

BACKWATER BURNING

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1 COLD OPEN

INT. A BROOKLYN, NY LIQUOR SHOP-NIGHT.

The shop CLERK stares at a small TV. Images of an apocalyptic storm system pour across the screen.

He walks to his front door and peers outside.

EXT. A BROOKLYN, NY STREET-NIGHT.

The street is deserted. Massive clouds arch in the distance.

INT. LIQUOR SHOP-NIGHT.

The clerk pulls down a metal security door but a hand stops it from underneath. He pulls the door back up.

ELEANOR MONROE (28 years), an awkwardly beautiful woman with dark, messy hair, stands in the doorway.

ELEANOR
I'll just be a second.

INT. THE LIQUOR SHOP-NIGHT.

Eleanor inspects the inventory, in search of the perfect bottle. She lands on a 26er of vodka. She brings it to the counter.

The clerk is staring at his TV, anxiously.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)
Just this.

EXT. AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE SOMEWHERE IN BROOKLYN-NIGHT.

INT. WAREHOUSE-NIGHT.

A makeshift dance-floor is packed.

ELEANOR (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
Do you ever wonder what it would be
like to be in a plane crash?

Hedonist partiers indulge themselves.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER)
Wind rushing at you as you look
around at the horrible faces people
make when they know it's all over
(MORE)

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 but before anything is technically
 wrong with their bodies.

A light over the dance-floor catches fire.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 One second you're just sitting
 there watching reruns of Seinfeld
 or mixing your clamato juice or
 doing whatever the fuck you do on a
 plane. The next minute the rudder
 rips off the tail, some fault in
 the fiberglass that we didn't know
 about and then the nose goes into a
 dive and everyone screams.

A mosh-pit forms under the burning light.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 Coffees splash brown swaths across
 the cabin, brief cases tumble out
 of storage bins, bodies fly up and
 hit the ceiling, unless you're one
 of the luckier ones strapped into
 your seat, and then you just feel
 your stomach fall out of your ass,
 as you clutch the armrest and try
 to wrap your mind around how fucked
 you are.

A man gets thrown down and trampled. He vomits on himself.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 And once the plane starts falling,
 like really falling fast, bits of
 it start breaking off. Maybe the
 engines come off their mounts or
 maybe the flaps break loose and
 flutter for a second, before
 tearing off into the night sky.

A piece falls from the light. Patrons scream in delight.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 The oxygen masks fall and you put
 them on knowing that the last thing
 you're going to smell is sweet,
 sterile plastic. You're sentenced
 to keep falling until you meet
 ground or water or whatever.

A blissed-out partier passes around an oxygen tank.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 You're totally alive but seconds
 from being sludge, spread across a
 flaming field or torrential ocean
 (MORE)

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
or the side of mountain.

The fire spreads and the room fills with smoke.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
You don't have time to think about
how Brody didn't call you back or
how your thesis wasn't picked up
for publication or how you lost
your virginity in the backseat of
your stepmom's minivan. Or about
how you're pretty sure you're not
going to amount to much.

Patrons rush for the exit.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
In fact, you don't have the ability
to think at all. The gravity is too
strong, it's pulling all that
mundane shit out of your guts. And
you're just alive on the most
primal level. And not for long.
While you fall and scream or don't.

Bottleneck forms around the door.

ELEANOR MONROE (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
Just clutch the armrest, crunch up
your face and hope everything goes
black soon. And then it does and
you're none the wiser.

A young woman dances alone in the smoke.

INT. A CLUB BATHROOM-NIGHT.

Eleanor stares in the mirror, studying herself. Her mascara
is smeared, her eyes are bloodshot, her expression is blank.

The lights go out. Eleanor flicks on her lighter,
illuminating herself and TAWNIE (late teens), a young woman
with ghostly blonde hair, standing next to her.

Water drips from the ceiling; the drips build into a spray
and then a rush. The lighter stays aflame, while the women
watch themselves become completely submerged. Eleanor screams
in agony. Tawnie screams in pleasure. Bubbles burst out of
their mouths.

The lighter goes out.

2 ACT ONE

INT. A UNIVERSITY BOARDROOM—DAY.

DR. DIANE BELL (late 40s), a nervous, bird-like woman in a pant-suit, sits opposite Eleanor at a long table.

DR. PAUL ECKHART (mid 60s), a visibly irritated older gentlemen in a tweed jacket, sits beside her.

DR. BELL

Eleanor, I need you to confirm that you understand what's happening.

Eleanor stares, vacantly.

DR. BELL (CONT'D)

Eleanor? Did you hear me? You're being issued a leave of absence from your research post. Your classes have been reassigned. It's all probationary, though. You can still come back from this.

DR. ECKHART (CONT'D)

Just have her sign the paper.

DR. BELL (CONT'D)

We have a responsibility to ensure that she understands what she's signing, Paul. Do you understand, Eleanor?

DR. ECKHART (CONT'D)

She understands, Di.

Eleanor signs the paper.

DR. BELL (CONT'D)

Eleanor. You don't have to rush this. Are you sure you—

ELEANOR

Mhmm.

DR. BELL

You do?

ELEANOR

Yeah.

DR. BELL

OK.

Pause.

DR. BELL (CONT'D)
Eleanor, there's help out there.
The union may cover it.

DR. ECKHART (CONT'D)
Oh, for Christ's sake. The union...
What union? Thank you, Eleanor. You
can leave now.

Eleanor gets up and leaves. Dr. Bell follows her into the hallway.

INT. A UNIVERSITY HALLWAY—DAY.

Eleanor stares at a framed print. "Babylon's Feast" by John Martin depicts the apocalyptic fall of Babylon.

