

TIME EXPOSURE

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EXT. FOREST STREAM - DAY

A small, quiet stream meanders through a summer forest, pressed close by ferns, mosses and overhanging trees. Here and there, patches of sunlight lance through the shade.

Approaching: voices of 6-YEAR-OLD DOUG and 14-YEAR-OLD ELLIE.

DOUG

Wait up!

ELLIE

Here it is!

Ellie breaks through the ferns, Doug right behind her. Ellie is coltish, leggy, hair nearly blonde. Doug is a scrawny, turbo-charged bullet.

Their clothes and hair styles suggest it's the mid 1970s.

Ellie carries an old girl scout knapsack.

She drops to her stomach beside the stream; Doug lands flat right beside her.

ELLIE

Watch.

Ellie plunges her arm into the water, past her elbow.

A moment later, she raises a cupped hand. She holds it out for Doug to see: A few ounces of water and a dozen half-inch tadpoles.

ELLIE

What do you see?

DOUG

Baby fish.

ELLIE

Nope. Try again.

DOUG

They're baby fish!

ELLIE

Well, they are babies. Try again.

DOUG
Tell me!

ELLIE
They're baby frogs.

DOUG
Frogs have legs!

ELLIE
They change. And they're delicious!

Ellie does some quick slight-of-hand, pretending to devour the tadpoles as she dumps them back into the stream, licking and gobbling at her palm.

DOUG
Stop it! Why'd you eat them?

Ellie cracks up.

ELLIE
I'm just teasing. I didn't eat them.

DOUG
Well cut it out. I don't like teasing.

ELLIE
I'm sorry. I won't do it again.

DOUG
Okay.

She reaches into the water again, lifts her hand, but lets all the water run out. She holds her cupped hand in a shaft of sunlight.

ELLIE
Now what do I have?

DOUG
Nothing.

ELLIE
Are you sure?

DOUG
Yes.

ELLIE
Nope. You're looking right at it.

DOUG

Come on!

ELLIE

How about a riddle. Um... You can't see me, but you can't see without me. What am I?

DOUG

Just tell me!

ELLIE

That's too easy. Tell you what, we'll take a picture, and you can think about it some more when we get it developed.

Ellie rummages in her knapsack, pulls out a cheap Kodak camera and lines it up to take a shot of her hand.

ELLIE

You ever take a picture?

DOUG

No.

ELLIE

Here.

She hands him the camera.

ELLIE

Look through that little hole and line up my hand in the middle, then push that button down until it clicks. Hold it steady.

Doug lines up the shot, pushes the shutter release.

ELLIE

You know what you just did?

DOUG

What?

ELLIE

You caught what's in my hand. For real. Now it's in the camera. When the pictures come back you'll see it.

Doug turns the camera around, looks hard into the lens. It stares back at him, a glassy eye dimly reflecting his face.

EXT. FOREST PATH - LATER

Pouring rain. Ellie and Doug march along a path, soaked to the skin; thunder rumbles beyond the trees.

Ellie is grimly determined, but Doug is utterly miserable. He begins to cry. She stops, hugs him.

ELLIE
We're okay.

DOUG
Dad...

ELLIE
We just have to get back before he gets home. Here.

She takes off the knapsack, puts it on Doug, then hoists him up. Carrying him piggyback, she trots off down the path.

A bright flash of lightning strobos the forest, followed closely by the loudest thunder yet. Doug wails.

ELLIE
It's okay, Doug.

The path takes them near a huge, shaggy old oak, branches like twisted arms, a gaping hollow near its base.

As Ellie passes the oak -

LIGHTNING RIPS DOWN THE TRUNK - HAMMER SLAM OF THUNDER

Wood explodes outward, a curtain of shrapnel.

Two side flashes leap from the tree to Ellie and Doug.

Ellie pitches forward, falls to the ground. Doug tumbles onto the path a few feet away.

They both lie motionless in the rain, their bodies peppered with spikes of wood.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM, DOUG'S AREA - NIGHT

Doug wakes.

He lies on a hospital gurney in a trauma bay, curtains closed on each side. The right side of his face is bandaged. He wears only a hospital gown.

JOHN and PATRICIA STROUD, (both 40) Doug's parents, sit next to the gurney. John holds Doug's hand, strokes his head. He offers a tentative smile.

JOHN
Hey buddy. How do you feel?

Doug hugs his father; John is a giant compared to his son. Patricia, her face tracked by tears, wraps her arms around them both.

DOUG
We got caught in the rain.

JOHN
I know. It wasn't your fault.

Doug feels his bandages and starts to cry, confused.

JOHN
It's okay.

DOUG
Where's Ellie?

JOHN
She's here. She's fine.

A doctor parts the curtain behind John and Patricia.

DOCTOR
Mr. and Mrs. Stroud?

PATRICIA
Try to rest, Douglas. Everything's okay.

She kisses Doug's cheek, then follows John into the adjacent trauma bay, leaving the curtain closed.

Doug hears the doctor behind the curtain. He looks around the space, at the I.V. drip, feels the bandages.

DOCTOR (O.S.)
Her condition's the same as your son, pretty minor injuries. What I can't predict are possible long term neurological effects. Cases like this can be strange. I know of patients where paralysis, memory loss, or sensory impairment developed months, even years later. So we just have to wait and see.

JOHN (O.S.)
I understand. Thank you, doctor.

DOCTOR (O.S.)
I want to keep them overnight.
Okay?

JOHN
Of course.

Receding footsteps behind the curtain.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM, ELLIE'S AREA - CONTINUING

Ellie lies on a gurney, dressed and bandaged like Doug, her face a mask of shame. John looms over her. Patricia hangs back, sensing a storm building.

JOHN
What do you have to say for yourself?

ELLIE
I'm so sorry.

JOHN
You're sorry.

ELLIE
Yes!

JOHN
You're not a child, Eleanor. Are you?

ELLIE
No.

JOHN
And you are responsible for your brother. It's up to you to look after him, to keep him safe, and instead you nearly killed both of you.

ELLIE
I can't predict the weather!

JOHN
Do not talk back to me!

Ellie starts crying.

PATRICIA
John, for God's sake, she--

JOHN
DO NOT INTERRUPT ME, PAT!

John never takes his eyes from Ellie.

JOHN
Did you check the weather forecast?

ELLIE
What?

JOHN
Did you check the weather?

ELLIE
How?

JOHN
It's in the phone book. Just dial a number and you get a forecast. Did you check?

ELLIE
I didn't know about it.

JOHN
That's what we could say at your funeral. My son and daughter died because she didn't know how to make a phone call. How would that be?

Ellie cries uncontrollably.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM, DOUG'S AREA - SAME TIME

Doug is crying silently. He's rolled onto his side to face away from the angry voices.

JOHN (O.S.)
I am so disappointed in you Eleanor.

ELLIE (O.S.)
I'm sorry.

JOHN (O.S.)
Do you admit you were irresponsible?

ELLIE (O.S.)
Yes, I was irresponsible.

Behind Doug, John draws the curtain aside.

JOHN
Get up and apologize to your
brother.

Ellie drops off her gurney, walks up to Doug wheeling an I.V.
stand. Doug rolls over to look at her.

ELLIE
Doug, I'm sorry I got us caught in
the rain. I'm sorry you were hurt.
It's all my fault. I'm so, so
sorry. Please forgive me.

Doug just stares at Ellie, mortified.

JOHN
Douglas, do you accept your
sister's apology?

Doug glances at his father, nods his head.

JOHN
Then everything's all right.

John plants a quick kiss on Doug's forehead, squeezes Ellie's
shoulder.

JOHN
Let's put this behind us. Get some
sleep. Your mother will pick you up
tomorrow.

John walks out without another word. Patricia kisses Doug and
Ellie, then trots after John like a forgotten dog.

Ellie paces back to her gurney, pulls the curtain closed.

Doug slides to the floor, wheels his I.V. stand in front of
him and parts the curtain. Ellie lies on the next gurney, a
zombie with wet eyes. She looks at Doug.

ELLIE
I'm sorry.

Doug climbs up onto the gurney, lies down next to Ellie. She
pulls him close, kisses him.

DOUG
What happened?

ELLIE
We were struck by lightning! Look
at your side.

Doug pulls his gown aside, sees a bandage just above the hip.
He peels back the tape, reveals a deep burn the size of dime.

ELLIE
I've got one too. See?

DOUG
Wow!

Ellie cracks up, laughing and crying, kisses Doug again.

ELLIE
We get hit by lightning and you
think it's cool.

DOUG
It is! Bet I'm the only kid at
school who got hit by lightning!
How'd we get here?

ELLIE
I woke up, carried you home. Mom
drove us to the hospital.

She turns off the light over the gurney.

ELLIE
Get some sleep, lightning boy.

DOUG
Okay.

He snuggles up to Ellie, she pulls the blanket over them.

DOUG
What's the answer? To the riddle?

ELLIE
If I tell you will you go to sleep?

DOUG
Yeah.

ELLIE
Light.

Doug closes his eyes. The ER hums around them.

EXT. SWIM CLUB, POOL - DAY

Brilliant sunlight. Chaos of voices, laughter, splashing, shrieks of children. A dozen SWIMMERS of various ages paddle, float or dive.

Marching from the shallow end: John holding Doug in his arms. Doug's facial wounds are now small scabs.

Doug clings to his father in mortal terror as John carries him into deeper water.

John keeps walking until the water is up to his shoulders.

JOHN

Okay, now just like we talked about. It's easy.

John pulls Doug away from his body. Doug tries to hold onto his father's neck, but it's no contest. John holds Doug out at arms length and lets go of him.

Doug immediately sinks, sputtering and crying. He bobs to the surface, paddling frantically, trying to reach his father, but John keeps backing away, forcing Doug to paddle.

John smiles, blind to Doug's terror.

JOHN

Just relax, Douglas. You can do it.

Doug is sobbing, thrashing, desperately trying to reach his father, but John just keeps stepping backward.

DOUG

Stop! Stop!

Ellie watches from the side of the pool, hating every second of this.

JOHN

You can do it. Good.

Doug sees Ellie, changes direction. Floundering and sputtering he manages to reach the side of the pool.

John watches Doug a moment, then walks to a ladder and climbs out.

Ellie approaches Doug and crouches down.

ELLIE

You wanna get out?

DOUG

Yeah.

Ellie lifts Doug onto the cement. He holds her. She looks off toward their parents.

ELLIE

Let's get some ice cream.

They walk off toward a snack bar.

EXT. SWIM CLUB, CHAIRS - SAME TIME

John sits at a chair next to a round table, under a big umbrella. Patricia sits across from him, reading a book, hair wet from an earlier swim. She glances up at him.

PATRICIA

They have lessons here. There's a children's class.

JOHN

A son learns to swim from his father.

PATRICIA

Then how'd you learn?

JOHN

I'm not the issue. Why's he afraid all the time? How's he ever going to grow up?

PATRICIA

John, he's six.

JOHN

We should go soon. I have office work.

She puts down the book, leans closer to John.

PATRICIA

I can think of something much more fun. Let's take another dip.

She runs a hand along his thigh. He pushes it away.

JOHN

You're being ridiculous.

PATRICIA

We used to do it. Point Pleasant?

JOHN

Yes, when there was no one around.

PATRICIA

This makes it more exciting. And I can tread water using only my legs.

JOHN

No.

PATRICIA

You don't even have to take off your suit.

JOHN

No, Pat! Dammit.

Scowling, John digs into a beach bag, grabs shorts and a shirt, puts them on. Pat hangs her head.

PATRICIA

Sorry.

JOHN

I'll meet you at the car.

John stalks off.

EXT. SWIM CLUB, MEN'S ROOM - SAME TIME

Ellie leans against the wall finishing an ice cream cone, holding a second one in her other hand. She's looking off toward her mom.

ELLIE

Doug! I think we're going!

INT. SWIM CLUB, MEN'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Doug stands at a urinal as some TEENS wash their hands.

DOUG

Okay!

He finishes, pulls his swim trunks back up. As he flushes the urinal, something catches his eye.

