

OVER BLACK

A blazing fire.

We don't see it. We hear it. Loud, enormous, the explosive HEAT practically engulfs us.

Wood, metal, glass CRACK and SNAP. Something BREAKS, falls through the air... CRASHES heavily on the ground.

And thousands of tiny POPS resound as the fire crackles...

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

A FAUCET SQUEAKS OPEN. Shower water sprinkles onto a tile floor.

We're in a small shower stall.

A TEEN BOY stands beneath a stream of hot water.

This is **PETER MORI** (17) - Asian, small for his age, pale, with messy hair that lands just above his boney shoulders.

Peter's narrow face is both guarded and vulnerable, childlike - just on the brink of maturing into adulthood.

He cups his hands, collects a small pool of shower water.

He rigidly washes himself with a sponge, porously scrubs every surface, rinses off the soap suds, turns the water OFF. He grabs a towel, dries himself...

And THREE LOUD KNOCKS ECHO into the bathroom.

Peter's shoulders TENSE.

PETER
Gimme a sec!

Peter hurriedly towels himself. He steps out of the shower, still damp with residue.

The small bathroom is minimal, lined uniformly with dark tiles.

Peter hurriedly pulls on underwear. He runs his fingers through his wet hair. He opens the door.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

A clinically simple room.

Stone floor, bare walls, minimal furnishings - bed, closet, lamp, floor mirror and a chair.

A petite ASIAN WOMAN in her 50's sits at the edge of the bed. No make up, grey hair neatly trimmed to a short, straight bob, crisp button-down shirt beneath a black dress. In her lap is a set of fresh clothes from Peter's closet.

This is **FELICIA MORI** - Peter's mother.

She sits with her posture rigidly straight. She carries a refined, composed air. Her penetratingly cold gaze seems to literally dictate the flow of time itself.

Peter steps out of the bathroom. Felicia stands on cue, places the chair in front of the mirror.

FELICIA
Come on, then. Sit.

Peter gingerly sits in his underwear and faces the mirror. Felicia combs her fingers through his wet hair.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Towel?

PETER
Bathroom.

Peter's voice is small and timid.

Felicia grabs the damp towel from the bathroom and returns. From behind, she dries his hair.

He watches his reflection as she turns his head this way and that to inspect it from every angle. She checks his ears, behind his neck, his jawline. She checks his nails.

She takes a tiny pouch out of her pocket. A grooming kit: tweezers, a comb, ointment, nail clippers, nail file, tiny scissors.

Using the blade from the scissors, Felicia scrapes stubborn bits of PAINT from beneath Peter's nails. She files his nails and evens out his cuticles.

She runs the comb through his hair. A lock stubbornly sticks out. She carefully clips it off with the scissors. She notices a spot on his skin. She dabs on some ointment - then concealer to cover it.

Throughout all this, Peter watches Felicia in the reflection. Her hands move with an almost surgical delicacy, like she's handling a sculpture. Their eyes meet. He quickly averts his gaze.

Felicia checks Peter from all angles - a final inspection. She glances at her watch.

FELICIA
Put these on. He'll be here soon.

Felicia hands Peter the clothes she picked out. She sits on the bed. Peter dresses.

A simple outfit, but tailored for Peter's small frame - a crisp, short sleeve collared button-up, loose-fitting khakis, both a muted dark beige. White Japanese tabi socks.

Dressed, Peter stands in front of the mirror. Felicia straightens his collar, brushes any lint off his shoulders.

The two gaze at Peter's reflection in the mirror.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
(satisfied)
Perfect.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

THE HOUSE is surrounded by an endless sea of trees. A single, narrow driveway leads to the entrance.

A concrete structure of raw cement and glass panels, the house is stunning, ALIEN in the lush, rural setting.

An OVERGROWN MEADOW filled with wild grass, a small VEGETABLE GARDEN, and a fenced CHICKEN COOP serve as a backyard.

An expensive, polished BLACK CAR approaches from the driveway. It pulls up in front of the house. The door opens.

An old male figure steps out.

This is **MARK GERSHWIN** (70's, Caucasian.) He wears a casual suit, combed back snowy hair with product to keep it in place.

You can practically smell the financially groomed sophistication he exudes, his economic and cultural capital, power.

Mark walks to the front door, rings the bell. It opens within a few seconds. Mark's eyes beam as he greets Felicia and Peter with a wide smile.

He gives Felicia a ritualistic peck on the cheek, places kindly hands on Peter's shoulders.

INT. STUDIO - DAY

A PAINTED FIGURE GAZES at us.

It's surrounded by surreal textures, vivid colours. Abstract expressionist - the painting is loud, violent with raw emotion.

The abstract figure is unidentifiable in age, gender, race. It stares out the canvas with dark, empty SOCKETS for eyes - with a haunted look of yearning.

The painting stands in a row with roughly 20 others on display. Some large, some small. Most feature abstract landscapes. But occasionally, the eerie FIGURE is included, close up or in the distance.

Immense windows take up one side of the studio from which bright, hot sunlight streams in.

Atop a work table sits a chaotic CLUTTER of dirty rags, tins of PAINT and PIGMENT, jars and bottles of various LIQUIDS:

Paint thinner, vinegar, alcohol, pigment, oil, lard, pickle juice, thick black soy sauce, mayonnaise, some kind of detergent... you name it.

Mark stands with his hands clasped behind his back. He takes his time to inspect each painting, digesting them one by one.

Peter sits on a painting stool. He picks his manicured nails, chews his bottom lip. Felicia sits regal, on a small sofa in the corner, legs crossed neatly, fingers interlaced atop her knee.

Finally, Mark straightens up. He examines the painting of the FIGURE that stares out from the canvas.

Peter glances at Felicia, whose eyes are trained on Mark.

MARK

There's more of them this time,
your... mysterious figure.

Mark turns to Peter.

MARK (CONT'D)

Last time you said you didn't know
who it is.
(beat)
Any ideas?

Peter thinks, before answering.

PETER

I don't know... still can't say. It
sort of appears once I begin
painting.

MARK

You don't plan for it.

Peter shakes his head.

PETER

The paintings - they come on their
own terms. I'm just there to move
the brush, really.

Peter lowers his gaze.

PETER (CONT'D)

I don't really think about it too
much... About why I paint what I
do.

Mark watches Peter struggle through his thoughts.

MARK

And why not? Maybe you should be
thinking about it more. It's an
interesting question you bring up,
on the subject of these
paintings... So you say you have no
control over them. But these
paintings - they don't just come up
out of the blue. They don't exist
independent of you, Peter. I think
they exist, rather, because of you.

Mark shifts his attention to another painting:

A PATH leads into the far distance. The FOREGROUND lit bright
with shimmering RED and GOLD textures. The path fades into
thick, dark absolute nothingness.

MARK (CONT'D)

And this one too? You have no idea
where it's from?

Peter blinks, frustrated as he tries to recollect - feeling like he's failing a test.

PETER

That image... It comes up sometimes, in my head. But I don't know where that is.

MARK

A memory?

Peter shakes his head.

PETER

That wouldn't make sense.

MARK

Why not?

PETER

Cause there's no path like that around here. And I've never been anywhere else.

Mark nods thoughtfully. He exchanges another knowing look with Felicia.

MARK

It seems like somewhere inside you, Peter, that place exists. You might not know where it's from, or how you came up with it - but let's keep digging... We'll figure it out.

Mark gives Peter a reassuring smile.

MARK (CONT'D)

And I think it's important to begin asking yourself, Peter, what your purpose is, as a painter... What do you think?

Thrown off guard by the question, Peter frowns deeply, flustered.

PETER

Purpose...? I - I don't know.

MARK

And what about your paintings? What's their purpose?

Peter frowns deeper in confusion. After a long silence, he can only muster a shrug, ashamed.

Mark nods.

MARK (CONT'D)
Very well.
(beat)
Thank you, Peter.

At those words, Peter unclenches his shoulders.

PETER
(quietly)
Thank you, Mark.

Mark gives Felicia a knowing glance. She lifts the corners of her mouth - just slightly. She gives Peter a stiff NOD.

It's barely perceptible, but this small show of approval is enough to fluster Peter. He lowers his gaze.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

A HEAVY WOOD TABLE that looks like it was pulled out of the middle ages. On top, a simple home-cooked Japanese meal.

Like the rest of the house, the dining room is minimally furnished. Tasteful but in a clinical kind of way.

Peter, Felicia and Mark sit here.

PETER
After breakfast I run in the yard, then I help with the garden. I feed the chickens. We have lunch, and after that I paint until --

FELICIA
Posture, Peter.

Peter straightens up. He tends to sag his shoulders inwards, as if to make himself smaller.

PETER
I paint til night. Then I have dinner. Then I shower and go to bed.

Peter speaks as though reciting lines for an exam.

MARK

You were learning to butcher your chickens last time. Remember? What happened to that?

PETER

I don't do that anymore.

MARK

Why'd you stop?

Peter hesitates, stares at his food.

FELICIA

Go on. Answer the question.

PETERJUST

I stopped cause... I couldn't do it. I don't like the way it -- the way it...

Peter blinks hard at his plate of food.

MARK

Don't like what, Peter?

PETER

The way it feels... The chicken, it fights back when I hold it down. I can feel it --

(clears throat)

I feel it suffocating. And its heartbeat, it - it just keeps beating... faster and faster.

(beat)

Once it's dead it's fine. I'd just rather not do that anymore... I'd rather just paint.

Mark watches Peter as if to examine a specimen.

MARK

But you were the one that wanted to learn to butcher, correct?

Peter shrugs.

FELICIA

That's right, Peter. You said so yourself.

MARK

And a painter needs a source for his work.

(MORE)

MARK (CONT'D)

You might want to keep trying.
Chase the discomfort. You can take
 that feeling you just described,
 use it in the studio... And what
 about those nightmares you were
 having? Do you still have them?

PETER

Sometimes.

MARK

You could probably find hints
 there, for where your paintings
 come from.

FELICIA

Tell Mark about this most recent
 dream you've been having.

PETER

Right, okay.

Peter hesitates... He looks up to Mark, who listens
 expectantly.

PETER (CONT'D)

I don't fully remember it in a
 sequence. It's more of a moment...
 But it's very vivid. In that
 moment, I feel like that's the real
 world. And maybe this one - here -
 this is just a dream.

