

THE POISON SQUAD

Written by

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Based on the true story.

ANONYMOUS CONTENT

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Red. The perfect shade of red.

A breeze rustles it. Yellow sunlight kisses its taut skin.

This is life. And then --

-- a hand, browned from soil and sun, reaches in, cradles the tomato on the vine. Gives it a turn.

And SNAPS it off, placing it atop a full bushel basket.

The FARMER carries the basket to a wooden cart, heaves it on a tottering pyramid of them. Wipes a fresh layer of dirt across the rear of his overalls.

Manages a weary gesture to its DRIVER, precariously seated atop the mound.

The driver tugs the reins. And we're off...

A DRY CRUNCH as hooves and wheels shuffle through earth.

The driver runs a hand across his push broom mustache, producing a dark mass that assuredly used to be spittle.

He pulls a tomato from the pile under him and bites into it.

The horse-drawn cart rattles down the dirt road.

The wheels rumble through the ruts and bulges as it

BA-BUMP!

lifts onto paved road.

The cart pulls to a stop in front of a factory. Soot curtains the sky.

FACTORY HANDS swarm the cart.

FOSTER (V.O.)
What chemicals were you testing?

INT. FACTORY

Tomatoes on an assembly line feed into a macerator...

Their liquid innards are fed into a mixing vat...

Catsup bottles on a conveyor belt pause under a nozzle.

WILEY (V.O.)
The first was boric acid.

The nozzle is labeled: BORIC ACID.

FOSTER (V.O.)
And your conclusion?

WILEY (V.O.)
Primary side effects included
headache, abdominal pain, vomiting.
In chronic doses, seizure--

It FIRES a shot of boric acid into the bottles beneath.

Freshly labeled bottles are packed into boxes...

...which are loaded into wagons. The wagons disperse down the avenues of a crowded city.

INT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

Those red bottles lined perfectly on a shelf.

A hand reaches in and grabs a bottle, dropping it into a shopping bag.

The GROCERY CLERK turns and hands the bag to a PRIM WOMAN in a blue dress.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

The woman opens her oven and bastes the roast inside.

She plates the roast. Opens a can of BRIGHT GREEN PEAS and adds them to the dish.

INT. DINING ROOM

It's the ideal family table setting. Dapper, mustachioed HUSBAND sits at the table beside young SON and DAUGHTER. He readies a pipe as behind, a fire crackles behind a grate.

The woman carries in the roast and places it at the center of the table. She adds a host of condiments, including the bright red catsup.

A quick unwrap of the apron and she joins her family at the table. They all join hands and bow their heads as the husband leads them in prayer.

HUSBAND

Heavenly Father, we thank you for
this bounty we are about to
receive, with this meal and forever
after.

ALL AT TABLE

Amen.

Almost in response, the catsup bottle EXPLODES, covering the family in a shade of red. Stunned faces. And then a shard of glass CLATTERS to the floor. Yes, *this really used to happen.*

FOSTER (V.O.)

And what exactly prompted you to
resort to human experimentation,
Dr. Wiley?

And now we get our first glimpse of our hero, HARVEY WILEY, 61. Beady-eyed, as if breaking down your math, and ruddy-cheeked, as if always in the midst of a tantrum. This is a man forgotten by history, and we'll soon know why.

WILEY

It was less a prompt and more a hunch. You see, of all the animals, the human being is the most resilient.

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLES: THE POISON SQUAD.

FADE UP ON:

EXT. 7TH STREET - WASHINGTON, D.C. - MORNING

A bustling morning in our Nation's capital. Horse-drawn carts and trolley cars exchange right-of-way as pedestrians pack the expansive sidewalks.

At a news stand, a group of elegantly dressed GENTLEMEN huddle over an outstretched copy of The Washington Post. Beside, their older BIDDY WIVES prattle on, re-pinning a corsage on one of their ostentatious hats.

WHOOSH!

Suddenly, a bicycle slices between them, its wake tugging newspapers into the sky. The women frantically chase after their unseated hats.

We WHIP, trying to catch up --

The bicycle angles through an interweaving mesh of unfettered motion. Like muscle memory, anticipating every opening.

We race behind as he:

--SPLITS the gap between passing trolley cars

--SKITCHES a ride from an apple cart, leaving a nickel, snagging an apple

--SLINGSHOTS through a narrow alleyway, bursting back onto a main road, SPOOKING a passing horse.

Finally level with the rider, we see the stormless face of Harvey Wiley, now 56.

A bright white sign for canned peas. Atop a ladder, a PAINTER brushes the last touches on the slogan proclaiming 'THE GREENEST PEAS MEAN YOU LOVE HER!'

Wiley zips beneath, clipping the base of the ladder. The painter hangs on for dear life.

EXT. RANKIN'S CANDY STORE - MORNING

The bicycle now leans against the front of the shop.

INT. RANKIN'S CANDY STORE

An exasperated MOTHER, 30s, hair tight in a head scarf, rants to the CHOCOLATIER.

MOTHER

A nickel of the peppermints will do. All night and day now. The only thing keeping her insides on the inside is peppermint candy. Soft stomach like her father.

Wiley, waiting behind, looks down to her pale YOUNG DAUGHTER crouched in a cold sweat beneath the counter.

Their eyes connect. Wiley bites his apple.

The chocolatier hands her the bag of candy.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Never again with the spinach. Let's go, Margaret.

She takes Margaret's frail hand.

The chocolatier notices Wiley.

A brick of chocolate CHOPPED. WRAPPED.

EXT. AQUEDUCT BRIDGE - MORNING

Wiley's bicycle glides across wooden panels bridging the Potomac, and onto a dirt path on the other side.

EXT. FARMLAND - SAME

Wiley slows as he nears a dairy farm.

A DAIRY FARMER in overalls milks a large cow, milk splashing into a pail. His BLONDE CHILD of 7 watches from behind.

The child turns and notices Wiley. He quietly sneaks away.

Wiley smiles.

The child approaches with another pail. Wiley produces an empty bottle from his jacket, and the boy diligently fills it with raw milk. He hands it back to Wiley.

Wiley brings a finger to his lips. Pulls the WRAPPED CHOCOLATE from his pocket and hands it over. Mimicking the gesture, the boy takes the chocolate.

Wiley pedals off.

EXT. HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING - MORNING

JAY GAFNEY, a coiffed, hale man in his 40s, compulsively checks his watch.

The bicycle rolls up, Wiley dismounting on the fly.

GAFNEY
So nice of you to make time for us
this morning.

WILEY
Good breakfast takes time.

Wiley takes an expiring bite, tossing the core to Gafney.

INT. HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING - MORNING

CHYRON: DECEMBER 6, 1901

A room of consequence: timeless, ornate. An elevated mahogany dais horseshoes formidably at the front.

Seated center is the brimstone-tongued CONGRESSMAN HOLLIS "HICKORY" SUMNER, 60. Beside him sits fellow Southern CONGRESSMAN WALKER HAYES, 45.

SUMNER

Sir, you're here on behalf of your associates in Richmond, which composes about 25% of farmland in the great state of Virginia, to petition the United States Government to pay you to farm? Am I missin' something?

Dwarfed by the dais, at a lonely podium, stands a farmer, 40, dressed in his SUNDAY BEST.

SUNDAY BEST

Mr. Congressman, with all due respect, we farmers out here are struggling. Even despite the record harvests the last few years, we just can't make ends meet. All we're asking for, is a loan against the value of our future harvest. The past five years, our gross has increased an average of--

Sumner waves him off.

SUMNER

No I very much got your logic. And what you're asking me to do is grant you a loan on the value of a harvest that hasn't happened yet. A harvest that God himself has yet to design. Well why don't we ask God for permission for this loan?

Sumner rises, invoking a Baptist preacher.

SUMNER (CONT'D)

O Lord, if you see fit to grant this farmer a loan based on crops you intend to bestow, then speak now, and it shall be done.

The room sits in ironic anticipation. The farmer slinks from the podium.

SUMNER (CONT'D)

Not much a man of faith, are you.

He sits back down.

From the gallery, a disturbance as a BRIGHT RED hat rises from the crowd. Balancing atop her chair, a young curly-haired SUFFRAGETTE shouts over the room, a VOTES FOR WOMEN sash draped around her.

SUFFRAGETTE

Hey Sumner, why don't you just beat him to death! Equal rights for equal lives!

A SECURITY GUARD lifts her off the chair and begins to carry her to the door.

SUFFRAGETTE (CONT'D)

Watch the sash, you're crumpling it.

Her shouts continue as she's dragged out.

SUFFRAGETTE (CONT'D)

We will be heard!

Wiley watches from the gallery. He turns to Gafney.

WILEY

What was that about?

GAFNEY

Women want to vote.

WILEY

No, the beating of a man to death.

In the background, Sumner is picking another VICTIM apart.

GAFNEY

Story goes that back when Sumner was a Junior Congressman from Georgia, he beat an abolitionist half to death with the leg of his desk.

WILEY

Persuasive.

GAFNEY

That's old Hickory.

Sumner scratches a name off the docket. Next: Wiley, Harvey.

SUMNER

He's back.

Congressman Hayes leans in to confer.

HAYES
Old Borax?

SUMNER
Probably with more about his
diseased little vegetable farm.

HAYES
Carrots with rickets.

The two CHUCKLE with disdain.

HAYES (CONT'D)
So what do you want to do?

SUMNER
Let's run him out--
(then)
Dr. Wiley!

Wiley steps up to the podium, unfolding his papers.

WILEY
Good morning, Congressmen. I know
this isn't the first time I've come
before you, with the warning that
our nation is in peril. But I fear
this could be my last--

SUMNER
Yes, yes of course. Unfortunately
we have a vote that has been moved
to right... now, so we will have to
share the pleasure of hearing your
apocalyptic findings at another
date. Thank you, Dr. Wiley.

Sumner and Hayes stand and hustle out of the room.

Wiley crumples the papers.

EXT. HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

Under the shade of billowing hardwoods, MONTY NORTH, 28,
matinee idol handsome, taps ash into the grass.

MONTY
Well at least he addressed him by
name.

GAFNEY

Monty, I've been doing this a long time. I know progress when I see it. That in there, that's not progress.

MONTY

Look, Jay, Moses led his people through the desert for 40 years. That probably didn't look like progress at the time either.

GAFNEY

Harvey Wiley is no Moses.

Monty hides a smile.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)

Just talk to him. For some reason, he listens to you. We need to focus on realistic goals. Regulating at the farm level. Seeds.

MONTY

Seeds?

Monty gives Gafney a look. We talking about the same person?

Wiley walks up, a bicycle at his side.

WILEY

I think he softened towards the end there.

GAFNEY

We need to look at shifting our focus.

WILEY

We've already discussed the focus. There's no problem with our focus.

Gafney looks to Monty. A little help?

MONTY

Harvey, maybe Jay has a point. We've been rejected five days in a row.

Wiley pops a puckish grin.

WILEY

Monday I'll make it six. Or seven. Or eight.

He mounts his bicycle and begins to pedal away.

WILEY (CONT'D)
(over his shoulder)
Or nine! Or 10!

He's a blur in the distance, still shouting numbers.

EXT. WILEY'S STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

Wiley's bicycle leans against a modest blue brick apartment.

INT. WILEY'S STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

Vacuous white walls, naked hardwood, and a lone desk pushed against a blank wall. Only the essentials.

At the desk, swallowed in empty space, is Wiley.

Staring at the white wall.

Unblinking. Brainstorming, fixated like he's trying to move That blank wall.

DRIP. DRIP.

As we TRACK IN on Wiley, the sound of DRIPPING builds.

DRIP. DRIP. DRIP.

Through the window behind him, crisp sunlight peeks in.

Now tight on his clenched face, brow knotted, as the DRIPPING swells to downpour.

We sit with him in the rain.

INT. HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING - MORNING

CHYRON: DECEMBER 16, 1901 - DAY 11

Wiley sits in the front row of the gallery.

SUMNER
Wonders never cease.

HAYES
A glutton for punishment...

SUMNER

Alright, Dr. Wiley. You're nothing if not enduring. You've got five minutes of our time.

Wiley again approaches the podium, this time without reference material.

WILEY

I won't need that long. Congressmen, today I'm not going to leaf through pages of data, or tell stories of children that have fallen ill to additives designed to make canned peaches colorful, or give prognostications of a world where humans have no control over the deadly chemicals they consume. Instead I'm simply going to ask you, as men of God, to do what's decent.

Sumner furrows his brow.

WILEY (CONT'D)

You can continue to deny there's a problem with our food in this country. I'm not asking for legislation. I'm only requesting an opportunity to show you. With a grant of \$5000, the Department of Agriculture can do that. As a decent man, I would hope you wouldn't want to leave behind the people you may be poisoning.

Sumner sits back in his chair.

HAYES

Look, as much as we--

Sumner raises a hand to stop him.

SUMNER

Dr. Wiley, you're a devoted sort. Pious. With a deep love for your fellow man. And, as you so eloquently pointed out, a decent man would never turn a blind eye to a brother in peril.

(leaning forward)

But \$5000 is a lot to spend to find which of our foods give hamsters a headache.

(MORE)

SUMNER (CONT'D)

So, this is the proposition I make to you. If you can show me a direct link between food additives and the damage they inflict in man, I will give your Department the grant.

On Wiley, resolve as his ASSOCIATES deflate behind him.

SUMNER (CONT'D)

I suspect I won't be seeing you here tomorrow.

INT. LOBBY - HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING - LATER

Wiley's face fills the screen. A tight, creased ball of tense consternation. His eyes burn through us.

As we very slowly PULL BACK, DULL MURMURS resolve into:

MONTY (O.S.)

...What do you feel like for lunch? I'm in the mood for something with cheese on it. I've been off of it for three days; to kind of re-set things. Like a cheese holiday.

Monty notices Wiley isn't paying attention.

MONTY (CONT'D)

...Doctors say it'll be the cheese that comes for me. Roving packs of ravenous cheese with their sights set on cold-blooded murder.

WILEY

(vacant)

That's a shame.

Finally biting, Monty follows his stare across the crowded lobby to:

Congressman Sumner, engaged in a rather congenial conversation with a well-groomed BUSINESSMAN with severe features and slicked hair, packaged into a tailored suit.

From a distance, we catch a crumb of their conversation.

BUSINESSMAN

You'll love it. This time of year, the sun rises over the hills, and the sky just sings. It's like being born all over again.

SUMNER

Awfully neighborly of you, Mr.
Hutton.

HUTTON

I'll have my secretary messenger
over the keys. Word of warning, the
snow can be treacherous. One wrong
turn up there, Hickory, we won't
see you till the thaw.

Haughty LAUGHS from the two, and with a pat, Sumner departs.

Now alone, Hutton turns to catch Wiley's stare. Caught, Wiley
spins around, but Hutton is already making his way over.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

Dr. Wiley.

Hutton slides a hand in front of his face. A golden fox pin
on his lapel GLISTENS.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

Arthur Hutton. Big fan.

His pencil mustache twists into an insufferable grin.

WILEY

I take it you're also a fan of open
sores and botulism.

HUTTON

Oh, I find you far more tolerable
than that. You have the people's
best interests at heart.

WILEY

I take immense pride in biting the
hand that only feeds itself.

HUTTON

Well, if there's any way my company
can assist your research, please be
sure to let me know.

WILEY

As a matter of fact--

Monty swallows a laugh.

WILEY (CONT'D)

I've sent several notices to your attention with regards to the instability of your catsup, including accounts of victims with facial lacerations from exploding bottles. For some reason, they were all returned to me unopened. I'd be happy to deliver them in person.

A smile that could torch forests.

HUTTON

I wish you the best of luck, Dr. Wiley.

Hutton tugs on a hat and stalks away.