He pulls the waistband down on his right side. The wound from the lightning strike has changed. Now, small, twisting branches, themselves like tiny bolts of lightning, extend outward about a quarter-inch from the center.

MIKE (O.S.)

You comin' or you gonna jerk off?

Doug glances up toward the door.

INT. SCHOOL BOY'S ROOM - DAY

Five years later.

11-YEAR-OLD DOUG washes his hands. His friend MIKE, chunky and freckled, is half out the door.

DOUG

If I wanted to jerk off I'd have my dick out. Do you see my dick?

MIKE

I hope I never see your dick.

Doug towels off his hands, heads out the door behind Mike. He carries a camera bag on a shoulder strap and a lunch sack.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Doug and Mike head down the hall amid a crowd of other middle-school kids.

DOUG

Can I borrow some change?

MIKE

You brought.

DOUG

So?

MIKE

It's Karen, isn't it?

DOUG

No.

MIKE

You wanna buy Karen Hazelhurst a Pepsi! Lovebird!

DOUG

Are we friends or not?

MIKE

Blow me later and we'll see.

DOUG
Come on, a quarter?

MIKE
That's a 7-ounce cup. It'll make
you seem cheap.

DOUG
Okay, 50 cents.

MIKE
You owe me a dollar twenty-five
from two weeks ago!

DOUG
Douche.

GREELY swings into step beside them, rail thin, smiling,
black frame glasses. He claps Doug on the back.

GREELY
What'd he do this time?

MIKE
Karen Hazelhurst.

DOUG
You suck.

GREELY
Give it up, she's an 8th grader,.
And she's a head taller than you.

DOUG
So what?

MIKE
You'll need a ladder to kiss her.

DOUG
Forget I asked, okay? God!

Doug trots away from the two boys as they enter the
cafeteria.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - LATER

The lunch crowd has thinned. Mike and Greely have finished
eating. They sit over cluttered trays, looking off at--

Doug, at another table, talking to a KAREN (13), a tall
brunette.

Doug occasionally snaps a photo of Karen using an old 35mm camera. He is smooth, quiet, holding eye contact, gradually moving closer. He's positioned her for good light.

GREELY

Wow.

MIKE

I'm gettin a camera.

CLOSER ON DOUG AND KAREN

DOUG

Turn toward the window. Good.

Another snap.

KAREN

Why do you want pictures of me?

DOUG

I like taking pictures. Uh, and you're pretty, and we're friends.

KAREN

We're not friends.

DOUG

You want me to stop?

KAREN

No, it's okay. You're weird.

DOUG

Cross your arms. Look right in the camera. More serious. Great.

Another snap.

Two of Karen's girlfriends approach, aghast at this entire enterprise. One of them steps up to Karen and whispers in her ear. Karen shoots a disgusted look at Doug.

KAREN

Eeww! Gross!

DOUG

What?

The girlfriends giggle as Karen grabs her backpack, and the three of them bustle away.

Doug slumps, reaches for his camera bag. Greely and Mike approach.

GREELY
Why'd she run off?

MIKE
You're lucky she'd even talk to
you.

DOUG
I guess. At least--

A hand swoops in and grabs Doug's camera.

He whirls around, grabbing for it.

A BIG KID holds Doug's camera, pushes Doug off with one hand.
Two other BIG KIDS enjoy the show.

BIG KID
Hey Stroud, I saw you taking stroke
pictures of Hotspot Hazelhurst.

DOUG
Give it back!

BIG KID
She is definitely stroke material.
She let you tickle her beaver?

DOUG
Gimme by camera!

BIG KID
You tickle her beaver, Stroud?

DOUG
Gimme by camera!!

Greely and Mike hover near Doug like nervous sheep. The other
two big kids circle them.

Big Kid tosses the camera to a crony, then holds up his empty
hands.

BIG KID
What camera?

The three Big Kids play monkey-in-the-middle, tossing the
camera away just as Doug approaches. Greely and Mike grab for
it, but neither is quick or tall enough.

BIG KID
Hey, Stroud, you know there's
something amazing about this
camera.

DOUG
Please give it to me.

BIG KID
It can fly!

Big Kid throws the camera straight up; it hits a ceiling tile 20 feet overhead.

Big Kid and his two cronies run out a back door.

Doug runs to position himself under the camera.

BIG KID
STROUD!

Doug whips his eyes over. As the big kids watch from a doorway--

BIG KID
Don't drop it!

THE CAMERA SMASHES ON THE FLOOR. BITS OF METAL AND GLASS SKITTER IN ALL DIRECTIONS--

The Big Kids run away, laughing.

Doug gives an animal howl, runs after the big kids. Mike and Greely follow him--

EXT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - CONTINUOUS

--Doug chases after the three Big Kids, into a parking lot, but they're already receding.

DOUG
I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL KILL YOU...

Doug runs out of steam, sinks to his knees, weeping.

Mike and Greely are at once angry and embarrassed. Mike kneels down by Doug, puts a hand on his shoulder - Doug shakes it off, tears running down his face.

EXT. STROUD HOUSE - AFTERNOON

A school bus pulls up at an intersection just down from Doug's house.

The door creaks open, Doug and two other students step out, go their separate ways. Doug wears a backpack, carries the camera bag on a shoulder strap.

He walks toward his house.

As he nears his house, Doug sees an old red sedan in the driveway. His face lights up and he starts running.

INT. STROUD HOUSE - CONTINUING

Doug streaks in through the garage door. He finds 19-YEAR-OLD ELLIE in the kitchen. She has become a beautiful, willowy brunette, a foot taller than Doug.

Doug drops his things and grabs her in a fierce hug.

ELLIE
Hey you! You okay?

DOUG
I'm fine now.

INT. STROUD HOUSE - EVENING

In the kitchen, the four Strouds sit around a small round table, having dinner. John is a white-collar dad, still wearing a dress shirt and suit pants, tie removed. Doug avoids eye contact with everyone.

ELLIE
But Jung is so different, even though he worked with Freud for six years, he developed these wildly different ideas about human consciousness.

PATRICIA
Did you bring laundry home?

ELLIE
Um, yeah. I can do it.

PATRICIA
I'm happy to do it, as I'm sure you know.

ELLIE
Thanks, mom. Anyway, see, Jung didn't think people are just shaped by childhood and that's it, he felt that each person's process of becoming a unique individual goes on for your entire life. And he did all this work with archetypes, and--

JOHN

--Okay, okay, never mind the archetypes. How are you going to live? Buy food, clothes? I'm paying a lot of money for your education and I'd like to think it wasn't being wasted.

PATRICIA

You can go into practice, can't you Eleanor? See patients? That must be a good living, John.

ELLIE

Well, yes, definitely. But right now, I was thinking I'd like to do research, maybe teach. You know, they have computers now that can analyze information on thousands of people, and let you--

JOHN

--That's a field that makes sense. My office has to pay top dollar for one programmer. You should think about that.

DOUG

Computers are cool.

ELLIE

Dad, I'm a psychology major. This is what I want to do.

JOHN

I know. And when you can't find a job, you'll end up living off this family again. Is that what you want?

ELLIE

No.

JOHN

Still time to change your major.

Ellie drops her eyes, struggling to contain her anger.

JOHN

Are you going to sulk now?

PATRICIA

Eleanor, are you going out with Diane and Gina this weekend?

(MORE)

PATRICIA (CONT'D)

There's that new movie theater on Route 34. It has three screens!

ELLIE

I have a date tomorrow night.

PATRICIA

With a boy?

ELLIE

Yeah. Carson. Carson Stone. He goes to Penn, but his family's in Marlboro. He's home for the weekend, too.

PATRICIA

Well, tell us about him!

ELLIE

Okay, uh, he's a psych major like me. We met in class. His dad's an engineer. Um, He's cute.

Ellie and her mom chuckle.

JOHN

Where are you going?

ELLIE

Asbury Park. Just, hang out. Play some games.

JOHN

What time?

ELLIE

He's picking me up at five.

JOHN

I want to meet him. And I want you home by ten.

ELLIE

We'll have to leave the shore by nine!

JOHN

8:30 if you're smart. Don't be late. Is that clear?

ELLIE

Yes.

JOHN

Well. Have a good time. Not supposed to rain, I think.

PATRICIA

Douglas, did you take any new pictures today?

DOUG

No. It's getting, I dunno, boring.

JOHN

Just as well. That's an expensive hobby, Douglas. Very good chicken, Pat.

Ellie and Doug stare at their food. John's clinking fork and knife are the only sounds.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, PARENT'S ROOM - NIGHT

It's a setting out of Better Homes and Gardens magazine: twin beds, matching night stands and dressers, tasteful, coordinated lamps.

John sits in a recliner by the door, reading a thick novel.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

No light save what shines through the windows and the doorways to other rooms. Patricia sits in the dark sipping a cocktail, soft music playing.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DOUG'S ROOM - SAME TIME

Doug is reading a paperback fantasy novel. He glances at his beside clock-radio: it's after midnight.

He drops the novel and gets out of bed, pajama clad.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALL - CONTINUOUS

Doug steps out of his room, walks silently to Ellie's door. He taps softly. No reply.

DOUG

Ellie?

Doug inches the door open.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, ELLIE'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

DOUG

Ellie?

Rustling in the dark, then a click as Ellie switches on her bedside lamp. She squints in the sudden light, sleepy.

ELLIE

What's the matter?

Doug looks sheepish.

ELLIE

Oh, Doug...

DOUG

I can't sleep.

ELLIE

You're too old for this.

DOUG

Big kids took my camera today. They were tossing it around and then it smashed on the floor. A million pieces.

ELLIE

Jesus, Jesus. I am so sorry. Okay, come on.

She turns the covers back, and Doug slips into the bed next to her. Ellie switches off the light.

ELLIE

Think about something nice, and have sweet dreams. Good night.

Doug spoons up to her.

DOUG

Good night.

A moment later, Ellie's eyes fly open and she leaps out of bed, whirls on Doug.

ELLIE

Doug, what the hell!?

DOUG

What's the matter?

ELLIE
You're hard!

DOUG
Yeah, so?

ELLIE
Do you know what it is? What it's
for?

DOUG
Of course! What, you think I, I
want to do that with you?

ELLIE
Ugh. I love you, my brother, but
this isn't gonna work. You're too
old. And so am I.

She moves to the bedroom, door, ushers Doug out.

ELLIE
Good night. And tell mom about the
camera. She'll help.

Crestfallen, Doug returns to his room, closes the door.

Ellie steps to the bathroom. While peeing, she opens a toiletries bag on the counter and takes out a round dispenser of birth control pills. She checks how many are left.

Leaving the bathroom, she hears a noise from downstairs. She steps silently to the head of the stairway and looks down.

Her father, John, is standing in his underwear at the foot of the stairs. He's motionless, looking straight ahead. A moment later, he walks forward, disappearing into the shadows.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DOUG'S ROOM - CONTINUING

Doug lies in bed, staring up at the ceiling. His hands drift under the covers, move toward his groin.

EXT. CANTWELL'S HOUSE - DAY

Another suburban home, not very different from the Stroud house. Mike and Doug wait on the front steps, their bicycles leaning against nearby shrubs.

Cantwell (11), another classmate, opens the front door.

MIKE

Hey.

CANTWELL

Come on.

Cantwell ushers them in, shuts the door. The house is silent.

CANTWELL

You got the money?

MIKE

Yeah.

Mike and Doug each give Cantwell a dollar.

CANTWELL

Come on.

Cantwell leads the boys into his father's den. He opens the bottom left drawer on a large desk, reaches under some envelopes, and pulls out a Penthouse magazine.

CANTWELL

There's a new one each month. You won't believe this.

Doug reaches for the magazine. Cantwell shoves him back.

CANTWELL

Don't touch it! Didn't you tell him? Only I touch it.

DOUG

Okay.

Cantwell pages to the first pictorial, and it's a revelation. Mike and Doug point, howl and laugh at the images: the size of breasts, curve of asses, and tangles of pubic hair.

The more he sees, the more quiet Doug becomes.