Peter laughs nervously, embarrassed. He looks to Felicia, who
 nods encouragingly.

FELICIA

Louder, Peter.

PETER

(clears throat)

I'm behind the house... In front of
 me, where the backyard should be,
 it's just... **dark**. Nothingness,
 it's huge - it stretches on
 forever. It's calling to me. Like
 someone from the outside is
 waiting, for me... And I want to
 run, but I can't. My legs, no, my
whole body, paralyzed... And - and
 I feel this heat, inside.

(beat)

It burns.

MARK
Inside... the house?

Peter shakes his head. He lowers a hand to his abdomen.

PETER
In here. It burns. I feel it
tearing at me. I want to rip it
out. But I can't... I can't move.

Mark's brows knit together in concern.

MARK
Do you... feel pain?

PETER
No. There's no pain. I just wake up
afterwards and the feeling is gone.
(beat)
That's all I can remember.

MARK
When did these dreams start?

FELICIA
A month after your last visit. 5
months ago.

MARK
Someone from the outside, waiting
for you.

Mark exchanges a thoughtful glance with Felicia.

MARK (CONT'D)
You've lost weight, Peter. You're
looking a little pale. Is this
dream affecting your sleep?

PETER
No.

MARK
How much sleep do you get each
night?

PETER
Eight hours.

MARK
And you're eating?

PETER
Uh huh.

Mark glances at Felicia.

FELICIA

Yes, he's eating like normal. He's lost weight since the last visit, but his BMI's still in the normal range.

MARK

And your focus? Stress levels...?

PETER

They're fine.

Mark gazes at Peter carefully.

MARK

Well, the most important thing is that you keep painting.

Peter nods. He stares at his food quietly.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Inside, the house is mostly an open floor plan with spacious areas made up of empty raw concrete walls, stone floors and immense windows.

On the other side of the glass windows, the unkempt backyard bursts with an UNCONTROLLED WILDERNESS.

The living room is furnished with Japanese minimalist design - a vase of carefully arranged flowers, plants, a low hanging lantern, a low table and seat cushions.

There are no family photos, books, art or any other distinguishable decor.

A huge METAL DOOR LOOMS in the center of one of the walls.

Peter sits alone on a seat cushion adjacent to the dining area. He faces a sunken hearth - a traditional Japanese open stove. He holds his hands against the warmth of a few embers in the center.

He glances towards the shut metal door. Shadows move in the light that leaks from a crack beneath.

The door opens. Mark and Felicia step out. Mark takes a seat across from Peter. Felicia leaves the room.

MARK

I want you to know, Peter, I'm very, very impressed this time around.

Mark gazes at Peter kindly across the hearth.

MARK (CONT'D)

Your work... It's matured so much. Just these past 6 months alone... After all these years that I've watched you grow, since you were born -- your gift, it's become so defined.

Felicia returns with a tray of tea. She takes a seat, places the tray on the floor.

MARK (CONT'D)

And now we're getting somewhere critical.

Mark chooses his words carefully. Peter listens earnestly.

MARK (CONT'D)

You turn eighteen the next time I see you. I think you've known for a while now - this age will be a significant turning point for you... For us.

Peter nods, unsure.

MARK (CONT'D)

When you're eighteen, your mother and I will introduce you to the outside.

At these words, a chill goes down Peter's spine. He wears a stoic expression, digesting every word.

MARK (CONT'D)

But whether you'll be ready or not is entirely dependent on you, Peter. It's vital that you focus on developing your paintings. Your paintings tell us who you are.

(beat)

And you need to dig deeper. We need to see more progress. Do you understand?

PETER
(gravely)
Yes.

Mark keeps his eyes trained on Peter's.

PETER (CONT'D)
(hesitant)
But... will it be safe?

MARK
You mean the outside?

PETER
Yes. Won't it be dangerous?

Mark turns to look at Felicia, who has kept her gaze fixed on Peter throughout the conversation.

MARK
There's still so much you don't
know about the outside world,
Peter. A lot has changed since it
ended.

PETER
So it's safe to leave now?

Mark shakes his head.

MARK
No. Not for you.
(beat)
You're in a special position.

Peter clears his throat. He tries to hide his confusion.

PETER
Right, I've heard that before. I
just never really understood what
it means.

Mark senses his frustration. He exchanges another glance with Felicia. He gives her a small nod.

MARK
You've been safe here. But out
there, it's different. A person
your age, with your talent is
especially vulnerable.

PETER
Vulnerable... to what?

MARK
The sickness out there.

Peter clenches his jaw. He's heard this all before. He has no rebuke.

MARK (CONT'D)
I'm curious. That dream you had about the fires... Your mother's never told you about the fires, has she?

Peter shakes his head.

PETER
What fires? From when?

He turns to Felicia for answers.

FELICIA
Around the time you were born, back when we lived on the outside. I've never told you, no.

MARK
Your mother and I figure you should know these things as you get older. She'll tell you about the fires in due time.

Mark stands. He prepares to leave.

PETER
Wait, what fires? Was this before everything ended?

MARK
Your mother will tell you. It's her job to keep you safe. Listen to her.
(beat)
I'll see you in six month's time.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DUSK

The sky grows dark. Sounds of INSECTS CHIRPING fill the air.

Mark steps into his car and shuts the door.

Felicia and Peter stand at the house's entrance. They watch him drive off.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Peter has changed into a set of pajamas. He sits at the foot of the bed and brushes his teeth. Seemingly alone --

except FELICIA watches him from the doorway.

FELICIA

Interesting question Mark brings up, don't you think? On the purpose of your paintings.

Peter finishes brushing his teeth. He steps into his bathroom to spit out the contents of his mouth.

PETER

I guess.

FELICIA

Do you know what catharsis means?

Peter shakes his head.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Guess I've never taught you. It's what's most commonly known as the purpose for art. Catharsis.

PETER

But what is it?

FELICIA

It's... a kind of release. Of emotion. Suppressed urges, desires, dreams. And art is the trigger to unleash it.

Felicia speaks dryly, sterile and without emotion.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

But that's just one way of looking at it. I think it's up to the artist.

(beat)

Get some rest. He expects a lot from you these coming months.

Peter gets under the covers.

Felicia flips the light switch OFF. The room goes dark.

Peter waits for Felicia to leave. Her silhouette remains in the doorway.

Til finally, she turns and shuts the door.

MOONLIGHT from the window illuminates Peter's face. He stares at the ceiling, listens to Felicia's FOOTSTEPS trail off.

Alone at last, he inhales - lets out a looong sigh.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

The moon is higher up in the sky - an hour or so has passed.

The house is DEATHLY QUIET. Peter slowly sits up from his bed. He gently lifts his covers and steps out of bed.

Careful not to make a sound, he slips a jacket out of his closet.

Peter tiptoes to his door, quietly opens it. He sneaks out.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - NIGHT

Jacket on, Peter opens a backdoor.

The faint sounds of INSECTS ring through the backyard.

Peter steps into the backyard. He expertly cuts across the wild meadow - towards a grove of trees on the other side, and into the forest.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Immense pine trees stretch for miles throughout the dense forest. They create a cool, dark world shadowed beneath sky.

Peter hurries forward through the trees with quick, knowing steps.

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

The forest opens to an immense LAKE. It stretches, vast, out into the dark.

A giant FALLEN OAK lies on the shore. Its trunk creates a small cave-like opening beneath it.

Peter emerges from the forest. He heads to the fallen oak. Here, he takes off his jacket, lays it on the ground and sits.

Totally alone in the wild, Peter shuts his eyes. He takes in large breaths of the fresh air. He lifts his face, opens his eyes. He gazes at the stars.

A distant HUM resounds from above. Tiny, blinking red and green LIGHTS cross the night sky - a plane.

Peter watches it fly away, his eyes stretched wide open - following it til it disappears.

He's alone again. He's surrounded only by the CHIRP of crickets. He gazes at the lake.

He edges near the lake. He dips his hands into the cool water.

SPLASH!

PETER JUMPS. He turns to the sound.

There's nothing... Just dark.

Then, a FOOTSTEP. In the leaves - closer.

Peter's eyes stretch wide, terrified. He instinctively stands and steps back.

SOMEONE emerges.

A TEENAGER - about Peter's age.

Gender-neutral. Skinny, a few inches taller than Peter. They wear an oversized hoodie, black jeans and leather boots. They have wild, curly hair that ends just below their ears, and falls over their large, searching eyes.

They watch Peter carefully. Their eyes appear glassy in the dark.

Peter gazes back at this person. Utterly frozen in fear.

TEEN PERSON
(softly)
Am I intruding?

The Teen Person's VOICE is gentle - almost a whisper. Neither masc nor femme. ASMR-like, it cuts crisp through the night.

They take another step towards Peter, who remains absolutely petrified.

TEEN PERSON (CONT'D)
What's your name?

The Teen Person take another step.

Startled, Peter stumbles back.

TEEN PERSON (CONT'D)
Do I frighten you?

The person steps closer to Peter.

TEEN PERSON (CONT'D)
Look... It's okay.

The spell is broken.

Peter JERKS away from the Teen. He turns. He RUNS!

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Peter DASHES BLINDLY through the trees. In total flight mode.

Peter trips! He yells in fear, scrambles up. He turns - no one's behind him. He keeps running.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The house remains dark and still. The backdoor opens soundlessly.

Peter steps in. Careful not to make a sound, he shuts the door behind him.

He heads back to his room with soft steps.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Peter shuts his door silently. He COLLAPSES against it, slides down to the floor. He shuts his eyes...

The ADRENALINE fades.

Peter catches his breath. He opens his eyes, gazes out the window across the room.

Outside, the backyard is empty and dark, lit only by the moon.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

SUNLIGHT streams into the room. Peter lies wide awake in bed.

Outside FOOTSTEPS and sounds of movement leak into the room.

Peter sits up. He throws his covers off of himself and steps out of bed.

He looks down at his feet. They're dirty. His pajama bottoms are stained with DIRT and GRASS from running in the forest.

Peter quickly brushes the evidence off his feet, off his sheets.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Chopsticks, a bowl of rice, a square omelette, pickled vegetables, miso soup. Japanese breakfast.

Peter sits at the table. He's dressed in the same minimal attire as the day before. Dark circles ring his eyes - he didn't get much sleep.

