Dun-dun-dun.

Just then, the sound of FOOTSTEPS approaching catch Stella's attention.

She turns the camera toward them to find a FISHERMAN (30s) approaching the woods. He's taken aback when he notices Stella filming him.

FISHERMAN
Oh whoa, sorry, am I in your shot?

STELLA (O.C.)
Do you fish in the stream up here often?

He straightens himself up a bit, realizing that this is going to be a whole thing.

FISHERMAN
Uh, no, I'm actually just passing through on my way east. Been doing some camping, fishing, hiking on a little cross country road trip. I heard the bass practically jump into your bucket up here.

STELLA (O.C.)
You might want to reconsider, we've heard this area might be contaminated.

FISHERMAN
With what?

OSCAR
A half century's worth of battery acid.

FISHERMAN
...right.
(then)
(MORE)

FISHERMAN (CONT'D)
Well, good luck with your...
whatever this is.

Before Stella can protest again, the Fisherman disappears into the trees.

STELLA (O.C.)
That’s just great.

OSCAR
Maybe the bass will give him superpowers.

Stella scoffs.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The SHOT BOUNCES as Stella shoots Oscar’s back. They step through tall grass, carefully making their way forward.

It’s silent except for the BUZZ of cicadas and the CRUNCH of dead leaves under their shoes.

STELLA (O.C.)
There’s a stream here which runs along the back edge of the property where the Ion factory once stood. We’ll be searching for signs of improper waste disposal.
(then)
Actually, here.

Stella hands Oscar the camera. He points it at her.

STELLA (CONT'D)
We’re looking for things like stunted vegetation growth, a metallic sheen or discoloration to the water, unusual animal behavior, which we’ve already seen.

OSCAR (O.C.)
We assume.

She looks at the fork in the path ahead of them. Then rummages in her pack for Red’s map.

She unrolls it, consults it.

STELLA
We should go this way. I think.

She turns the map, looks at the sun, turns it again.

OSCAR (O.C.)
What's wrong?

STELLA
Nothing.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Have you still not learned how to read a map? I thought you were a girl scout.

STELLA
Yeah, not a cartographer. If you want a friendship bracelet, I got you covered.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Cartographers *make* maps.

STELLA
Well I assume that means they can also read them.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Can you really not tell where we are?

STELLA
Give me a break, neither of us have been here before.

She takes another moment to consult the map...

STELLA (CONT'D)
Okay, yeah this way.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Why?

STELLA
Because it's left. You always go left.

OSCAR (O.C.)
What??

STELLA
If you go left enough times, eventually you'll be facing the right direction.

OSCAR (O.C.)
That's some sound logic.

STELLA
(sotto)
You're sound logic.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Just give it to me.

Stella, defeated, hands Oscar the map.

After a few moments...

STELLA
Well?

Oscar sighs.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Left.

Stella smirks into the lens.

EXT. WOODS - DAY (LATER)

Stella and Oscar truck along in silence for a while.

The birds chirp in the distance. Leaves crunch underfoot.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Does it remind you of her?

STELLA
Being out here?

OSCAR (O.C.)
Yeah.

STELLA
Yeah.

After a few more moments of huffing it, the sound of RUNNING WATER finally appears.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Vindicated!

She pushes through a thicket of brush to an eventual clearing at the edge of a stream.

A smile creeps across her lips.

OSCAR (O.C.)
You look deranged.

STELLA
Okay here, look.

She removes her pack and takes out a pair of large rubber gloves.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Just stay over there and don’t touch the water. I only have one pair of gloves.

Oscar snorts.

After putting the gloves on, she also takes out a small jar and a pack of test strips with colored squares.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Thank you Allegheny College Environmental Sciences Department.

Stella holds the strips up to camera and poses with them as if in a commercial.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Yeah, great, I’m sure they’ll appreciate that.

STELLA
They absolutely will.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Yeah, I said they will.

Stella kneels and dips the jar into the stream, careful not to get any water on her. Once it’s filled with water, she drops a test strip into it.

She watches carefully as the test strip changes color.

STELLA
Weird.

OSCAR (O.C.)
What?

STELLA
I mean it’s not the cleanest water ever, but it says there’s a normal level of contaminants.

OSCAR (O.C.)
I don’t think I need to say “I told you so.”

STELLA
Let me just do another one.

Stella turns her attention back to the water.

A SNAP from the trees behind Stella catches Oscar’s attention. He quickly PANS the camera up to the source.

Stella doesn’t bother to stop. In the foreground, she takes another test strip and drops it into the jar, then covers it.

Another CRUNCH.

Oscar zooms into the trees a bit more, almost completely framing Stella out.

We barely see her put the jar in her bag and zip it up.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Okay we should get moving if we want to get to the gate and back before dark--

Another loud SNAP.

This time Stella whirls around towards the sound.

Something RUSTLES in the trees. Stella stands.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Who’s there?

We hear a low GRUNT from the brush.

OSCAR (O.C.)
(calling out)
Who the fuck is it?

STELLA
(voice shaking)
Come out, now!

More rustling.

The bushes quiver, threatening...

Then Red steps into view.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Jesus *Christ*.

RED
I haven't gotten that one before.

STELLA
Did you follow us?

RED
No, I told you I was coming out here today. Did you think I didn't have my own map memorized?