Cantwell reaches the centerfold. Even Mike falls silent. It shows a busty, mostly naked brunette with brown eyes; she looks a bit like Ellie.

MIKE

Oh man.

CANTWELL

Last month there were twins.

MIKE

Twins! Doug, twins!

DOUG

Wow.

CANTWELL

Time's up.

MIKE

Oh, come on, let's see it again!

CANTWELL

No way. But I'll tell you when the new one's here.

Cantwell returns the magazine to its place in the bottom drawer.

DOUG

Who takes the pictures?

CANTWELL

How the fuck do I know?

MIKE

Luckiest guy in the world, that's who.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DOUG'S ROOM - NIGHT

Doug is asleep in bed, the room dark.

Yelling from downstairs awakens him: his father's voice. Doug looks at the clock: after 1:00 AM.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DINING ROOM - CONTINUING

Doug pads softly through the first floor rooms, nearing the kitchen. The yelling gets louder.

He peers into the kitchen from the dining room. He sees:

Ellie's boyfriend CARSON (19), trying to bear up under John's verbal onslaught. Patricia stands behind Ellie, trying to split her allegiance. Tears run down Ellie's face.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

JOHN

Don't tell me you lost track of time. That's a child's excuse.

ELLIE

Dad...

JOHN

Eleanor, you wear a watch. So how do you lose track of three hours? How is that possible?

CARSON

Mr. Stroud, I--

JOHN

Shut up! In fact, get out of my house, and don't ever see my daughter again.

ELLIE

No--

JOHN

Do not interrupt me! (to Carson)
You are unable to keep even the simplest commitment. I don't want my daughter spending another minute with you.

Carson's own sense of defiance is growing.

CARSON

This is ridiculous! Ellie, let's get out of here.

Carson reaches for Ellie's hand.

John slams him against the wall, hard.

PATRICIA

John! Let him go!

Dishes rattle on the shelves, a picture drops to the floor, glass breaks. John's voice is ice.

JOHN

Don't you ever touch my daughter.
Get out of here.

John shoves Carson toward the garage door. He stumbles out of sight. The garage door slams.

Doug stares in horror at the scene. Ellie sobs.

JOHN

I have given you every opportunity,
every freedom.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

I pay for your education, your car,
your clothes. Why do you treat me
with such disrespect? I'd like to
know that. Tell me why? Why?

Ellie mumbles.

JOHN

I can't hear you.

ELLIE

I do respect you! I'm sorry we were
so late. We were having a good
time! Why does it matter so much?

JOHN

Because it means I cannot trust
you, Eleanor! You prove it again
and again. I can't trust you to
choose a sensible career, I can't
trust you to find responsible
company, or keep a simple
commitment. What am I supposed to
think, Eleanor? It's after
midnight. Are you dead? Are you
injured? Should I call the police?

ELLIE

I'm sorry!

JOHN

Honestly, what should I do? What--

DOUG

--Stop yelling at her!

John whirls on Doug, grabs him by the shoulders.

JOHN

This does not concern you! Go back
to your room!

John shoves Doug back into the dining room. Doug trips, falls
onto his back. John turns back to Eleanor, continues his
tirade.

Doug gets to his feet, runs out of the room.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. STROUD HOUSE, FIRST FLOOR HALL

Doug sprints away, along the hall. He runs into his parents' bedroom. A light comes on somewhere inside.

BACK TO SCENE

JOHN

Your college time is over. You're moving back here immediately. And I want the keys to your car.

PATRICIA

John, you're being ridiculous! You plan on locking her in her room?

JOHN

This is your fault! You're supposed to guide her, teach her to be--

DOUG (O.S.)

--Stop yelling at her!

Doug stands in the kitchen doorway. He holds a 45 CALIBER AUTOMATIC PISTOL with both hands, aimed at his father. It looks huge in Doug's small hands.

All eyes are on Doug. No one moves.

ELLIE

Doug, put--

With one snake-quick move, John lunges forward, slams the gun to the floor, grabs Doug and pulls him over his knee. He begins spanking Doug as if hammering nails into oak.

JOHN

I. WILL. NOT. LET. YOU. FOR. GET. THIS.

PATRICIA

John, stop for God's sake! JOHN!
STOP!

Patricia tries to grab John's arm; he back-hands her in the face. She cries out, collapses, a hand pressed to her jaw.

Doug is screaming in pain and shame. His bladder lets go; urine soaks into his father's lap, drips to the floor.

Doug wails. Ellie pleads for her father to stop.

Then John's motion slows. He lowers his hand. Doug sobs from deep in his chest.

John jerks upright; Doug tumbles to the floor.

John walks out of the kitchen with slow, measured steps.

On the floor, Doug curls into a ball in a puddle of urine, sobbing. Ellie hugs him.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, PARENT'S ROOM - CONTINUING

John walks slowly into their bedroom, closes the door. Patricia follows him, but stops outside the door.

PATRICIA

John?

No reply.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, BATHROOM - LATER

Doug sits in the bathtub, face slack, eyes red.

The tub drains.

Doug stands, towels off.

ON HIS SIDE: the tendrils of inflamed tissue from his lightning scar now spread much farther, forming a twisted, maze-like mandala the size of a saucer.

He pulls on clean pajamas.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DOUG'S ROOM - CONTINUING

Doug steps into his room like a boy sleepwalking, sits on his bed.

Ellie walks in carrying a sandwich on a plate.

ELLIE

Mom made you this.

She puts the plate on his desk.

DOUG

Not hungry. You okay?

ELLIE

I don't know. Are you?

DOUG

Dad's gonna kill me.

Patricia steps into Doug's room.

PATRICIA

Your father's in the bedroom,
sitting by the window. He won't
talk to me. If he doesn't... If
there's no change by morning, I'll
need to call someone.

DOUG

What's that mean? Call who?

PATRICIA

This has happened before, Douglas.
Just as well you don't remember.

ELLIE

I remember.

DOUG

Is he still mad?

PATRICIA

He's not anything. He's gone.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DOUG'S ROOM - MORNING

Sunday. Doug is putting on a tie, getting ready for church.

On the wall, among much other kid art, hangs a PICTURE of 5-year-old Doug and his father on a fishing trip. Big smiles on both faces, a normal father and son.

Doug slips on a navy blazer, gives his shoes a quick buff.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALL - CONTINUING

Doug walks across the hall. Ellie's door is closed. He heads downstairs.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, FIRST FLOOR HALL - CONTINUOUS

Doug passes his parent's bedroom; the door is closed, but not latched.

He makes his way toward the kitchen.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DINING ROOM - CONTINUING

Doug sees his mom on the phone in the kitchen. He lingers in the next room, listening.

PATRICIA

No... No... Well, so far... No...
No, absolutely not... What do you
expect me to say?

He returns to his parents' bedroom door, taps softly.

DOUG

Dad? Dad?

Doug pushes the door open.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, PARENT'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

John sits in a recliner near the door. His face is blank, eyes staring straight ahead.

DOUG

Dad? Are we going to church?

Silence.

DOUG

Dad, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry,
it was wrong and stupid and I'm
really sorry. I love you, Dad.

John doesn't react at all. Doug is getting panicky, his eyes welling up.

DOUG

Dad, please forgive me. Please say
you forgive me. Please, Dad...
What's wrong! Say something? Are
you mad? I'll stop taking pictures,
okay? No more pictures, okay?
What's wrong? Say something to me!
I'm sorry! I'M SORRY!

No reaction.

Doug runs from the room.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALL - CONTINUING

Doug runs to Ellie's door, throws it open, steps in.

DOUG

Ellie...

Ellie is gone. The bed is made. Lots of empty hangers in the closet. No luggage.

Doug rushes to the window, looks out at the driveway. Her car is gone.

Doug's anxiety hits the red line.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALL - CONTINUOUS

Doug wanders out of Ellie's room, sobbing, at once horrified and ashamed. He looks sick.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Doug rushes to the toilet, kneels on the floor, raises the seat. He retches and spits, but his stomach is empty. His breathing slows, though he continues to cry.

He turns, sees Ellie's nightgown hanging behind the door.

He stands, closes the bathroom door, takes the nightgown in both hands, buries his face in it.

Doug undresses.

He slips the nightgown over his head. It's too long for him; the sheer fabric puddles on the floor around his feet.

Doug lies on the bathroom floor, flat on his back. His eyes find a patch of reflected sunlight on the wall.

He pulls the fabric up over his face.

He reaches toward his groin, begins to stroke himself.

His head tilts far back. He sees sky and clouds through the upside down window.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, ELLIE'S ROOM - SAME TIME

Visible outside the window, an ambulance pulls up to the house.

Ratcheting and clicking sounds, soft voices--

HERB (O.S.)
 Brian, move the key-light straight
 back about a foot.

INT. COLLEGE PHOTO STUDIO - DAY

Nine years later.

A blur comes into focus: the naked form of a young figure model, ALICE (20). She sits on the floor, one knee up, head in profile.

Alice rests on a broad sweep of seamless grey paper, extending behind her, up the wall, unrolled from a ceiling rack.

A dozen PHOTOGRAPHY STUDENTS stand or crouch about 15 feet away, eyes pressed to their cameras, most using tripods, all feverishly snapping away at Alice.

Among the students is a statuesque black woman, OMKARI (20).

HERB (40), the professor, stands to one side.

HERB
 Form and texture, right? Remember
 Edward Weston. After every
 exposure, reframe. Don't forget to
 bracket.

20-YEAR-OLD DOUG crouches a bit outside the group, a new SLR film camera in hand; but he's not shooting. He looks at the crowd of students, at the model.

Doug detaches the lens from his camera and approaches her.

DOUG
 Hi.

ALICE
 Hi.

STUDENT 1
 Hey, what's up with this?

DOUG
 What's your name?

ALICE
 Alice.

STUDENT 2
 Doug, you're in the shot!

DOUG

Professor, five minutes? Please? I can't do what I want from across the room.

HERB

Three minutes.

Doug turns back to the model.

DOUG

I'm Doug. Can I touch you? With this?

He holds up the lens.

ALICE

Okay.

Doug sets an exposure. He holds his camera in one hand, lens in other, with the lens held backwards over the camera. Looking through the viewfinder, he moves toward Alice until the lens just touches her skin.

The viewfinder shows an extreme close-up with an ultra-shallow depth of field. He frames the crease of skin at her elbow, takes a shot.

Doug selects other fine details of Alice's body: the corner of her mouth, the curve of a thigh, an eye, a nipple.

HERB

Everybody see what he's doing?

STUDENT 1

I wanna do that.

HERB

He thought of it first and we're almost out of time. Anybody smart might decide to move closer and document this.

Every student changes to a wide-angle lens and moves in, surrounding Alice and Doug in a half circle.

Doug leans close to Alice's ear, whispers.

DOUG

I'd like to shoot one between your legs.

Alice just looks at Doug, appraising.

DOUG
Last frame.

Doug snaps the lens into place normally, spins around, aims at the surrounding cluster of heads and cameras. He frames a shot of Omkari, smiling at him, about to raise her camera.

He takes a shot.

INT. ALICE'S DORM ROOM - LATER

Doug and Alice stumble into her room, close the door. Her roommate is out. A curtain is drawn over the single window and the space is dim.

DOUG
What I really need is an RB-67. I
can get a used one for--

Alice silences him with a kiss, begins rubbing his crotch. Doug kisses back, lets his hands explore.

Alice pulls off her top, falls onto the bed and kicks off her pants. Doug does the same, but leaves his T-shirt on.

ALICE
Still wanna see between my legs?

DOUG
Fuck, yeah.

ALICE
Take your shirt off. This is a
clothing-free zone.

DOUG
Uh, I have this scar. I'm kind of
embarrassed about it.

ALICE
Were you in an accident?

DOUG
Sort of.

ALICE
What's that mean? Come on, I wanna
see.

DOUG
It's private, okay?

ALICE
If we're gonna fuck, nothing's
private.

With a grin, Alice moves to strip the T-shirt off Doug's torso. She tears open one shoulder.