Monty bursts out laughing.

INT. EXECUTIVE OFFICE - DEPT OF AGRICULTURE - DAY

A cigarette is snubbed into a mound of ash and butts.

It's somber. Gafney, seated at his desk, rubs his temples.

KNUCKLES CRACK from the corner. Behind his Coke bottle glasses, LOUIS KRUPP, 38, roately counts ceiling tiles.

Monty reclines his feet up onto Gafney's desk. He lights another cigarette.

MONTY

Well gentlemen, we can always run away with the circus.

Louis releases a puff of smoke.

MONTY (CONT'D)

Louie, you've got a weird-shaped head. I'm sure they could use that.

Gafney pushes Monty's feet off his desk.

GAFNEY

So Monty's out of ideas.

(beat)

The ruling is a dead end. I don't see a way around it.

Through the cloud of smoke in the corner, the glasses emerge.

LOUIS

What about the Public Health Service? With their backing and-- and-- their field tests-- we could mount an offensive to apply more pressure on Sumner.

MONTY

I think his weird-shaped head is on to something.

GAFNEY

George Slotter is in charge of the Public Health Service. Guess who appointed him?

The guys deflate again.

Gafney stands and faces them, playing the part of a general.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)

We need to understand when our dog's been bit. I was made the head of Agriculture to act in the people's interests. And I won't let this department devolve into a parade of moral crusades.

...as he knocks Monty's feet off his desk again.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)

From here on out, the focus is seeds. I don't care about toppling corporations and proving people wrong. We are through with doing it Wiley's way. I'm in charge. So the next time Harvey Wiley walks through that door, the line starts here.

He points to the floor behind him.

The door opens and Harvey Wiley walks in. Crosses the room and leans against a shelf. Begins to peel an orange.

Everyone watches him. Pin drops would be thunder.

Wiley lets orange peel drop to the floor.

WILEY

These doors are remarkably thin.

GAFNEY

Harvey, it's over. You were in
there today. You saw it with your
own eyes.

Wiley flashes a smile like the cat that ate the canary.

WILEY

He blinked.

GAFNEY

He blinked? Have you lost it? There
are no experiments that will
satisfy those specifications.

WILEY

You're right, Sumner left us no
option for standard animal
experimentation.

GAFNEY

Thank you.

WILEY

He did, however, leave open the
option of testing humans.

Frozen faces of shell-shock. Like a bomb went off.

Monty's grin peeks around his hand. This fucking guy.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

A windowless basement lit by gas lamp.

Empty mugs pile up around Monty and Wiley.

WILEY

Never stop shooting.

MONTY

We're getting down to the meaning
of life, huh?

WILEY

Never stop. Don't be like that
spineless puppet Gafney.

MONTY

Come on, Jay means well.

WILEY

He's never taken a shot in his life. Monty, eventually your time will come. You may not even recognize it.

A wistful beat.

WILEY (CONT'D)

When the war started, I was just a child. I was sent out on patrol with three other soldiers... this was near Nashville. We got to about two miles from base, stumbled upon a clearing. And sitting right there in the middle was an abandoned Rebel ambulance wagon, with a big red cross painted on its side. The boys challenged me to hit it. It was well known at the time that I was the worst shot in the company. I made no false claims about that. Charlie went first. He was the oldest private we had -- and he was very aware of it, if you follow me. So old Charlie took first shot and he misses. And the group goads me to go next, make a fool of myself. So I line up my shot, close my eyes, and pull the trigger. Wouldn't you know it. Dead center. Charlie didn't take it well, he was furious. Even drew his rifle -- except with his misfortune it went off and hit another soldier. Guns were very unpredictable back then, they'd fire at the slightest jostle. But I'll tell you, when we got back to camp, my entire reputation was different. They called me Red Cross.

Wiley takes a gulp from his mug, deep in memory.

Monty's hands are up in exasperation.

MONTY

Well -- what in the hell happened to the soldier who got shot?

WILEY

The ball went through his brain. He expired.

Monty starts chuckling.

WILEY (CONT'D)
What?

MONTY
That's what I love about you,
Harvey. You sure know how to rob a
story of its essence.

WILEY
You'll hit one out of a thousand
shots you take with your eyes
closed. You just have to live long
enough to take them all.

MONTY
So is that what this is about? You
taking your shot?

He rises.

WILEY
I need to get back to work.

MONTY
Harvey, you can't seriously be
suggesting we experiment on humans.

WILEY
The only other option is
abandonment. Do you want to go back
to testing seeds?

MONTY
No, but--

WILEY
You're aware of the stakes here.
We're fighting for people's
lives... and those lives we're too
late to fight for.

On Monty, the loss that he alludes to flickers across his
glassy eyes.

WILEY (CONT'D)
Get some rest. And go easy on the
beer. I'm going to need you
healthy...

Wiley heads for the exit, leaving a slack-jawed Monty behind.

MONTY
Wait-- what? Harvey! Healthy for
what?

INT. HUTTON'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Two bottles of catsup. Noticeably different shades of red.

One bright, one dimmed.

Hutton turns the bottles in his hands, the flickering of a gas lamp casting distorted colors across his face.

As it turns, we land on the bright bottle's label: Cassel's.

The moment is jarred by the door closing across the room. A NERVOUS SCIENTIST in a lab coat stands tentatively in the corner. He moves to sit across from Hutton's desk.

Hutton doesn't shift his glance.

HUTTON
How do they do it?

SCIENTIST
From what we can find, there's just
a spike in vinegar. The shelf life
proves to be exactly the same.

Hutton leans back in his chair.

HUTTON
So what's the bottom line?

SCIENTIST
It's not an ingredient cost, Mr.
Hutton, vinegar costs almost
nothing. It's a procedural cost.
The infrastructure involved in
preserving this way...

Hutton waves him off. He's heard enough.

HUTTON
Well now, Doctor, it all comes down
to the highest quality of product
we can reasonably provide for the
customer.

The scientist nods, he knows what he means. Or... he thinks
he knows what he means...

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - MORNING

We're moving down a row of houses -- each with a fresh bottle of milk prominently placed on the porch.

Milk... Milk... Milk... Milk...

...and then we stop on a MILKMAN.

He's carefully studying an overly simplistic MAP of his delivery route. A cluster of houses with big GREEN CHECK MARKS -- with one exception. He stands before the only house on his route with a RED X.

The milkman glances back and forth between the map and this house. And then Wiley is there, looking back.

WILEY

New delivery man.

MILKMAN

Yes sir.

WILEY

Have you tasted it?

MILKMAN

Excuse me?

WILEY

Have you tasted it.

MILKMAN

The milk?

WILEY

Yes.

MILKMAN

Why, of course.

WILEY

Tell me, does it have a soft hue?

MILKMAN

...A soft hue?

WILEY

On the palette. Does it have a soft hue on the palette?

MILKMAN

I don't believe I've ever noticed a soft hue.

WILEY

The soft hue is a sign of an adulterant in the milk. Namely formaldehyde. Which is the same preservative used to embalm dead bodies.

Wiley walks down his porch steps. The milkman seems to be frozen in place.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Over time, the toxin builds up in the body with some unsavory side effects. Largely fatigue and nausea, but also ulceration, and eventually the perforation of the oropharynx. Which sounds like a complex medical term but is quite simply a hole in the soft tissue at the back of your throat.

A CLANKING noise as the milk bottles shake in the milkman's quivering hands.

Just then, the MAILMAN walks up beside him. Looks at the now pale milkman and then to Wiley.

MAILMAN

Did he ask you about a soft hue?

MILKMAN

He sure did.

The milkman hustles away down the road.

The mailman hands Wiley a letter.

MAILMAN

Take it easy on the kids, Doctor.

And he heads off.

Wiley looks down at the letter in his hands. Sent from Capitol Hill.

INT. RECEPTION - DAY

Arthur Hutton and SEVEN CHAIRMEN in similar suits and style, sit together on a long bench along the wall, their matching GOLDEN FOX PINS glistening.

Across, an eager SECRETARY smiles back encouragingly.

Arthur Hutton clears his throat. A cacophony of HACKS and THROAT CLEARINGS from the other chairmen. CHAIRMAN #4 begins passing out cough drops.

The secretary gives a stern look.

Suddenly, the door beside her cracks open and Sumner leans out. He nods to her and then disappears, closing the door.

The chairmen lean forward in unison.

SECRETARY
Congressman Sumner will see you now.

INT. CONGRESSMAN SUMNER'S OFFICE - SAME

Sumner is seated at his resolute desk. And on the wall above him, a splintered desk leg displayed behind glass.

Hutton leans over the desk, the chairmen flanking behind.

HUTTON
My fellow chairmen and I have just been informed that Dr. Wiley was approved his grant for a human trial to test food additives.

Collective GRUMBLES from the chairmen.

SUMNER
Now, now, let's not get our tits in a vise. The approval of Wiley's grant is little more than political theatre.

HUTTON
I'll hope you understand we're not in the business of drama, Congressman.

CHAIRMAN #5 hacks up a cough drop. The others tend to him.

Sumner's eyes fall back on Hutton.

HUTTON (CONT'D)
I trust you'll do what's necessary.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

A wobbly tower of folders, and it looks like it's moving.

Strained fingers hold tight as a man carefully staggers down the hallway struggling to keep the mountainous stack upright.

The dwarfed man enters

INT. LABORATORY - CONTINUOUS

and dumps it on a lab table. Around it, Wiley and Monty look up from papers to a breathless Louis.

LOUIS
(adjusting glasses)
That's the first load.

MONTY
Well alright, kids, let's find our
guinea pigs.

SMASH TO:

INT. LABORATORY - LATER

A daunting pile of papers blanket the lab table. The guys pull sheets at random.

Louis hands a stack to Wiley. He flips through indifferently.

WILEY
Too fat, too stupid, too sick. We
need twelve of the best.

Gafney, sitting off on his own, turns a page in a book.

Monty, camped out in a lab chair, tosses a folder across the room. It somehow lands on Wiley's lap. He opens it. Then closes it.

WILEY (CONT'D)
I feel compelled to impress our
standards here. This man has hammer
toe. Our goal is to find the best
of body and mind that humanity has
to offer so that no one is left
behind. You give me hammer toes,
and we're leaving all straight-toed
people behind.

Back to the drawing board. Papers are pulled from the stack.

Louis jumps up and sprints across the room.

LOUIS
Here's one -- here's one.

He hands a folder to Wiley. Labeled: BJ TEASDALE.

WILEY
(reading)
"I would describe myself as
indestructible."

CUT TO:

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

BJ TEASDALE, 25, a broad tree of a man, sits on a table in his undergarments. He speaks with an Ozarks twang.

BJ
Fifteen years ago, I was diagnosed
with seven different diseases.
Doctor said, "BJ, you got six
months to live." So-- I went home
and, at the advice of a friend who
was close with a slew of medical
doctors himself, recommended that I
ingest a bunch of rocks.

Wiley sits beside a DOCTOR, whose jaw drops.

BJ (CONT'D)
My friend said the rocks would
carry away any maladies that were
livin' inside my bloodstream.
Fifteen years later here I am. Not
a single illness since.

He flashes an aw-shucks grin. It's hard to not be charmed.

Wiley raises an eyebrow, flips a page on his file.

BJ (CONT'D)
Even today I'll spot a rock and
take a chomp.

He's distracted by something on the floor nearby.

BJ (CONT'D)
Is that...? Naw, just dirt.

BACK TO:

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Monty buried in a folder.

MONTY
Here's one--

He wings it at Wiley--

--but it spins off target and into the wall beside him,
SMASHING a line of flasks.

Unruffled, Wiley reaches and picks it up. Reads.

WILEY
Hmm. That's the most effusive
doctor's note I've ever seen.

CUT TO:

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

A foot nervously TAPS the floor. It belongs to
FELIX SMALL. A slight man of 28, who appears to be
perpetually on the verge of tears.

WILEY
It's truly rare to see such an
immaculate bill of health.

The doctor moves a stethoscope around Felix's body.

Sweat collects on Felix's hairline. He swipes it before it
drips down his face.

FELIX
It's all there.

DOCTOR
Any history of intestinal disease,
bowel obstruction, upset stomach?

The beat is telling.

Felix taps his hands.

FELIX
No sir.

The doctor moves the stethoscope to his back.

His stomach GROANS -- Felix YAWNS to mask it.

FELIX (CONT'D)
Looks good, right?

The doctor looks at Wiley and nods. Wiley makes a note.

BACK TO:

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Louis pops out from under the lab table with an armful of folders. He hands one to Wiley.

LOUIS
She has everything.

No look, Wiley tosses it aside.

WILEY
I need strong bodies, Louis. Please
don't make this a women's rights
issue.

A lingering look from Louis...

CUT TO:

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

Wiley and the doctor look up from a file.

Across from them sits a priest.

Wiley looks back down at the file and we punch in on the particulars:

IRVING PRATT.

40.

HARVARD SEMINARY.

WILEY
Well you can't dream up a better
candidate.

IRVING
Dr. Wiley, I wouldn't want to enter
this study under false pretenses.
As a child, I contracted influenza.
I missed two weeks of schooling.

Wiley and the doctor exchange a glance.

WILEY
We'll work around it.

BACK TO:

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

The room now glows orange by gas lamp. Applications spread across every surface of the room.

Gafney kicks a pile away as he turns to the last page in his book.

Wiley leans on a window sill, sifting through the remainder of his stack.

Monty enters, mouth full of sandwich.

MONTY
Harvey--

He whips a folder across the room. It sails out the window.

Wiley looks down out the window.

MONTY (CONT'D)
That was a good one.

CUT TO:

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

WILEY
You seem to have a fine job. A wife, two kids... You are aware that the study requires that you live out of the dormitory here at the chemistry building for no less than twelve months?

Across from him is MARION STERNWAFT, 27. Flawlessly groomed and impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit.

MARION
Yes, and that is no problem at all.

Wiley furrows his brow at this.

MARION (CONT'D)
Gentlemen, I was married at the age of 17. Haven't really known a life outside of that since.
(MORE)

MARION (CONT'D)

The realities of the American Dream aren't something you can grasp at that age. Needless to say, you folks are the most exciting thing to come through this town since the Civil War.

(beat)

And heck, poison or not, the cooking can't be any worse.

He laughs alone.

EXT. WAGON - MOVING - DAY

A young, apple-cheeked kid, HARRY, 18, leans against the back of the driver's bench watching landscape roll past.

He's jostled as the wagon pulls to a stop in front of

EXT. CHEMISTRY BUILDING - DEPT OF AGRICULTURE - DAY

Harry leaps out of the cart and stares in awe at the four-story Federalist building that looms above.

Nearby under the building's portico, Monty takes a drag as he watches the boy's FARMER PARENTS unload his belongings.

MONTY

Here they come.

As more horse-drawn wagons begin to arrive.

BEEP BEEP!

A sound out of time. BJ watches as a 1902 Cadillac Runabout CHUGS up the road and stops in front of the building.

FELIX

You know who that is, right?

BJ turns to see Felix mesmerized by the scene.

FELIX (CONT'D)

Edwin Carnegie.

On cue, the regal and monied EDWIN CARNEGIE, 29, is helped out of the vehicle by his DRIVER.

BJ

Carnegie Carnegie?

Felix nods.

BJ (CONT'D)
I walked here from Union, and these
folks is getting around in
spaceships.

Edwin whisks past, his driver dragging his luggage behind.

BJ bends down and helps carry the luggage.

BJ (CONT'D)
Are you dining with us, too?

INT. LOBBY - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - DAY

The front door opens, yielding blinding light from outside.

From it emerge the men we will come to know as THE POISON SQUAD.

A CLASSICAL MELODY echoes through this cavernous, elegant lobby. Necks crane, eyes wide at the detailing of the room. It's like a cathedral.