Felicia pours Peter a cup of tea. She cradles a cup of her own as she watches him. He stares blankly at the breakfast.

FELICIA

What's wrong? Eat.

Peter blinks out of his daze.

He eats quietly. Felicia watches him over her tea. She wears the same attire - crisp button up beneath a dress - her short straight hair combed neatly. This is her daily uniform.

Peter pauses from eating. He looks up at Felicia.

PETER

I have a question, mom.

Felicia halts. There is the slightest TREMOR in her teacup.

FELICIA

Yes?

PETER

Outside - what happens to young people? Like me?

Felicia frowns. She thinks this over - like she's trying to decipher the question.

FELICIA

But there are no young people like you in the outside world.

PETER

What? None at all?

FELICIA

Well, no - they exist.

Felicia shakes her head, as if to correct herself.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

They're there, far from here. But there's none like you. None with your gift... It's not safe out there for a boy like you.

PETER

But - there are young people, right? What about them? Are they safe out there?

Felicia reaches forward. She abruptly lifts Peter's chin and examines his face.

FELICIA

You're having nightmares again.

Peter stares back at her searching face. He shakes his head.

PETER

(quietly)

... no, mom.

Felicia notes the bags under his eyes.

FELICIA

I'm worried you're not getting enough rest. You'll need to put some oil on your skin before you sleep.

Felicia releases him. She sits down calmly and again, gazes at him from above her tea.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

There's a sickness out there. It's pungent with it... The world is full of hatred and corruption. It's too much for a young person. Even if they survive it, they're damaged beyond repair.

(beat)

You're very lucky to be here, Peter. To be safe.

She stands and tidies her dishes.

PETER

And my paintings? Will they be safe?

FELICIA

You'll have to ask Mark these questions next time he comes. He'll have all the answers for you then.

With her dishes on a tray, Felicia straightens up.

PETER

And the fires? He said you'd tell me about the fires.

Felicia pauses.

FELICIA

Later. It's time for your photo. Hurry and finish your food. The sun is moving.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Peter steps onto a scale. Felicia quickly jots down his weight into a notebook.

Peter steps off the scale, fastens the strap of a digital blood pressure monitor around his upper arm. Felicia notes the reading and jots it down. He removes the monitor.

He takes a seat before a large-format HASSELBLAD CAMERA: a monstrous black box with a single, unblinking EYE aimed right at him.

Sunlight from the window comes in on a slant, hits Peter from above.

Felicia stands behind the camera. She disappears beneath the focusing cloth. Her hand presses against the shutter.

Peter gazes at the silhouette of her head underneath the cloth.

FELICIA (O.C.)

Alright, one... two... three --

Felicia squeezes the shutter. CLICK.

A pause. Felicia unveils herself from the cloth. She looks up to give Peter a nod. At the signal, he gets up off the chair.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - DAY

Dirty brown canvas shoes THUD against the dirt.

Peter runs laps around the edges of the meadow. The wild grass grows tall - up to his neck.

He nears the house. He passes the vegetable garden, the chicken coop.

Felicia steps out of the coop. She holds a LIVE CHICKEN under her arm.

Peter runs another lap. Sweat drips down the sides of his face.

He passes Felicia again. She holds the chicken down by its neck on a bench.

It STRUGGLES against her hand. She takes a knife... SLITS its throat.

Blood gushes out. The chicken struggles. It opens its beak pathetically. There's no airflow. It screams in silence.

Peter eyes the chicken. He can't look away. Blood bubbles in its throat.

Peter stumbles, breaking his gaze. He picks himself up, eyes back on the path. He keeps running.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - LATER

The plucked chicken hangs headless. A metal bucket below collects its blood. A light metallic CLINK resounds with each drop.

Peter crouches in the vegetable garden. He uses shears to cut ripe vegetables at the stem - cucumber, tomatoes, eggplants. He digs out carrots and potatoes with a shovel. He tosses the vegetables in a bucket.

Peter straightens out. He wipes his brow, grabs the bucket, takes it inside.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Peter sets the bucket of vegetables down by the hearth. Another bucket filled with water awaits nearby.

He hears FOOTSTEPS and looks up. Across the room, Felicia leads two MEN IN JUMPSUITS through the metal door.

Peter takes the vegetables, soaks them in the bucket full of water. He cleans the dirt off their surface.

He watches as Felicia steps out of the door. The men follow. They carry heavy RECTANGULAR OBJECTS, carefully wrapped in layers of cloth and bubblewrap - his paintings.

FELICIA
Careful. Watch those corners.

The men nod wordlessly in response.

One by one, they take the paintings out the front door.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

The two men load the paintings into a van.

Once loaded, Felicia reaches up and checks their sturdiness to make sure they're secure. She nods with approval, and steps back into the doorway.

The men shut the van. They nod goodbye. They get into their seats and drive off.

INT. STUDIO - DAY

The studio is now cavernous and empty. The paintings have left behind a void.

In the center of the empty space is Peter's painting stool and an easel.

Changed into a large t-shirt and jeans, both splattered with old paint, Peter stretches a fresh canvas - a huge one.

When finished, the canvas TOWERS above him and stretches several paces wide.

Peter moves the easel out of the way and leans the canvas against the wall. He gazes at the large, blank EMPTINESS that seems to swallow him.

He turns to his work table. He picks up some white paint. He takes a large brush and covers the entire canvas with strokes.

Once it's wet with white, Peter adds strokes of colour at varying consistencies - at times SPLASHING the paint on, at times SMEARING it.

Peter steps back to see his progress: from the collage of colours emerges the outline of a dark LAKE. It surrounds a blank spot In the center.

The blank white spot gapes back at him. Peter stares at it thoughtfully, indecisive... when he senses it --

Someone watches him from behind.

Peter TURNS. He looks directly at us.

But no one's there - only the wall of his empty studio. A CRACK runs through the raw concrete.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Peter sits at the foot of his bed in his pajamas. He brushes his teeth.

Felicia watches him from the doorway.

FELICIA
Don't forget your jojoba oil.

Peter stands, steps in to the bathroom. He spits out his toothpaste.

Peter rubs some oil onto his face haphazardly. Felicia walks in, LIFTS Peter's face and roughly rubs it into his skin. Peter squeezes his eyes shut, uncomfortable.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Mark's right... You've lost weight.
Try to get better sleep.

Peter turns away from Felicia and quickly gets into bed.

Felicia switches off the room's lights. She shuts the door.

In the dark, Peter opens his eyes.

Felicia's FOOTSTEPS recede, replaced by the thick quiet night. Outside, WIND blows through the grass and trees.

From his pillow, Peter shifts his head to glance out the large window.

Dark masses of trees and grass sway to and fro. Like an immense machine of sentient flora.

They BECKON to him.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - LATER

THICK SILENCE falls on the house. Still, then - the backdoor opens, soundlessly.

Peter's figure slips out. He crosses the yard toward the trees.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Peter walks through the tall pines with cautious steps. He keeps his eyes trained ahead - alert to any movement.

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

Peter slows his steps as he emerges out of the trees. Quietly, he approaches his spot on the shore - the fallen oak.

It's as he last left it, but empty. He finds his jacket on the ground.

The WIND picks up. He shivers in the cold.

Peter hurries to the jacket, reaches down to pick it up --

TEEN PERSON (O.S.)
You're back.

That soft VOICE. It slits through the air like a knife.

Peter starts. The Teen sits in the dark nook of the oak.

Peter freezes. The Teen watches him with sharp eyes that GLEAM in the dark. They gesture to his jacket with their chin.

TEEN PERSON (CONT'D)
You cold?

It takes a few seconds for Peter to unfreeze. He nods, and without taking his gaze off the Teen, throws his jacket over his shoulders.

The Teen has an even, calm way of speaking. Every word is pronounced slowly with care. Their voice is soft, but neither deep nor high, loud nor quiet.

TEEN PERSON (CONT'D)
What's your name?

Peter wets his lips. His throat feels dry.

PETER

Peter.

TEEN PERSON

I'm El.

PETER

(repeats in a whisper)

...El?

EL

Sorry I frighten you.

The Teen smiles warmly. Peter shakes his head.

PETER

Frighten? No, it's just... I've never met anyone from the outside before.

El tilts their head.

EL

The outside?

Peter nods. El gently shows Peter their empty hands. They shine pale in the dark of the oak.

EL (CONT'D)

Well, Peter, I won't hurt you. I promise.

Peter watches El cautiously. They pick up a stick and poke at some dry leaves.

After a few seconds, he gathers the courage to ask --

PETER

Where do you come from?

El points to the other side of the lake.

EL

Not far from here.

Peter stares out into the dark.

EL (CONT'D)

If you run through the forest far enough, there's a road that takes you to the other side of the mountains.

(beat)

(MORE)

EL (CONT'D)
 You run in any direction far enough, you can get anywhere. Whether you end up exactly where you want is another question.

PETER
 You ran here, all the way from home?

EL
 No.

El shakes their head.

EL (CONT'D)
 Don't have a home.

El fishes into their pocket. They pull out an old, metal **LIGHTER**. They flick it open. A tiny FLAME burns bright.

El picks up a dry leaf, holds it to the flame. They watch it burn. They toss it into the lake. The warm flame goes out with a HISS.

PETER
 So did you? End up exactly where you want?

El turns their gaze to him.

EL
 Don't think so.

They flick their lighter on again as they study him - the GLOW illuminates their face in the dark.

EL (CONT'D)
 There's something off about you, you know.

PETER
 Huh, about me?

EL
 Uh huh. Like maybe there's something... missing.

El grins.

EL (CONT'D)
 Not in a bad way.
 (beat)
 You live alone?

PETER
I live with my mother.

EL
No one else?

PETER
(shakes head)
No.

EL
Just you two, all the way out here,
middle of nowhere. What does she
do? Your mother.

PETER
She looks after me... and the
house.

EL
Huh.

El's lighter goes OUT. Peter blinks in the sudden dark.

EL (CONT'D)
Must get pretty lonely.

PETER
I - I'm not supposed to talk to
outsiders.

El flicks their lighter on again. They pick up another leaf,
burn it.

EL
But here you are, talking to me.

They pick up another leaf - light it with the first - and
toss the first leaf into the lake. Another HISS as it
contacts the water.