DOUG
Stop it!

Doug shoves her back on the bed. Alice hits her head on the wall. Doug backs away, glaring at her.

ALICE
Ow, fuck! Fuck! You asshole, get
out of here. Get out! GET OUT! GET
OUT! GET. OUT.

Alice stays on the bed. Doug collects his clothes and camera bag, hurries into the hallway.

INT. COLLEGE RESIDENCE HALL - CONTINUOUS

Doug drops his clothes and bag as Alice slams the door behind him. He pulls his clothes on.

He reaches into his camera bag, finds the roll of film with the photos of Alice from class. He crushes it under a shoe, yanks the film out, ties it around the doorknob.

He storms away down the hall.

INT. DOUG'S DARKROOM - DAY

An FM radio station plays Seattle Grunge.

Doug stands at a counter next to the enlarger, the normal room lights on. He searches through older photos and proof sheets.

He sets aside two 8 by 10 inch portraits: full-face shots of a man and woman. He folds the woman's face in half, just below her nose. He holds this shot over the man's image, making a single face: female on top, male underneath.

He begins looking for negatives.

A knock on the door.

ELLIE (O.S.)
It's me. Can I come in?

DOUG

Yeah.

28-YEAR-OLD ELLIE opens the door. In the last 9 years, she has added muscle, poise and presence. She wears good clothes, as if going to church.

There's a distance between them, but she gives him a hug.

ELLIE

Hey. How's it going?

DOUG

Okay. Classes, you know. How's Chicago?

ELLIE

They just gave me a column.

DOUG

Like, a weekly thing?

ELLIE

A weekly thing. "Stroud On Your Mind." Alarmingly close to pop psychology, but I'm getting readers.

DOUG

Far out! That's great!

ELLIE

Thanks. Um, are you gonna change?

Doug looks down at his clothes, at his watch.

INT. STROUD CAR - LATER

Ellie sits very straight, both hands on the wheel. 54-YEAR-OLD PATRICIA rides shotgun, also well dressed, purse on her lap. Doug sits in back, khaki pants, oxford shirt, sport jacket.

They cruise along tree-lined, pleasant streets. No one speaks.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Doug, Ellie and Patricia stand around a grave.

The headstone: John Vincent Stroud, Loving Husband and Father, 1937 - 1984

Patricia looks at the empty plot next to John's grave.

PATRICIA
That's where I'll be.

Doug and Ellie don't want to hear this.

PATRICIA
Father Wade says John's in hell,
because he took his own life.
That's why I couldn't bury him at
St. James. He actually had the
nerve to tell me my husband is in
hell. Can you imagine? I don't
believe it. What do you think?

ELLIE
I'm sure Dad's in a better place. I
don't know what to call it. But
it's better.

PATRICIA
You're sweet. Either of you want to
say any more?

ELLIE
I love you dad. And I miss you.

DOUG
You don't miss him!

ELLIE
Don't tell me what I feel, Doug!

Doug walks away.

PATRICIA
John, I love you. See you next
year. Soon enough, I'll see you
every day.

Patricia and Ellie head for the car.

INT. RESTAURANT - LATER

Patricia, Ellie and Doug sit around a table in a casual dining place with faux Irish trappings, the remains of lunch and drinks on their table. Their waitress passes.

PATRICIA
Another Manhattan, please?

Patricia is already tipsy. She gulps down the last of her drink.

PATRICIA
Lovely bracelet, Eleanor.

ELLIE
Thanks, present from Richie.

PATRICIA
And who's that?

ELLIE
My boyfriend.

PATRICIA
Is that who came for Easter?

ELLIE
No, that was Robert.

PATRICIA
Robert, of course. Well, why buy a cow when milk is so cheap?

Patricia reaches out to squeeze their arms.

PATRICIA
Your father loved you both so much.
You know that, right?

DOUG
No, mom, I don't know that.

ELLIE
Doug--

DOUG
--He didn't want a son, or a daughter. He wanted some kind of talking dolls. Pull the string on our backs and the right words would come out, that's what dad wanted.

PATRICIA
Well. Excuse me.

Patricia rises, walks away from the table.

ELLIE
You really had to get into that?
Today?

DOUG

You think I'm wrong?

ELLIE

You weren't around. Dad changed. A lot. When I was really little, he was like a regular father. He was fun, he laughed. He played with me.

DOUG

I don't remember anything like that.

ELLIE

Like I said.

DOUG

One time, I think I was nine, I was watching TV, alone, and he came in and walked up to me, bent down and hugged me, without a word. Completely freaked me out. I froze. It was like somebody trying to talk to me in a foreign language. I was like, what does he want? A minute later he stood up and walked out. He never mentioned it.

ELLIE

You never told me.

DOUG

I ended up hating him, but I felt shitty about that. Now I wonder if that was some kind of turning point, some final effort to connect. Maybe if I'd hugged him back, said I love you, dad, we'd still be a family.

ELLIE

We are a family, Doug.

DOUG

We're broken.

ELLIE

That's stupid, and speak for yourself. I am not broken.

DOUG

Was it my fault?

ELLIE

Doug, he was broken. And you were a kid! How were you supposed to know what was best for your father?

Ellie looks sad and frustrated, but still lovely in the glow from a fake Tiffany lamp. Doug sees a shot.

DOUG

Can I take your picture?

ELLIE

With what?

Doug pulls out a compact 35mm camera.

ELLIE

You're unbelievable.

Doug snaps a quick portrait. Sad Ellie.

Patricia returns to her seat.

The waitress glides up with Patricia's drink.

PATRICIA

Thank you, dear.

She takes a big gulp.

PATRICIA

So. I'm selling the house. You both have to get your things out. The end of the summer will be fine.

ELLIE

When did you decide this?

PATRICIA

A few weeks ago.

DOUG

My darkroom is in that house, where am I supposed to work?

PATRICIA

That was an awfully short hop from sentimental to mercenary, Douglas.

ELLIE

Mom, I know we've never talked about it, but I've always thought I'd live there again some day.

(MORE)

ELLIE (CONT'D)

Maybe after I'm married. I'd like to raise a family in that house.

PATRICIA

A family.

ELLIE

Yes.

PATRICIA

Eleanor, you're 28. How many boyfriends have you had since college?

ELLIE

That's not fair, I'm being careful, I don't want to... to--

PATRICIA

--to make the sort of mistake I did. Perfectly reasonable. Well, I don't think your "family" will be coming along any time soon, do you?

ELLIE

Mom--

PATRICIA

--I'm having trouble with the stairs. It's too much space. And I keep seeing John, sitting in that chair. So, end of the summer, all right?

DOUG

This is the kind of thing dad would've done.

PATRICIA

What does that mean?

DOUG

We're your children and you treat us like possessions. You're a dictator, just like he was.

PATRICIA

You have no idea what he was. You only knew him after... after too many years doing a job he hated, working for people that didn't respect him. After a lifetime being crushed by that harridan of a mother.

(MORE)

PATRICIA (CONT'D)

You never knew the man I married.
But you're clever, Douglas. Can you
at least try to imagine him? Can
you imagine the boy I fell in love
with? The first boy I kissed? The
first boy I fucked?

DINERS at nearby tables are sending dark glances at the Strouds.

Tears run down Patricia's face. She takes another gulp of whiskey.

PATRICIA

Oh, my.

ELLIE

Let's get you home.

Doug slumps. He stuffs the camera back in a pocket.

ELLIE

You drive. Come on, mom. I've got
your purse.

She drops car keys on the table, along with a pile of cash.

Ellie helps Patricia stand, then holds her arm as they move toward the exit.

ELLIE

Doug, pull up to the front door.
Come on!

Doug rises, trails behind Ellie and Patricia. They wander slowly to the exit.

Sounds of a birds, a bubbling stream, and the groans and sighs of a couple having sex.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK, WOODS - DAY

Three years later.

A secluded grove of autumn trees and ferns. In an open spot, OMKARI (23) straddles Doug (23), who's lying on his back. Both are fully clothed, pants pulled down, wearing autumn jackets.

Omkari slows the rise and fall of her hips as Doug nears orgasm. She watches his face intently.

Doug's eyes are closed. He tilts his head back and groans.

OMKARI

Shhhh!

Doug groans again into Omkari's shoulder. His climax is explosive, all-consuming. Omkari grins, slows her rhythm. Doug takes a huge breath.

DOUG

Stop! Oh, God.

Omkari settles down on top of Doug. They hold each other, breathing hard.

OMKARI

Was that nice?

DOUG

Oh my God.

Omkari watches the ferns. Doug's eyes remain closed.

OMKARI

What do you see when you come? Your eyes were closed. You'd better not be thinkin' about somebody else.

Doug looks at Omkari, searching her face.

DOUG

It's chaotic. Flashes. Kind of cubist. I see different parts of you all at once.

OMKARI

What parts?

DOUG

The fun parts, ya know. And light. Lots of light. Light on your skin. And your eyes. Your magnificent, penetrating eyes.

OMKARI

The things you say.

She kisses him.

OMKARI

Let's move in together.

Doug strokes her hair, his smile growing bigger.

OMKARI

Is that yes?

DOUG
That's yes. Hell yes. YES!

A horse whickers nearby. Doug and Omkari spin their heads toward the sound.

An NYPD MOUNTED POLICEMAN sits on his horse ten yards away.

OMKARI
Oh fucking shit.

DOUG
(yelling to the cop)
We're moving in together!

POLICEMAN
That is wonderful. When can I come over?

DOUG
Uh...

POLICEMAN
I'm going to ride away, and you're going to leave the park. Everybody on the same page?

OMKARI
Yes, officer. Sorry. And thank you.

DOUG
Thank you!

POLICEMAN
Thank me after I come over. I'll bring a plant.

The officer rides away. Doug and Omkari begin laughing, and kiss again.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK, WALKWAY - LATER

The walkway heads toward 5th Avenue. Tall buildings peek through the trees. Doug and Omkari walk along, the very definition of young, glowing devotion.

DOUG
The Village has gotten too expensive.

OMKARI
Just move in with me, it's rent controlled.

DOUG

But we need more room. Two working photographers have to spread out. We need a loft.

OMKARI

Where can we afford that?

DOUG

I don't know. Maybe Tribeca, maybe the lower east side. Brooklyn.

OMKARI

I don't know, Doug.

DOUG

I do know. Trust me. We need a bigger place.

OMKARI

And then what?

DOUG

We work. And then we get a bigger place. And then a bigger one.

Omkari begins laughing.

OMKARI

Listen to that bravado! I bet you're hard again.

She grabs his crotch.

OMKARI

I knew it!

Doug grins in her face and laughs.

Sounds of a party crowd fade in, dance music, laughter, growing louder...

INT. SOHO PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - NIGHT

Five years later.

Clothing and music suggest the late 1990s.

Music, people, light. Exposed brick and ductwork, freight elevator, 15-foot ceiling: a classic New York loft.

Tonight the studio is also a gallery. ENORMOUS BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS cover the walls.

The huge prints show drag queens: old and young, austere and outrageous, but all celebrating their applied identities. They ponder, scream, pout, beckon from the walls.

A sign: DOUGLAS STROUD - DRAGGING THE RIVER

The guests love the show. Many are in drag.

A bar serves up champagne and cocktails.

In one corner, a STYLIST at a makeup table applies finishing touches to a tall queen.

A working photography area dominates one wall: white seamless sweep, electronic flash umbrellas, work tables. The model resembles Cher.

28-YEAR-OLD DOUG is the photographer. He coaches the model, encourages, teases, dances, pleads. RACHEL, Doug's assistant, hands him a variety of cameras.

Doug is in drag himself: sequined cocktail dress, blonde wig, heavy makeup, and something underneath to give him curves.

The queens turn tables on Doug, insist that he model for them. He relents, but squirms under the camera's focus. A half dozen queens yell directions at him as Rachel shoots.

The freight elevator opens, and OMKARI (28) a statuesque black woman, steps out, holding daughter GEORGIA (3). Omkari grins at the throng.