MONTY
Welcome home.

Light cascades through a massive stained glass window high above. It's a gorgeous kaleidoscope of tessellated color. Below, it paints Irving's transfixed face. His attention is only broken by --

BRUMMMMP!

The delicate music is SCRATCHED into silence by Harry, whose fascination with the gramophone has knocked the needle from its track.

HARRY
Sorry.

The MUSIC resumes.

MONTY
Gentlemen, if you'll follow me.

The men follow Monty up a wide marble staircase. Marion slides his fingers over the delicate contour of the bannister.

INT. DORMITORY HALLWAY - SAME

The long hallway is flanked by doors on each side, and a large window at the end which bathes the space in yellow.

Our meditation on this hallway is disturbed by the silhouettes of twelve men ascending into frame. As they continue down the hallway, they're thrown into relief.

INT. BJ/FELIX DORM ROOM - DAY

On a wooden desk sits a document titled HYGIENIC TABLE WAIVER. Felix's alarmed eyes dart about it.

FELIX

"...hereby absolve the Department of Agriculture of liability for any acts that lead to severe illness, irreversible physical or emotional damage, and/or death." Are you signing this?

He looks up to see BJ already signing his waiver.

FELIX (CONT'D)

Shit. Okay.

Felix Catholic crosses himself, then signs it too.

INT. DORMITORY HALLWAY - LATER

Yellow light has faded into orange. The hall is now empty.

Under Wiley's sweeping oratory, we peek into the dorm rooms, like watching rats in cages.

WILEY (V.O.)

Good evening, gentlemen. What we begin tonight is an undertaking not for the faint of heart nor the faint of stomach.

INT. MONTY/HARRY DORM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WILEY (V.O.)

You each are participant in a moment in time capable of sending ripples throughout the world.

Monty reads The Post on his bed as Harry sits mesmerized by the sun setting over a bustling city.

INT. MARION DORM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WILEY (V.O.)
Changing forever the dominion of
our food as well as the dominion of
our voice.

Marion fills the closet with his wardrobe, blithely
chattering away while his ROOMMATE sleeps.

INT. IRVING/CLARENCE DORM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WILEY (V.O.)
You will spend the next twelve
months here in the dormitory of
this building. From this point
forward, your every move is a part
of this experiment.

Irving studies his Bible while CLARENCE, 65, combs his
tangled, gray beard.

INT. BJ/FELIX DORM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WILEY (V.O.)
Your digestion of food and drink,
your physical exertion, the hours
you sleep... your bodies belong to
science.

BJ pulls on a suit, while Felix remains at his desk. Foot
tapping away as he anxiously scans the waiver again.

INT. EDWIN DORM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WILEY (V.O.)
The rules of this study are simple:
no outside food, no liquor. Your
residence is to be here for the
duration of the study. Curfews are
not to be missed. You have made an
oath of complete confidentiality.

Edwin writes correspondence while his driver unpacks the last
of his belongings.

INT. KITCHEN - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - EVENING

WILEY (V.O.)

Tonight our chef has prepared a meal that I believe will make you forget all about its quirk.

Silver lids are dropped on platters. White gloved hands scoop them and butler them out.

Pressing through the mad tangle of last-minute preparation and busy COOKS, the SERVERS shoulder open swinging doors into

INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

As Wiley completes his address to his seated group.

WILEY

Welcome to the Hygienic Table.

The room is abuzz. Three tables, four men each; dressed to the nines and marveling at the elegance of the presentation.

Marion FLICKS a crystal glass with his finger. DING!

Felix picks up a small card with the evening's menu:

APPLE SAUCE w. BORAX
SPLIT PEA SOUP w. BORAX
TURNIPS w. BORAX
CANNED STRING BEANS w. BORAX
TURKEY w. BORAX
BREAD AND BUTTER. TEA. COFFEE.
A LITTLE BORAX.

Felix blanches.

FELIX

So then we're having Borax.

MARION

I've lined my undergarments with napkins.

In a flourish, the servers converge, unveiling platters before each diner.

BJ produces a small leather pouch from his jacket and shakes a few rocks loose into his palm. Offers some to Irving, who declines. BJ tosses them into his mouth and dry-swallows.

Like a waiter passing through the room, we dip into conversations:

FELIX

So what is it? Trouble in paradise?
What else would drive you to join
us lowlifes?

MARION

What can I say? After ten years of
marriage life becomes complete
stillness. Any sort of movement is
a celebration. Breaking out of that
to be here with you fellas, I
couldn't be happier.

FELIX

Whatever you say, Marion.

MARION

Maybe the better answer is, I'm
doing it for the stipend.

FELIX

Ha! Finally, something you and
Edwin have in common!

The two chuckle.

EDWIN

Okay, then. Let's get this out of
the way right now... Yes, my father
is Alfred Carnegie. Most of America
has stood inside or ridden atop his
steel. It's been quite good to us.
But I've always felt there was more
to building society than can be
held up with metal and brick. I
suppose that's why I'm here.

MARION

So you're out of the will.

Another dip:

MONTY

This was years ago -- and in my
endless ungracefulness I spilled my
drink all over this woman's dress.
Her drunk husband started to puff
his chest and was preparing to
break me in half. When Harvey --
out of nowhere -- tipped a server's
entire tray of drinks onto the
woman.

Harry laughs.

MONTY (CONT'D)

He's a misunderstood man. A lot of people can't stand him. But what makes Harvey special is that he'll never care about that. He's always willing to throw himself into the machinery to save the rest of us from the gears.

Another dip:

CLARENCE

Fought my last battle in Palmito Ranch for the Rebels. Took 15 Yankee lives myself that day. Now the war had ended a month earlier, but word just hadn't reached us yet. All that fighting for nothing. But sending those 15 souls to Hell-- I'll never need a reason for that.

BJ and Irving look horrified.

Another dip:

MONTY

So what about you, kid?

HARRY

Me?

MONTY

What's your story?

HARRY

I'm eighteen. I don't have a story.

MONTY

Every man has one. If you've drawn a breath you have a story.

(beat)

You don't seem too impressed by the food.

HARRY

My mom's a good cook. We grow a lot of string beans and turnips back home. Nothing beats food you pull up yourself.

(deep in it)

Don't know if I'll ever do it again.

MONTY
It's only a year.

HARRY
It's not that... Pa's struggling to
keep the farm. Even sold the
horses. Really only a matter of
time. They sent me to the city
first chance they got. I guess it's
where I deserve to be.

Monty leans back, lighting a cigarette.

MONTY
Turns out the kid's got a story.

Harry smiles.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Darkness filled with cricket chirps.

A man we will come to know as BILLY CARTER, 42, African-American, steps up to the front door, juggling bags and a ring of keys.

The keys CLATTER to the floor. He bends to pick them up when--

A BRANCH SNAPS BEHIND.

Billy whips around -- stillness.

Eyes wide, he gropes for the keys.

INT. BILLY CARTER'S HOUSE - SAME

He closes the door behind him. Sets his bags down. Lights a candle on the sideboard.

The glow illuminates the square frame of an OLD MAN. Gray hair and heavy, droopy bags under his glazed eyes.

Billy jumps back defensively.

The old man just stands there.

Just the crickets. Finally --

BILLY
Can I help you?

OLD MAN
I'm waiting for someone.

Billy, perplexed. His gaze trails to the man's side, where candlelight flickers off a long carving knife.

Billy checks the corner, a suede bag just out of reach...

Suddenly the door slides open. A familiar Southern accent:

VOICE
Mr. Carter. I believe
congratulations are in order.

Sumner steps into the light, a grin pulling his lips taut. In his hand, a tree branch.

SUMNER
A government job, that's quite the fancy thing. Even for a bright man like you. Truly is a remarkable time, Mr. Carter.

His lingering smile met with icy nerve.

Sumner continues.

SUMNER (CONT'D)
A chef hired to poison his fare,
now that's a strange task. Not that I know a lick about being a chef.

He slips the knife from the old man.

SUMNER (CONT'D)
No, I've never been much of a craftsman. When I was a boy, the most I ever did with my hands was whittle.

He runs the carving knife down the branch, flaying shards of bark and twigs.

SUMNER (CONT'D)
Whittling is a thinking man's craft. It's as much a creation of the mind as it is the hands.

SHINK! Another strip of bark falls to the floor. Sumner's beady eyes lift to Billy.

SUMNER (CONT'D)

See, the goal is to chop off the unnecessary parts, make sure everything is working toward the same purpose.

There's now a pile of wood scraps. And above it, Sumner wields a newly-crafted switch.

SUMNER (CONT'D)

Look at me. Explaining to a chef how to do his job. Bet a bright man like you already knows how this works.

The switch goes up.

Billy lunges for the suede bag, pulling out a pistol and training it on Sumner.

BILLY

Get the fuck out of my house.

Sumner's smile persists behind surrendering hands.

SUMNER

No need for threats, Mr. Carter.
You have a pleasant evening.

He steps out with the old man. The door slides closed, the switch leaning against the frame.

Billy exhales.

INT. WILEY'S OFFICE - DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - MORNING

Billy sits back in his chair.

He waits out the silence.

At the window, Wiley absently stares out. Perturbed.

WILEY

Fuck. I thought this was going to be about napkins.

Billy squirms in his chair.

Finally turning from the window--

WILEY (CONT'D)

And it was just the two of them?

BILLY

Yes. Just him and that old man.

Wiley looks out again.

WILEY

If we can be sure of anything,
you're certainly not the only one.
They'll come for others. Anything
to compromise this study.

BILLY

You mean like a mole?

WILEY

If you see anything -- if anyone
approaches you -- you let me know.
You did the right thing.

BILLY

Yes sir.

Turning to him.

WILEY

You can stay at the Chemistry
Building. There's a spare bedroom
downstairs. You'll be safe there.

BILLY

Thank you.

Wiley sort of shifts in place. He's sure he's supposed to do
more here.

WILEY

Umm.

BILLY

Sir?

WILEY

Do you need a... hug, or something?

BILLY

No. No thank you.

WILEY

Right.

As he turns back to the window.

INT. LOBBY - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - MORNING

The men are lined up along the wall. Felix staggers to join them, looking colorless and shaking.

FELIX

Jesus, was everyone else up all night vomiting?

Marion and BJ turn to him.

BJ

What?

MARION

It's only been one meal. I have a bit of a headache, but--

BJ

It's going to take a little time. Why, were you up all night?

FELIX

No. Just a headache.

Suddenly, swinging doors fly open, giving way to an unwieldy contraption. Its caster wheels yield an earsplitting GRINDING under its weight.

The room falls silent as the men watch.

Wiley rolls it to a stop at the center of the room.

WILEY

Good morning, I trust you all slept well.

GROANS from some of the group.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Splendid. I'd like to take a moment to introduce you all to a friend of mine that will be assisting with the experiment.

Wiley gives a pat to the prominent glass tank that sits above a series of jars and metal piping.

WILEY (CONT'D)

This device, which I patented specifically for this study, is known as a fecal drying machine.

(MORE)

WILEY (CONT'D)
It accelerates the process of
dehydrating and breaking down the
chemical components of your excreta
to be analyzed.

Marion leans in to Edwin.

MARION
That's to dry our--?

WILEY
You will each use these sample jars
to collect your waste.

Wiley holds up a pair of half-gallon size jars, and places
them into leather slots on a belt around Louis' waist.

WILEY (CONT'D)
My associate here will be on call
to gather your specimen from you.
If you require additional jars,
that can be arranged.

Louis walks down the line distributing the jars.

Edwin looks into the bottom of the jar. This wasn't on the
waiver.

WILEY (CONT'D)
Lunch is at noon.

The SCREECHING again as the contraption is rolled back out.

Felix snatches three jars from Louis.

INT. WASHINGTON POST OFFICES - DAY

We track a pair of patent leather shoes walking down the
center aisle of the office's main bullpen. CLOP CLOP CLOP on
the hardwood.

We pass desk after desk, men hunched, vigorously scribbling.

The shoes come to a stop at the end of the room, an office
door labeled:

PHILLIP MACCALL, EDITOR IN CHIEF

It's embossed on reflective glass that reveals the face of
GEORGIA ROTHWELL BROWN, 24, galvanic and bright, with eyes
that hint to a relentlessness behind.

A breath to steady herself and she pushes the door open.

INT. MACCALL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

PHIL MACCALL, 40, stern eyes beneath bushy eyebrows, leafs through handwritten stories at his desk. The gust from the door sends pages into the air.

MACCALL

Brown! How many times do I have to tell you--

As he moves to collect the fallen stories.

GEORGIA

I have a lead on factory conditions at Mason Packing. Five limbs maimed in the last week and there's no indication they're even cleaning it out of the machinery.

MACCALL

Turrell is covering our macabre factory beat. We have it canvased. Why don't you chase something a little more tender?

Georgia's eyes are daggers. We've been here before.

GEORGIA

Tender.

MACCALL

Now, there's no need to get up in arms...

GEORGIA

Fine. I'll cover the rally in Dupont Circle tonight.

MACCALL

Dammit, Georgia -- tender. We're not running another suffragette piece.

GEORGIA

Well gee, MacCall, you aren't giving me a lot to work with. My dossier here is a scintillating expose of bridal pieces and cake recipes.

MACCALL

You want a better dossier? Write one. Give me something that captivates everyone. Sell some newspapers, Georgia.

MacCall looks back down at his work.

GEORGIA

I heard a rumor about this dinner club.

MACCALL

Did you not just hear me? I said give me--

GEORGIA

They poison themselves.

MacCall looks back up at Georgia. He's captivated.

MACCALL

What do you know?

GEORGIA

They meet somewhere in a basement in DC. Elaborate five course meals. They sign over their lives to be a part of it.

MacCall nods.

MACCALL

Get some facts.

INT. KITCHEN - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - EVENING

This kitchen belongs to Chef Billy Carter, whose steady hand carves into a slab of pristine marbled beef.

Gracefully patters salt onto the freshly oiled meat.

Adroitly chops vibrant green vegetables and slides them into a waiting pot.

Adorns a cake with a delicate spiral of whipped frosting...

...and then adds a final touch from a dropper, which he then screws back onto a bottle labeled with a skull & crossbones.

Billy stands before his work, a pleased sigh.

INT. DINING ROOM

The dinner is again butlered to the tables. This time though, a much more sober reception.

MARION
Striking how quickly one's
reverence erodes.

He pokes at the roast beef.

BJ
How far?

HARRY
...maybe Clarksville?

BJ and Felix react.

FELIX
Oh boy. You really are a farmer's
son.

BJ
Okay, just down the road, bout a
mile from here, there's a train.
Will take you all the way to
Boston. When this is over, you hop
on that train. It's like a whole
new world up there.

HARRY
I don't know I could afford all
that.

FELIX
Nonsense. Hey, Irving, isn't your
congregation up in Boston? How much
is that Boston train?

Irving's caught off guard.

IRVING
Oh-- I... hmm. Can't remember.
Seems different every time I go.

He laughs, as Felix's glance lingers.

BJ
That's all right, I'm sure Edwin
can pull some strings, shut down
the rail so you can pump train up
there.

A table over, Edwin shoots him a middle finger.

Off to the side, Wiley stands with Billy, watching over things.

WILEY
How's the new room?

BILLY
Nice and quiet.

They look out at the men.

BILLY (CONT'D)
They're eating slower tonight.

WILEY
They tend to shy away once they
locate where the poison is.

Zeroing in on untouched pads of butter on the tables.

WILEY (CONT'D)
Switch the Borax out of the butter,
I think they're on to it. Put it in
the salt.

Across the room, Felix douses his plate with salt.

FELIX
This is how we get through the
meal.

BILLY
It's already in the salt.