ELEANOR
Guess the party's over.

DR. BELL
Listen, I've been fighting for you.

ELEANOR
I know, Di.

DR. BELL
And what are you going to do now?

Eleanor shrugs.

DR. BELL (CONT'D)
Be careful.

INT. A NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY—DAY.

Eleanor wears sunglasses and sits across from SUBWAY GUY (early 30s), a creepier version of Christian Bale, who holds a can of Bud Light and has an earphone dangling from one ear.

He stares her down.

ELEANOR
Can I help you?

SUBWAY GUY
Those glasses. Her glasses. Your
glasses.

He makes an "OK" with his fingers.

SUBWAY GUY (CONT'D)
Really working.

Eleanor slides her sunglasses off and pockets them.

SUBWAY GUY (CONT'D)

What do you drive, like a Volvo or something?

ELEANOR

A Civic.

SUBWAY GUY

Shit. You gotta feed the gerbils on that thing or they run on their own?

ELEANOR

What do you drive? Something with a trunk big enough for a hooker?

SUBWAY GUY

A Saturn. I know, it's brutal. I gotta make an appointment with the fuckin' thing just to get to sixty. So, you wanna come to a party tonight? Good people. Good music. Hang with me and Charlie?

ELEANOR

You hangin' with Charlie right now?

SUBWAY GUY

Yeah, I'd say so. Learn it, love it, live it.

The train screeches to a halt in the tunnel.

Eleanor looks out the window. When she looks back, Tawnie is sitting next to Subway Guy, rubbing his inner thigh. He doesn't notice. Eleanor shifts, nervously.

ELEANOR

What kind of music is it going to be?

SUBWAY GUY

Noise music. Skinny Puppy shit.

ELEANOR

You into them?

SUBWAY GUY

Fuck no.

ELEANOR

I thought you just said—

SUBWAY GUY

Give me your number, I'll call you.

Eleanor looks at Tawnie, who now has her leg over Subway

Guy's.

ELEANOR
Or how about you just fuck me now.

SUBWAY GUY
Huh?

ELEANOR
You wanna fuck me now?

SUBWAY GUY
Uh, yeah. OK. Sure.

Eleanor takes him by the hand and leads him to the door. She pries it open and they walk down the tunnel, into a narrow alley that leads to a room where a giant fan bleeds pulsating light.

Something is smoked, a bottle is put to lips, tongues touch and quiver like slugs, teeth chatter, eyelashes flutter, jeans are unbuttoned, and naked bodies writhe with animalistic panting.

INT. A NEW YORK SUBWAY PLATFORM—DAY.

Eleanor climbs onto the platform, a cigarette perched in her mouth.

A train rumbles in the tunnel. She drops her bag and approaches the edge. She closes her eyes and holds her breath. The train rushes past her nose, into the station.

EXT. A WASHINGTON HEIGHTS APARTMENT COMPLEX—DAY.

Rain pours.

INT. A DEPRESSING TWO-BEDROOM APARTMENT—DAY.

Eleanor shoves open her front door.

Beer cans litter the counter. A rolled-up bill sits next to a small mirror on a side-table. A TV plays looped music from a video game menu. Eleanor looks in the direction of her roommate's door; it's closed.

Eleanor picks-up a porn magazine off the top of the TV.

ELEANOR
Don't take this personally, Brooke.
But kill yourself.

INT. ELEANOR'S CRAMPED BEDROOM—NIGHT.

Eleanor ENTERS in a towel. She takes a shot of vodka and turns on the radio.

RADIO VOICE A
 ...the exodus of the city's urban population to upstate New York and beyond is threatening just about every piece of infrastructure imaginable. Authorities are appealing to all skilled labourers to come forward.

She gets a pack of smokes from her desk drawer.

RADIO VOICE B
 Right, this is particularly important as sea levels continue to rise and the work of insulating the coast becomes increasingly dire.

Eleanor opens the pack but it's empty. She shakes her head.

RADIO VOICE A
 A new storm system being tracked over the Atlantic promises—

She leaves the room.

INT. APARTMENT HALL—NIGHT.

Eleanor swings open her roommate's door.

ELEANOR
 Brooke? My smokes...

She freezes.

INT. BROOKE'S BEDROOM—NIGHT.

A MAN'S BODY (late 20s), hanging from a pipe, is silhouetted by vague light from a window. Eleanor shakes her head.

INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM—NIGHT.

Eleanor sits on a couch, smoking a cigar with a phone to her ear. She is on hold. She hangs up and redials three digits. She waits. Nothing.

INT. BROOKE'S BEDROOM—NIGHT.

Eleanor approaches Brooke's body and touches his hand, gently. She looks at his face; his lips are puffy and blue.

Then she goes through his room looking for something. She finds it—a cell-phone. She scrolls through his numbers and lands on "Jerry." Then the phone dies.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Shit.

She opens Brooke's desk drawer and pulls out a charger but the chord is stuck. She pulls and a stack of papers come out with the it. They fall on the floor.

She's gathers the papers but stops on one. It's the DEED to a piece of property. A PHOTOGRAPH of a cabin in the woods is stapled to it. Eleanor studies the image.

EXT. A SIDE STREET—NIGHT.

Rain still pours.

Eleanor throws a suitcase into the trunk of her car. She looks up at her apartment.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Fuck. Sorry, Brooke.

EXT. A REMOTE HIGHWAY—NIGHT.

INT/EXT. ELEANOR'S CAR—NIGHT.

Brooke's deed is on the dashboard.

Eleanor smokes out the window as she drives. She passes a sign: "US/Canada border crossing, 15 miles."

In the opposite lane, a truck full of pigs heading to slaughter, passes.

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