Stella and Oscar are at a loss.

RED (CONT'D)
Speaking of which.

He steps forward, intimidating.

RED (CONT'D)
(threatening)
I would've been happy to take you out here, you know. You didn't have to steal from me. In fact, it really hurt my feelings.

Stella just stares back at him. A tense silence between them.

Then she sees the HATCHET in his left hand.

Red notices her eyeing it.

RED (CONT'D)
I know what you're thinking, alright. They found an axe in Brenda's head. But this?

He holds up the weapon.

RED (CONT'D)
This is a hatchet. Not an axe. Biiiig difference.
(then)
It's great for cutting down brush in the path.

Red makes a big swinging motion to demonstrate. Stella cringes instinctually.

STELLA
Okay, okay!

RED
Just answer me one thing: how are you going make a movie with no characters? I mean, you're testing *my* theory, you take *my* map, but you won't include the man himself? What's wrong with me? Not Hollywood enough for you?

STELLA
It's not a movie.

OSCAR (O.C.)
(quietly)
We should go.

Red widens his stance and holds out his hand towards Stella.

RED
Give me back my map, please.

STELLA
I thought you had it memorized.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Give it to him, Stella.

STELLA
(to Oscar)
We don't know where we are.

RED
(sinister)
Please, Stella. Give it back.

Stella doesn't move.

RED (CONT'D)
You should have a little more sense of self-preservation. Don't want to end up like your sister.

Red lowers his hand, and grips his hatchet a little tighter.

Oscar clocks the motion and quickly grabs the map from Stella and gives it to Red.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Here!

Red takes it.

RED
Good luck getting out of here on your own.

He starts to walk away.

RED (CONT'D)
(calling back)
Maybe I'll make my own movie. Then we'll see who gets the glory.

This stings. But Stella and Oscar turn away from Red and continue into the forest alone.

EXT. WOODS - DAY (LATER)

The sun hangs lower in the sky. The woods take on a bluish hue as warmth drains out of the air.

Oscar trudges through the dense trees while Stella films.

STELLA (O.C.)
Do you think we should've followed him?

OSCAR
No.

They take a few silent steps.

STELLA (O.C.)
She'd be so pissed that we were out here for her.

OSCAR
She'd be so pissed that she's dead.

STELLA (O.C.)
I like to think she's not.

OSCAR
Uh, what?

STELLA (O.C.)
A lot of physicists believe time is non-linear.

OSCAR
And?

STELLA (O.C.)
Well, if that's the case, then death is an illusion.
(MORE)

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
There is no end because it’s all happening at once.

OSCAR
But if our conscious experience is linear, then it doesn’t really matter. Our awareness of time is linear. Subjectively we still experience an end.

Stella deflates.

STELLA (O.C.)
Well, that sucks.

They take a few more steps, letting that sink in.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Do you think he killed his girlfriend?

OSCAR
Maybe.

A long moment.

STELLA (O.C.)
Do you think he had something to do with Iris killing herself?

An even longer moment.

OSCAR
Maybe.

Stella stops and Oscar turns to her.

STELLA (O.C.)
Do you think he was planning on killing us?

OSCAR
And the battery factory story was just bullshit to get us out here?

STELLA (O.C.)
Yeah.

OSCAR
...maybe.

They let that settle.

Oscar takes a step forward and suddenly DROPS out of frame. Without thinking, Stella reaches for him, then stumbles, sending the camera end over end down a steep hill.

Eventually, the camera comes to a hard stop at the bottom. And CUTS OUT.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

The camera flicks back on, we're surrounded by darkness. Hours seem to have passed.

The frame orients itself, and pans around the new area. The trees are thicker here, more oppressive. It feels somehow quieter.

We then see Stella unconscious on the ground.

Oscar reaches from behind camera and checks her pulse.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Wake up.

He gently shakes her.

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Stella.

She stirs. Then feels the back of her head.

STELLA
(dazed)
My head's bleeding.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Are you dizzy?

STELLA
Not really.

The camera and Oscar stand.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Can you walk?

Stella labors to her feet.

STELLA
Yeah.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Let's go.

Oscar leads the way as they carefully make their way through the darkness with the camera's light as their only illumination.

Every twig that CRACKS underfoot seems deafening.

The further they go, the thicker the trees seem to become. It's unsettling.

Minutes pass like this and they continue their way forward.

When just then, a distant RUSTLE catches their attention.

Oscar freezes.

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Stop.

He slowly pans to the left.

Just trees.

Pans to the right.

More trees.

Pans to look behind Stella--

And the FISHERMAN RUNS AT THEM from the darkness.

Until suddenly, the Fisherman is YANKED backward. He has a vacant expression and TEARS streaming down his cheeks.

He runs forward again, only to be halted again.

The man continues on like this, oddly making short quick strides backward and forward from a tree.

Oscar stumbles backward as he tries to make space.

Then suddenly, a wet red LINE appears on the man's throat.

It's only now that Oscar and Stella see the FISHING POLE that's tied around the tree.

The line from the fishing pole is also WRAPPED AROUND THE MAN'S NECK.

He runs from the tree with exponential effort.

Forcing.

The line.

Through his neck.

Stella SCREAMS.

But before she can do anything, blood POURS from the man's neck, and he drops to the ground. Dead.