WILEY
Superb.

BILLY
I'll have them plate the dessert.

Billy turns to leave but Wiley stops him with a hand.

WILEY
Actually, hold back a moment.
(to the room)
Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce
you to the man who has been
preparing your meals. He grew up in
Philadelphia, and was a longtime
head chef for the Queen of Bavaria.
I give you the esteemed Billy
Carter.

Applause as Billy turns to address.

BILLY

Thank you, thank you. If you have any dietary restrictions, please be sure to let me know.

(pausing for laughs)

The next course that will come out is a dessert that was a personal favorite of the Queen. I hope you enjoy it. You know, aside from the formaldehyde cream.

Chuckles from the room.

Except Clarence, who's been stewing. He throws a fist onto the tabletop, rattling the dishes.

CLARENCE

I didn't know we were eating the cooking of a nigger.

Deathly silence. Even the plates dare not settle back in place.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

I'll drink straight from the bottle of poison before I put my health in the hands of a scurrilous negro.

Wiley's face is climbing crimson. Billy takes notice and holds him back.

Irving stands.

IRVING

Clarence, the table is a place for grace. You are among God's children. Act like it.

Clarence turns his leveling eyes to Irving.

CLARENCE

The only thing weaker than a nigger is a man who defends one. If I wasn't already sick...

Clarence stalks off, the room still quaking.

EXT. AGRICULTURAL GARDENS - NIGHT

A summer night thick with heat, as vines and branches tangle in the shadows.

There's Wiley, standing alone staring up at the stars. A thousand specks of pure, unfiltered light.

MONTY

The great Dr. Harvey Wiley
recharges by starlight, the one
thing in the universe still
untouched by man.

WILEY

There's never a moment out here
with the stars that I've felt
resistance to my curiosity.

MONTY

What are you going to do with
Clarence? Torched quite a bit of
goodwill in there.

WILEY

Oh he'll be at the next meal.

MONTY

Did we watch the same outburst?

WILEY

I don't agree with his views any
more than you do, Monty. It's a
question of humanity. Bigots have a
right to pure food as well.

Monty turns his gaze skyward to digest this.

WILEY (CONT'D)

How are you faring?

MONTY

Good so far, until you go and
switch the control groups on me.

Monty searches his eyes for clues. None given.

WILEY

I'm very glad you're a part of
this. It's important.

MONTY

You don't have to tell me.

Wiley sees that flicker again and knows.

WILEY

Lily would be proud.

ZZZ-POP!

Their attention is pulled by something new.

Through the branches, a BRIGHT ORANGE GLOW as street lamps pop to life for the first time, besting the stars above.

They watch in silent wonderment.

EXT. ANIMAL PRESERVE - HUTTON'S ESTATE - EVENING

Night begins to settle on the grounds of an animal preserve. Lush green meadow dotted with audacious enclosures.

HUTTON

Majestic, isn't it?

The chairmen fidget with their safari glasses as they stroll past pens of increasingly exotic animals.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

The precarious balance of beauty and brutality serves as a reminder to us all, the elegant design of Mother Nature.

They stop before a pen of ostriches. Glasses go up in unison.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

Which one, Declan?

CHAIRMAN #3 squints through the glasses as he decides.

CHAIRMAN #3

I like the one in the back.

MURMURS of agreement from the other chairmen.

HUTTON

Excellent choice. Anyway, I'd like to take this moment to announce some good news. I have received an update on our reinforcements. I expect it to bear fruit in no time.

Behind them, a SERVANT steps into the ostrich pen and approaches the one in the back.

CHAIRMAN #6

Is this to mean we should be concerned with the progress Wiley is making?

HUTTON

I like to think of it as a little
insurance policy. And we all do
enjoy insurance, don't we?

ALL CHAIRMEN

Bully!

HUTTON

Now who's hungry?

In the pen, the servant throws his arms around the giant bird
and struggles to pull it to the ground.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

Ah, such elegant design.

INT. DINING ROOM - MORNING

Eggs and bacon. A little bit of Borax.

Men blankly scoop breakfast to their mouths.

And then,

BANG!

The swinging doors nearly slam off their hinges.

A volcanic Wiley STOMPS through the room. Men straighten in
their chairs.

He POUNDS a newspaper onto the middle table. It's an early
edition of The Washington Post with the back page headline:

THE POISON SQUAD TESTING HUMANS' LIMITS

Eyes move from the headline to Wiley's boiling face.

WILEY

Can someone here tell me what in
the hell "The Poison Squad" is?

BJ

I think it's us.

WILEY

This is the kind of uncontrollable
garbage that could sink us!

Wiley looms over the table.

WILEY (CONT'D)
Who here spoke to this
(reading byline)
Georgia Rothwell Brown?

Stone faces look back at him.

WILEY (CONT'D)
Let me be clear. You each signed an
oath of confidentiality. If I find
that anyone has revealed classified
information to the press, that man
will be immediately terminated. Are
there any questions about that?

He studies each face.

WILEY (CONT'D)
The papers will single-handedly
turn this experiment into a
sideshow.

As he scuffs away...

WILEY (CONT'D)
I will not allow it!

Annoyed, the men slowly turn back to their meals.

FELIX
Can you pass the salt?

EXT. ALLEYWAY - NIGHT

On Georgia's face, cautious. Peers left. Right.

A SQUEAKING.

Georgia turns and drops to her knees to see through the now-open window and into the eyes of

Billy.

GEORGIA
This the biggest window you've got?

BILLY
If you want a bigger one, you can
get a great tour of the coat room.

GEORGIA
In we go.

She slides her legs through and Billy lifts her down.

INT. KITCHEN - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

As she dusts herself off--

GEORGIA

Thanks for the help. It would have
taken forever to break in.

BILLY

Always willing to help a woman in
need.

GEORGIA

So, where do you keep the...

Billy throws his hands up, already walking away.

BILLY

No, no, no, my job is done.

GEORGIA

...Is anyone still up?

He hangs his apron on the hook by the door and walks out.

BILLY

I never saw you.

The door snaps closed leaving Georgia alone in the empty
kitchen. She turns to take it in.

INT. DINING ROOM

Moonlight spills into the pitch blackness as the door cracks
open. Georgia peers inside.

INT. LOBBY

CLOP. CLOP. CLOP. Echoes boom through the abandoned lobby.

Georgia takes off her shoes and slips silently through the
room.

She stands at the foot of the staircase. Considering...

Until the CRACK of a floorboard sends her skittering away.

INT. HALLWAY

Georgia hurries down the hall, pulling at locked doors along the way.

Finally, a knob turns, but to her surprise it's just a closet -- crammed full with the fecal drying machine.

Fixated, she reaches out to investigate.

VOICE (O.S.)
You wouldn't touch that if you knew what it was.

Georgia spins around and comes face-to-face with Monty.

GEORGIA
I was just--

MONTY
--about to cover your hands with excrement?

Reflexively glances at her hands.

GEORGIA
--about to leave. And you?

MONTY
Midnight snack.

He produces a pipe.

MONTY (CONT'D)
Poison of choice.

She smiles despite herself.

MONTY (CONT'D)
Are you precious about your work?

GEORGIA
My-- what?

MONTY
Mind if I give you a few pointers?

He pulls her article from his pocket. Dotted with notes.

MONTY (CONT'D)
Now, if I were writing an article about this experiment, I would have led with something more, colorful.

GEORGIA

Oh, would you.

MONTY

Like this for example:

(reading)

"Night after night these men sit to dinner to dose their bodies with the most they can bear."

GEORGIA

Not good, huh?

MONTY

It's dramatic and factual. Doesn't catch the eye. I'd instead start by saying that we're superhuman. You'd sell a lot more newspapers.

GEORGIA

It's too bad I carry the burden of integrity. And now that I've met you, I'd know it's a lie.

She turns and begins to walk back down the hall.

MONTY

I'm Monty, by the way.

GEORGIA

I didn't ask.

MONTY

It's a fecal drying machine.

She stops. Turns around to face him.

GEORGIA

What does it do?

Monty smiles.

INT. LOBBY

The dim glow of a lantern bobs through the room.

Wiley is on patrol, peeking into rooms as he makes his way down the

HALLWAY

Propping a door, he peers into the dining room, when something down the hall draws his attention.

He hustles to the end, the lantern exposes a door left ajar. Inside, the fecal drying machine askew.

Wiley scans the hallway. Concerned.

INT. WASHINGTON POST OFFICES - MORNING

Rows of men writing. And at the center, Georgia.

A distant SLAM of a door below. And angry STOMPS up the staircase.

A shadow announces him before his voice does.

WILEY

I'd like to speak to Georgia
Rothwell Brown.

Wiley stands at the back of the room, holding up a rolled copy of the paper.

Heads pivot around to face him.

Wiley zeroes in on the single female face, and without breaking eyes, moves to her desk.

He drops the paper atop it, revealing the mid-page headline:
SECRETS OF THE SQUAD.

WILEY (CONT'D)

We have a problem.

GEORGIA

Oh do we?

WILEY

You trespassed upon government property and are now spreading lies about official business of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

GEORGIA

I did my job, Dr. Wiley. Everything in this article that you've kindly brought to my desk was properly cited with sources.

WILEY

Who do you think you are?

GEORGIA

I'm a reporter. I report news. And like it or not, you're news.

Wiley leans in, towering over her.

WILEY

I need to know your source. They're compromising the study and I have a right to speak to them.

GEORGIA

Actually, you don't, and while we're here...

She pushes his hand off of her work.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

You're smudging my notes.

CHUCKLES from the surrounding desks.

MacCall opens his door and watches, leaning against the jamb.

Wiley reddens.

WILEY

You persist with no regard for boundaries. Why do you women always need to test limits?

GEORGIA

Because we have them.

WILEY

You're forbidden from being anywhere near the experiment, the equipment, or the subjects. Next time, I won't be so friendly.

Wiley picks up his paper and tromps off.

GEORGIA

(after him)

Would you like to make a comment while you're here?

Over his shoulder--

WILEY

It's Wiley's Poison Squad.

MacCall smiles to himself, shuts the door behind him.

INT. THE BLACK CAT CAFE - DAY

A bustling little cafe.

Georgia sits alone at a small table. She's studying the faces around her, looking for someone.

Under her hand, on the table, a note:

**ANONYMOUS TIP:
THE BLACK CAT CAFE**

RED RIBBON

She glances down at the note, then back at the crowd. Searching...

And then a MAN wearing a hat with a RED RIBBON is sitting across from her, hat tilted low on his face.

She starts.

RED RIBBON
I have a shocking revelation about
the Poison Squad.

Nudging his brim, we catch a glimpse of Monty's classic grin.

MONTY
The men oil themselves up and dine naked. I would know, I do the oiling.

She breaks, a smile escaping her facade.

GEORGIA
You have no shame.

MONTY
Shame is not one of my stronger suits. However, I do know you're no longer allowed anywhere near the experiment, and I feel partly responsible.

GEORGIA
It's not my first time being thrown out of a building.

Monty laughs.

MONTY
I wouldn't imagine. The Capitol Building?

She smiles.

GEORGIA

Twice. They really don't like women demanding things there.

MONTY

Well how dare you inconvenience the men like that.

Laughs.

MONTY (CONT'D)

Look, I'm not so naive that I don't know what this story means for you.

GEORGIA

Is it that obvious?

MONTY

You carry a lot with you. That was apparent the moment I met you.

She looks down.

GEORGIA

When I was twelve I was playing dress-up with my sister. I was rooting through my mother's dresser when I discovered this little box. And inside it were pages upon pages of poems. The most beautiful poetry I'd ever read, to this day. And it was my mother's. In my naivete I showed the poems to her. She looked down at them without a trace of feeling and dismissed them like a childhood boyfriend. That always sat with me. Cause I knew in that moment she had made a choice. After that, I never wanted to have my life put in a drawer.

MONTY

What happened to them?

GEORGIA

I still have them. I read them whenever I need a reminder of why I do this.

She absently furls the note in her hand.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

And what about you, Monty? What do you do when you're not wasting a journalist's time?

MONTY

I eat poison to save the world. Other than that, not a lot.

GEORGIA

Quite the résumé. And how long have you wanted to save the world?

Monty hesitates a moment, his answer caught in his breath. Then:

MONTY

Wiley signed me up, I didn't really have a choice.

GEORGIA

And what was your first answer?

A conceding nod from Monty.

MONTY

I think... we should go dancing next time.

He pulls another smile out of Georgia as we

CUT TO:

INT. STAIRWAY - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - DAY

BJ tenderly holds his wrist as he walks upstairs.

WILEY (O.S.)

BJ.

BJ looks up to see Wiley.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Are you feeling alright?

BJ

Yes sir.

WILEY

Tell me, have you seen Monty?

BJ

He said the lab was out of
kerosene. He went to get more.

Wiley freezes at this, his face tightening.

BJ (CONT'D)

Why, is everything alright?

WILEY

Yes.

As he briskly heads down the stairs.

INT. BJ/FELIX DORM ROOM

TAP-TAP-TAP-TAP-TAP.

Felix sits on his bed, stomach again in uproar.

His eyes land on BJ's desk. He walks over and picks up the leather pouch. Pours the rocks into his hand. Considers it.

BJ enters, and Felix quickly turns to hide them.

FELIX

Hey.

BJ sits at his desk and drops his head. For once, he looks tired.

Felix takes this in.

Atop the desk, BJ's fingertips begin to jitter. He grasps it.

FELIX (CONT'D)

You know it's funny. Of everyone
here, you're the only one I haven't
seen symptoms from yet.

His forehead on the desk--

BJ

Just lucky I guess.

Sizing him up as he continues...

FELIX

No, it has nothing to do with luck.
It comes from an indestructible
body. An unshakable spirit. A will
that refuses to give in...

BJ is silent.

Felix steps over, places the leather pouch on BJ's lap. BJ looks at it, confused. He turns to Felix.

FELIX (CONT'D)

I don't have any of those things.
Mine is the worst stomach that
perhaps has ever been made. Doctors
compared me to a goose. And
frankly, I'm lucky this experiment
hasn't killed me yet.

BJ looks up with heavy eyes.

BJ

I'm scared, Felix.

FELIX

You don't have to do this alone.
All of us are fighting off monsters
right now--

BJ

I feel like I'm losing control of
my body. I've got this twitch. The
other night I was in the stall for
an hour waiting for my hand to stop
shaking. All a sudden, I dropped to
the floor and-- I guess it was a
seizure. I don't know how long I
was there.

FELIX

BJ. You need to tell Dr. Wiley.

BJ

Yeah. I just-- haven't felt weak in
a long time.

Felix places a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

FELIX

I know. It's tough being the goose.

INT. WEST WING - THE WHITE HOUSE - DAY

A hand grips a newspaper. A well-dressed AIDE walks purposely through the stately hall and its clusters of STAFF MEMBERS.

Pushes her way through the hallowed doors into

INT. OVAL OFFICE

She strides up to the desk and drops onto it a copy of The New York Times, headlined: **THE SQUAD SWEEPING THE NATION.**

AIDE

Mr. President, I thought you should see this.

Across, TEDDY ROOSEVELT, 44, takes the paper in his hand. A smoldering, domineering force. His silence fills pages.

He grumbles.

AIDE (CONT'D)

News coverage is up. The public is increasingly in favor of what's happening.

Roosevelt turns in his chair, gazing out the window.

AIDE (CONT'D)

We need to be on the right side of this.

ROOSEVELT

Thank you.

INT. SUMNER'S OFFICE - DAY

Buried in the same edition of The New York Times.

The door bursts open, yielding Hutton and the chairmen.

The paper folds down to a wracked Sumner.

Hutton steps to his desk as the chairmen fan out behind.

HUTTON

What the hell is this, Hickory?