OMKARI

See sweetie? This is where daddy works. He took all these pictures.

GEORGIA

It's scary.

OMKARI

Yes it is. But it's okay, these are all friends of daddy's. Let's go find him.

They spot Doug and move toward him, weaving through the crowd. He sees them approach.

DOUG

Hi beautiful!

Doug takes Georgia from Omkari, plants a kiss on her cheek. Georgia shrieks and breaks into tears, pushes away from Doug, reaches for her mom.

DOUG
Oh, jeez. Hi other beautiful!

He moves to kiss Omkari.

OMKARI
Don't get that goop on me. Look at her, now, you left a lip print like my aunt Trudy.

DOUG
You better take her.

Doug hands Georgia back to Omkari.

GEORGIA
You look like mommy.

DOUG
I'm playing dress-up, honey. Like Halloween.

GEORGIA
Candy.

DOUG
There's no candy, but we'll get you something. Did you bring something for her?

OMKARI
No, I figured she'd be fine with shrimp puffs and Merlot. You sell any?

DOUG
More than half.

OMKARI
Holy shit!

GEORGIA
Bad word, mommy.

OMKARI
Sorry sweetie. F-U-C-K, Doug!

DOUG
That guy over there? The New Yorker.

OMKARI
Red. Hot. Chili Peppers. We're getting a new apartment.

DOUG
There's Ellie!

Doug trots toward the elevator.

36-YEAR-OLD ELLIE and husband JASON (40) step into the space. Jason is tall, fit, anchorman handsome, looks like money.

Doug rushes up, grabs Ellie in a fierce hug.

DOUG
Agh! So great to see you! Thanks
for coming.

ELLIE
God! Is that you under there?

DOUG
A bunch of the queens said they
wouldn't show up unless I submitted
to a makeover, so tonight I'm Iris.
Get it? Lens? Iris?

ELLIE
So appropriate.

DOUG
Jason, thanks very much for coming.
Really.

JASON
Ellie insisted.

DOUG
Uh, well, I'm glad she did. How'd
the book signing go?

ELLIE
Too good. My hand's about to fall
off.

DOUG
We must endure pain for our
passions.

Rachel steps up.

RACHEL
Excuse me. Doug, I can't get the
film out of the Bronica. I think it
pulled off the spindle. I'm really
sorry.

DOUG
No problem. Get the bag out, I'll
do it.

He turns back to Ellie and Jason.

DOUG
Can I steal Ellie for a few
minutes? Girl stuff.

JASON
Sure.

ELLIE
Meet me at the bar, babe?

JASON
Don't be long.

Doug and Ellie walk toward the shooting setup.

AT THE BAR

Jason flags a server.

JASON
Scotch rocks.

The server hustles up his drink in a flash.

DELICIOUS, one of the drag models from the show, sidles up
next to Jason, holding a glass of champagne.

DELICIOUS
You're lucky you made it. The art
press will be on fire about this
show for months. I'm Delicious.

She extends a hand. Jason leans close to her, smiles, takes
her hand warmly.

JASON
Get the fuck away from me.

Delicious drops her eyes, finds a friend in the crowd.

Jason looks around, shakes his head, drinks.

AT THE SHOOTING SETUP

Rachel places the problem camera and a changing bag on the
work table. Doug seals the camera inside, fits both hands
into sleeves on the bag, and begins working by touch to
recover the film.

DOUG
Talk to mom lately?

ELLIE
Last night.

DOUG
How's she doing?

ELLIE
You could ask her yourself.

DOUG
Yeah. Well, I'm asking you.

ELLIE
She's drinking a lot. Put her car
in a ditch last month.

DOUG
Fuck! Was she hurt?

ELLIE
Why don't you know, Doug? She's
your mother. Why is it so hard for
you to call her? Visit, even? It's
right across the river.

DOUG
It's complicated.

ELLIE
No, it's simple. She makes you
think about dad, and you'd rather
stick pins in your eyes. Some nerve
you've got, the suffering artist.
You don't go anywhere near
suffering.

DOUG
Or maybe I just got my fill when I
was a kid. Surely you remember,
dear sister.

ELLIE
Bullshit. You're hiding. You like
seeing the world inside a frame.
Selective focus. Nice clear
boundaries.

DOUG
Hadn't realized you'd moved into
clinical practice.

ELLIE

Come on, I've been watching you do it since high school. A camera makes things easier to deal with.

DOUG

There might be some truth to that. Could you move that case?

Ellie starts to push a camera case to one side on the work table, but she winces a bit, and switches to her other arm. Doug slides the changing bag over.

DOUG

How's the arm?

ELLIE

Still weak. I've been going to physical therapy since the cast came off.

DOUG

You have too many stairs.

ELLIE

I'm fine with stairs! I just slipped.

Doug pulls his hands out of changing bag, unzips the other side and removes the camera, film magazine, and the rewind spool of film.

DOUG

Rachel?

Rachel trots up. He hands her the film.

Glancing off, he sees Omkari and Georgia by the makeup table. Little Georgia is getting a princess makeover.

DOUG

Hey, check it out. Come and say hello.

Ellie and Doug make their way to the makeup table.

OMKARI

Ellie!

ELLIE

Hey sweetie!

Hugs. Ellie leans up to Georgia.

ELLIE

This can't be Georgia Stroud! You must be a member of the royal family! So nice to meet you, your highness!

Georgia giggles with delight.

OMKARI

God help me when she turns 13.

Doug looks hard at Ellie in the brighter light around the mirror.

DOUG

Why are you wearing so much makeup?

ELLIE

What do you mean?

Ellie shifts, steps back. Doug gently draws her back into the light.

The makeup lights reveal that Ellie's face, and even her arms, show a coating of foundation. She's trembling.

OMKARI

Doug, what's the matter?

Doug grabs a makeup sponge. He wipes under Ellie's right eye.

ELLIE

Ow.

Ellie has a black eye, perhaps a week old.

ELLIE

Doug--

Doug rubs the sponge down Ellie's right arm, discovers a set of livid finger marks.

ELLIE

Doug, it only happened once. And we're working things out. We're in, Doug--

Doug isn't listening. He walks away toward the bar.

ELLIE

Doug!

INT. PRISON DORMATORY - CONTINUING

The guard ushers Doug into a large open room with beds and lockers against opposite walls, also in a line down the center. The guard removes the handcuffs and leaves. Doug puts down the box.

Some of the other prisoners smile and applaud at Doug's return. Others just stare. FRESCA, a tall, slim Latino man, embraces Doug hard.

FRESCA
Hermano. Missed you, man.

DOUG
Me too. Mucho.

Doug shakes hands with other prisoners.

DOUG
What, no cake?

ZIMBOB
Check the john. I left you a cake.
Nice big one.

RUSHMORE
You watch that shit.

Zimbob glares at everyone, shuffles away down the room.

RUSHMORE
Iris, everything workin alright?
They didn't have to cut nothin off?

DOUG
I am fully intact. Haven't had a
chance to check the plumbing.

FRESCA
I'll check it right now.

Fresca reaches towards Doug's crotch, but Doug bats him away.

DOUG
At ease. Who's ready to work?

Doug reaches into the box, pulls out two KODAK DISPOSABLE CAMERAS. He holds them up. He calls to Zimbob.

DOUG
Zimbob! How about it? I'll Make you
famous, man!

No reply.

Doug limps down the room, finds Zimbob lying on his bunk staring at the ceiling.

ZIMBOB
The fuck you want?

DOUG
You're the only one in this wing I
don't have a picture of.

ZIMBOB
Fuck you.

Doug sits on the next bunk, reaches into the box he brought from the infirmary, produces two packs of cigarettes. He puts them on Zimbob's bunk.

EXT. PRISON EXERCISE YARD - LATER

Under a grey sky, Doug has arranged a tableau of prisoners. A group of three in the background look forward at Zimbob.

Doug rests a disposable camera on Rushmore's shoulder: a human tripod. Nearby, Fresca holds a piece of cardboard with a layer of wrinkled aluminum foil glued to one side. He bounces light onto Zimbob's face.

Two guards stand nearby, watching Doug work.

Doug peers through the tiny viewfinder while talking softly to Zimbob. He sounds like a coach, a doctor, or a priest.

DOUG
You're doing great, man. One more.
So, what do you dream about?

Zimbob's expression shifts slightly. Doug snaps a photo, advances the film.

DOUG
If you could change anything in
your life, what would it be?

Another shift in Zimbob's expression, and his eyes dart into the lens. Doug snaps a photo.

DOUG
What's the first thing you
remember?

Zimbob's eyes drop, his face falls. Doug snaps a photo.

DOUG
Who do you love?

Zimbob breathes in, raises his eyes toward the horizon. Doug snaps a photo.

DOUG
And there's the man himself. So
full of love. Who knew.

INT. PRISON, GENERAL - DAY

MONTAGE - Using a series of disposable cameras, Doug shoots portraits of guards, cooks, other prisoners. The prints from these snapshots are on display all over, in cells, near desks, on security consoles. Each has captured an intimate expression.

INT. PRISON DORMATORY - DAY

Doug addresses a padded envelope to Ellie, slips two disposable cameras inside, adds a letter, seals the envelope.

INT. PRISON VISITORS ROOM - DAY

The room is filled with rows of cheap folding tables and plastic chairs. Guards stand in each corner, eyes scanning the room. Nearly every chair is filled with a prisoner or family member. Lots of intense conversations.

Doug sits facing an empty chair. The signs of his injuries have nearly disappeared.

41-YEAR-OLD ELLIE approaches from the entrance. She is thin, pale, a bit rough around the edges.

ELLIE
Hey. Sorry. Traffic.

Doug rises to hug her.

DOUG
Don't worry about it. Oh, you feel
good, sister.

ELLIE
You too, brother.

She pulls away. They sit on opposite sides of the table.

DOUG
Got a fresh one.

He hands her another disposable camera.

ELLIE
Trade ya.

Ellie produces a big envelope. Doug spills out the contents: many cameras' worth of color snapshots. He flips through them like a kid with a box of new toys.

ELLIE
And one more.

She passes Doug a photo of herself holding a 3-year-old girl.

DOUG
Check out little Lisa! Oh, El.
She's so gorgeous. God damn. I am
so happy for you. You have enough
help?

ELLIE
An army of girlfriends. And good
day care two blocks away.

DOUG
So, everything's good?

ELLIE
Um, yeah, pretty much. Jason's
estate is taking forever to
probate. My lawyer says it'll be
another year. Just aggravating.

DOUG
You know I won't say I'm sorry
about him, right?

ELLIE
Let's not drag that up, okay?

DOUG
Fine. I still can't figure it. Guy
was a rich, abusive egomaniac. What
happened to him?

ELLIE
Anybody can become suicidal. Who
should know better than us?

DOUG
Yeah. Who should know better.

Doug returns his attention to the photos.

ELLIE

Please don't tell me you're blaming yourself for dad again.

DOUG

Forget it. Here they are!

From the pile of snapshots, Doug pulls out a half dozen shot over a few seconds. He lines them up for Ellie.

They show an ANGRY SKINHEAD and his buddies screaming at the camera, stepping closer, and then throwing punches. The final shot is a blur, the ground coming up.

DOUG

Negatives are in your fridge, right?

ELLIE

You just kept shooting?

DOUG

Yep. That's why they beat me so bad. Really pissed them off. But I got these. They're going in a show, like, huge.

GUARD

Two minutes!

ELLIE

STOP THIS!

Doug looks up.

The guards all snap their eyes to Doug and Ellie. Nearby people stop talking, glance over.

ELLIE

You are my only family now. I can't lose you. Stop taking stupid fucking risks like this.

Doug leans forward, eyes on Ellie.

ELLIE

Mom died last week. I lied. The second round of chemo never did anything except make her miserable. I didn't want to tell you on the phone. I'm sorry... Are you mad at me?

Doug shakes his head, takes her hands.

DOUG

Mom and I kind of said our good-byes after the trial. I trashed that relationship, El. By the time I gave a shit it was too late. I don't think she had much interest in seeing me again.