Stella and Oscar can only scream, barely comprehending what they just witnessed.

Then suddenly, a SHAKE from a nearby bush.

Stella's still screaming when Oscar pan's to the bush. He can barely make out the shape of an ANIMAL that looks like it's preparing to CHARGE.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
Run, Stella!

The camera is YANKED away with a quick jostle, then cuts to STATIC.

INT. FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

An UP CLOSE shot of Iris' ghost costume as she stands at someone's door.

YOUNG IRIS
TRICK OR TREAT!

STATIC AGAIN.

THEN--

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

The camera JOSTLES AROUND as Stella and Oscar make a run for it.

They trip.

Heavy breathing.

More running.

The world is an endless blur of trees and dirt.

MORE STATIC.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT (MOMENTS LATER)

Oscar films chaotically as they both continue running.

OSCAR (O.C.)
(near hysterics)
What was that, a wild boar?

STELLA
(exasperated)
Boar?? All I saw was the man cutting his own head off!

OSCAR (O.C.)
It just seems weird that we have boars out here!

STELLA
They’re mostly non-native, and cause really severe ecological damage!

OSCAR (O.C.)
That’s a huge disruption of ecosystem dynamics!

STATIC.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT (MOMENTS LATER) ALT

Oscar films chaotically as they both continue running.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Oh god, oh god...

STELLA
What the fuck was that??

OSCAR (O.C.)
Oh god--

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT (LATER)

The camera is steady. Oscar is seated on a log with his head in his hands.

OSCAR
Where are we??

STELLA (O.C.)
I don’t know--

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

HEAVY BREATHING heaves behind the camera, currently aimed at the ground.

We can hardly see anything in the dark - until the camera’s FLASHLIGHT CLICKS ON, illuminating a few feet in each direction.

Oscar raises the camera and points it at Stella who trudges along, exhausted.

OSCAR (O.C.)
How long have we been walking?

STELLA
I don’t know, hours?

OSCAR (O.C.)
How are we gonna get home?

STELLA
If we can just find the stream, maybe--

OSCAR (O.C.)
I told you we shouldn’t have come here.

STELLA
What are you talking about? You didn’t say that!

OSCAR (O.C.)
I said it was a bad lead and we should wait.

STELLA
That’s not the same thing!
(then, composing herself)
It doesn’t matter.

OSCAR (O.C.)
You’re just saying that because it’s your fault we’re here.

STELLA
Why me? Maybe it’s Red’s fault for showing us the map. Or Iris’ for plummeting out of a fucking tree!

OSCAR (O.C.)
Okay, okay, I’m sorry, jeeze. I’m just scared.

STELLA
So, what do we do now?

OSCAR (O.C.)
(incredulous)
You’re asking me?
(then, pointed)
You’re the one who’s been calling the shots so far.

STELLA
I know you think I’m a fucking idiot, but you don’t have to talk to me like one.

She stands, picks a direction, and strides off.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Where are you going?

STELLA
I’m not going to sit here with you and pout. We have to get in touch with the police and get some help to that fisherman. I’ll walk til I find something.

She’s quickly getting out of range of the light.

Oscar goes after her. The camera’s flashlight dances in the trees.

OSCAR (O.C.)
Wait.

He finally spots Stella waiting for him. He jogs to catch her.

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
We can’t split up. That would be the dumbest possible thing.

STELLA
Then keep up.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Oscar holds the camera and points it into the trees.

STELLA
(whispering)
Listen.

Suddenly, an odd CRYING sounds in the distance. It's faint, but almost sounds like a woman crying.

The camera zooms in the direction of the sound.

OSCAR (O.C.)
She sounds like she needs help.

Oscar starts to move in the direction of the sound, but Stella stops him.

STELLA
Wait, what are you doing?

OSCAR (O.C.)
I'm not letting someone else hurt themselves. I couldn't live with that.

STELLA
I think we need to start looking out for ourselves right now.

OSCAR (O.C.)
What if we could stop her. Ask her what really happened?

Stella let's go of him. Something comes alive behind her eyes as she looks at the camera.

STELLA
Let's do it.

They start to move toward the sound, their pace quickening.

The crying grows louder and more distressing. It sounds distinctly human, but also somehow... not. Uncanny.

They move even faster.

Through trees and brush.

To finally, a clearing.

But the crying stops abruptly, replaced by an unwelcome silence.

Stella pauses, scanning the area with the camera.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Hello?

The camera swings around, capturing nothing but trees and silence. Occasionally a confused Oscar.

STELLA (CONT'D)
I don’t understand. Where is she? Where--

OSCAR (O.C.)
Stella.

STELLA
What?

OSCAR (O.C.)
Look.

He points to the slender green leaves of blue flag irises at their feet.

OSCAR (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Do you know where we are?

He zooms in on the flowers. Then suddenly shoves the camera into Stella’s hands.

STELLA (O.C.)
What are you--

When Stella pans back up, tears are STREAMING down Oscar’s cheeks.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Hey, whoa. It’s okay.

Oscar chokes on a sob. Then falls to his knees.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Oscar. What’s happening?

OSCAR
I-- I don’t know.

STELLA (O.C.)
You didn't even cry this much when we found out she died.