Peter watches El avidly - afraid they would disappear if he
looks away.

El's eyes reflect pinpricks of golden light from the burning
leaf.

EL (CONT'D)
You've never left before, have you?
(beat)
How come you've never left, Peter?

A low HUM echoes down from the sky. A PLANE passes - and
disappears behind some clouds.

The WIND picks up. It blows the lit leaf out of El's hand into the lake. Darkness falls again.

As if being pulled back into reality, Peter stumbles backwards.

PETER
I shouldn't be here - I need to get back home.

EL
Did I say something wrong?

PETER
No I - I don't want her to find me gone.

Before El can respond, Peter turns. He hurries back towards the forest.

EL
Wait...!

But Peter hurries onwards. He runs into the forest.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The dark and silent house. Peter returns. He opens the backdoor and steps in. He cautiously crosses the living room, when --

A door CLICKS shut.

Peter FREEZES. He turns to the sound...

The METAL DOOR, closed, unmoving.

It looms in the dark. Auster, it seems to stares back at him.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

SUNLIGHT pours in through the windows.

Peter stands on the scale. Felicia takes down his weight.

He straps on the blood pressure monitor. He waits as Felicia takes his blood pressure reading.

Then he sits before the Hasselblad. Felicia steps behind the camera and lifts the focusing cloth to disappear beneath it.

FELICIA
One... two... three --

CLICK.

A pause.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
One more, ready? One... two...
three --

CLICK.

Felicia emerges from the cloth. She frowns deeply as she checks on Peter.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Look here.

Felicia holds a hand up. Peter faces it. She disappears beneath the cloth.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
One... two... three --

CLICK.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Ugh!

Felicia SIGHS in frustration. She emerges from the cloth and glares at the camera.

Peter drops his gaze, ashamed though not quite sure why.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - DAY

Sunlight floods the meadow. Dark STORM CLOUDS approach in the far distance.

Peter runs laps around the yard. He passes by the house ... the chicken coop... the vegetable garden... Felicia, working in the garden... the forest.

The scenery passes by as a blur in his vision's periphery. THUNDER rolls in the distance.

Peter keeps running. He pants, focuses his eyes forward.

Again, he passes the house... the chicken coop... the vegetable garden... Felicia... and --

a FIGURE in the forest.

Peter stops. He looks back at the forest, startled.

Where the figure was is only darkness between the trees.
THUNDER rolls again.

FELICIA (O.S.)

Peter - !

Peter squints at the forest - wondering if he was seeing things.

FELICIA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Peter!!

PETER

Coming!

Peter turns away from the forest. He cuts through the tall grass of the meadow towards Felicia's voice.

He finds her in the vegetable garden. She's stooped over a patch of UPTURNED DIRT. She wears thick rubber gardening boots and gloves.

FELICIA

Look at this.

Felicia points to the messily dug up fresh earth. Carrots and potatoes have been roughly pulled off at their roots.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Whatever it was, they got to the fruit, too. Two melons that were here, almost ripe - gone!

With her gloved hands, Felicia studies the ripped roots, their trampled leaves.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Looks like some kind of... animal did it. See? They dug around here, but --

She points to the area around the dug up earth.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Animals leave behind scraps, footprints or something. But there's no trace... Strange...

Felicia looks up to him.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 Do you have any idea, Peter? It
 wasn't you, right?

Peter shakes his head in alarm.

PETER
 What? No!

Felicia straightens out. She gazes hard at Peter. She takes a step closer.

FELICIA
 Don't lie to me. You sure it wasn't
 you?

Peter instinctively leans away from her intense gaze.

PETER
 It wasn't me.

Felicia keeps her gaze fixed on him.

PETER (CONT'D)
 Mom, why would I do that...? Where
 would I put them?

Felicia watches him carefully, then looks away. She steps back, puts her hands on her hips. She inspects the garden.

FELICIA
 Well, maybe I ought to lay a
 trap...

Felicia turns back to Peter. His face is flushed from running. Her expression softens. She reaches forward to gently brush some hair out of his face.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 Go on with your run then.

Peter turns away from Felicia. RAIN DROPS begin to fall as he walks away. He picks up his pace.

It begins to POUR.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

RAIN falls in torrents outside the windows.

Peter glances out at the dark as he eats with Felicia. He picks at his food without taking a bite, distracted. Chicken.

FELICIA
Peter.

PETER
Hm?

FELICIA
Eat your food.

Peter half-heartedly picks at his food, chews discontentedly.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Are you getting enough sleep?

PETER
Uh huh.

FELICIA
You need to speak up. I can't hear
you half the time.
(beat)
If you're having trouble painting --

PETER
What? I'm not --

FELICIA
Don't interrupt me.
(beat)
We need to make sure you're getting
enough rest. You've been distracted
lately. I don't think you're taking
things seriously.

Silenced, Peter eats sullenly.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
You know how crucial these last
months are. You haven't even given
any thought to what Mark said, have
you...? On the purpose of your
painting?

Peter shrugs dismissively.

PETER
I paint cause it's what I do. I
don't know what else to say.

FELICIA
Well try harder.

Without appetite, Peter shoves food into his mouth.

PETER
What'll happen to them after I'm
eighteen?

FELICIA
Hm?

PETER
My paintings. What'll happen to
them?

FELICIA
What do you mean? They'll go in
Mark's collection.

PETER
But why? What's he collecting them
for?

Felicia gazes back at Peter coldly.

FELICIA
Fix your posture.

Peter straightens his posture.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
You'll see your paintings again
when you're eighteen.

PETER
(quietly)
But that doesn't answer the
question.

FELICIA
What? Speak up.

Peter keeps his eyes lowered, growing frustrated.

PETER
I mean, what're the paintings for?
What does Mark want them for?

FELICIA
They're for his collection.

PETER
(mumbles)
That's not what I meant.

FELICIA
Speak up, Peter --

PETER
 (screams)
 I SAID THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!

Felicia **SLAPS** Peter.

Peter stares away, unmoving. His eyes on the brink of watering.

Felicia takes her seat. She continues eating. Peter remains still. Then --

FELICIA
 Eat your dinner.

Peter inhales, lets out a shaky breath. Takes another. He turns back to his food. He eats.

The CLINKS of their cutlery punctuate the seamless PATTER of rain. Peter chews his food, robotic.

Felicia finishes her meal. She puts her hands together. She clears her throat and looks up at Peter.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 I appreciate the difficulty of your position, Peter... I know it isn't easy.

Peter doesn't meet her gaze. He stares hard at the tabletop.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 I can't answer those questions for you. You'll need to think of them yourself.
 (beat)
 Look up when I speak to you.

Peter shifts his gaze up. He glowers at Felicia.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 But it's good you're asking questions. Thinking for yourself... That's the only way you'll survive on the outside, without being... corrupted.
 (beat)
 You'll be an adult soon. You'll see what I mean then.

Felicia gathers her plates and stands.

PETER
 ... And the fires?

FELICIA

Huh?

PETER

The fires from outside... You're supposed to tell me about them.

Felicia stands still, caught off guard. She sits.

FELICIA

Alright.

(beat)

I guess now's a good time.

Felicia thinks for a bit. She gathers her words.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

I've considered for some time now, how to best inform you of... my history. Our history. I've wondered if it's necessary for you to know. If there could be another approach... But Mark advised that it'd be best just to tell you, directly.

Felicia laces her fingers together atop the table. When she speaks, every sentence is spoken with deliberate care.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

The end of the outside world didn't happen at once. It was gradual... It began when I was pregnant with you. The first major event was an earthquake back in my home country.

Felicia speaks without emotion, matter-of-factly. She keeps a steady, unwavering gaze on Peter.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

My family lived in an old wooden house. It was all they had, everything they owned. The earthquake started a fire. They perished within the house. When their remains were found, there was nothing left. They were charred bones.

(beat)

That was the first fire. I was far away, here. I couldn't return. I was pregnant. My visa was expired, and my first priority was protecting you.

Peter sits still. He's forgotten his anger. He listens avidly.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

And then you were born. And I was happy. But - I was also cursed. The fires, I felt that they followed me. Like we were the source of their fuel... The whole world was falling apart. It was a downward spiral. A fire in my neighbourhood blew through the entire town - burned it down like we were nothing. Civilization... it was only a matter of days before we were reduced to embers.

(beat)

I just barely got away with you. I saw many casualties. I saw neighbours and friends walk up the street in flames. As they burned, they turned, and they looked at me, with... blank, empty faces. Like they'd run out of fear. I watched the fire eat their hair, their skin. They left blood on the pavement. Some people laughed, some cried, and I - I ran.

Felicia's gaze wavers. She blinks, looks away. She steadies her gaze again.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

And I lost everything. Mark came and found us. You were unscathed. I was treated at a hospital. Then he moved us here, where we're safe, far from... Far from all of that.

Peter sits in utter stillness. He doesn't dare to move.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

So those were the two fires that marked the weeks before and after you were born.

(beat)

Mark wants you to be prepared. He wants you to know.

(beat)

Outside, we are all so fragile.

Felicia unlaces her fingers. She gives him a tight smile, as if to punctuate the conversation.

Felicia picks up her plates and stands.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Finish your food.

Peter opens his mouth. It takes him a while to find his voice.

PETER
(weakly)
... Okay.

Peter watches Felicia turn to leave.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Peter sits at the edge of his bed. He stares out his window with a steely gaze as he brushes his teeth. Flecks of LIGHT reflect off fat rain drops on the glass.

Felicia watches him from his doorway.

Peter finishes brushing, spits out his toothpaste in the bathroom, gets under his bed covers.

Felicia switches his lights OFF. She turns, shuts the door behind her.

Peter stares out at the dark.

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

Light rain DRUMS over the lake's surface, on the shore sand, on fallen leaves, and on the bark of the fallen oak.

In the dark nook, a LIGHTER ignites. The warm flame softly lights El's hands and face.

El leans forward. They hold the lighter up - to reveal Peter. He sits a few feet away. He shrinks away from the light.

El laughs softly.

EL
Still so frightened. There's no need.

El's voice is reassuringly slow, gentle as usual.

Peter looks at their hands. They're dirty. Earth cakes their nails and creases.

El pulls their jacket - Peter's - tighter around their shoulders.

EL (CONT'D)
Thanks for lending me this.

Peter shrugs.