ALL CHAIRMEN

Hmmph!

SUMNER

Excuse me?

HUTTON

Well, it--

He trails off as he searches behind him.

HUTTON (CONT'D)
Where the hell is Harold?

AT THE WINDOW, a knock. Outside, CHAIRMAN #7 holds up a bundle of newspapers. Waves a finger and darts out of sight.

The room waits for him.

Finally, CHAIRMAN #7 bursts in, breathless, and makes a show of dumping the newspapers onto Sumner's desk.

CHAIRMAN #7
Hmmmph.

HUTTON
There you have it. Six prominent news outlets, all with favorable headlines about this "Poison Squad".

SUMNER
They're just stories, Arthur. I took you for a tougher scare than that.

Hutton leans in.

HUTTON
Let me make this clear to you. If you don't do something to end this now, we'll find someone who will.

(standing back)
See if it's just a story when you're the headline.

Hutton leads the chairmen out.

UNDER THE TABLE, Sumner grips the leg of the desk.

EXT. STREETS - NIGHT

Monty leads Georgia along the road. She's overdressed for this part of town. She glances around self-consciously.

GEORGIA
I have no idea where we are right now.

MONTY
Good, because I forgot to blindfold you. This place is a bit of a secret.

They approach a stairwell leading underground.

Monty nods to the DOORMAN, who pulls back a curtain. They duck inside to

INT. UNDERGROUND DANCE HALL

A sprawling cellar packed with a life and exuberance unique to the lower class.

Men in suspenders and porkpie hats; in loose cotton dresses, women spin wild. Sweat drips, adding still to the thickness of the trapped air.

Georgia takes this all in, enamored.

GEORGIA

I--

MONTY

Are you alright with this?

Couples around them spin with abandon to IRISH FOLK MUSIC.

GEORGIA

I need to lose these.

She pulls off her velvet Louis heels and tosses them away.

Monty smiles wide, taking her hand and leading her out to the middle of the floor.

Through the jubilant carousel of bodies in motion--

Monty spins Georgia out -- and back. The blur of motion WHIPS us to:

The DORM HALLWAY, where Wiley patrols the night by lantern.

BACK TO:

Georgia throws herself into a jig. Monty claps along. The claps sync with:

FOOTSTEPS. Wiley's feet stop at a doorway. He looks at the door. It beckons.

BACK TO:

Dancers weave, they trade partners. Georgia laughs. She spins freely, matching to:

A DOORKNOB TURNS. Wiley peeks inside. The lantern illuminates a sleeping Harry -- and an empty bed. Wiley's stunned...

BACK TO:

Returning back to each other, Monty dips her low. Back up, lips tantalizingly close.

EXT. UNDERGROUND DANCE HALL - LATER

Monty strikes a match against the brick wall outside the hall. Music THUMPS from within.

Georgia pulls sweaty hair back, out of her face.

GEORGIA
I feel like I could dance forever.

MONTY
We wouldn't object.

GEORGIA
That's real life in there. There's not a care in the world.

He pulls a drag from his cigarette.

MONTY
I think if you care to search enough, you'll find it hidden in places you'd never expect.

Their eyes meet.

GEORGIA
I'm impressed. I want to know all your secrets.

Monty's eyes drop. A more profound hit than she was going for. A silence passes.

MONTY
Listen, Georgia, there's a lot to me.

GEORGIA
What hurt you, Monty North?

Monty looks off, deciding whether to go there.

MONTY

I've only been in love once before. We met in high school, and I fell hard for her. I didn't know what real meant before that. It was like I'd finally discovered what forever was. And then just as quickly, everything changed. Something came that I couldn't stop. They said her liver was dying. Copper sulfate, something they add to peas to make them greener. And I watched her fight it. Body wilting. Hair falling out in clumps. All I could do was try to squeeze hope into her hand. And then everything I fell in love with, I watched fade from her.

He turns back to her, as she blinks back tears.

MONTY (CONT'D)

It's been three years and I didn't think I could find real again until tonight.

She moves in. Holds his face and kisses him. Deeply.

GEORGIA

Don't ever lose that sense of forever.

(beat)

You're going to need it to save the world.

The door flings open beside them. A YOUNG COUPLE stumbles out, music trailing just behind.

The man tips his hat, the woman smiling as he leads her into the night.

MONTY

Speaking of forever... I believe we have more dancing to do.

Offers a hand. Glowing more than she realizes, she takes it.

SLAM CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

On clasped hands against the wall. Monty and Georgia make love. Passion forged by pain.

Souls connecting, dancing forever...

CUT TO:

MORNING

First sunlight peeks through.

Monty takes in Georgia, sleeping peacefully.

A smile.

He gently shifts his pillow, and notices something.

His hair. Clumps of it.

Monty jolts upright, gathering it tightly in his hands. Terror enveloping him.

GEORGIA (O.S.)
Is everything okay?

He swallows it and forces a smile. Turns to her.

MONTY
Good morning.

She smiles back.

Under fragile notes of a piano, a TENUOUS WALTZ carries us...

INT. EDWIN DORM ROOM - DAY

Curtains drawn, the room dark.

At the foot of his bed, Edwin leans against the baseboard with a bucket between his legs, rocking...

He stares down into the bucket with dread, face wracked. Waiting.

INT. MONTY/HARRY DORM ROOM - DAY

At Harry's desk, a pile of blankets in his chair.

Poking from that mound, Harry's face in a cold sweat. He pulls the blankets tighter, his breath measured.

His teeth chattering...

INT. MARION DORM ROOM - DAY

Sheets thrown clear from the bed, Marion writhes on his mattress. Body twisting, unable to find a position of relief.

Something's not right.

INT. PARLOR - DAY

And finally we land on the source of the music. BJ's fingers dance atop the black and white.

He's also sweating. Laboring as he plays.

The DELICATE MELODY jitters. And then halts.

Suddenly, BJ's head drops to the keys with a discordant
BWANG!

His body convulses. Foam pours from his mouth.

We sit with his struggle for a torturous moment before we mercifully...

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. PROVIDENCE HOSPITAL - DAY

CLOSE ON a pallid older WOMAN's face. Broad and scored with deep lines. Eyes teeming, red-rimmed. Silent as she listens.

Over her shoulder stand two tree trunks of men, uncomfortably shifting through the silent tension. Three echoes of BJ.

And after what seems like an eternity...

DOCTOR (O.S.)
I can't say how long he's had it.

Tears logjam and she nearly chokes on them. A stomach punch.

DOCTOR (O.S.) (CONT'D)
It's far enough along to have manifested in as many ways as it has.

(beat)

There's a chance that his weakened immune system may have contributed, but we may never know for sure.

Sweeping the edges of the room, the Squad lines the walls, fighting off tears, hearts bound to BJ's broken mother.

Finally we land on the DOCTOR, as he stands.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
I'll give you some time with him.

He offers a whisper of a smile and turns to leave.

Felix rushes to intercept him.

FELIX
Doctor, what's to be done for him?

DOCTOR
Our priority at this point is making sure he's comfortable.

A solemn nod that levels the room. Felix struggles to keep it together.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
If you'll excuse me.

The doctor opens the door, crossing with an entering Wiley.

The devastated room's ire stacks onto him. It bears down as he lugs a limp flower to BJ's bedside.

Monty watches this.

MONTY
Guys-- let's give them some air.

He shepherds the Squad as they file out.

The door SNAPS closed on the emptied room.

Wiley slowly lifts his glance across the bed to BJ's family.

They stare back.

A moment thick with the unspoken. And then:

WILEY
I've spent a lot of my years studying life and its confounding factors. And I've come no closer to understanding death or how to cope with it.

He reaches across the bed, offering the drooping flower.

They stare on, a baffled stupor.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - DAY

From a brittle, over-painted tin door, the Squad slips out into the dirt alleyway behind the hospital.

They sit on a bench along the building. Keeping thoughts at bay with hat adjustments and cigarette lighting.

Swallowed in the silence.

Harry looks about, scanning the glum faces.

HARRY

Well comfortable is good, right?

Felix has had it, angrily stamps to his feet.

Monty places a hand on Harry's shoulder.

MONTY

Comfortable means end of life care.

Felix unleashes a wild barrage of punches into the flimsy door, scarring it with dents.

Squad members jump in to pry him away, calm him.

FELIX

It just isn't fair.

Felix shakes them off.

FELIX (CONT'D)

There's nobody stronger than BJ.
Doesn't deserve an end like this.

It hits hard.

IRVING

We all signed death waivers. You can't say we weren't warned.

MARION

That's some damned nonsense. I've been in the control group, and I could barely summon the strength to stand this morning. There's something wrong with the experiment.

CLARENCE
And Wiley's to blame!

At that, tempers flare, angry bursts resounding off the surrounding walls.

FELIX
GUYS -- have some decency! Our brother is dying in a bed upstairs.

A hush falls over. Felix shakes his head.

FELIX (CONT'D)
This isn't a time to stand around picking one another apart. We need to look out for each other. Because no one's looking out for us.

Humbled, they share glances. He's right.

Edwin flourishes, thinking aloud:

EDWIN
If it did that to someone like BJ... what could be happening to us?

Their stunned faces belie that this is the first they've considered it.

Suddenly the brittle door BANGS back open, as a HOSPITAL WORKER steps out, lugging a bag of sloshing hospital waste.

He takes a hard stare at the battered door, before dumping the bag out into the alley.

Marion dances away, dusting off his leg.

The worker shoots a final scornful look as he ashes his cigarette, and returns inside.

EXT. DOWNTOWN WASHINGTON, D.C. - EVENING

A browned hand picks through tomatoes, pulling out rotting ones and throwing them aside.

The VENDOR snatches one of the last ripe ones, giving it a playful toss into the air.

VENDOR
End of day special, half-price for the pretty lady.

Georgia passes arm-in-arm with Monty, waves him off.

GEORGIA

You're lucky I'm here. This time of evening, I can get us anything we want.

Monty laughs.

Georgia stops as she spots an OLD MAN tending a pastry stand.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

I know you can't partake, but I hope you don't mind if I...

Monty watches as she bounces over to the stand.

He smiles. Mind clearly elsewhere.

Just as quickly, she returns boasting two giant chocolate doughnuts.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

Don't judge me.

Takes a bite from each doughnut.

Monty struggles to put on a face. Georgia notices.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

(mouth full)

What's wrong?

MONTY

Nothing.

GEORGIA

No. You're a terrible liar.

Shaking it off...

MONTY

I'm sorry. Let's just get you some more free food.

GEORGIA

Monty.

She looks to him deeply.

MONTY

Listen, something happened. But before I tell you, I need your confidence. This is just you and me.

GEORGIA

I promise. What's going on?

MONTY

BJ, one of the Squad. He contracted meningitis. Be lucky to make it through the week.

GEORGIA

I--

She struggles to find words. Monty puts an arm around her.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

(re: the doughnuts)

I really wish you'd have told me before I got these.

He leads her to a quiet corner.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

How is Wiley handling it?

MONTY

I can't imagine... the whole thing is a disaster.

GEORGIA

What about the Squad?

MONTY

Everyone's shaken up right now. The whole group was violently ill this morning... more than any experiment would call for. We just don't know who we can trust.

GEORGIA

Something doesn't add up. I can--

Monty grabs her shoulders. Looks into her eyes.

MONTY

No, you can't say anything. I'm placing my trust with you.

GEORGIA

Okay.

(then)

Monty, are you safe continuing?

He sits with it a moment, then flashes an unconvincing smile.

MONTY

I'll tell you tomorrow.

INT. MONTY/HARRY DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Wiley roots through Monty's closet. Opening boxes, checking jacket pockets -- a handful of ticket stubs and a pack of cigarettes. There has to be more.

MONTY (O.S.)

Something I can help you with?

Wiley stops. Slowly turns to face him standing in the doorway. A tension pulses between them.

Finally, Wiley stands, straightening himself out.

WILEY

No, thank you. I was just looking
for that refill of kerosene.

And he walks out of the room. Off Monty, thrown...

INT. WASHINGTON POST OFFICES - DAY

Rows of men writing broken by Georgia, still deep in thought.

MACCALL

Brown.

Georgia snaps to.

MACCALL (CONT'D)

Can I have a minute.

INT. MACCALL'S OFFICE

MacCall tosses Georgia a page of notes.

MACCALL

I have your next story.

Georgia takes the page, hesitant.

GEORGIA

Kind of have my hands full with the
good housewife tips.

MACCALL

Not anymore. I have a big
development in the Poison Squad
story. And since you broke it, I'm
giving it to you.

GEORGIA

What happened?

MACCALL

I have information from a source
inside the Squad that one of the
subjects has left the experiment
with an illness. I need it for
early edition.

Georgia is floored. Searches for breath.

GEORGIA

Who's your source?

MACCALL

Didn't want to be named. One of the
Squad.

GEORGIA

--I can't.

MACCALL

Georgia. This is a front page
story. Lead reporters don't run
away from front page stories.

Across from his desk, she seems a million miles away.

MACCALL (CONT'D)

I expect it on my desk by 8.

INT. DORMITORY HALLWAY - MORNING

Leather shoes softly CLACK across the groaning floorboards.

Wiley makes his way down the hallway, past the deserted
rooms. A pause as he crosses BJ's room, the door slightly
ajar. Desk bare.

We follow as Wiley descends the staircase. He reaches the
landing, which greets him with eerie stillness.

INT. DINING ROOM - MORNING

He pushes the door open.

Tables set for breakfast. Untouched silver platters emit whispers of steam.

And at the front of the room, eleven men stand defiantly, arms crossed.

The door closes behind Wiley.

They stand on opposite ends of the room, watching each other.

WILEY

I can't imagine you were waiting
for me to begin.

His humor is met with dead air.

Edwin steps forward.

EDWIN

Dr. Wiley, we've all decided this
morning to withdraw from the study.

The steely eyes behind seem to echo his resolve.

Wiley weathers.

EDWIN (CONT'D)

I joined this experiment to do
something just in a world that can
be anything but. I think I speak
for everyone here when I say that I
don't feel like we're doing that
anymore.

Bracing. But Wiley is soft, contrite.

WILEY

I owe you all an apology. I have
nothing that can erase the events
of the last couple of days. The
pain that you all are assuredly
suffering. Nor have I yet located
the cause of the egregious overdose
that transpired.

His stern eyes fall onto Monty.

FELIX

He died on your watch! How do you
live with that?

Wiley swallows this.

WILEY

I'd never been responsible for the loss of a human life. Then, when I was about your age, I committed my life to science. In my mind, that was how I could help bring about a world that's a little more fair. To make life absolute. But my career has been a humbling process of endlessly relearning that science detests the absolute. You can't fathom the devastation when every victory you claim is paralyzed by loss. But death and change is a symbiosis. And sometimes a sacrifice like BJ's allows the world to become a little more absolute.

The men soften. Felix chokes back tears.

WILEY (CONT'D)

I owe it to you to get to the bottom of what went wrong yesterday, and to ensure every safety measure I can. If this is more than you can bear, I will understand if you must take your leave. But my plea to you today is to persist; to endure an imperfect attempt to change an unjust world. Or just to make it a little more fair.

The room falls silent. Glances around the Squad break up the guise of their steadfast resolve.

And then Harry steps forward. And in front of his cohorts, he takes a seat at the table. Lifts the silver lid. And begins to eat.

MURMURS stir.

Harry finishes the plate, slides over to the next seat. Lifts the silver lid. And does it again.

There's worry now beginning to set in. Felix leans into Edwin.

FELIX

(sotto)

He's going to kill himself!

Harry finishes the second plate, and moves to slide over once again --

But Monty has already taken the seat. He looks up at Harry, a faithful nod, and begins to eat.

One by one, the other members of the Squad take their seats.