Through gasps:

OSCAR
Maybe I-- maybe I never really accepted that she was gone. That any of this--

But he can't get the words out.

STELLA (O.C.)
Oz, listen--

OSCAR
I don't want to do this anymore, Stell. I don't want to-- it's too much.

STELLA (O.C.)
What are you talking about?

OSCAR
It's too hard!! I want to be with her.

STELLA (O.C.)
Wait, what--

OSCAR
(hysterical)
I want to take one of these sticks and drive it through my eye.

STELLA (O.C.)
Stop--

OSCAR
Twist it until it punches through my brain.

STELLA (O.C.)
Oscar--

OSCAR
Until my head is a shredded puddle of BLOOD and PULP leaking out my ears--

STELLA (O.C.)
Oscar, stop!

Stella drops the camera, which lands on the ground, capturing them at an upended angle.

She grabs his face hard.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Stop it!

He sobs into her hands, a wet mess of tears and snot.

OSCAR
I'll do it! I'll--

Stella SLAPS him hard.

And he suddenly goes silent. A look of shock washes over Oscar's face as he wraps his head around what the fuck just happened.

STELLA
Oz?

OSCAR
I-- I don't know what that was.

STELLA
It's okay.

OSCAR
I'm sorry, I don't know what that was.

STELLA
It's okay, Oscar. Relax.

He takes a few more deep breaths, and after a while, they finally get back up.

STELLA (CONT'D)
You good?

OSCAR
Yeah.

Stella picks up the camera and they start walking again.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT (LATER)

Slowly, and silently, Stella and Oscar make their way through the trees. It feels like an eternity passes like this.

When suddenly, from the distance:

RED (O.C.)
Help!

Stella and Oscar freeze. They look at each other. The voice is so far away they can barely hear it.

STELLA
Did that sound like Red to you?

Oscar nods.

Stella swings the light around, searching the trees.

RED (O.C.)
Help me, please!

Oscar shoots her a nervous look before carefully moving toward the voice.

They push through the trees to:

EXT. ION LABS - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Stella and Oscar come upon what's left of the abandoned battery factory.

STELLA (O.C.)
It's Ion Labs.

RED (O.C.)
Help!

Oscar looks at Stella, shaking his head in dissent.

STELLA (O.C.)
He has the map.

OSCAR
Stella.

STELLA (O.C.)
Oz.

He sighs, then scans the ground, and picks up a rusted out metal pipe.

OSCAR
Okay.

They step inside.

INT. ION LABS - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

It’s pitch dark. Stella can’t see shit.

The camera’s on board light only provides a little relief from the blackness.

Barely visible, we can see cinderblock walls and stained electrical panels.

And a hallway that seems to go on for eternity.

It’s all been stripped down and left empty. A husk of a former factory.

STELLA (O.C.)
Red?

A long time before a response.

RED (O.C.)
Stella?

STELLA (O.C.)
Where are you?

But there’s no response.

Stella slows but keeps moving forward.

STELLA (O.C.) (CONT'D)
...Red?

Still nothing.

The deeper she makes her way into the factory the darker it seems to become.

Further and further...

OSCAR
I don’t like this.

A CRASH sounds in the distance.

Stella stops.

STELLA (O.C.)
Red? Answer us!

Silence.

For a long time.

So long that it starts to seem suspicious...

Until from deep in the darkness, a figure emerges at a break neck pace. Running right toward them--

It's RED.

Before she knows what she's looking at, Red CRASHES right into Stella as she BOLTS for the exit.

The camera JOSTLES WILDLY, disorienting.

CUT TO STATIC. The video swirls and emits sounds that indicate it's been recorded over more than once. Iris' young voice, but warped, pleading, drawn out.

YOUNG IRIS
Please, Stella?

Then--

EXT. ION LABS - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

The camera orients itself as they all emerge back out into the woods. Red quickly backs off.

RED
Wait, wait. I'm sorry!

STELLA (O.C.)
What the fuck were you doing??

RED
I heard crying in here, and I thought someone might be in danger. But then I got locked inside one of the rooms -- I eventually had to break down a door.

STELLA (O.C.)
Why the fuck were you running at us??

RED
I saw something! There was an animal or something in there. I could barely even see you until I was already on top of you.

OSCAR
You've just been out here this whole time?

Oscar looks down at the HATCHET that Red dropped amongst his other belongings.

RED
I was doing some tests here.

STELLA (O.C.)
That’s not what you just said.

RED
It isn’t?

STELLA (O.C.)
No, you said you heard crying and then decided to go in.

RED
Well, it’s what I said earlier I mean. I was collecting some water samples then headed here to get more. It just took me a while to get started, I was upset and needed to get my head straight first. You guys really wound me up back there with cutting me out of the movie and all.

STELLA (O.C.)
It’s not a fucking movie!

RED
Alright, jeeze.

OSCAR
(to Red)
You’re the one that keeps sneaking up on us.

RED
I wasn’t sneaking. You came to me this time! And the first time I was just approaching you. Is it not okay to walk up to two people who reached out to me online in the first place?

STELLA (O.C.)
We made it pretty clear we wanted space when we ran out of your house.

RED
I didn’t do anything!

OSCAR
You bruised my arm!

RED
That was an accident. You don't even know me.

OSCAR
We know enough.

RED
What does that mean?