PETER
I figured you'd be cold.

EL
Kind of you.

Peter doesn't know how to take this comment. He looks away from El's gaze, embarrassed.

EL (CONT'D)
Is that so strange to say? That you're kind.

PETER
I've never thought about it.
(beat)
I don't know what it means to be kind. I just want to be good.

EL
Huh. Good... at what?

PETER
Just - a good person.
(beat)
A good son.

El scoffs friendlily.

EL
How do you tell if you're good or not?

Peter struggles to find an answer.

EL (CONT'D)
A "good person." I don't believe in such a thing.

PETER
You don't?

El shakes their head. Peter takes this in.

PETER (CONT'D)
 But what about for others?
 (beat)
 What about for your mother?

El shrugs.

EL
 Dunno. My mother barely notices me.
 (beat)
 Listen, it's overwhelmingly
 difficult enough just to be. Do we
 need to add a whole other layer of
 scrutiny?

Finding that he doesn't disagree, Peter nods slowly.

PETER
 And how do you tell what's right or
 wrong?

EL
 I don't.

El cups their hands together, reaches their hands forward until they're under the rain. Droplets pool into their hands, and wash off the smears of dirt.

PETER
 Must be nice.

El turns to Peter. They grin.

EL
 Hell yeah. That it is.

El pours the rain out onto the ground. They rub their hands clean.

EL (CONT'D)
 I need to get moving soon.

Peter's face falls.

PETER
 Oh.

EL
 Can't stay here forever, as much as
 I'd like to.

PETER
 Where would you go?

EL
 Elsewhere. Through the forest. Far
 from here.

PETER
Outside.

EL
 Uh huh.

El lights their lighter, and holds their hand over it as if
 to dry it.

EL (CONT'D)
 I'll stay another night tomorrow,
 leave the next day.

Peter gazes at the dark. His eyes glow in the dim light.

PETER
 God, I wonder what it's like,
 outside.

EL
 There's a way to find out.

Peter looks up to find El watching him. They share a glance.
 Realizing what El is implying, Peter instinctively looks
 away.

EL (CONT'D)
 You've never thought about it...?
 About leaving here?

It stops raining.

PETER
 I need to get back home.

EL
 Right. Before your mother finds you
 missing.

Peter stands.

Before Peter steps away, he turns to face El. He says
 assuredly --

PETER
 I'm a painter.
 (beat)
 I can leave this place when I
 finish my paintings.

El looks up.

EL
Who decides when you're finished
painting, Peter?

Peter falters at this question.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Peter chews his breakfast absentmindedly as he watches Felicia from across the table. She looks up, meets his gaze.

Felicia's expression grows concerned. Her lips move as she says something, but Peter doesn't hear.

Wrinkles form as she frowns at him. She continues to speak --

FELICIA
(fades in)
-- you listening?

PETER
(nods)
Huh? Yeah.

FELICIA
You're letting the pressure get to
you. You can't keep producing work
if you're unwell.

PETER
Uh huh. I'll go to bed earlier
today.

Felicia watches Peter eat quietly.

FELICIA
When you're stressed, it shows.
Your work is an extension of
yourself. While I understand the
need to be in control, too much
will ruin the work.

Peter frowns deeply in frustration.

PETER
I know that.

FELICIA
Don't you think that you should --

PETER
(frustrated)
It's not like you're helping.

Felicia clenches her mouth shut.

Peter glances at the BURN MARK peaking out of Felicia's wrist. He instinctively averts his gaze, suddenly filled with shame.

INT. STUDIO - DAY

An IMMENSE COLLAGE of textures fill Peter's canvas.

The lake is now a luminescent pool of gold, red, yellow and green, formed by thick layers of paint and oils.

In the center of the frame, the BLANK SPOT remains on the lake's shore.

Peter sits before the canvas. He smears white paint on his fingers. He leans forward. In the center, he paints the outline of a shadowy grey FIGURE.

Peter steps away from the canvas. He takes a paintbrush, adds some detail to the figure. He sighs, unsatisfied. He rubs the figure away with a cloth, tosses the cloth on the ground.

And he senses it again.

Someone watches him from behind.

Peter turns! He looks directly at us.

But no one's there. Peter frowns. He HEARS something. An unfamiliar, light SOUND, rhythmic, repetitive.

Sounds like something SCRAPING. Again... Then again.

Peter tilts his head. He stands up off his painting stool. He follows the sound out his door.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The SCRAPES grows louder as Peter walks into the kitchen.

Felicia stands with her back to the doorway. She's doing something at the sink. She uses her hands to roughly rub something back and forth.

Peter approaches Felicia cautiously. She doesn't seem to notice him. He gets closer - and glances into the sink.

Felicia holds a large KNIFE. She holds down a large TROUT with her other hand, and roughly scrapes the scales off with the knife's edge. Two more trouts lie in a bucket.

Her bare arms are exposed. They're covered in old BURNS and SCARS.

Felicia finishes scraping the scales off. She turns the trout upside down, inserts the knife into its smooth white belly.

A drop of blood trickles out as Felicia digs the knife in. She reaches her fingers in to the slit, pulls out its GUTS. The stringy innards YANK the trout's head back. It seems to gasp for breath as its insides are torn out.

Peter watches, transfixed. He feels sick. He turns away, GAGS.

And he notices someone at the door - it's EL.

El puts a finger to their lips. They gesture for Peter to come. He hurries over.

PETER
(whispers)
El...? What're you doing here?

EL
(whispers)
Come on - let's go!

Peter turns to Felicia - she hasn't noticed them.

PETER
Where?

EL
This way - come on!

El turns. Alarmed, Peter follows.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

El leads Peter across the living room, and approaches --
The METAL DOOR.

PETER
You can't be here. My mother --

EL
In here.

El stops at the door, their hand on the handle. Peter shakes his head.

PETER
No, I can't go in there!

EL
Don't be scared.

PETER
You need to leave.

EL
We have to figure out what's behind here first.

Peter looks at the door. It looms ominously above them. He notices FLICKERING LIGHTS from the crack beneath. Then --

a SCREAM THUNDERS from behind the door.

Peter jumps.

PETER
What was that?!

EL
Come on, Peter... Open the door.

PETER
No - I can't --

Another SCREAM - urgent, BLOOD-CURDLING!

EL
Peter!

Peter reaches forward. He OPENS THE DOOR.

DARKNESS

There's nothing on the other side.

Only a DARK VOID. COLD EMPTINESS. It stretches for eternity around.

Peter stares and stares into this nothingness.

And then, from far away, a pinprick of LIGHT approaches.

HOLD on Peter's face. The light grows nearer. It GLOWS in Peter's eyes. They widen in terror.

The FIRE reflects off Peter's face in waves of CRACKLING HEAT. Burning yellow, red and orange bursts of hot LIGHT. It looms brighter... BRIGHTER...

Peter opens his mouth in a distorted SCREAM.

Bright RED and GOLD FLAMES engulf us. Peter's small FIGURE stands in the center.

We PULL back, to the --

INT. STUDIO - DAY

The LAKE in the painting is now saturated with bright RED and GOLD painted flames.

In the center, surrounded by the burning lake, the ABSTRACT FIGURE stands. It gazes out the canvas from the lake's shore.

A camera shutter **CLICKS**.

Peter JOLTS AWAKE on his stool.

He SCREAMS. He falls backwards onto the floor. He writhes on the floor, fending off imaginary flames.

It takes Peter a few seconds to calm down. He steadies his breath. He'd fallen asleep in front of the canvas, still seated on his painting stool.

Peter picks himself up. He blinks at the canvas, brings his face closer... Did he paint that?

The abstracted FIGURE seems to almost melt in the flames.

Peter reaches forward. He gently traces his finger above the wet paint.

We watch Peter from behind as he studies the painting.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner. An entire grilled TROUT, pickles, miso soup, rice. The roasted fish barely fits on the plate.

Peter stares at the trout. He tries to summon an appetite. Unsuccessfully.

FELICIA
What's wrong?

PETER
I'm not hungry.

FELICIA
Do you feel sick?

PETER
No --

Felicia reaches forward. She feels Peter's forehead with the back of her hand. She lets go. She continues with her meal.

FELICIA
Eat your food then.

Peter picks up his chopsticks. He halfheartedly chews on a mouthful of rice. He swallows. Looks up...

Felicia doesn't move. She watches him, threatening - daring him to stop eating.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Eat.

The fish on the plate gapes at Peter.

Peter digs his chopsticks into the soft grilled flesh, picks it off its bones. He clenches his jaw, tries not to gag. He chews on the fish.

Felicia watches him reluctantly eat another mouthful, chew, swallow, chew, swallow. Another, and another, and another...

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Fix your posture.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Peter stands in the shower stall. The WATER streams out and hits him.

FELICIA (V.O.)
Do you think you're challenging
yourself? Truly? Are you
considering the question of your
work's purpose?

He shuts his eyes and takes deep breaths. He clenches and unclenches his fist. Holding tight to something within him. Rage...?

Peter opens his eyes. He hurriedly OPENS the shower stall - rushes out and VOMITS into the toilet.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The METAL DOOR looms in the dark.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Wide awake, Peter stares up at his ceiling from bed. He shifts his covers off, and slides out of the bed. He soundlessly makes his way out of the room.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

The night is clear, the water still. Peter arrives to the lake shore.

Peter hurries to the fallen oak, peers inside.

PETER
(hushed)
El...!

No response.

Peter takes a step further. There's no one there. They're gone.

Peter takes this in. He shuts his eyes, takes a breath. A wave of resentment, regret washes over him. Then --

The metallic FLICK of a lighter.

EL (O.S.)
Hey, it's you.

Peter opens his eyes. He turns. He finds El a few feet behind him. An EXHALE escapes him. Relief washes over.

PETER
I thought you'd left.

El shakes their head.

EL
I'm leaving tomorrow.

PETER
I wanted to say goodbye before you did.

El gazes at Peter thoughtfully. They sit in the fallen oak's nook. They turn their gaze to the dark lake.

EL
Glad you're here then.

As always, El's cadence is even, calm. Their voice both sharp and gentle at once.

Peter lowers himself to sit side-by-side with El. Together, they gaze at the dark lake in silence. Now that El's here, Peter realizes he doesn't know what he wants to say.

El breaks the silence.