ELLIE

She never wanted to see you here.

DOUG

So we're both alone.

ELLIE

What's that mean?

DOUG

Omkari asked for a divorce.

ELLIE

Fuck! Fuck her!

DOUG

No, no. Think about it. This is a four hour drive. Georgia is a real handful now, they moved in with Omkari's mom. It's better. She's lonely, El. Lonely as I am.

ELLIE

Bullshit. She abandoned you.

DOUG

And it could be said your husband abandoned you. Maybe people just get worn out.

GUARD

Visiting Hours are now over! You know the drill, people!

Ellie and Doug stand as Doug collects the photos.

DOUG

Thanks again. This is the only thing keeping me sane in here.

ELLIE

If you were crazy, are you sure you'd know?

DOUG

Fuck you.

They embrace, another big squeeze. She whispers in his ear.

ELLIE

It wasn't suicide.

Doug stares at her. She gathers her things and steps away, disappearing into the scrum of departing visitors.

INT. PRISON DORMATORY - NIGHT

Doug lies on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. Light spills in through the windows. Men snore in the semi-darkness.

FRESCA

Iris, duermes?

DOUG

No.

FRESCA

Your sister, she visits today.

DOUG

Fresca, did I tell you we both have the same scar?

FRESCA

Del relámpago?

DOUG

Yeah, from lightning. But from other things too.

FRESCA

No entiendo.

DOUG

I'm worried my bad juju or whatever is rubbing off on her. Malos espíritus. I always wanted us to be close, but not like this.

FRESCA

You're a good man. Sleep easy.

DOUG

After seven years in this box, I think waking up is gonna be the problem. Duerma bien, hermano.

INT. NEW YORK ART GALLERY - NIGHT

Three years later.

Doug's prison portrait of Zimbob hangs on the wall, vastly enlarged, printed in angry, high-contrast black & white.

Other images from Doug's years in prison fill the walls on all sides.

A display case just in front of the entrance holds a neatly mounted array of 100 Kodak disposable cameras.

The violent sequence leading to Doug's beating is arrayed as one giant continuous strip, printed with visible edge numbers and sprocket holes.

A sign near the entrance: DOUGLAS STROUD - PREDISPOSED

Near the back wall, 36-YEAR-OLD DOUG stands with 36-YEAR-OLD OMKARI. Also Omkari's new husband, JAYDEN (30).

JAYDEN

It's smokier, and in Texas the sauce is always on the side.

DOUG

I had no idea.

JAYDEN

Yeah, and it's great, but give me Atlanta style every time, I like that sweetness, you know?

DOUG

That's mostly why I married Omkari.

OMKARI

I never made you barbecue.

JAYDEN

The best thing Omkari makes is reservations.

Jayden cracks up at his own joke. Omkari just stares at him. Oops.

OMKARI

"Are" reservations, my love. Get me a refill, would you?

Omkari thrusts her glass at Jayden, who walks off looking contrite.

DOUG
He is the blackest guy I've ever
seen. You trying to compensate?

OMKARI
Stop it.

Doug and Omkari exchange a long look.

DOUG
Are you happy?

OMKARI
You know I am.

DOUG
Anything you'd change? Maybe do
differently?

Omkari looks away, then off to the entrance.

OMKARI
Here's Ellie.

Doug follows her gaze, finds--

44-YEAR-OLD ELLIE entering the gallery. She looks at the
series of screaming skinheads, and seems more horrified than
the first time she saw them.

Doug steps up.

DOUG
Too contrasty?

Ellie hugs him tight.

DOUG
Thanks for coming. I know it's a
long trip.

ELLIE
Like I'd miss this.

DOUG
Where's your new honey? Max?

ELLIE
Um, he's afraid of you.

DOUG
That's nuts.

ELLIE

Yeah, have to do something about that. Anyway, he stayed in Chicago, taking care of Lisa.

DOUG

Damn, I was hoping to see her. She getting big?

ELLIE

Oh, yeah. Lotta changes.

DOUG

So, is he step-dad material?

ELLIE

We're not rushing anything.

DOUG

I'm not hearing the L word.

ELLIE

I will thank you to stay the fuck out of my personal life. Please.

DOUG

You wanna get outta here?

ELLIE

This is your show.

DOUG

The only thing about tonight I was looking forward to was seeing you.

ELLIE

How can you just leave?

DOUG

Have somebody cover my tracks. Watch this.

Doug scans the room, waves, and in seconds CHESA (25), a petite Asian girl, stands by his side.

CHESA

Yes, Doug?

DOUG

Chesa, my sister Ellie. Ellie this is Chesa, my assistant. Her kung fu is strong.

CHESA

Hello! Your brother is a brilliant man. It's an honor to work for him.

ELLIE

Are you for real?

CHESA

Oh yes, quite real.

DOUG

Chesa, we're sneaking out. Quietly. Okay?

CHESA

You left some time ago, I think. After an urgent phone call.

ELLIE

You're good.

CHESA

I am.

DOUG

Let's boogie.

INT. HOTEL RESTAURANT - LATER

The remains of dessert, drinks and coffee lie on the table, amid crumbs and wrinkled napkins.

Doug and Ellie have been talking with a couple at an adjacent table. They're all a bit tipsy.

ELLIE

No, you were four, I'm sure you were four.

DOUG

And already a visionary.

ELLIE

And the frog was like flattened and dried up. Did Doug notice? No.

DOUG

Deep respect for life.

ELLIE

We weren't allowed to have pets, so Doug sneaks this dead frog up to his room, and he finds a shoe box, and our mom sees him bringing in all these leaves and grass and stuff, and then carrying up a little dish of water--

DINER 1

Did you understand it was dead?

DOUG

I dunno. I do remember I liked putting all that stuff in the box. Like making a little jungle.

ELLIE

So finally mom comes up and says like, Douglas, what are you doing? And he says "Shhh! Froggie is sleeping!" And mom starts laughing her head off, and now Doug practically yells, "It's his nap time!"

DOUG

There are no witnesses to this event.

ELLIE

I heard you!

Ellie flags a passing waiter, waggles her wine glass.

DOUG

Two, please!

DINER 1

How'd the young biologist turn to photography?

DOUG

This woman literally put the camera into my hands.

DINER 2

Your folks must be so proud of you.

Doug looks down. The waiter returns with two glasses of wine.

ELLIE

They've both been gone for a while.

DOUG
I never really had a father.

DINER 2
Your mom raised you alone?

DOUG
No. I just never had a father. I think Ellie did, for a short while. But the guy was history by the time I came along.

ELLIE
Can we not talk about this?

DOUG
Sure. Ellie's the smart one.

The conversation lags.

DOUG
Hey, I'm gonna pack it in. Great talking with you guys.

DINER 1
And great meeting you. I love your work.

DOUG
Thanks. Great night.

Doug shakes hands with them, turns back to Ellie.

DOUG
They'll bill this to my room.

He picks up his wine.

DOUG
Thanks again for coming.

Doug bends down to kiss Ellie, then walks away.

ELLIE
Doug... Excuse me.

She grabs her purse and wine, trots off after Doug.

INT. HOTEL, ELEVATOR BANK - CONTINUING

Doug stands by the elevators. Ellie walks up.

ELLIE

I haven't seen you in almost a year. Can't we end this evening on an up note? Is that so hard?

DOUG

Prison was hard.

ELLIE

Oh, great, is that gonna define all our conversations from now on? Everything ultimately falls under the shadow of the worst time in your life?

DOUG

Could be.

ELLIE

I will not let you end the evening this way.

A familiar smile spreads over Doug's face.

DOUG

How about a picture?

ELLIE

Doug, you have thousands of pictures of me.

DOUG

Not one of you half in the bag at 44.

The elevator arrives, doors slide open. Doug steps in, looks back at Ellie.

She steps into the elevator next to him. Doug presses a button and the doors close.

INT. HOTEL, DOUG'S ROOM - CONTINUING

Ellie flips channels with the TV remote, sipping her wine. She lands on an old movie, the sound muted.

Doug has a camera case open on the desk. He digs out a Digital SLR camera, pops in a memory card.

Ellie steps to a mirror that nearly fills one wall over a low dresser. She examines herself.

Doug snaps a lens onto the camera.

DOUG
All set. Stand right over here.

ELLIE
No.

DOUG
Come on, just a couple.

ELLIE
Tonight, I'll take the pictures.
How about that?

DOUG
Have you ever used a Nikon D300?

ELLIE
I'm sure it's very hard, but you're
a great teacher. Show me what to
do.

DOUG
This is silly.

Ellie pulls the camera out of Doug's hands.

DOUG
Ellie--

ELLIE
--So I look through here, and focus
the lens, yep, that works, and push
the shutter release, right?

DOUG
There's a little more to it.

ELLIE
Stand over there.

DOUG
Come on!

Ellie snaps a photo of Doug. She smiles at him.

ELLIE
I just caught you. Now you're in
the camera. Sit on the bed.

DOUG
Jesus.

Doug relents. He avoids looking at Ellie.

She moves closer to Doug, frames another shot.

ELLIE

I can't get close enough. Give me a different lens.

Doug yanks the camera away from her, changes the lens. He hands it back to her, never meeting her eyes.

ELLIE

Wow, you don't like this at all, do you.

DOUG

Nope.

The new lens let's her move much closer to Doug to frame each shot. She pulls up a chair and sits five feet away.

ELLIE

Much better. Why don't you like it?

DOUG

I don't know.

ELLIE

But you do it for a living. Look at me.

Doug glances into the camera: focus, snap.

ELLIE

Think about the last dream you had.

DOUG

This is stupid. Or maybe you're working on another book?

ELLIE

Where were you in the dream?

Doug's face shifts, he looks up into a corner. Snap.

ELLIE

Better. What do you regret?

DOUG

Fuck, Ellie.

Snap.

ELLIE

What's your deepest pain?

DOUG
Oh, gonna charge me for a session,
now?

Snap.

ELLIE
Who do you love?

Doug just stares at her.

ELLIE
No answer?

DOUG
I don't think I like being
interrogated. Blame it on my
scarred childhood.

ELLIE
Hmmm. Take your shirt off.

DOUG
No!

Ellie steps right up to Doug, gets in his face.

ELLIE
For me.

DOUG
Forget it.

ELLIE
I'll show you mine if you show me
yours.

Doug stares into her eyes. He stands, starts to remove his shirt.

Ellie turns away from him, steps toward the desk to find her wine, takes another swallow. She turns back to face Doug.

ELLIE
Oh my God.

The lightning scar on Doug's side now spreads over half his torso, like the trails of a hundred worms. Arcs, tendrils, a maze of narrow pathways that twist across his skin from his shoulder to below his belt.

ELLIE
Turn around.

Doug turns. The arcs and tendrils spread across the right half of his back as well. Doug completes his turn, faces Ellie again. He looks embarrassed, crosses his arms.

Ellie puts the camera down, kicks off her shoes. She backs up to Doug, pulls her hair aside, presenting the zipper on the back of her dress.

He pulls the zipper down.

She steps away from him, then lets the dress fall to the floor. She faces him.

Her lightning scar is as large and complex as his. The tendrils peek out from under her bra, reaching past her right breast. They cross her stomach, encircle her navel, reach under her panties, partially down her right thigh.

She slowly turns around, stops when facing Doug again.

ELLIE

Wait a minute.

She grabs Doug's hand, pulls him over to the big mirror. She turns her back to the mirror, takes off her bra, stands so their right sides are touching. She looks over her shoulder into the mirror.

Placed side by side, their lightning scars form a symmetrical Rorschach of lines and curves.

ELLIE

It's the tree.

And it is: a stylized image of the tree struck by lightning when Doug was 6 years old. Even the rotted hole is visible as a dark area where the lightning first touched them.

Doug steps away, picks up the camera, pulls Ellie into a better spot for lighting. She touches the scar on his chest. He flinches.

ELLIE

Does it hurt?

DOUG

No. Just stand there.

Doug begins shooting close-ups of Ellie's side, capturing different areas of the scar. He detaches the lens, turns it around, and begins shooting even closer images, but his hands are shaking.