STELLA (O.C.)
What happened to Brenda, really?

RED
She killed herself supposedly.

STELLA (O.C.)
Supposedly?

RED
Well, I don't think that's the whole story, same as you!

STELLA (O.C.)
Are you sure you didn't hurt her?

RED
What?? Why would I do that? I loved Brenda. She was my whole world.

OSCAR
You have the murder weapon.

Both Red and the camera look down at the hatchet again.

RED
I told you, that's a hatchet. Not an axe.

STELLA (O.C.)
Big difference.

RED
Why would I be poking holes in the suicide theory if I actually killed her? I already got away with it.

STELLA (O.C.)
Is that an admission??

RED
No! I meant I would've already gotten away with it if they declared it a suicide.

STELLA (O.C.)
That's not what you said.

RED
This is ridiculous.

A SNAP suddenly sounds from the woods. Red turns toward it. His brow furrows, he sees something.

RED (CONT'D)
What is that?

STELLA (O.C.)
Just confess, Red, it'll be a lot easier.

Tears start to well in Red's eyes.

RED
I didn't do it! I didn't hurt her! I'd rather be dead than live another day without her.

Red's sobbing now. He takes a step toward the hatchet.

OSCAR
Don't move! Don't move and inch!

RED
I'm so lonely now!

More SNAPS from the trees. Red goes for the hatchet.

STELLA (O.C.)
He said don't!

Red lunges for the hatchet, and at the same time Stella drops the camera and goes for it too.

Chaos as Red and Stella wrestle over the weapon.

RED
You don't even know pain, you bitch!

STELLA
Oscar!

Oscar leaps on Red, but it’s really just a mess of bodies tangled over this sharp object.

OSCAR
Get off of her!

They all fight against each other.

They grunt.

And kick.

And tear.

Until--

CRACK.

A crimson tint washes over the camera.

And all at once, it stops.

Red goes completely still as a stunned expression turns on his face.

What the fuck just happened?

Red’s eyes blink rapidly in shock. A few broken noises choke out of his throat as his mashed brain tries to make words.

Then he suddenly falls to his knees.

And we see Oscar kneeling behind him with the hatchet in his hand. He quickly drops it, horrified.

Red collapses onto the ground, and we see the massive wound on the back of his head.

Both Oscar and Stella look down at Red’s body in stunned horror.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
I didn’t mean to. I was just trying to get it away from him! I couldn’t see what I was doing, everyone was on top of each other, I--

When suddenly, the SNAPS from the trees resume.

Then something unseen DRAGS Red’s corpse away, into the dark.

Oscar and Stella freak out at the horrific sight.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
What the fuck??

STELLA (O.C.)
Go! Run!

They book it as fast as they can.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

RED-DRENCHED SHOTS of Oscar and Stella running through the trees and along the stream.

The two of them pant and sob in a panicked rhythm as they move through a rocky area.

Then, A MISSTEP -- Stella's ankle twists beneath her with a loud POP.

Stella cries out in pain and the CAMERA GOES FLYING--

STATIC FLICKERS, then fades into:

INT. FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

More Halloween footage.

Young Iris and Stella are half out of their costumes, going through their candy buckets.

Iris spots something she wants in Stella's bucket and reaches for it.

Stella tries to pull it back with a WHINE.

YOUNG IRIS
Please, Stella? This one is my favorite.

YOUNG STELLA
You have your own.

YOUNG IRIS
But I didn't get any of this one.

YOUNG STELLA
No, Iris, I want these!

YOUNG IRIS
But what about me--

The footage cuts to STATIC.

Then A BLUE SCREEN.

We hold on blue.

For a while.

Longer.

Eeeeeven longer.

Stretching patience now. Is the movie over?

Cut to BLACK.

TEXT OVER BLACK:

END OF FOOTAGE.

The text disappears. This really seems over. Short movie, I guess.

But then, a SCREAM rings out in the dark.

Note: the rest of the film is shot cinematically.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

We match to Stella SCREAMING in pain, her ankle twisted. The sun is teasing its rise, a pale gray creeping up the sky.

Stella's ankle bone protrudes from the skin. The wound bleeds profusely.

STELLA
Oh my god! It's bad! It's so bad!

OSCAR
(panicked)
It's not great.

STELLA
What do we do??

OSCAR
I don't know!

STELLA
You're a doctor!

OSCAR
Not yet!

STELLA
Oscar!

OSCAR
Okay okay, let me think! Stop fucking screaming at me!

Oscar guides her to sit down on the rocks.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
Can you get it out?

Stella gingerly lifts her foot out of the hole she stepped into, wincing.

Oscar peels the canvas tongue of her shoe back. Her ankle is swollen to twice its size. The bone protrudes from the skin.

STELLA
I don’t feel so great.

She grabs his arm to steady herself.

OSCAR
Your hands are fucking freezing. I think you’re going into shock.

Stella’s lips have gone purple.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
Lie down right now. I have to elevate your legs. Get blood to your vital organs.

Stella screams unintelligibly as Oscar raises her knees up.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
Don’t move.

He gathers a couple sticks and fashions a splint. Then he covers the wound with gauze from his pack.

STELLA
You don’t have to re-set the bone?

OSCAR
Only if you want it to get jacked up and cause more damage.
(sincerely)
Do you want that?