EL (CONT'D)
Can I ask you a question?

PETER
Uh huh?

El continues to stare out at the dark. They choose their words carefully.

EL
Do you think there're other realities?

PETER
"Other" realities...?

EL
Mm-hm.

Peter falters...

PETER
But... I don't know if I believe in this one.

He holds his hands up to his face, as if to confirm that they're still there.

EL
Like here, now, you don't feel it's real?

PETER
I don't know.
(beat)
Here and now is also all that I know.
(beat)
Outside, there's a sickness.
(MORE)

PETER (CONT'D)

It spread like a plague when everything ended. It fills you with greed, self-interest. Makes you violent, hateful... You become infected without even realizing it, til you're blinded from the truth.

(beat)

But here, now, this is safe. This is supposed to be real... I just don't really know what that means.

EL

And there's truth here?

PETER

Huh?

EL

You said on the outside, you're blinded from "the truth." So you must mean you see it clearly, here.

Peter shakes his head.

PETER

I don't know.

Peter brings his hands together til they're touching. He reassures himself that he's still there, at least, physically.

PETER (CONT'D)

"Truth"....? I don't know what I meant by that.

Peter rubs his hands together. There're smudges of PAINT on his fingers, and he notices some beneath his fingernails.

PETER (CONT'D)

Thing is, when I paint I can exist somewhere else... Like, outside of space, and maybe outside of time, even. I'm not here... I'm in a different realm. Cause everything feels more real there. Feels like the world I'm living in - here, right now, this - it's all a lie, and the one I'm in when I paint - that's the truth. I can feel it. I can touch it, almost... Almost. And I'm free there.

(beat)

Here, it's different. It's empty...

(MORE)

PETER (CONT'D)

I feel like a memory of other things, of things more - more truthful. Whatever that means.

(beat)

That's why I paint. It's cause I need to. The world, it feels bigger. Not dangerous. It's waiting for me.

Peter stops talking. He lets out a long breath - he's never spoken this much before.

Immediately self-conscious, he turns to El, embarrassed.

But El watches him avidly. They listen with complete seriousness.

EL

You don't belong here.

Peter holds El's gaze.

El reaches forward. They put their arms around Peter, pull him tight and HOLD him.

Peter sits still, unsure of what to do. He stares out at the dark in a kind of trance.

His arms lift automatically. He HOLDS El. He shuts his eyes, squeezes El back.

El lets Peter go after a few seconds.

The WIND picks up. It sends ripples through the lake. Trees sway. Leaves on the ground blow around them.

El sits up straight and collects themself. They turn away from Peter to face the lake.

Peter's not sure of what just happened. He doesn't dare to move.

EL (CONT'D)

Come with me to the outside.

Peter lets these words sink in.

PETER

What... out there?

EL

Uh huh.

Still unsure, Peter falters...

PETER
My mother will kill me.

El laughs.

EL
Good reason enough.

PETER
Are you serious?

EL
I'm leaving tomorrow.
(beat)
I'll wait for you here.

PETER
What about my paintings?

EL
What about them?
(beat)
What's stopping you from painting
out there?

El turns to him.

EL (CONT'D)
You're locked up from some unknown
fear... What's more terrifying than
fear itself? Hmm?
(beat)
Maybe the world is dangerous, or
bleak as hell. But I promise you
won't be blinded. I can already
tell, Peter... You'll be absolutely
fine.

El lets go of Peter's face.

EL (CONT'D)
I'll make sure of it.

Peter thinks quietly. He's hit with a rush of fear,
excitement, and a desperate grasp for reason all at once.

Peter studies El's hand. Like his, their hand is dirty, with
dirt beneath their fingernails.

Slowly, Peter raises his gaze to meet theirs. His voice is
shaky, hesitant, but now holds a newfound resolve --

PETER
 (quietly)
 Alright then.

A smile slowly spreads across El's face. Peter echoes this.

EL
 Alright then.

PETER
 Tomorrow?

EL
 Tomorrow.

Peter thinks.

PETER
 But let me finish my painting,
 first. It's almost done. I just
 need a day. One more session in the
 studio.

EL
 You know you can't bring it with
 us, right?

PETER
 I know.
 (then, softly)
 It's for my mother.

El carefully studies Peter's face. They nod.

EL
 Tomorrow night, then.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Peter blinks in the bright SUN that streams in through the large window.

He gazes outside, distracted, while Felicia takes his blood pressure.

FELICIA
 Breathe in.

Peter takes a deep breath.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 Out.

Peter exhales.

He watches Felicia read the blood pressure monitor. Close to him, she blinks in the sunlight that hits her hair and face. She jots down the reading.

Felicia straightens up. She gets behind the Hasselblad camera, beneath the focusing cloth. She focuses her lens on him.

Through the viewfinder, Felicia catches sight of Peter's hands. His nails are lined with PAINT and DIRT.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Look over here, Peter.

Peter faces the camera. He looks directly into the lens.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Lift your chin, ***slightly***. Alright -
one... two... three --

The heavy shutter **CLICKS**.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - DAY

Peter runs laps around the meadow. He runs passed the garden. Felicia's FIGURE rushes by in a blur.

Peter keeps his eyes on the calm, deep forest. He runs another lap, passes by Felicia's figure again.

She's inspecting something on the ground.

Peter stops. He turns back to run to her

In the garden, Felicia bends over the vegetables.

Peter steps closer. He hears the BUZZING of flies.

FELICIA
Careful!

Peter stops.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
Watch where you step! I left traps
overnight.

A large STEEL TRAP is on the ground at Felicia's feet. Its metal jaws are clenched shut around a small POSSUM's neck. The possum lies still, dead. Flies buzz around its wound.

PETER

Oh God, what is that?

FELICIA

Possum.

Felicia stoops down. She opens the trap with her gloved hands. She removes the dead possum. Peter cringes from the sight. She drops the dead possum onto an open spot on the ground.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

This one can't be the culprit.

Felicia gestures to a small patch of melons. Some missing.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

It's barely half the size of one of those.

Felicia straightens. She surveys the yard and circles it. Peter follows. She stops to check another trap - untouched, still left open.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Don't go near it.

Felicia straightens again. Something catches her eye at the far end of the garden.

Felicia frowns. She crosses the garden and stoops over.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Huh.

Felicia reaches forward, and picks something off the ground. Peter nears... In her hand is an old METAL LIGHTER.

A deep frown of confusion fills Felicia's face. It slowly turns to realization, then fear. Her hand shakes, almost drops the lighter.

PETER

(lies, cautious)

What is that...?

Felicia blinks several times to collect herself.

FELICIA

It's a lighter.

Felicia turns to Peter. She pockets the lighter.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 (gravely)
 Get back in the house. It's not
 safe out here.

Felicia ushers Peter towards the house.

She stoops to grab the dead possum as she does.

INT. STUDIO - DAY

WHITE PAINT runs and bubbles over vivid textures of hardened RED and ORANGE PAINT.

A dirty, paint-covered hand reaches in with a wide brush, SWIRLS the colours together, creating textures and colours that both meld and clash together.

Clear liquid is poured over - PAINT THINNER. The paint separates into rivulets and trickles - spreading out all across the canvas like veins.

Thick dollops of BLACK PAINT ooze on top of the layers of fluid and texture.

The canvas lies flat on the floor. Covered in paint, Peter hunches over it. Totally zoned in, hyper focused, he looks just slightly maniacal.

Peter empties a tube of the black paint onto the canvas. He pushes and spreads the paint with his wide brush.

The black paint blends irregularly with the other colours and texture - melding together in some parts, pooling in others, creating CRISP, JAGGED, and BUBBLING edges.

Peter leans back on his heels. He wipes his brow. He steps back to see his progress:

Where the burning lake was previously, the new layer of paint and liquid now form a dark, CHARRED LANDSCAPE, filled with splintered and singed shadows of absolute destruction.

Peter stretches his neck, sore. He pulls his arms back, stretches out his back, takes deep breaths.

Peter bends over the painting again. He makes a few slight adjustments - pushing the dark paint and texture this way and that. He steps back again.

PETER
 (under his breath)
 Done.

The FIGURE remains in the foreground of the painting. It gazes out the canvas, its back to the burned landscape.

Peter bends down, leans in close to examine the figure. With a finger, he traces the wet paint around it to define it better.

The figure looks different from the last time he'd painted it. A little less abstract. Pale, with messy straight hair that just falls to its shoulders.

It stands tall, somehow more assured. Its blank gaze looks out defiantly from the canvas.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Peter sits at the edge of his bed. Felicia watches him from the doorway as he brushes his teeth.

He watches her reflection in the dark window. He finishes brushing, goes to the bathroom to spit out his toothpaste.

He gets under the covers as usual. He shuts his eyes. He waits for Felicia to leave.

Felicia switches off the lights, but she remains standing in the doorway.

FELICIA
The painting. You changed it.

Peter opens his eyes.

PETER
Uh huh.

FELICIA
Finished?

PETER
Yeah.

FELICIA
Are you sure?

Peter frowns, hesitates. Felicia's silhouette watches him from the doorway.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
I'll put it away once it dries.

PETER
Okay.

A pause. Peter stares at the ceiling, anxious for her to leave. Felicia opens her mouth to speak, but then changes her mind.

FELICIA
On to the next one then... Get some rest.

Felicia turns, shuts the door behind her. Peter stares out despondently at the dark.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

The MOON floods the meadow outside the window.

Peter remains in bed, eyes open.

Slowly, he slips out from under the covers. He bends down, and from underneath the bed pulls out a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. He changes quietly.

Peter stops. He examines his hands. There's FRESH DIRT on his skin and pajamas. He pulls his bed covers back to notice more DIRT in his sheets.

Peter frowns, confused. He shakes the dirt off of his hand. He finishes changing his clothes, puts his covers back to hide the dirt.

Peter quietly makes his way out.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Moonlight from the window illuminates the outlines of furniture. The dark living room is totally silent.

Peter steps out of his room. He crosses the living room, towards the backdoor that leads to the yard.

And then stops in the middle of the room.

He's not alone.

A FIGURE watches him from a dark corner.

Wearing thick rubber boots, gardening gloves.

It's FELICIA.

For a few seconds, Peter doesn't move or breathe. Then --

PETER
... M - mom?

Felicia watches him silently.