ELLIE

Let me.

She takes the camera from him, begins using the same technique to photograph extreme close-ups of the arcs and tendrils on his chest and side.

She moves lower with the camera, finally catching the top of Doug's pants in the viewfinder.

She puts the camera and lens aside, looks up at Doug.

Ellie darts up and kisses Doug, pulling him against her, both hands wrapped behind his head.

He pushes her away.

She steps toward him, unfastens his pants. She kisses him again. This time, he pulls her closer.

INT. HOTEL, DOUG'S ROOM - LATER

Doug and Ellie lie in bed facing each other, close enough to whisper, covers drawn up to their shoulders. The only light is from the TV; another old movie sends flickering light around the room.

ELLIE

Lisa was almost one. Jason hadn't hit me since she was born; I thought he'd really changed. You know, a kid, being a dad. One Friday, I got home after midnight, so I sort of tip-toed in from the garage. We had a video baby monitor in the kitchen. Jason was standing next to her crib. Lisa was asleep. I thought it was so cute, you know, dad watching his little girl sleep. Then he lifted her up and dropped her. And then again. A little higher. First couple of times, she didn't wake up. Then he dropped her from about two feet over the crib. She started to scream, terrified, and he picked her up, and cuddled her, and she calmed right down. That was the worst part. I couldn't... I couldn't...

Tears run from Ellie's eyes.

DOUG

You don't have to tell me any of this.

ELLIE

I want to. I ground up four Ambien, put them in his second scotch. He passed out in front of the TV. I dragged him into his office, and I hung him with his belt, from the door. I made sort of a ramp from furniture. It wasn't that hard. Wrote the note on his computer. Wore rubber gloves from the kitchen. Then I closed his office door, walked to Lisa's room. And I picked her up, sound asleep, and just carried her around the house for a while, sort of humming to her. I felt like it hadn't really happened. Next morning, I called the cops.

DOUG

If I'd killed him at the show, you wouldn't have had to do that.

ELLIE

And you'd have spent the rest of your life in prison.

DOUG

Small price.

ELLIE

You're still such a kid. I don't regret it. But it's so horrible. I'd like to forget it ever happened. The things we do.

DOUG

There is nothing horrible about you.

ELLIE

I could have just left him.

DOUG

And would he have made that easy?

ELLIE

God, no.

DOUG

Shared custody, at a minimum. Every other weekend alone with Lisa.

ELLIE

I wouldn't have accepted that.

DOUG

So there it is. Let it go, Ellie. We're both good people.

ELLIE

But only one of us is a murderer.

Ellie rolls over, presents her back to Doug.

ELLIE

Could you turn off the TV?

Doug finds the remote, turns off the TV, then slips back into bed next to Ellie. He spoons up to her, an arm around her waist. Ellie stares into the dark, wide awake.

INT. HOTEL, DOUG'S ROOM - MORNING

Doug stirs in bed. He looks around. Ellie is gone.

He gets out of bed, walks to the desk. His camera from the night before sits there. The memory card slot is open.

A glass of wine stands next to the camera, the memory card resting on the bottom.

JOSEPH (O.S.)

Through this marriage, we broaden our family circle, we remember our heritage and recall those who gave us life.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY PARK - AFTERNOON

Ten years later.

A wedding reception is in progress, cheerful and luxurious, about 75 guests. They include 21-YEAR-OLD GEORGIA, Doug's daughter, but not Omkari, his ex-wife.

The best man, JOSEPH (50), is giving a toast.

46-YEAR-OLD DOUG, the groom, and 35-YEAR-OLD CHESA, the bride, stand before the guests.

JOSEPH

We call upon our ancestors, the foundations of our families, immortalized in our thoughts. We call upon our elders, whose wisdom we seek in all endeavors.

Doug turns, scans the park around the wedding crowd.

JOSEPH

Our friends whom we are blessed to have in our lives. Our parents who guided us along the road to adulthood. We call upon those who have passed over and could not be here today. We call upon the bride and groom, that they may always find prosperity in love and devotion. And we wish everyone to leave more blessed than when they came. To Doug and Chesa!

Doug and Chesa embrace and kiss. Applause from all the guests.

A young photographer shoots the happy couple.

GUEST 1

Doug, you're trusting your wedding photos to someone else?

DOUG

I shot the last one and look how that turned out.

GUEST 2

What advice would you give a young photographer?

DOUG

Put overtime in your contract. My love, I have to drain the conjugal snake.

CHESA

You are abandoning me on our wedding day!

DOUG

Only the demands of biology will ever separate us. Can you mingle for a bit?

CHESA

I can mingle. Abandoner. Take good care of that snake.

Another kiss, and Doug drifts into the swirl of guests. He makes his way toward a vintage brick building down a paved walkway. Rest rooms.

Just clear of the wedding crowd, he sees a teen-age girl approaching. He doesn't recognize her, but she's looking right at him.

She walks up without hesitation.

LISA

Uncle Doug.

DOUG

Lisa? Where's your mom?

LISA

Not far.

DOUG

Okay...

LISA

Come on.

16-YEAR-OLD LISA heads back the way she came. Doug just stands there. Lisa glances back to Doug without stopping.

He trots after her.

INT. MID TOWN BAR - CONTINUING

Doug and Lisa enter from the street: dark wood, tin ceiling, tile floor. A few listless customers, a TV with no sound.

Doug follows Lisa to a booth near the back. They pass a BRAWNY WOMAN at the bar, who glances at Doug as they pass.

Doug and Lisa reach the last booth. 54-YEAR-OLD ELLIE sits alone in the dim light, her back to the door. She looks up at Doug. Her hair is cut short in a neat pageboy.

Doug sits down opposite Ellie, glares at her.

DOUG

I gotta piss.

He slides out of the booth, goes hunting for the men's room.

LISA
Classy guy. More ginger ale?

ELLIE
Sure.

Ellie slides her glass toward Lisa.

Doug returns, again sits facing Ellie. Angry eyes.

DOUG
Fuck this.

Doug rises and storms out of the bar. Ellie doesn't move.

Lisa returns with a fresh ginger ale.

ELLIE
Thanks, sweetie.

LISA
Where is he?

ELLIE
Working things out. He'll be back.

Lisa sits in the booth. Ellie peels the paper from a straw, slips it into her ginger ale.

LISA
Hungry?

A head-shake.

Doug re-enters the bar. He hesitates near the entrance, then approaches Ellie's booth. Lisa glares up at him.

LISA
Welcome to the Loser Lounge. Wanna see our list of specials? The asshole burger is excellent.

DOUG
Fine. I'm a shitty uncle.

Lisa leaves the booth and finds a seat at the bar.

Doug sits down again. His eyes drill into the table top. Ellie stares at him.

ELLIE
I'm glad you had nice weather.

DOUG
I'm sorry, have we met?

Ellie sighs. Doug seems like he wants to punch a wall.

DOUG
A couple dozen emails in ten years.
And every time I try to visit, you
have business in fucking Singapore
or someplace. You wouldn't even
give me a phone number! What
happened to my sister?

ELLIE
I've missed you more than you can
possibly realize.

DOUG
Were you even gonna come today?

ELLIE
Yes. But the closer I came, the
more I felt like hiding. So I'm
hiding here. Do you understand?

DOUG
Ellie, no one knows what happened
in that hotel room except us.

ELLIE
I told Max.

DOUG
Why!?

ELLIE
Because I needed somebody to
convince me that I wasn't a
perverted freak. Somebody besides
you. I thought if Max could do
that, I'd be okay.

Doug reaches across the table and takes Ellie's hands in his,
his face twisted in anguish.

ELLIE
Max said you and I have a blighted
relationship. He used the word sick
a number of times. I came back to
the states three years ago. He
stayed in Sweden.

DOUG

And you didn't want to tell me
because...?

ELLIE

You don't feel ashamed?

DOUG

Jesus. Ellie... Ellie there's
earth, air, and fire, and then
there's you. You are the fourth
element in my universe.

ELLIE

Better not let Chesa hear you say
that.

DOUG

Yeah, better not.

ELLIE

But you love her.

DOUG

We're talking about you now. You
are the closest thing to a soul
mate I've ever had. I have never
regretted what we did, not for a
second. And Christ, it was like a
dream, a mirage. It'll never happen
again. This is why you cut me off?

ELLIE

It will never happen again.

DOUG

Ellie, one time, we grabbed hold of
a door that always stays closed,
and we pulled it open. But a few
hours later it was closed again.
End of story.

ELLIE

But maybe that's not what I wanted,
brother. Maybe I wanted to leave it
open. Maybe I wanted to kick that
door off its hinges and burn it.
Tell me I shouldn't feel ashamed
about that.

Doug sits back, then slides out of the booth and moves to the
same side as Ellie. He kisses her.

DOUG

Fuck ashamed. What's ashamed ever
done for you?

Tears spill from Ellie's eyes. She hugs Doug close.

Doug feels something between them. He pulls back.

DOUG

What's this?

Ellie unfastens a few buttons on her blouse, pulls out the
top of a central-line chemotherapy catheter.

DOUG

Jesus. How long?

ELLIE

I'm finishing my second round. Not
sure I'll do a third. I get another
scan in two weeks.

DOUG

That's a wig, isn't it.

ELLIE

Only a man would have failed to
notice that immediately.

DOUG

You should have gone for blonde! I
have a thing for smokin hot
blondes!

ELLIE

Not so funny now, Doug. Lisa!

Lisa trots up from the bar.

LISA

Oh, we're all friends now?

ELLIE

I need to use the bathroom.

Lisa runs down the bar toward the entrance.

DOUG

Want me to help you?

ELLIE

No. This calls for a pro.

Doug slides out of the booth. The heavysset woman from the bar rushes up.

STEPHANIE
How you feeling, dear?

ELLIE
Long as you can get me to the john quick, I'll be fine.

STEPHANIE
You got it.

Stephanie reaches past the booth, to an alcove by an ice machine, and pulls out a folded wheel chair. She snaps it open and helps Ellie into the seat.

The two disappear towards the ladies room.

Doug returns to his original seat. Lisa sits down in Ellie's place.

DELICIOUS
Why's she need a wheelchair?

LISA
Lesions on the lower spine.

DOUG
I'd like the chance to be a better uncle.

LISA
Tough to be anything when you're not around. Mom says the big fight was her fault. Ten years ago. That true?

DOUG
Um, well, uh, I think we share the blame, actually.

LISA
She said you'd say that.

EXT. DOUG'S CAR - DAY

Three months later.

The rear hatch on a late model SUV pops up, revealing Doug bundled in a winter coat. He looks rough, needs a shave.

November sunlight glows on suburban lawns around him.

DOUG

So Ellie, if you're in a hurry, I could hold a pillow over your face. Or rip open a vein. That's messy as hell, but you'll be dead, right? Let somebody else clean up.

ELLIE

I'll let you know.

DOUG

That's cool. Just want you to know I'm here for you.

ELLIE

That's so sweet.

They both drift into their own thoughts.

A patch of dappled sunlight appears on the bed, right on Eleanor's lap, a shifting pool of radiance.

ELLIE

Hey.

Ellie reaches over, cups her hand in the light. Doug smiles.

He digs into a pocket, finds a TATTERED SNAPSHOT. He places it next to Ellie's hand. It's Doug's first photograph, showing Ellie's hand cupped in a shaft of sunlight.

Ellie smiles. She looks up at Doug and his demeanor crumbles. His throat hitches in an agonized sob.

DOUG

Fuck this.

Ellie holds his hand.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - MORNING

Doug finishes showering, shaving.

Clothes, books and personal items lie scattered around the room; Doug has been there about a week.

He stares into a large mirror, naked. The lightning scar now wraps around most of his torso, over his right shoulder, the top of his right thigh.

INT. MOTEL RESTAURANT - LATER

Sitting in a booth, Doug stares at a plate of eggs and bacon. He sips coffee, doesn't touch the food.

He regards the empty seat opposite.