STELLA
(the smallest smile)
Fuck off.

He continues working.

OSCAR
Okay, done.
(then)
You should stay like this for a while until you stabilize.

The quiet settles in. Then:

STELLA
Thank you.

OSCAR
Can’t let you make me a sibling orphan.

OSCAR (CONT'D) STELLA
A sorphan. A sorphan. *

The smallest amusement. And then the moment settles again.

A long time passes like this as the blood slowly returns to Stella’s brain and her cheeks get back their color.

Stella looks down at Oscar’s red hands.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Is that my blood?

Oscar’s face contorts.

OSCAR
I didn’t see that before.

He tries to wipe it off on his pants. But the skins seems stained. He tries again, more agitated this time.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
I thought he was gonna hurt you.

STELLA
I know. He might’ve.

He keeps wiping his hands.

STELLA (CONT'D)
You don’t--

Wiping more frantically.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Oscar stop! Stop it.

He finally does. Then, after a long time.

OSCAR
I killed a person.

STELLA
You don’t know that. Whatever took him might have.
(then)
Okay?

Oscar nods. A beat.

OSCAR
How are we gonna get out of this?

STELLA
You didn’t get his map, did y--

Off his look, she stops herself.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Never mind.

But then, Stella gets an idea.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Wait. Wait a minute. I’m so fucking stupid. Where’s the camera?

OSCAR
What? Why?

STELLA
Just where? Do you see it?

Oscar picks it up from behind a large rock. It’s sticky with blood and scratched up on the sides.

Stella looks it over. Holds the power button...

And it flickers to life.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Yes! Okay give me the tape from earlier. I think maybe -- what if there’s a clear shot of the map from when Red first showed us?

OSCAR
Oh my god.

Oscar goes through his bag searching for the tape.

She takes out the current tape in the meantime.

He finally unearths it and hands it to her.

STELLA
No, the tape from before.

OSCAR
This is the tape from before.

STELLA
The one we filmed all Red's cabin stuff on.

OSCAR
Yes?

STELLA
Are you kidding me?

OSCAR
What?

Stella's face sinks as she barely chokes the words out.

STELLA
This is Iris' death tape. Are you telling me we filmed over the whole thing??

Devastation washes over her.

OSCAR
I mean, I don't know! That was the tape that was in there! Was it rewound all the way?

STELLA
I told you to change the tape!

OSCAR
No, you asked if there was one in there already.

STELLA
I can't believe you did this. I can't believe you could be so fucking stupid. That's the whole story. It's all gone now. This whole thing is pointless.

OSCAR
I thought the point was to figure out the truth.

STELLA
It-- it is!

OSCAR
No, it's not. You just want to profit off her death. Like this was your big scoop.

STELLA
It doesn't matter now.

OSCAR
Yes it does!

STELLA
Fine! I saw an opportunity okay? Sue me!

OSCAR
Oh my god...

STELLA
I didn't see another way back in after Prospect!

OSCAR
What are you talking about? The story you quit in the middle of? Who cares about that?

STELLA
I didn't quit.

OSCAR
What do you mean you didn't quit?

STELLA
I didn't quit! I was fired.

OSCAR
For what??

Stella looks at him for a long time before continuing. She clearly doesn't want to tell him this.

Finally, she just chokes it out.

STELLA
It was a domestic abuse case, right? But the story wasn't worth shit without a quote from the victim.
(MORE)

STELLA (CONT'D)
So I kept going to her house trying to get an interview, and I guess it turns out she'd actually been in hiding. And her ex knew I was writing the story, and he'd been following me... so yeah, he found out where she was, and... it didn't end well, okay? For her or for me.
(then)
But it wasn't my fault! Sometimes a few eggs get broken. That's how this works.

Oscar's at a loss.

OSCAR
I can't even look at you.

He gets up.

STELLA
Wait! Wait, don't leave me!

OSCAR
I'm not leaving you! I'm getting the map.

STELLA
I can come with you.

But his face sinks with disappointment in her.

OSCAR
You shouldn't move.

And then he disappears into the woods.

For a long.

Long.

Time.

EXT. WOODS - DAWN

The sun rises a little bit higher in the sky. Barely poking through the tree canopy now.

EXT. WOODS - DAWN (LATER)

Stella still waits for Oscar to return. It's been what feels like an eternity since he left.

But he doesn't come back.

Finally, Stella wills herself to get onto her feet.

She grabs a nearby LARGE STICK and starts hobbling in the direction he'd gone.

EXT. WOODS - DAWN

Stella limps her way through thick underbrush. She's disheveled and pale.

The weathered stick she uses as a crutch barely supports her weight.

Her breath is labored and pained with every inch forward. Sweat drips down her forehead. This is torture.

When suddenly, Stella's foot catches a hidden root.

She stumbles forward, trying to catch herself with the stick, but it's no good.

She hits the ground hard. A cry of pain rips through the stillness as she lands awkwardly on her bad leg.

Stella rolls onto her back, clutching her ankle, face twisted in agony. Her breaths come in short, ragged gasps.

And then, she just lies there for a moment.

The quiet becomes oppressive. Suffocating.

Until a low WHIMPER breaks the silence. That woman's voice again. The sound of it chills through Stella's spine.

Her eyes widen, body tensing.