PETER (CONT'D)
What're you doing there...?

Felicia steps forward and roughly GRABS Peter's wrist. She holds up his hand. There's dirt caking his fingers, beneath his nails.

FELICIA
I should've known.

Peter shakes his head in fear and denial.

PETER
The - the vegetables? No - mom,
that wasn't me!

FELICIA
What're you doing up in the middle
of the night?

PETER
I --

FELICIA
Sneaking around behind my back. You
think I don't know?

PETER
Know what? I haven't done anything!

Felicia SLAPS Peter.

FELICIA
Don't lie to me. You think I don't
know you? You think I don't know
how you've been sneaking out at
night, how you think you're
outsmarting me?! Huh?

Stunned, Peter can only stare back at Felicia wordlessly.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
I've dedicated my life to feeding
you, to protecting you! I've
watched your every move since you
were born. And you think I don't
know you?!

Felicia's eyes DRILL into Peter's.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 It's my fault for trusting you. I
 should've known.

Peter fights back tears. Felicia pulls him towards his room. He shakes his head and pulls back to resist.

PETER
 No - I'm sorry! I'll be good, I
 promise, I promise! Let me
 explain... please, mom!

Felicia roughly drags Peter by the arm to his room. At his door, she tries to yank him into the room, but he resists. She SLAPS him again. He raises his arms defensively.

FELICIA
 Should've known this was coming --

PETER
 (begs)
 Please don't lock me up, mom -
 STOP! Please --

Felicia grips Peter's arms tightly - too tight. Her fingers DIG into his arm. She struggles to pull him into his room.

PETER (CONT'D)
 (enraged)
 MOM, DON'T DO THIS TO ME!

Peter SHOVES Felicia - knocks her backwards. Her head HITS the edge of the door. She DROPS to the floor.

She doesn't move.

Peter holds still.

PETER (CONT'D)
 M - mom...?!

Felicia doesn't respond. Peter gingerly gets on his knees. He tries to steady his breathing.

PETER (CONT'D)
 Mom... you okay?

No response. Peter reaches forward to touch her -- but stops.

He gets back on his feet. He keeps his eyes on her, and takes some steps away.

Finally, he tears his eyes from her. He turns, and heads back towards the backdoor.

But something stops Peter.

From the corner of his eye, Peter sees FLICKERS of light. The METAL DOOR, left just slightly open.

Felicia remains unmoving. Peter eyes the metal door, Felicia, the backdoor -- and the metal door again.

Peter cringes to himself. He can't help it. He heads to the metal door. He OPENS it...

Inside is what looks like a large OFFICE.

The flicker comes from a desktop computer screen. On the screen plays a VIDEO of Peter's studio.

Peter stands in the doorway. His eyes are lit by the distant screen. He watches the image of his studio, confused.

He takes a step forward into the space.

INT. FELICIA'S OFFICE - NIGHT

The OFFICE: a large STUDIO SPACE similar to Peter's - but meticulously organized. Cabinets line the walls, each marked with a small white label.

A large work table stretches across a wall at the far end of the office. The SCREEN of the desktop computer is here. It lights up the otherwise dark room. The LIGHTER sits next to it.

Peter steps towards the glow. He approaches the desk, and squints at the bright screen.

The VIDEO shows Peter's studio. The view is from the wall with the crack directly behind his painting stool.

The studio is empty. Peter's painting is centered, leaned against the far wall. A digital COUNTER on the corner of the screen shows that the video is being recorded live.

Peter frowns. **What the...?** He glances back to make sure Felicia hasn't moved. Through the door, her feet lie still on the floor.

Peter scans the cabinets. Each drawer is marked with a printed label.

Peter opens a cabinet - marked "PAST WORK"

Inside are large, flat DRAWERS with carefully preserved large-scale PHOTOGRAPHS - self portraits by a much younger Felicia in her 30's. Peter shifts through the photos. He finds stills of what look like performance pieces of the younger Felicia.

Peter opens another drawer. Inside are old ARTIST STATEMENTS, PRESS RELEASES of exhibitions and NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS, all filed in plastic.

Several feature photos of Felicia - some in her 30's, later ones in her 40's. In one, she stands alongside Mark. They gaze out of the article solemnly. Headlines read:

FELICIA MORI DEFIES CATEGORIZATION IN HER EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN GUGGENHEIM EXHIBITION.

IN GERSHWIN-PRIZE WINNING PERFORMANCE PIECE, MORI QUESTIONS NOTIONS OF POWER BETWEEN ARTIST AND SUBJECT

ARTIST FELICIA MORI SETS ABLAZE THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND THE PUBLIC. "FOUND NARRATIVES: WORKS FROM 2018-2020"

Peter scans the articles and statements. He grows more confused by the second. He has trouble taking it all in. He's learning for the first time that his mother is an artist.

PETER

Huh.

The next cabinet's label catches his eye:

"MOTHERHOOD PROJECT (I): INFANCY & CHILDHOOD, 2020 - 2030"

Peter puts the articles back into the drawer of "PAST WORK", shuts the cabinet. He opens the one marked "MOTHERHOOD".

Inside are 10 deep, box-like drawers. These too are labelled: "AGE 1", "AGE 2", "AGE 3" ... all the way to "AGE 10".

Peter reaches to open one of the drawers... but stops himself. An ominous feeling overcomes him.

He notices the cabinet directly next to it, labelled:

"MOTHERHOOD PROJECT (II): PUBERTY & ADOLESCENCE, 2031 - "

Peter opens this cabinet instead. Inside are the same box-like drawers, each labelled from "AGE 11" to "AGE 17".

He holds still for a second - debating whether he should turn away, pretend he hasn't seen anything.

But it's too late. Peter pulls open "AGE 14".

Inside are hundreds of FILES - large and small, all meticulously, obsessively labelled.

Peter fishes one out - and several vacuum-sealed plastic BAGGIES slip out onto the floor. He picks one up.

Stapled to it is a photo of a single, curled hair, along with the writing: "FIRST AXILLARY HAIRS, AGE 14". Inside the plastic is the single hair.

He examines the other plastic baggies. They contain other small odds and ends: used band-aids, nail clippings, hair clippings, shavings...

Disturbed, but unable to stop, Peter pulls out more files.

They contain hundreds of photocopies of his belongings: clothes, paintings, art supplies, drawings, unfinished meals.

Each noted with the content and Peter's age. Most are labelled "IN STORAGE IN MARK'S COLLECTION".

Peter swallows. What the fuck??

He opens another drawer... "AGE 17"

Inside are more recent archives of Peter's belongings. Stacks of photocopies of Felicia's daily portraits of Peter. Photocopies of different stages of his recent painting.

A photocopy of a dead CHICKEN, noted "**FIRST BUTCHERING EXPERIENCE, AGE 17. SEE NOTES IN INDEX A. INCLUDES VIDEO RECORDING.**"

Peter's hands begin to SHAKE.

Peter pulls open drawers from the first cabinet. He finds more archives - photographs and archives from his infancy and childhood. Old clothes, toys, scribbles, hairs, nail clippings...

A seemingly INFINITE RECORDING of his entire life, archived, photocopied.

Meticulously, obsessively collected.

Peter steps back in disbelief at his findings. Stunned dread fills him...

He knocks into a thick BINDER on the worktable. It falls open at his feet.

Inside are more ARTIST STATEMENTS, NEWS CLIPPINGS printed from websites. The whiteness of the paper show that they're recent.

Peter picks up the prints. A HEADLINE reads:

MARK GERSHWIN TO UNVEIL ARTIST FELICIA MORI'S FIRST PROJECT AFTER 18 YEAR ABSENCE

Peter's fingers can't stop shaking. He scans the page-long statement titled "**MOTHERHOOD: PROPOSITION FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS, 2020-2038**"

Peter realizes he's holding his breath. He GASPS for air. He begins to hyperventilate.

Peter looks around the office. He sees more unopened cabinets lining the walls. He opens them.

He finds an AUDIO RECORDER. Hits PLAY. Felicia's recorded VOICE leaks out, mid-sentence.

FELICIA (O.S.)

-- after the fires, all my records were gone. So that raised the question of how specific sites and people exist in our memory, how recording and archiving memories can recreate them in new forms. So art then became a means to immortalize, to provide evidence for one's existence...

Peter opens another drawer. He JERKS back at what greets him:

A life-size DUMMY, folded into the drawer. It wears Peter's clothes. Its body crumpled eerily. Its blank FACE stares up at Peter.

FELICIA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

And so these records become symbols - signifiers of real lived experience. And then we begin to ask... Where's the line between a symbol and the signified experience? Between art and life? Between what's real and created?

Peter eyes the empty eyes of the dummy.

A deep, dark DREAD grows within him. A primal FEAR resounds through his system.

Peter backs away towards the door. He steps back out into the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Peter's hands shake uncontrollably as he distances himself from the office.

He TRIPS! STUMBLES BACKWARDS over Felicia's unmoving body.

Felicia's eyes are open. She watches him, unmoving.

Peter SCREAMS.

He frantically kicks himself away from Felicia. He shakily scrambles up. He tries to steady his breathing. He can't.

Peter DASHES for the back door, yanks it open, runs OUT.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - NIGHT

Peter rushes out into the moonlit yard. He doesn't stop, keeps going without turning back.

Peter STUMBLES, almost falls into something. He yells out as chickens screech about him. He'd tripped into their pen.

Peter hurriedly gets up, keeps going through the tall grass of the meadow, towards the forest.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Peter runs blindly through the trees, through the dark towards the lake.

He turns to check behind him. He's completely surrounded by the dark.

Peter keeps going - towards the distant bit of moonlight. It's reflected off the lake, up ahead of him, just hidden behind some trees.

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

Peter stumbles out of the forest into the opening. He scans the shore for El. It's empty.

PETER
(hushed)
El!

Peter rushes to the fallen oak. He checks the nook beneath. No sign of El.

PETER (CONT'D)
(louder)
EL!

No response. The area is totally quiet. The moonlight reflects calmly on the lake's surface.

Peter tries to catch his breath. He scans his surroundings for any sign of El.

The METALLIC SCRAPE of a lighter. Peter turns to the sound. It comes from inside the dark forest.

Peter holds his breath, holds completely still. Hyper-vigilant.