A warm nod from Wiley, a smile creaking the corner of his lips.

LOUIS (O.S.)
Harvey.

Harvey lifts a hand to wave him off.

Peeking in from the hallway, Louis insists.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Harvey!

Wiley finally relents, beckoning him over. They huddle. Wiley's face sinks.

From his seat, Monty's attention is with them -- and the newspaper Louis holds:

POISON SQUAD MEMBER FALLS ILL, STUDY IN PERIL

Monty's in shock. And being stared at.

Wiley glares back as he shepherds Louis out of the room. Off Monty's bewilderment...

INT. MONTY/HARRY DORM ROOM - NIGHT

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

A door opens to reveal a guarded Georgia, shoes in hand.

Harry stares back. Like seeing a ghost.

GEORGIA
(hushed)
Can we talk?

A cautious look over his shoulder, Harry snatches a book and slips past her out the door.

Georgia closes the door, alone with Monty.

A tense moment. Thick with the unsaid.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

I know you're mad. You'd be less mad if you knew what happened.

MONTY

You mean about betraying my trust and destroying everything?

GEORGIA

It's more complex than that--

MONTY

It's more complex? It's as black and white as the front page it was plastered all over.

GEORGIA

Monty, listen to me -- I'm trying to tell you there's a mole.

MONTY

What are you talking about?

GEORGIA

My editor handed me the lead on that story. A member of the Squad leaked BJ's story to him. Someone is trying to sabotage the experiment.

Monty shakes his head.

MONTY

I told you when you're opening a story you should make it eye-catching.

(then)

If you just wanted to come here to cover your tracks I could have saved you a favor.

GEORGIA

Monty, I would never betray you like that.

MONTY

I wish I could trust your word.

(beat)

You should go.

Monty holds the door open, his eyes lowered to the floor. A last appeal, then Georgia takes her shoes and marches out.

INT. PARLOR - NIGHT

In the sprawling darkness the space is barely recognizable.

In a small corner we can see him illuminated by lamp light.
Hunched. Consumed. Engulfed.

Wiley.

Like before, he stares ahead into nothing.

And somewhere inside

It's raining again.

Thick drops collecting, pooling...

Swelling and rising...

As we TRACK IN on Wiley, wrinkles threaten to split his face open. A pencil splinters in his hand.

The RUSH of water filling to the brim...

And then the ominous surge of CREAKING--

MONTY

Kind of late to be bleeding out in
the corner of a room, isn't it?

Wiley looks down at his hand. Blood drips to the floor.

WILEY

I was just running some numbers.

And drops the splintered pencil.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Do you need something...?

Monty places a can of kerosene on the desk.

Wiley's eyes move from it to Monty.

MONTY

One night at a bar you told me to
take my shot. That scared the hell
out of me. For so long it felt
selfish to so much as consider what
I deserve, not to mention to try
and actually get it...

His eyes fall.

MONTY (CONT'D)
I need to come clean. I've been
sneaking out of the dorm at night.

Wiley reaches into his pocket, places the ticket stubs on the desk.

WILEY
I know.

Stunned, Monty goes to speak--

WILEY (CONT'D)
She had better be worth it.

A smile.

MONTY
Harvey, I would never jeopardize
what you've worked so hard for.

Wiley leans back, looking past him into the darkness.

WILEY
Do you remember when you showed up
at my door three years ago? It was
right after Lily. You came to me,
this wide-eyed young kid, and said,
"I know very little about
agriculture, and I know nothing
about chemicals, but I want to help
people."

MONTY
I was lying. I knew nothing about
agriculture, either.

WILEY
You were an idealist. You wanted to
give yourself to what you believed
in, to step up for others who
couldn't do it themselves. I hired
you because you reminded me of
myself.

The first he's heard of this.

WILEY (CONT'D)
We just wanted to be good men.

MONTY
Harvey--

WILEY

Looking back, it's a foolish notion. To have any hope of coming out of this a good man. What we're all too idealistic to realize is that accomplishing anything on this big a scale requires far too much sacrifice to come out undamaged. You can do good things. But there are no good men.

MONTY

Your good things define you. Whatever happens with this, you gave that wide-eyed young kid purpose.

The two men reflect in the dark.

WILEY

Well I've got numbers to run.

Monty pats his friend.

MONTY

Get some sleep, Harvey.

And leaves him to his thoughts.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

On an empty seat at the table.

MARION (O.S.)

It's weird, isn't it?

EDWIN (O.S.)

I don't know what else they could have done with it.

MARION (O.S.)

Anything. They could have dressed it up with ribbons or flowers or something.

Across, Irving eyes it, chewing uncomfortably.

EDWIN (O.S.)

Ribbons?

We land on Marion and Edwin.

MARION

I don't know, I'm not a funeral director. But I feel like someone should say something.

Suddenly, from the background, the swinging doors fling open, Billy yelling frantic.

BILLY

Don't eat anything! The food has been poisoned!

Felix freezes, a giant forkful in his mouth.

Wiley stands from his perch in the corner of the room.

WILEY

Billy, what's this about?

Billy holds up a small glass bottle.

BILLY

Someone was in the kitchen earlier. He fled into the dining room, and left behind this empty bottle.

Wiley snatches the bottle and inspects it. Runs a finger around the rim and taps it to his tongue.

WILEY

Gentlemen, there's a traitor in our midst.

(then)

You'll be able to spot him from the blood on his hands.

Amidst gasps, heads swivel, reconsidering their roommates and neighbors.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Did anyone else notice anything out of place?

Edwin turns to Marion.

EDWIN

Does he mean other than the chair?

Meanwhile, Felix's eyes are locked on Irving. Irving catches his stare and shifts anxiously.

The room buzzes. Scouring tabletops, scanning faces...

Tension rises to fever pitch.

FELIX
Tell me again about that Boston
congregation.

Then Felix stands. Raises an admonishing finger at Irving.

FELIX (CONT'D)
You son of a bitch.

The room falls silent. Marion looks around.

MARION
Is he serious?

Felix's solemn face continues to stare through Irving.

BILLY
I think we should search him,
Doctor.

CLARENCE
Now wait just a God-damned minute.
May we all sooner be swallowed
whole by the scorching fires of
Hell than question the virtues of a
God-serving priest.

Clarence walks over to Irving.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)
You know what our problem is? We
always fall in with the herd before
we think for ourselves. Follow
blind accusers to the edge of
Perdition. How are we to believe we
haven't been sabotaged by our negro
cook?

Clarence reaches down and grabs Irving's Bible before he can stop him. Holds it high above his head.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)
Proverbs 1:22. *"How long, O naive
ones, will you love being simple-
minded? And scoffers delight
themselves in scoffing and fools
hate knowledge?"*

The Bible opens to reveal its pages hollowed out.

THUMP!

A glass bottle drops to the floor and rolls to Wiley's foot.

Wiley picks it up and looks closely. It's IDENTICAL to the one Billy discovered.

Shaken, Clarence slowly takes a seat.

The room turns to Irving.

He sweats.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Tucked between rolling hills under a singing sky is a winter cabin. An oasis where the rich get away.

The chairmen approach, bedecked in riding gear and jodhpurs, lugging rifles and the day's spoils -- including white-tailed foxes that match their still-glistening GOLDEN PINS.

CHAIRMAN #5
Three trophies in a scruple's time!
Bully!

ALL CHAIRMEN
Bully!

As the men ascend the steps, a package awaits them: an elaborately wrapped basket filled with gourmet pastries.

Hutton pushes his way to the front to get a look.

HUTTON
Ah -- Looks to be goodwill from
Washington.

ALL CHAIRMEN
Bully!

The men dig in, filling their faces with the crispy treats.

As the basket diminishes, a crumb-laden handwritten note appears at the bottom.

Hutton pauses mid-bite as he notices.

HUTTON
Let's see who we have to thank--

He plucks the letter from the basket, shaking it free of crumbs. He reads aloud:

HUTTON (CONT'D)

Dearest Arthur Hutton et al, I hope you enjoy these one-of-a-kind treats, a particular favorite of the Queen of Bavaria.

A wave of awe as the chairmen chew.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

It has come to my attention that someone in your employ has taken the liberty of contributing his very own stock to our supply of adulterants. As a token of thanks, I have filled the enclosed with the contents of his bottles. Yours sincerely, Harvey Washington... Wiley.

Hutton stops, color draining. The rest of the chairmen desperately spit out their last bites, knowing it's too late.

The chairmen look at each other and the retching begins.

INT. HALLWAY - DEPT OF AGRICULTURE - DAY

Journalists swarm outside Gafney's office. Wiley maneuvers to the front and knocks.

The door opens, a swinging broomstick keeping the press at bay.

GAFNEY

Back, you animals!

He yanks Wiley in, slamming the door behind.

INT. EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Wiley sits across from Gafney.

The commotion from the hallway pours through the thin door.

GAFNEY

Harvey, no one appreciates what you've accomplished with your human trial over the last eleven months more than I do. What you've done for pure food is... I mean it's groundbreaking.

WILEY

How about we get to the point.

Gafney's face sours.

GAFNEY

The facts here are very simple. You were already way over budget. Now one of your subjects is gravely ill. I get the distinct feeling there's more--

Wiley goes to speak.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)

--It's probably better I don't know.

(beat)

Effective today, I'm de-funding the Hygienic Table.

It stings even though he knew it was coming. Wiley leans forward.

WILEY

Jay, we've been friends for a long time.

GAFNEY

No, we haven't.

WILEY

Well then I'll just get to the point. I have eleven men that have given themselves up, sacrificed their bodies and even their lives for our cause. Not to mention what we've given. It's been ten years, and for once we can actually taste it. You've seen the data, Jay, you know how close we are.

Gafney re-sets in his seat, listening...

WILEY (CONT'D)

You can't do this. For once in your life, when people are counting on you, stop quivering like a toothless child and actually stand for something.

...and hardens just as quickly.

GAFNEY

Look I don't know who the fuck you think you're talking to, nor do you comprehend the hail of gunfire I am under because of you.

As he flails an arm at the mounting chaos through the door.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)

The BJ story was picked up by every major newspaper outlet in the country. There comes a point where the press outweighs the performance, and we've reached it. I'm sorry, Harvey, but I'm done sticking my neck out.

Wiley stands and walks out, leaving the door open for the press to stream in.

INT. PARLOR - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - MORNING

Wiley sprawls across the sofa, a bottle of whiskey resting on his chest. A messy snore.

Louis bursts in, spilling light into the darkened room.

LOUIS

Dr. Wiley!

Wiley's bloodshot eyes peel open.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I--

WILEY

What is it, Louis?

LOUIS

I can't describe it. Just put on a shirt--

EXT. CHEMSITRY BUILDING - MORNING

Louis leads Wiley out onto the portico.

His eyes widen.

Before them, a boisterous throng. Hundreds of SUPPORTERS wrapping around the building, stretching deep into the garden. Handmade POISON SQUAD signs, joyful singing, and supportive chants greet Wiley.

An unmistakable smile wraps across Wiley's face. In this moment he's glowing.

From the crowd emerges a curly-haired woman we've met before. This is the SUFFRAGETTE. She tilts to Wiley a crate overflowing with letters.

SUFFRAGETTE

These are yours. I grabbed them before they could be consumed by the ravenous pack here.

Wiley glances across the letters -- all addressed to POISON SQUAD ADMISSIONS.

WILEY

Thank you.

SUFFRAGETTE

Dr. Wiley, I'm Catherine. I'm a big fan of your movement. All of us are.

WILEY

Movement?

CATHERINE

(looking out)

There are people here from Boston, Chattanooga...

He follows her gaze through the diverse crowd.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

They came out cause they believe in your voice. Feels like you could use the support. I'm the head of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the Suffragette Association. Not that they'd say it, but women are actually the group most susceptible to the poisons you're testing. We're the ones getting sick and dying.

This resonates.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Listen, if there's anything that we can do to help...

She hands him a pink pamphlet with the Suffragette Association seal.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
Give 'em the hell we can't.

With a smile, she turns and falls back into the crowd.

Off Wiley, gears turning...

A CRACK of a flashbulb and a FLASH of white takes us to:

INT. STUDIO - DAY

On a photo stage with a simple backdrop, a PHOTOGRAPHER snaps photographs of the ten-member Poison Squad.

While the camera POPS, a young REPORTER fires questions --

REPORTER

Is it true that your Poison Squad left behind their families for a full year to participate in the study?

WILEY

Well, now, you can't believe everything you read in the newspapers. -- But yes, that's true!

He flaunts a gaudy smile as the camera FLASHES white --

-- matching to the black & white cover of Harper's Weekly:

THE BRAVE SOULS OF PURE FOOD

INT. HALLWAY - CHEMISTRY BUILDING - DAY

Wiley parades a horde of JOURNALISTS through the halls of the Chemistry Building.

Candidly swings open a door to reveal --

WILEY

And this is our fecal drying machine.

A flurry of camera CRACKLES.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Posed before a dazzling array of additive bottles, Wiley hosts another photo op, Billy at his side.

WILEY

Yes, 17 poisons is a lot for one man to bear. And yet, that's exactly what the American people are consuming every day in this country.

Wiley throws an arm around Billy as camera bulbs are eviscerated --

-- matching to another cover story:

YOUR KITCHEN'S SILENT KILLER

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

The frenzy of cameras now surround Wiley at the table.

He feigns a bite, a heaping staged forkful to his lips.

JOURNALIST

Dr. Wiley -- do you yourself eat the poison?

Wiley pauses with the fork, smiling.

WILEY

My feeling is a little camaraderie never hurt anyone.

And he slides it into his mouth.

The cameras eat it up. And once again we match to a headline:

THE FACE OF AMERICA'S HOPE

And then match back from the headline to catch Wiley spitting the bite into a napkin.

WILEY (CONT'D)

What's your circulation again?

FADE OUT.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

A special night. The tables have been replaced with one large one, around which all the men now begin to sit.

Down the table, Monty takes his seat beside a dour Harry.

MONTY
What's your story, kid?

A limp smile.

MONTY (CONT'D)
Look, at least you can go back to
food you pulled out of the ground.

HARRY
My parents are sending me to school
instead.
(beat)
They're so close to losing the farm
and they don't even want me there.

MONTY
I see.

A server passes, dropping platters.

MONTY (CONT'D)
What are you planning to study?

HARRY
I don't know. All my life I've just
been waiting to take over the farm.
Then I saw all those doctors
running around, pulling stuff out
of medicine bottles... I think I'd
like to look into that.

Monty grins.

MONTY
I could certainly see that. And I
don't want to hear you talking like
your parents gave up on you.
Succeeding down your own path can
be your own way of keeping their
legacy alive.

Harry brightens as he considers this, an assuring nod.

Monty takes pause as his advice washes over him as well.

DING DING DING!

At the head of the table, Wiley stands with fork and glass.

WILEY
On our final night, it felt
appropriate to say a few words.
(MORE)

WILEY (CONT'D)

I would be remiss not to thank all of you. Your dedication to the cause and your enduring spirits are the real success story. But even more importantly, you've provided me with hope. Hope that future generations will have no way to fathom the horrors that took place within these walls. The souls that never escaped them.

Felix looks across to BJ's empty chair, now covered in flowers and ribbons.

WILEY (CONT'D)

And so tonight, I raise a glass to you, the Poison Squad.

Glasses go up; a rousing toast.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Enjoy your poison-free meals.

As the Squad digs in, Billy delivers Wiley a separate platter.

BILLY

This one isn't edible, sir.

Billy lifts the silver lid, uncovering a telegram beneath.

Wiley picks it up and reads. His eyes dart about it, a satisfied grin stretching his lips.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Looks like you got his attention.

WILEY

I would say so. This came from--?

BILLY

Hand delivered from the White House.