She pushes herself up onto her elbows, scanning the space for its source.

The whimper comes again. Closer this time.

Stella tries to stand, but her ankle gives out. She falls back with a cry, her hands clawing at the dirt and leaves.

She drags herself through the dirt trying to pull herself away from that sound.

But she hears it again.

Right in her ear.

Stella closes her eyes, she doesn’t want to see whatever it is that makes that noise. She knows it’s not human.

We stay tight on Stella’s face for the rest of this sequence. If she can’t see the world around her, neither will we.

Stella GRUNTS as she continues to pull herself forward.

That CRY, the softest of inhuman sorrow, hisses in her ear. She freezes.

And after a long moment, we begin to see the snout of some bastardized version of a boar. The skin on its face is so wrinkled it almost looks melted, covered with viscous tears and spit.

Stella doesn’t dare look at it.

STELLA
(whispering)
Please go away.

The sticks and leaves CRUNCH as Stella drags her body forward again.

Her labored breath quickens.

The WHIMPER gets louder now.

Building and building to a full on SOB.

Stella crawls faster, the ground shifting beneath her in hurried bursts.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Stop! Please stop!

The inhuman CRY is almost deafening now.

STELLA (CONT'D)
LEAVE ME ALONE!

Stella TUMBLES down a decline, a chaotic mess of blurs and noise.

Until she hits the ground hard.

Followed by silence.

After a few moments of this Stella finally opens her eyes. We now see she’s landed in a clearing surrounded by a thick layer of trees.

She scans the space and jumps when she sees Oscar standing at the far end of the clearing leaning forward against a large tree. His arms are wrapped around his head, covering his ears.

Oscar doesn't move an inch.

Stella grabs her stick and struggles hard to her feet. She slowly makes her way toward Oscar.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Oscar?

He doesn't reply.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Oscar? Are you sleepwalking again?

Slowly but surely Stella is able to make her way to him.

STELLA (CONT'D)
...Oz?

Stella reaches a hand out to Oscar, but just before she can touch him, he spins around. Almost as if he never even heard her approaching.

His eyes are wide, and tears are streaming down his cheeks.

Finally, words come. Barely audible.

OSCAR
I saw it. It wouldn't stop crying, and then I saw it.

She looks around, but it's just them now.

Oscar's face twists as he searches for the words.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
It's like an infection. The sadness. It knows what I did. To Red. It knows.

STELLA
Hey--

She reaches for his shoulder, but he swats her away.

OSCAR
Don't touch me!

Stella backs off.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
I don’t deserve it. I’m bad. I’m a bad person.

He sobs where he stands.

STELLA
You’re not bad.

Oscar’s cries become hysterical. He cries so much he vomits.

She tries again to step forward--

OSCAR
Don’t!

So she doesn’t.

And without even thinking... she reaches for her camera.

And presses record.

But what she doesn’t see is the “NO TAPE” warning blinking on the bottom of the screen.

She zooms in on Oscar as he continues to break down.

STELLA
Just relax, Oz.

OSCAR
I don’t deserve to be here and not him.

In one swift motion, Oscar picks up a sharp stick and quickly JABS IT INTO HIS EYE, over and over.

Stella SCREAMS and instinctively drops the camera, lunging for the stick. She manages to wrestle it away from him before she loses her balance.

The dead weight of Stella’s leg takes her to the ground. She FALLS HARD on her hip.

Oscar’s body falls to the ground next to her. She turns away from it, squeezes her eyes shut so she can’t see it twitch.

But we can.

Stella lets out another scream.

She tips her head back, desperate.

STELLA
HELP! ANYONE!

She sobs to herself.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Help me!

Several beats go by waiting for a reply, but there's nothing.

Stella sits in the eerie silence for a moment, trying to slow her heartbeat. It seems more deafening than ever.

She trembles in the cold, still covered in Red's blood, or is it Oscars?

Grief hardly touches her yet through the shock.

Finally, Stella pulls herself onto her good leg. She picks up a large stick and uses it as support.

For a while, she shuffles along the stream with the walking stick. Prays she's moving the right way.

Every tiny sound from the still-dark woods around her sounds like a threat.

Up close, her face bears the hollow look of someone whose entire world has been shattered.

The sun has almost come to the edge of the horizon. The air GLOWS A SOFT PINK.

Stella reaches a sort of crest. Beyond it, she can hear CARS in the distance.

She's almost there.

Stella sighs with relief. Tears spring to her eyes. *She's finally going to get out of these woods.*

Then, that CRY slithers through her, piercing the moment like a popped balloon.

Stella draws a sharp inhale. Her breath gets shallow.

The horrible, drawn-out MOAN echoes through the trees. The sound twists and distorts, very barely like a woman now.

Stella clasps her hands to her ears and tries to block it out and continue walking.

But she hears it again as if her hands do nothing to quiet it at all.

Behind her, we see something move. Just a silhouette. The shape indicates a bear or some sort of large pig, but its movements are terrifyingly fluid.

The sound of the creature moves through the trees surrounding Stella.

After a while, she can't help but glance in its direction--

And she sees it. But we stay on Stella's face as it slowly begins to shift.

Into that same vacant expression that Iris had. That Oscar had.

And then tears stream down her cheeks.

The creature begins its guttural SOB. It's so visceral. Completely inhuman now.