INT. ELEANOR'S HOUSE - LATER

Doug and Lisa sit at the kitchen table. A copy of the DO NOT RESUSCITATE notice is taped to the fridge.

The HEALTH AID steps in.

HEALTH AID
She's asking for you.

Doug and Lisa follow the health aid out.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - CONTINUING

Ellie lies in the hospital bed, breathing fast and shallow through her mouth. She is shrunken, corpse-like.

Doug sits on Ellie's right, Lisa on her left, so they can each hold her hands. Doug is already weeping. Ellie's voice is little more than a whisper. She looks up at Lisa.

ELLIE
I can feel it. Like when a storm is coming.

Ellie rolls her head to face Doug.

ELLIE
Some people say this is a better way to die. So you have time to say goodbye. You think so?

DOUG
I could do without hearing you say goodbye.

ELLIE
Oh. Doug, there's a beautiful tunnel of light. And I see grandma, and grandpa...

Lisa is crying and laughing at the same time.

LISA
Don't, mom.

ELLIE
Will you keep working?

DOUG
I don't know.

ELLIE
You should. Hold onto things.

DOUG
But they slip away. Just like those
tadpoles.

ELLIE
The picture.

She gestures to the bedside table. The old snapshot of her hand by the stream, Doug's first photo, now rests there in a small frame. He picks it up, holds it closer to Ellie.

ELLIE
Such a perfect moment. Light.

DOUG
Light.

ELLIE
Take him there.

Ellie's face goes slack. She stops breathing.

DOUG
Ellie?

EXT. FOREST PATH - DAY

LIGHTNING RIPS DOWN THE TRUNK - HAMMER SLAM OF THUNDER

Wood explodes--

14-YEAR-OLD ELLIE pitches forward, falls to the ground.

6-YEAR-OLD DOUG tumbles onto the path a few feet away.

They both lie motionless in the rain.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM - LATER

6-year-old Doug wakes, motionless.

He lies on a hospital gurney in a trauma bay, curtains closed on each side. He wears only a hospital gown.

Doug hears a voice. He looks at the curtain to his right.

DOCTOR (O.S.)

What I can't predict are possible long term neurological effects. Cases like this can be strange. I know of patients where partial paralysis, memory loss, or sensory impairment developed months--

Doug throws off the blanket, yanks out his I.V. line. He hops off the gurney and pulls the curtain aside, blood trickling down his arm.

In the next trauma bay, 40-YEAR-OLD PATRICIA stands by the DOCTOR. On the gurney rests a small form covered by a sheet. Doug screams.

DOUG

It doesn't happen this way! This is wrong! It doesn't happen this way!

Patricia tries to embrace Doug, but he keeps pushing her away. Doug pulls the sheet from Ellie's face, feels her cold, lifeless skin.

DOUG

It doesn't happen this way!

He collapses in tears and writhes in Patricia's arms. A nurse rushes in. The doctor gives Doug a shot, and he fades into unconsciousness.

INT. HOSPITAL PATIENT ROOM - DAY

MONTAGE - 6-YEAR-OLD DOUG lies in bed, talking with a succession of medical professionals, a social worker, his mother.

Later, alone in the room, Doug rises, goes to a mirror, gazes at his reflection, his hands.

He examines the lightning scar. It spreads over about half his torso on the right side.

INT. PATRICIA'S CAR - DAY

Patricia drives Doug home, silent, along pleasant tree lined streets. Doug looks at the houses like a boy in a dream.

INT. STROUD HOUSE - CONTINUING

Patricia and Doug enter from the garage. Doug looks around like everything is strange, memories slowly returning. He runs his hand over door frames, the back of a chair.

Patricia watches him closely.

PATRICIA

Douglas, are you hungry?

DOUG

No, thanks. Where's dad?

PATRICIA

He's resting. Douglas, Ellie's... this has hit your father very hard. He's very, very sad. And it may be a while before he seems like your father again. But he loves you, remember that. And be patient, okay?

DOUG

Of course. You've both lost a child. Nothing worse for a parent.

PATRICIA

No. No, I don't expect there is. How, how...?

DOUG

Mom, I'd like to just rest in my room, okay?

PATRICIA

Sure, I'll tuck you in.

DOUG

You really don't have to.

PATRICIA

I want to, Douglas.

DOUG

Okay. Thanks.

He hugs her. They make their way to the stairs, passing the closed door of his parents' room. Doug looks at the door as they walk by.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, SECOND FLOOR HALL

Doug and Patricia pass Ellie's room. He pauses, walks in, as if entering a museum. He takes Ellie's pillow and presses it into his face, breathes deep. He begins to cry.

Patricia sits on Ellie's bed, tries to comfort him.

PATRICIA

It's okay to cry. It's okay.

DOUG

Nothing's okay, mom. Nothing is even remotely okay.

She draws her hand away from him.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, BATHROOM - NIGHT

Doug sits in the tub, still and silent.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, KITCHEN - MORNING

Doug fixes himself a bowl of cereal, sits to eat at the kitchen table. In the living room, he can see his mother sitting with a cocktail.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, PARENT'S ROOM - DAY

Doug approaches the closed door, knocks lightly. No reply.

He edges the door open, sees his father sitting motionless in the recliner, face a blank.

DOUG

Dad?

Doug enters the walk-in closet, sees the gun box on the shelf. He walks back out, sits on the floor in front of his father.

DOUG

Dad, I'm really sad. I miss Ellie. I loved her. She was my best friend. You must miss her even more. You knew her longer. We should talk about it, about how much we loved her. We can--

John's voice shakes.

JOHN
Please go away.

Doug rises, leaves the room.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, DOUG'S ROOM - NIGHT

Doug lies in bed, staring at the ceiling.

He rises, dresses, grabs a flashlight.

EXT. FOREST PATH - LATER

Doug makes his way along the path, his flashlight reducing the forest to a narrow pool of vision. Dawn is beginning to lighten the eastern sky.

He approaches the tree where he and Ellie were hit by lightning. Bright fragments of wood litter the ground. Ellie's knapsack lies where some rescuer dropped it.

Doug kneels by the knapsack, lies down next to it, looking up at the sky. Stars prick through the tapestry of overlapping branches.

Doug digs into Ellie's knapsack, finds her camera.

He approaches the tree. The trunk is split all the way to the hole, a dark line stretching up out of sight.

Doug stands the flashlight inside the hollow so it shines up into the trunk. He props Ellie's camera on top of it, the lens staring back at him. He faces the hollow like a boy praying.

DOUG
Ellie?

Not a sound in the woods.

DOUG
Ellie, are you there? Ellie, I'm lost. I don't know what's happened, but I'm lost. I can't live like this. It's impossible. Did you do this? Somehow? Did anybody? Or did it just happen? I need you to help me. Maybe I'm dreaming. Can you make me wake up? Please? Can you make me wake up?

John stands about 20 feet behind Doug, tears running down his face.

DOUG

Please tell me what to do, Ellie.
Please tell me what to do. I need
you back. Please, Ellie, I need you
back. I can't face it all a second
time. Not alone.

A sob from behind him.

JOHN (O.S.)

Doug--

Doug turns. John sits down next to Doug.

JOHN

You shouldn't have come out here
alone.

DOUG

I wanted to pray. For Ellie.

JOHN

This is where I found you.

DOUG

What was it like?

JOHN

Almost dark. Raining. I thought you
were both dead. She... I didn't
tell your mother this. Your sister
was alive when I found her. Just
for a moment. She spoke to me.

DOUG

What did she say?

JOHN

She said, "Take him there." And
then she, then she was--

John chokes up. Doug throws himself at his father, a fierce hug that takes John by surprise. John squeezes Doug close.

JOHN

Douglas, I don't know how to live
with it.

Doug pulls away. The sky is brighter, sunrise not far off.

DOUG

Come on.

He grabs his father's hand, drags him up and away down the path.

EXT. FOREST STREAM - LATER

Doug and his father trot up to the stream. The sun is just peeking over the horizon.

DOUG

Ellie brought me here, that morning. Watch.

Doug plunges his hand into the water, comes up with handful of tadpoles. He holds them out for his father to see.

DOUG

What do you see?

JOHN

Tadpoles.

DOUG

But did you know they're delicious?

Like Ellie, Doug pretends to eat the tadpoles. John laughs.

JOHN

What are you doing? Douglas!

DOUG

I was just teasing. Is that okay?

JOHN

Sure.

A ray of sunlight appears through the trees, lights up the clearing where John and Doug stand. Doug sees it. He holds his hand cupped in the light.

DOUG

Now what do you see?

EXT. FOREST PATH - LATER

John and Doug appear from the side, following the path toward home. John carries Doug on his shoulders.

DOUG (V.O.)

Within a few weeks, it became a different time, a variation on a theme. I learned how to be a kid again. And my father became a man I had never known.

INT. STROUD HOUSE, PARENT'S ROOM - DAY

Two workmen are carrying out the recliner. Two other workmen assemble a queen size bed where the twin beds used to be.

DOUG (V.O.)

Mom and Dad grieved, and healed. They learned how to be parents, and lovers, and that was both strange and wonderful to see.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

8-YEAR-OLD DOUG sits in class among other third graders, as the teacher sketches math on the blackboard.

DOUG (V.O.)

I remembered a lot. Friends, jobs, victories and failures. Forty years of songs, movies, and TV commercials. Every inch of Ellie's wonderful skin.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - NIGHT

Halloween. 10-YEAR-OLD DOUG is out trick-or-treating with some friends, laughing and joking.

DOUG (V.O.)

Within a couple of years, my life had diverged completely from what I remembered. And then even the memories started to fade.

INT. COLLEGE PHOTO STUDIO - DAY

A dozen photography students stand or crouch, eyes pressed to their cameras, most using tripods. All are feverishly snapping away at something off screen to the right. Among the students is a statuesque black woman, OMKARI (20).

HERB (40) the professor, stands to one side.

HERB

Form and texture, right? Remember Edward Weston. After every exposure, reframe. Don't forget to bracket.

20-YEAR-OLD DOUG sits naked on a sweep of grey seamless paper, one knee up, face in profile, motionless.

A mobility cane leans in a nearby corner.

DOUG (V.O.)

Long term neurological effects appeared when I was 11. I wondered if this was a bargain that someone had in mind: gain my family, lose my sight. It assured that my path would be uncharted, my future entirely new. This felt like a good thing.

INT. COLLEGE STUDENT CENTER - DAY

Doug sits at a table with some friends, a tray of lunch in front of him, his folded white cane on the table.

DOUG (V.O.)

Yet there were familiar currents in this second life. I could feel it when one of them took hold of me. They usually swept me toward something worth finding.

20-YEAR-OLD OMKARI sits down at Doug's table.

OMKARI

Okay if I join you?

DOUG

Uh, sure. You got enough room there?

OMKARI

Plenty. I was in that class where you modeled today.

Doug cocks an ear at the voice, breaths in.

DOUG

I hope it was worthwhile. Can't say I'm much into photography.

OMKARI

Well, you are very nice to point a camera at.

DOUG

Really.

OMKARI

Take it from me. And I set a high standard.

DOUG

That's good to know. Hey, I bet I can guess your name.

OMKARI

No way are you guessing my name.

DOUG

And if I'm right, you'll go out with me tonight.

54-YEAR-OLD JOHN walks up and sits at Doug's table, a stack of braille books in his hand.

JOHN

Good afternoon.

DOUG

Hey, dad.

JOHN

They didn't have Jung's "Man and His Symbols," but I got "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious." Oh, I'm sorry, I'm being very rude. John Stroud.

John shakes hands with Omkari.

OMKARI

Hello.

DOUG

Thanks, that's great. So, is it a bet?

JOHN

What's the bet?

OMKARI

Fast moving boy. Sure, it's a bet.

DOUG

Dad, I'd like you to meet Omkari.
She's having dinner with me
tonight.

OMKARI

Sir, your son is a tad spooky.

JOHN

I know exactly what you mean. We
love him anyway.

OMKARI

Who told you my name?

DOUG

Guy I know. Wanna meet him?

Doug reaches across the table. They clasp hands.

THE END