Content, Wiley reads it once more.

INT. MARION DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Marion stands at his bed, carefully folding his shirts over an open suitcase.

A KNOCK.

He opens the door on Wiley, vigilantly balancing two pressed suits in his arms.

WILEY

Hope I'm not interrupting. I'm...
just doing my rounds.

MARION

Not an interruption. Have a couple
of suits there?

WILEY

Oh, these. Well, I was invited to
meet with the President tomorrow
morning. Still... deliberating what
I'll wear.

An inquisitive glance lingers.

MARION

The more important the occasion,
the darker the suit. That's sort of
the rule of thumb.

Wiley looks at the suits again, in a new light.

WILEY

Oh. Yes.

MARION

Accessories.

WILEY

What?

MARION

I would not be caught dead at the
White House without a suit
accessory.

Marion disappears into his closet. He returns with a
beautiful, silken white pocket square.

MARION (CONT'D)

This brings a whole suit together.
If I were going.

Wiley takes the pocket square in his hands, regarding it.

MARION (CONT'D)

I have others, so if you want to
look at that one for a day... be my
guest.

WILEY

Of course. Just a look. It'd be a
little out of my element to wear
it.

MARION

It takes courage not to be what
others want you to be.

An acquiescing smile from Wiley.

WILEY

It was a pleasure having you here.
You were an invaluable specimen.

MARION

I don't think I've ever received a
more humanizing compliment.

WILEY

Yes, well. I'll bet you're excited
to get back to your life.

MARION

Oh. Yes.

WILEY

Wife, kids...

MARION

Of course.

A silence builds. And then.

MARION (CONT'D)

I don't know.

Marion drops his head, the acknowledgement weighing heavy.

Wiley steps close, a reassuring hand on the shoulder...

WILEY

I hear it takes courage not to be
what others want you to be.

(then)

Thanks for giving me something to
look at.

With a wave of the pocket square, Wiley heads back out and
down the hall.

Marion, now alone. Thinking.

INT. WEST WING - THE WHITE HOUSE - MORNING

The aide leads Gafney and Wiley, adjusting his pocket square.

GAFNEY

(quietly)

We're lucky to be here, okay? He's clearly taken by the groundswell of support we've created.

A side eye from Wiley.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)

But he's a strong-willed man. So, please-- only speak when you're addressed.

WILEY

If I'm in the room, I assume he's addressing me.

GAFNEY

Just let me do the talking.

The aide pushes open a set of doors, showering us with blinding light as we move into

INT. OVAL OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

AIDE

Mr. President. Dr. Jay Gafney and Dr. Harvey Wiley.

The aide slips back out the door.

Roosevelt twists his chair to them.

ROOSEVELT

Harvard.

Wiley bemused.

WILEY

Yes sir.

ROOSEVELT

Well dressed. Smart men always know how to dress.

A knowing smirk.

ROOSEVELT (CONT'D)

Please, have a seat.

Gafney and Wiley take their seats at the center of the room.

As Roosevelt plods over, Gafney takes notice of some tiny white objects behind glass by the President's desk.

GAFNEY

Those are beautiful pearls.

Roosevelt pivots to see.

ROOSEVELT

Teeth, actually. Human!

Gafney and Wiley's eyes grow.

ROOSEVELT (CONT'D)

I was at a bar years ago in Montana. Hunting trip. Drinking a mint julep when a cowboy took exception to it. Shabby individual in a broad hat, a cocked gun in each hand. He chastised my drink choice as feminine in nature, and recommended I set up a round of bourbon for everyone to redeem myself. So, I did what I had to do. I struck quick and hard with my right, and then again with my left. When he went down he struck the corner of the table with his head; a lot of things came out of it. I don't enjoy being questioned in my affairs.

Gafney and Wiley shift uncomfortably.

GAFNEY

Well. They're beautiful.

ROOSEVELT

There is a reason I called you here this morning. Your human trial has developed into quite the spectacle. A lot of people hate to see it cut short. For good reason. The health of our people should be of the utmost importance.

GAFNEY

Thank you, sir. That is the crux of everything we do. And our findings so far only lend to its urgency. A lot of people are relying on us.

ROOSEVELT

Now see, I owe my immaculate health to Dr. Rixey. Every morning he dispenses me a dose of pressed herbs and saccharin. Not everyone is so fortunate to have a doctor like him to keep them in peak form. So then -- What have you learned?

GAFNEY

My chemist carried on experimental determinations on healthy young men and found, principally, Borax to be an injurious substance when placed in food.

Roosevelt leans back as he takes this in.

ROOSEVELT

Dr. Wiley. Do you think Borax is an injurious substance?

Wiley looks at him squarely.

WILEY

Mr. President, I don't think, I know.

Roosevelt LAUGHS, a bellow just short of a bear's roar.

ROOSEVELT

Good answer. I've read some troubling headlines recently about one of your subjects becoming greatly sick. Not the most reassuring turn of events.

WILEY

It's true, and I think that unfortunate episode only speaks to the severity of our current state of affairs.

Roosevelt finds himself nodding in agreement.

ROOSEVELT

I must admit, Borax is of personal concern to me. I saw its dangers myself during the Spanish-American War. I led the Rough Riders in to take Cuba. And what claimed most of my men wasn't the battle. It was the canned meat they ate.

GAFNEY

Yes, I--

WILEY

It is astounding how little we know about the effects of what we consume. For example, the saccharin you take actually makes the body resist its own impulses. Probably the cause of your dry skin.

Gafney turns to Wiley in horror.

Roosevelt turns purple with anger.

He SLAMS a fist on the table.

The teeth rattle in their glass case.

ROOSEVELT

You say saccharin is a poison. Then either we shall lock up the White House doctor for sedition, or you, Wiley, are an idiot!

GAFNEY

Mr. President, he misspoke.

WILEY

I did not misspeak. Mr. President, some of the truths behind our chemicals are unpleasant. And I am not in the business of sugar coating them. You don't have to like me, only what I'm here to do.

Off Roosevelt, still stewing...

INT. SUMNER'S OFFICE - DAY

Sumner kneels, screwing a new leg onto his desk.

The door opens. His secretary enters, letter in hand.

SECRETARY

Mr. Sumner, we just received this from the House Chamber.

Sumner plucks it from her. Flaps it open and reads.

As his eyes trace, his face darkens.

SECRETARY (CONT'D)
Is it good news?

SUMNER
The President just granted approval
for the pure food study to move
forward.

The secretary looks searchingly from the letter to his face.

SECRETARY
That sounds like good news. Is--?
It's not good news.

Sumner stares ahead motionless.

She shows herself out.

INT. EXECUTIVE OFFICE - DEPT OF AGRICULTURE - DAY

The door sneaks open and Wiley jostles through, past the swarming press, and closes it behind.

Gafney looks up from his paper -- **ROOSEVELT: PURE FOOD STUDY WILL CONTINUE.**

Gafney waits for Wiley to speak, but instead he just pulls an orange from his coat pocket and begins to peel.

Gafney drops his head.

GAFNEY
Okay, Harvey.

A smug grin. Wiley continues to peel.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)
I don't know how you did it, but,
well...

Orange peel drops to the floor.

GAFNEY (CONT'D)
Is there actually a reason you're
in my office?

Wiley pops a slice into his mouth. Another insufferable grin, and then--

He turns back and exits, leaving the door wide, unleashing another torrent of eager reporters.

Gafney grabs his broomstick.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dressed in a nightgown, Georgia readies for bed.

She moves to the window to draw the shade, but as she does something catches her eye.

Below, a SHADOWY FIGURE quietly slides open a first floor window and pulls himself in.

As he does, SHRIEKS ring out from inside the room.

MONTY (O.S.)
I'm sorry! I'm sorry.

The look from Georgia says it all.

Monty tumbles back out the window. Dusts himself off and walks along the building to the next window, directly beneath. Once more, he climbs through.

Georgia moves to her bed and sits.

Moments later, from below, BANG... SMASH! And another SCREAM. A CHAIR falls over... and another BANG.

Georgia sighs to herself, walks to the door and unlocks it. Sits back on her bed.

The sound of FOOTSTEPS approaches the door, and then a shadow blocks the light beneath it.

Georgia waits.

The doorknob's screws begin to JOSTLE. This is a whole to-do.

GEORGIA
It's open.

A pause.

The door quietly squeaks open, dramatically revealing Monty. He steps in the room, shoes in hand.

MONTY
You're probably wondering why I'm here.

GEORGIA
Not even a little.

MONTY
You may have heard, there was a mole.

GEORGIA

I know.

MONTY

And you didn't betray me.

GEORGIA

I know.

MONTY

This is the kind of thing you don't come back from...

GEORGIA

You don't apologize much, do you?

MONTY

Downside of being right all the time.

She fights off a smile.

MONTY (CONT'D)

Listen, I was wrong. I went somewhere with you that I haven't been in a long time. It's a place that used to be hers. I didn't mean to push you away... I'm just so used to protecting it.

GEORGIA

You don't need to make room in your life for me.

Off Monty's confusion, she continues.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

When my mother passed away, I didn't think I'd ever see the world the same way again. When I was little she would take me and my sister outside, and we'd look at the stars. And she would sing a song about the moon's adventures. But then one evening after she passed, I looked up at the moon, and I heard her singing. And I realized she was still there. Because as long as her gifts remain, so does she.

She moves to him, taking his hand in hers.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

Monty, your wife will always be there. Her gift is helping you to save the world.

They embrace.

EXT. 7TH STREET - MORNING

Crisp morning. Wiley strolls down his morning route, his bicycle at his side, passing bundled locals. The first of winter.

And then the sky opens. Snow begins to fall from above in a thick blanket. Heads look up in wonder.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - CONTINUOUS

Wiley wanders onto a side street. He holds out his hand and watches the snow gather. Mesmerized.

VOICE (O.S.)

Dr. Wiley.

The familiar Ozarks twang jars us from the moment.

Wiley turns to the source, where a tree-sized man steps into the alley. We've seen him before. It's BJ'S BROTHER.

Suddenly he doesn't want to be Dr. Wiley.

BJ'S BROTHER

You believe in God, Doc?

He reaches a hand into his heavily patched tweed jacket and begins to rummage.

BJ'S BROTHER (CONT'D)

...You believe in yourself?

Wiley freezes as the brother steps closer.

Removes a piece of paper and SLAPS it into Wiley's chest.

BJ'S BROTHER (CONT'D)

Church we're taught to believe
those two things are separate.

Wiley uncrumples the paper: the Hygienic Table death waiver.

As he goes to speak, a SECOND MAN steps in from the other side of the alley: lanky limbs shoved into overalls; crooked teeth peeking out from his lips.

BJ'S BROTHER (CONT'D)
My brother signed his life over to you. Not to his family. Not to the Lord. To you.
(then)
What makes BJ's life less valuable than yours?

Second man takes a step forward. From his carpenter's loop he pulls a cudgel.

WILEY
I would say this made his more valuable.

He glances to the street as the men close in.

WILEY (CONT'D)
He made a sacrifice. That's something to be proud of.

BJ'S BROTHER
When BJ was a boy, before he got sick, he usedta sneak his dinner into his pockets so the dogs didn't go hungry. You don't know the first thing about sacrifice. BJ was my pride. My question for you is... who the fuck are you?

Just past the brother, Wiley spots a POLICE OFFICER crossing the far side of the street.

WILEY
I'm not God. But I'm as close as it's gonna get.

His words still in the air, Wiley moves to mount his bicycle. But before his feet can find the pedals, large hands engulf him and drag him to the ground.

The brother tosses the bicycle aside and proceeds to unload on Wiley. A vicious punch to the face. A devastating crack to the ribs.

The second man hands over the cudgel. The brother holds it high, ready to strike -- as a butcher's wagon pulls up, blocking our view.

WORKERS unload beef quarters while underneath, the beating continues. PUMMELS echo from the alley, while the movement of the city continues unabated.

Drops of blood stain the new snow as we harrowingly drift to

BLACK.

EXT. CAPITOL BUILDING - MORNING

As the morning sun rises, a NEWSBOY stands on the steps of the Capitol Building, a newspaper held high in his hand.

NEWSBOY

Extra! Hearings start today to decide your food's fate! Read all about it!

As SPECTATORS and MEMBERS for the press alike ascend past him into the building, we

CUT TO:

INT. COMMITTEE ROOM - CAPITOL BUILDING - MORNING

In turns daunting and majestic. A spacious chamber with a frescoed dome and chandelier, walls adorned with portraits of former chairmen. The shaping of the nation happens here.

CHYRON: HOUSE COMMITTEE HEARING, DAY ONE

As the milling crowd filters to their seats in the gallery, Wiley's team of Gafney and Louis huddle at the witness table with CONGRESSMAN DAVID FOSTER, 35.

Foster moves in to shake Louis' hand.

FOSTER

David Foster. Great State of Massachusetts.

LOUIS

It's a pleasure to be working with you, Mr. Foster.

FOSTER

This is common sense to me, boys. I'm close with my mother, and Lord knows she handles a shit ton of peas.

They laugh.

It's cut short by Wiley, slinking by them to take his seat in the gallery, his arm in a sling.

WILEY
Gentlemen.

Looks abound.

QUICK TO:

A right hand raised.

SUMNER (O.S.)
Do you solemnly swear that in the matter now pending before this committee that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

We move out to reveal Gafney.

GAFNEY
I do.

Across from the witness table, at a long dais, Sumner is seated center among his committee.

SUMNER
Thank you for joining us this morning, Mr. Gafney. Your purview is invaluable on an issue like this. How long have you been acting Secretary of the Department of Agriculture?

GAFNEY
Nine years in March.

SUMNER
And in this title, you oversee all matters pertaining to the Bureau of Chemistry?

GAFNEY
I do.

SUMNER

Clear as it might be, our particular point of interest pertains to the human trials known as the Hygienic Table, conducted by your Chief Chemist, Dr. Harvey Wiley. Can you enlighten this committee as to the findings?

GAFNEY

We tested twelve men of sound body and mind with the most common food additives used on the market today. We found, conclusively, these additives to have a deleterious effect on the health of the men.

SUMNER

And what were these common food additives tested?

GAFNEY

Primarily we tested Borax, copper sulfate, and benzoate.

SUMNER

And could you define "sound body and--"

Down the dais, Foster leans forward to interject.

FOSTER

--What were these deleterious effects?

GAFNEY

Collectively, the men experienced a material loss of weight, burning in the throat, stomach pain, dizziness, loss of appetite, persistent headache, cramps...

FOSTER

Oh, is that all?

The gallery laughs.

QUICK TO:

Monty at the witness table.

SUMNER

The committee recognizes Mr. Montgomery North.
(MORE)

SUMNER (CONT'D)

Mr. North, you were part of the group colloquially known as "The Poison Squad"?

MONTY

That is correct. The most widely advertised boarding house in the world.

Monty smiles.

SUMNER

How would you describe that experience?

MONTY

Nauseating. Should I elaborate on that?

SUMNER

Mr. North, we have testimony here from a Dr. Liebreich, who attributed the men's loss of appetite to an odor of chemicals and fumes that poured in from the adjoining kitchen. Care to comment on that?

MONTY

I would attribute that more to the violent cramps.

A TITTER buzzes among the audience.

MONTY (CONT'D)

But really, I don't have any qualms with Dr. Wiley's experimental design. It was something of a well-oiled machine.

SUMNER

Have you ever had a stomachache, Mr. North?

MONTY

Yes sir.

SUMNER

Ever had a meal not quite sit right?

MONTY

Of course. I think we all have.

SUMNER

Tell me, how exactly are we supposed to decipher between a stomachache caused by a meal not sitting right and one caused by food additives?