It soon becomes EXCRUCIATINGLY LOUD.

Stella's ears RING. Covering them makes no difference. The sound is in her bones.

But instead of breaking her down, the sobs push her to the edge. She can't fucking take it anymore.

She lets out the most primal SCREAM in response.

Fuck this thing.

This is the thing that took her sister.

And her brother.

It won't take her too.

Stella grips her walking stick and swings it like a baseball bat against a nearby tree.

It completely shatters into two pointed halves.

One painful step at a time, Stella hobbles her way in the direction of the creature. Wielding her weapon.

A FLASH MEMORY in Stella's mind of Oscar tossing the coco-puffs into his mouth. He laughs.

Then something begins to happen to Stella.

Another FLASH MEMORY of Oscar stabbing himself with the stick.

The closer she gets to the creature, the more she cries.

A FLASH MEMORY of Iris' ant-infested corpse.

And then Stella realizes that suddenly, she's turning the weapon on herself.

It's very nearly pressed up against her own neck.

Horrified, Stella throws the stick to the ground, and collapses to the ground.

Sobbing hysterically now, Stella continues to crawl forward.

STELLA (CONT'D)
(encouraging herself)
No! No...

She pushes the stick out in front of her, careful not to keep a hand on it too long.

But it's not working. She can't take the pain anymore.

Stella collapses into the dirt, sobbing. Broken.

The moment hangs here as she stares at that fucking stick. Considers what she could do with it.

She holds the stick above herself...

Then, a heavy shadow falls over her:

THE CREATURE, a hulking mass, looms over her, making that horrible sob in its throat.

She grips the stick tighter, adjusting the angle up toward her own chest. As if her limbs are functioning separately from her brain.

Tears stream from her eyes.

STELLA (CONT'D)
I just want it to stop.

Whether she's talking to herself or the creature is unclear.

The creature's tears drop onto Stella. One hits the back of her neck.

Stella's face twists in agony as she fights against her own arms.

She steadies the stick. Pulls it back--

And then, in one movement, Stella LEANS BACK and THRUSTS IT UP THROUGH HER SHOULDER AND INTO THE CREATURE'S BELLY.

The creature HOWLS. The sound ROARS in Stella's ears.

Instead of blood, more water falls from the creature. Its skin steams.

Stella reacts to the hot water. Each drop feels like a hot poker.

She digs the stick deeper in. The thing SQUEALS in pain. It liquifies even more, as if dissolving.

With a final SCREAM of effort, Stella twists the stick and YANKS it out of both of them, then shoves it off of her.

The creature stumbles away. We hear it quickly collapse with one last sad MOAN.

Stella gasps for air. She takes a moment before sitting up. She looks over to the creature's corpse.

There's nothing left but a steaming puddle, quickly dissolving into the dirt.

The sun has begun to rise. Shadows still fall across the trees, but somehow, they no longer seem threatening. Birds chirp. A warm breeze hums in the air.

Stella looks around - finds a new stick.

She crawls to it on her forearms and uses it to pull herself up to standing.

She continues along the river.

Then comes to a fork in the path. She goes left.

And after a few moments, she hears CARS again.

EXT. ONE-LANE HIGHWAY - DAY

Finally, Stella emerges from the trees. Filthy. Limping. But free. She did it.

Stella limps down the empty highway.

The sun lifts higher into the sky. It's getting hot.

Her tears have dried into a crust around her eyes. Her skin is beginning to look burnt.

But Stella continues to push on.

Up ahead, she spots HER CAR parked in the turnout.

She sees Red's busted SUV parked right next to it. A shudder moves through her.

Stella unlocks her driver's side door and gets in.

INT. CAR - DAY

Stella slams the door shut after her.

Suddenly the closed door BLOCKS OUT ALL THE NATURE NOISE.

Stella sits there for a moment soaking in the silence.

Stella sets her bag and the camera in the passenger seat. She takes a deep breath and puts the key in the ignition. Hesitates.

She takes a moment to buckle her seat belt and starts the car.

EXT. HIGHWAY/INT. CAR - DAY (TRAVELING)

We stay with Stella as she moves the car out of the turnout and merges onto the highway.

A crusty PUNK-ROCK SONG crackles through the speakers.

Stella drives....

And drives...

And drives.

Then a silhouette catches the corner of her eye from the trees. Blink at you'd miss it.

She turns her glance toward the woods, but whatever it was is already out of sight.

Stella turns back to the road.

A sniffle or two escapes her, but of course they do. She sniffs them back.

She sucks it up and wipes her eyes on her sleeve.

Then, Stella laughs.

It feels so good to laugh.

She lets it ring out.

The laughs become hysterical. She can’t stop. Tears fall from her face.

Then, the laughs turn to SOBS.

Stella just lets herself cry for a while.

Yellow lines flicker by on the road.

It feels so good to cry.

Tears stream down her cheeks.

She loosens her grip on the steering wheel, allowing the car to drift.

The crying and laughing mix together into completely unhinged emotional chaos.

The car moves gradually over the yellow lines into the opposite lane.

We see HEADLIGHTS GROWING ON HER FACE--

An oncoming car’s horn HONKS as Stella’s face drops into that vacant stare...

The car’s HONK becomes a WAIL...

THE END.