MONTY

As a subject, I'm not sure I can answer that. I'd assume it would involve the unenviable process of analyzing my fecal matter. Which occurred more times than I think it deserved.

The gallery stirs again. Sumner grimaces.

SUMNER

Thank you for your vividness. Just one more question, Mr. North.

A pause as he shuffles his papers...

SUMNER (CONT'D)

It was widely reported in the press that a member of your Poison Squad took ill and was forced to leave the experiment. Upon further delving I've learned that member, BJ Teasdale, has since died in Arkansas. Can you explain how this sort of thing could have been allowed to happen?

This is the first Monty has heard of BJ's death. His breath catches in his throat.

SUMNER (CONT'D)

I think your silence speaks volumes of this well-oiled machine.

Sumner's struck. In the gallery, Wiley slumps.

INT. COMMITTEE ROOM - CAPITOL BUILDING - MORNING

CHYRON: DAY TWO

A tighter crowd now spills into the hall.

SUMNER

Dr. Kremers, you are head chemist at the University of Wisconsin?

KREMERS

That is correct. With a specialty
in plant chemistry.

SUMNER

I take it you have an intimate
understanding of the additives that
Mr. Gafney mentioned in yesterday's
testimony?

KREMERS

I do. I find that there's a
fundamental misunderstanding when
it comes to the nature and origins
of the additives we're dealing
with.

Kremers lifts a bowl of cranberries and places it on the
witness table.

KREMERS (CONT'D)

I went picking this morning in the
cranberry bushes just outside the
Capitol. Cranberries are a natural
staple of the human diet. Man has
eaten them for centuries. What
people aren't aware of, however, is
that cranberries naturally contain
benzoate.

SUMNER

Well, based on the testimony we
heard yesterday, I would assume
that would render cranberries
poisonous to man.

KREMERS

The key is in the amount. The
proportion of benzoate in a single
cranberry is the exact same as what
is used to preserve food.

SUMNER

It would seem as if God knows how
much the human body can withstand.
Are you a religious man, Doctor?

KREMERS

I am.

SUMNER

Wouldn't you agree, then, that if this amount is good enough for God then it damn well should be good enough for man?

Foster jumps in.

FOSTER

This is irrelevant, strychnine is also found in plants, and I don't believe anyone would advocate we eat strychnine. The point of this, Doctor, is whether or not these additives are harmful to humans.

KREMERS

I can't claim to be the ultimate authority in what is and what is not poison, but I am very good with numbers. Forty-three States dispute Dr. Wiley's claim that these chemicals are harmful. And nine countries have opted against banning them.

SUMNER

What is your professional opinion of Dr. Wiley?

KREMERS

Dr. Wiley is one of our nation's most highly regarded chemists. But I'm in the business of consensus. And the consensus of my peers consistently disagrees with him.

Sumner sneers.

QUICK TO:

A GLISTENING FOX PIN. Hutton settles into his seat.

SUMNER

Thank you for joining us, Mr. Hutton.

HUTTON

It is my pleasure to be here. I felt the survival of my company depended on it.

FOSTER

We've heard a lot about the chemicals you put in your catsup. Are they necessary?

HUTTON

If we did not preserve, our catsup would spoil before it even got to market. Preservatives are a necessity to our business. If they were banned tomorrow, every food company I know would be forced to shut down.

FOSTER

Isn't it true, though, that there is a catsup company on the market already, Cassel's, employing a preservation method without additives?

HUTTON

I can't speak to the practices of others, but my company has found that to be an impossibility.

SUMNER

What chemical do you use to preserve your catsup?

HUTTON

We use Borax.

SUMNER

So, Mr. Hutton, do you feel like you're peddling poison to the American people?

HUTTON

My fear is that if you put Dr. Wiley on this stand, he could argue that every single ingredient in catsup is poisonous. The vinegar, the salt, heck, even the tomatoes. Lord knows, if I were to sit you down and pack your stomach full of tomatoes, you would probably get sick.

The gallery CHUCKLES. Wiley notices the sea change.

HUTTON (CONT'D)

I respect Dr. Wiley and have nothing but the highest of praise for his commitment to pure food. But I think all of us manufacturers shudder at the thought of the whims of one man deciding food laws that would put us out of business.

In the crowd, the seven chairmen bristle.

ALL CHAIRMEN

Hooey!

GAVEL BANGS silence the house.

SUMNER

I'm going to ask you to clarify that for this committee. You say that you have nothing but praise for Dr. Wiley, and yet you take exception to his defining a food law?

HUTTON

I take exception to any one man doing so. I had a brother who died recently. All of his doctors had had a different diagnosis. And each one was positive his diagnosis was right. But it was just seven wrong men in a room. Dr. Wiley is as good a man as lives, as conscientious as anybody, but he may be wrong, and I believe he is wrong; and I think a business such as ours should not be legislated out of existence because there's one wrong man in the room.

The room erupts, and Wiley looks dazed. Losing color.

Sumner does nothing to silence the room.

INT. EXECUTIVE OFFICE - DEPT OF AGRICULTURE - EVENING

The room is a hive of nervous panic. Gafney, Monty, and Louis pace, but we sit with Wiley, statue-like in his chair.

GAFNEY (O.S.)

What the hell happened in there?

MONTY (O.S.)

They're using parlor tricks!

LOUIS (O.S.)
They're reducing everything to
trusting the word of...

GAFNEY
Harvey. What are we going to do?

Wiley doesn't seem to flinch.

WILEY
Nothing changes. Tomorrow I
testify, as planned.

His eyes trail down to his hand, where we see a worn pink pamphlet with a familiar seal...

INT. COMMITTEE ROOM - CAPITOL BUILDING - MORNING

CHYRON: DAY THREE

Sumner sits at the dais with his committee, but something is amiss.

ANOTHER CONGRESSMAN looks at his pocket watch.

SUMNER
Where is everyone?

Across from them, the room is completely empty. Not a soul, not a sound. Except for...

A faint COMMOTION from outside the chamber.

Sumner and the others warily stand.

INT. LOBBY - CAPITOL BUILDING

Their footsteps ECHO hollow. The RUMBLE outside grows...

Sumner cautiously grips the door and pulls it open to

EXT. CAPITOL BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Absolute chaos.

A physical chain of SUFFRAGETTES, arms linked, blockade the entrance to the building. Their matching dresses and sashes cement their solidarity.

The crowd beyond them is whipped into frenzy.

And at the front, Catherine belts out an address.

CATHERINE
Today we take a stand together!

The crowd CHEERS.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
We are the silent victims. We're
stuffed into kitchens to handle
food that's dangerous. We have been
stepped on and broken. But today we
form something much stronger. A
bond among souls. A duty to each
other. What's at stake is more than
just the pureness of food. It's the
wellbeing of your mothers, your
wives. Our women. Now who stands
with me?

The crowd CRIES OUT its support. Catherine rides the wave and
leads them in chant.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
I need to be sure our women's food
is pure!

CROWD
I NEED TO BE SURE OUR WOMEN'S FOOD
IS PURE!

As the chanting crescendoes, we scan the faces of those
congressman. Sumner turns to his cohorts, who are swept up in
the sheer force of the moment.

CROWD (CONT'D)
I NEED TO BE SURE OUR WOMEN'S FOOD
IS PURE!

As GAVEL BANGS take us back to

INT. COMMITTEE ROOM - CAPITOL BUILDING - DAY

The energy from the rally outside has morphed into breathless
suspense in here. The room is filled wall to wall with
people, souls squeezing in to get a glimpse of history.

And before them, Wiley takes his seat at the witness table.
He delicately pulls off his sling.

Sumner boils from the dais. Ready to strike.

SUMNER
Dr. Wiley.

Wiley returns a firm nod.

SUMNER (CONT'D)
Can you please state for the record
your credentials pertaining to the
field of chemistry?

WILEY
I received my M.D. from Indiana.
Studied chemistry at Harvard, and
afterwards pursued analytical and
professional studies in Europe,
where my focus was pathology,
pathological chemistry, and
chemistry of foods. I am also a
member of quite a few privileged
societies in the scientific
community. I've brought a list--

Wiley produces a list. Sumner holds up a hand.

SUMNER
--That will suffice, Doctor. You
are deeply involved in the field of
chemistry. So I'm sure you're
familiar with the case Dr. Kremers
made yesterday about the
naturalness of additives.

WILEY
I don't think I'd be sitting here
before you today if I didn't know
where additives came from,
Congressman.

SUMNER
Well I am glad you are, because
there is something unsettling I'd
like you to explain to the
committee. If benzoate, which is a
chemical you have deemed poisonous,
occurs naturally in everyday foods
such as the cranberry, then what
right do we have to forbid
manufacturers from using it? Are
you asking us to redefine God as
The Great Poisoner?

Sumner has invoked a fire. He leans forward in anticipation.

WILEY

Well, I would like to think that he isn't. But anyone who has ever stepped into a patch of poison ivy before knows, hell, it's actually quite possible he might be.

Laughs ripple through the crowd.

WILEY (CONT'D)

To your point, however, it's actually a misleading question. The benzoate the manufacturers use doesn't come from a cranberry. It actually comes from the urine of cattle and horses boiled in hydrochloric acid. Now, personally, I wouldn't want to redefine God as having a hand in that.

A stomach punch. Sumner tries to get off the ropes...

SUMNER

The point I'm trying to get to is that the legislation you're proposing could be a disaster of apocalyptic proportions for manufacturers. You're denying these companies from the very means of preserving their product.

WILEY

If you take the manufacturers' claims at face value, yes. But do you know that in many cases, canners add copper sulfate, a chemical that has been linked to brain damage, simply to make vegetables greener? This isn't an issue of survival. This is an abuse of the American Way.

The gallery STIRS, restless. There's blood in the water.

Amidst the sea, Monty CLAPS.

Sumner BANGS his gavel to bring the house back.

SUMNER

There will be order here!

(beat)

Now let's say there is a modicum of poison needlessly being added to our foods.

(MORE)

SUMNER (CONT'D)

We've heard story after story of leading scientists who disagree with your conclusions on what is safe to consume. There are obviously many ways to determine pure food standards for this country. So Dr. Wiley, why is it that a scientist who allowed his subject to die on his watch should be that one man?

WILEY

Well I'm not.

A smile emerges on Sumner's face.

WILEY (CONT'D)

If you can produce a man who has attempted to change the course of humanity without so much as an ounce on his conscience, I'd be happy to cede the floor.

Wiley gestures around to a beguiled house.

WILEY (CONT'D)

In my case I would expect disagreement from my peers. Because in my research, I am the only one who has gone so deep into the woods that I cannot see daylight. It's not fair to expect anyone else to see me.

Sumner moves to interject, but Wiley is already closing the door.

WILEY (CONT'D)

But Congressman Sumner, I think what has been lost in this hearing, and what your constituents back in Georgia have a particular interest in, is the hidden implication at the bottom of this debate. In this country, our freedom is an accepted fact. But you and your colleagues will decide what we are entitled to with that freedom. Our entitlements are not stamped on our Constitution. We carve them out from sheer will; from the inherent knowledge that they need to exist. So you may see me as one man.

(MORE)

WILEY (CONT'D)
But I am also the unrelenting
servant that has willed us to this
moment. And that's why I am certain
I will see you at the next one.

At this flourish, Wiley rises from his chair, turns and walks
through the gallery.

Sumner slumps, his fight gone.

The crowd APPLAUDS as Wiley passes. Monty jumps into the
aisle and wraps his arms around him, tears in his eyes.

Wiley continues through and out the back door.

FADE TO:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Roosevelt puffs from a cigar.

ROOSEVELT
Pardon my phrasing but I do believe
I can taste it now.

At a table nearby, Foster and a number of CONGRESSMEN labor
over a draft of a bill titled 'THE FEDERAL FOOD & DRUG
ACT/WILEY ACT'. The tedious process of bill writing.

FOSTER
So we are in agreement on Wiley
heading the oversight agency to
uphold the new food regulations.
Now we move to the matter of
additives we have classified as
inconclusive.

CONGRESSMAN #1
We have to consider the
manufacturers here. We have letters
from over 200 companies that depend
on them.

ROOSEVELT
These are all chemicals without
definitive proof of harm?

CONGRESSMAN #2
Potassium nitrate, sulfites,
saccharin...

ROOSEVELT

We can't cripple manufacturers over chemicals for which we don't have scientific certainty--

FOSTER

The Federal Food & Drug Act is a starting point. We can set reasonable limits to ease practices in the right direction.

WILEY

First of all--

Wiley stands from his seat on the far side of the room.

WILEY (CONT'D)

--it's The Wiley Act. Secondly, your scientific certainty has been proven, by a man also named Wiley.

He paces the room and lands alongside Foster.

WILEY (CONT'D)

Thirdly, I don't care to hear the words "starting point" again. This is a finish line, a culmination of decades of tireless effort. If you'd like to do things reasonably, I suggest you stand aside.

Foster stammers, taken aback.

FOSTER

Dr. Wiley, surely you--

Roosevelt steps in, eyes on Wiley.

ROOSEVELT

I suggest you leave the politics to the politicians, Doctor.

WILEY

And where would those politics be without me, Mr. President? One could wager you'd still be feeding poisoned meat to your soldiers. This is my law.

Roosevelt seethes, spittle sniping through his teeth with each sharp breath.

ROOSEVELT

It's not a law until I sign it.

The room is still. He's burnt through his last allies...

INT. HOUSE OFFICE - CAPITOL BUILDING - NIGHT

A vacuous space, and in the dead of night, it's hollow. Desolate.

Far in the back, hunched against the wall, we find Wiley.

Unmoving. Beset. Uneasy.

We're back underwater.

Pooling water thrusting, stressed CREAKING exploring limits...

And then the first sounds of CRACKING under pressure. Violent splitting that gives way to a RUSH of water.

The door beside him opens, jarring us from the deluge.

Wiley tilts to the YOUNG PAGE framed in the doorway. Waiting.

PAGE
It passed. 143 to 72.

We expect a response, but instead Wiley remains in the darkness. Still waiting.

PAGE (CONT'D)
The "Federal Food & Drug Act".

The door closes.

We TRACK IN on Wiley, alone again. Staring ahead stone-faced.

Then he drops his head.

And one by one, tears fall to the floor.

Like drops of rain.

The door slits open again, spilling a sliver of light back onto him.

In the backlit opening, it's Georgia.

She takes in his slumped frame, rethinks, and quietly steps back out of the room, closing the door.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Georgia stands on the other side of the door a moment, then puts away her pen and note pad.

GEORGIA

I don't think he's ready for a statement yet.

(glance at watch)

I've got another hour before we go to press.

MONTY

You're reporting the biggest news in the country. So how are you going to open it?

GEORGIA

I was thinking, "Superhumans saved our food today." What do you think?

MONTY

It's colorful.

She turns and playfully presses her forehead to his chest. He puts an arm around her, fingertips landing on an impressive bump.

GEORGIA

Hey, congratulations.

She kisses him, looks down at her belly.

GEORGIA (CONT'D)

He never has to know what it was like.

MONTY

I can't think of a group of words that more vindicates the enduring of hell.

She leans on his shoulder as they walk down the hallway.

GEORGIA

Are you going to let me eat in the cafeteria now that the law passed? I haven't eaten in forever.

MONTY

Don't ever lose that sense of forever.

And as Monty opens the door for Georgia at the end of the hall, we

FADE TO BLACK.

CHYRON: Between 1901 and 1906, dozens of men participated in Harvey Wiley's Poison Squad.

Their sacrifices paved the way for a monumental shift in regulating food in America.

Through their efforts, the Pure Food & Drug Act was signed into law on June 30, 1906. It created what is now known as the FDA.

After signing it into law, President Roosevelt sent pens to the men who were influential in its passing.

Harvey Wiley was not one of them.