A few seconds... Silence. Peter stares and stares at the pitch-black VOID of the forest he just left. He waits for something to emerge. His heartbeat THUDS in his chest.

PETER (CONT'D)
(whispers)
... El...?

Nothing.

Peter lets out a shaky breath. He tries to calm himself. He checks his surroundings again. Still no sign of El, of anybody.

Crouched low, Peter quietly leaves the fallen oak. Careful not to make a sound, he hurries along the shore of the lake towards a different forest - as far as he could go from where he'd come out of.

Before Peter enters the forest, he scans the lake shore one last time. It's empty, calm, still.

Peter turns. He heads into the dark.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The living room is as Peter left it. Felicia's figure lies crumpled on the floor.

Her eyes are shut.

Moonlight shifts slowly. It spreads across the room. It illuminates Felicia's body.

Felicia's limbs TWITCH. Her face grimaces. Her eyes flutter open.

Felicia groans, comes to. Still on the floor, her eyes scan the room in confusion.

She blinks several times. Using her arms, she lifts herself off the floor to sit up. She rubs her head. She looks around in a daze.

Her eyes fall on the open METAL DOOR.

FELICIA
No... No no no no no.

Felicia scrambles to her feet, stumbles over to the door.

Felicia opens her mouth, HORRIFIED.

She takes in the mess of files and photocopies on the floor, the open cabinets and drawers.

INT. FELICIA'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Felicia looks at the office in shock. She stumbles inside, falls on her knees and grabs at the papers, the files.

She desperately scans through them, as if to find a clue that can undo what Peter had seen.

FELICIA
Fuck...

Felicia tosses the papers, grips her knuckles in distress. She looks up at the computer screen, where the live image of Peter's studio remains, still unchanged and empty.

Felicia stands and hurries back out into the living room.

FELICIA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Peter...?

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Felicia steps in. She turns on the lights.

The room is empty as Peter had left it. Felicia goes to the bed, pulls back the covers.

There's DIRT in the sheets. Felicia checks the bathroom, the closet. He's nowhere in sight.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - NIGHT

Felicia steps out of the backdoor into the meadow. She scans the area.

FELICIA

Peter!

Except for the faint wind and an occasional CRICKET, only silence greets her.

Felicia gazes at the forest. The dark trees stretch up and out, swallowing all light. WIND whirls through the canopies. Felicia SHIVERS in the cold.

Felicia takes a deep breath. She tries to calm herself, to think.

INT. FELICIA'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Felicia hurries to open a cabinet - then a drawer. She retrieves an old, 2000's FLIP PHONE. She opens it - it's dead. She presses down on the ON button. The screen lights up with a faint CHIME.

Felicia dials a number, holds the phone to her ear. She takes a deep breath. After a few rings, someone PICKS UP.

FELICIA

Mark, it's me.

Felicia's voice CRACKS as she struggles to hold it together.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

It's happened.

She clears her throat. Places a shaky hand over her chest, gets a hold of herself again.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

He's gone.

A LIGHTER FLICKS behind her.

Felicia freezes. She turns to look behind her.

No one's there.

EXT. FOREST - EARLY DAWN

Early morning. Soft, grey light faintly illuminates the trees. The sun begins to rise. A bird CHIRPS in a tree somewhere.

Peter pauses from running. He leans down, catches his breath. He's covered in sweat. His clothes are dirty where he'd fallen. He's exhausted.

The METALLIC SCRAPE of the lighter again.

Peter starts.

Peter turns back to gaze behind him.

Morning mist hangs amongst the silhouette of trees, just faintly visible in the early morning light. There's no one around.

PETER
El...? Th - that you?

Nothing.

Peter keeps moving forward, half-walking, half-running. Drained.

He SHIVERS in the cold. Minus the sounds of his feet walking through fallen twigs and leaves, the forest is dead silent.

Then, faintly, what sounds like the distant rush of WIND. It lasts for a few seconds - then fades to silence.

Peter stops still, all senses alert at the sound.

The sound again - a WOOSHING sound - like gushing water. It comes from a few meters ahead of him.

Then, fades back to silence.

Peter tentatively steps forward. He keeps going towards the sound.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAWN

A narrow 2-lane HIGHWAY stretches through the dense forest. Barely used, it's empty in the early morning.

Peter steps out of the forest into the opening. He gawks at the road.

Peter gingerly steps towards it. He climbs the slight hill to get to it.

Peter steps onto the tarmac. Takes another step, til he stands in the center between the lanes. He looks out towards both directions, unsure of what to do.

Behind Peter, the highway curves out of view. In front, it extends straight - far into the distance.

Peter gazes at the long road ahead. He takes a hesitant step forward.

The RUSHING sound approaches - loud.

A VAN appears from the curve behind Peter.

It's HEADLIGHTS hit Peter. He turns to gaze at it in confusion.

The van approaches, FAST. HORNS BLARING.

It RUSHES PAST Peter - almost grazing him. Peter shields himself instinctively.

Peter holds still for a second. He lowers his defensive arms. He watches the van speed off into the distance. It disappears as fast as it came. His eyes wide in shock - he's never seen a car driven so fast before.

Suddenly overcome by FEAR, Peter's hands shake uncontrollably. He takes a few steps back.

Peter turns. He walks off the tarmac. He heads back towards the forest where he'd entered.

Peter picks up his pace. He runs back into the trees.

EXT. LAKE - MORNING

The grey sky reflects over the serene lake. Mist hangs above the water. Birds CALL to each other as the day starts.

Peter emerges from the forest he entered earlier. He scans the area as he hurries along the shore. He makes his way back to the fallen oak.

Peter crouches, peers into the nook. It's empty. Unsure of what to do, getting cold, he stoops and crouches in the space.

A faint HUM from above. Peter looks up. A PLANE crosses the sky, barely visible above the fog and clouds. He watches it til it disappears. Then --

The METALLIC FLICK of a lighter again - from outside the fallen oak, just out of Peter's view. Vigilant, he holds his breath.

PETER
(hushed)
El... that you?

Peter keeps his eyes trained on the edge of the oak - makes himself as small as possible. He holds his breath.

A HAND appears - holding the lit lighter. A FIGURE emerges.

It's El. Peter BREATHES.

PETER (CONT'D)
Oh god... I thought you were my --

EL
Where'd you go?

PETER
Huh?

EL
Where did you go?

Peter gazes at El.

They stare back at him with a blank, glassy look. Their eyes no longer shine. They gleam emptily in the daylight.

The edges of El's sleeves and jeans are stained with dirt, and flecks of clear liquid.

PETER
You never showed up, so I left.

EL
I see.

Peter looks down to notice the state he's in - covered in scratches and dirt, his jeans WET from the knees down after running through forest all night.

El flicks the lighter closed.

EL (CONT'D)
But you're here now.

PETER
I couldn't do it alone.

El gazes at Peter, expressionless.

EL
You look like you've seen a ghost.

Peter stares blankly back, unsure of what to say - how to come to terms with everything he'd uncovered.

PETER
Where were you? I waited for you.

EL
I was here.

Peter shakes his head.

PETER
You never showed up.

EL
I didn't have to. I was here.

El speaks matter-of-factly.

EL (CONT'D)
Let's go then.

El turns, heads towards the direction of the distant forest, but Peter remains. They realize he's not following.

EL (CONT'D)
Peter - we need to go.

PETER
I can't.

EL
Can't...?

PETER
(almost to himself)
I need to go back.

El blinks at him.

PETER (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, just... I need to make
sure of some things. I need to
speak to my mother.
(beat)
I need to go back.

EL
Go back... You sure?

He's not. He stares at the ground.

EL (CONT'D)
Don't.

PETER
Why?

El doesn't respond.

PETER (CONT'D)
I'm going to head back.

El gazes at Peter. Slowly, they nod.

EL
Alright then.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - DAY

The fencing around the chicken pen is broken where Peter had fallen. The chickens are gone, except for one.

It lies dead on the ground. Its throat appears SMASHED into the dirt.

The rest of the chickens are butchered - their throats SLIT or BEHEADED. Their bodies lie scattered around the meadow.

Peter emerges out of the forest. He walks through the tall grass towards the house.

He stops at the sight of the chickens. His hands tremble with fear.

Cautiously avoiding the dead chickens, Peter continues through the grass toward the house.

FOOTSTEPS approach from the house.

Peter stops a few feet away. He ducks beneath the tall grass.

Behind Peter, El steps out of the forest. Peter turns back. He gestures for them to hide in the grass. They stoop and hurry over to him.

Hidden in the grass, Peter watches through the windows as someone opens the front door from outside.

It's MARK. He leans his head in.

MARK
(faint, through glass)
Hello...?

Mark steps into the foyer. His face is tired. Etched with concern.

Mark glances around. He sees the light on in the open OFFICE door. He steps into the living room, and then into the office.

Peter watches through the large window as Felicia and Mark's shadows move in the office doorway. His gaze is stone cold, fixed on the shadows that move conspiratorially.

Slowly, Peter stands. He steps towards the house. His hands clench, tight.

Sounds of the meadow SWARM in Peter's ears. The grass WHISPERS. A bird CAWS, and --

a SCREAM erupts behind him.

Peter turns, wide-eyed --

Crouched in the grass behind him, El SHAKES with pain. They hold a hand to their mouth to stifle any sounds that might come out.

El's other hand is twisted in a weird angle - one of Felicia's traps SLAMMED around their wrist.

Peter looks on, overwhelmed. He shakes himself out of his daze. He hurriedly pries open the trap with his hands. Its jaws leave a bright red mark around El's arm.

El gasps, tries to control their breathing.

The backdoor opens. Mark leans out to scan the yard. He squints in their direction.

PETER
Hide - hide!

Mark steps into the yard and approaches.

El's clutches their hurt arm. They quickly disappear into the tall grass.

MARK
Peter!

Peter tries to follow El - but something stops him. His jeans are caught in the trap. Wide-eyed, he panics.

Mark nears and catches sight of him.

MARK (CONT'D)
Peter! Oh, thank god!

Peter YANKS on his jeans, trying to free himself, as Mark reaches forward and GRIPS on his arm.

MARK (CONT'D)
We were so worried. We thought we'd lost you! Let's get you back in the house --

PETER
Let me go!

MARK
Calm down, Peter!

Mark struggles to grasp at both of Peter's wrist. Peter SWINGS back his fist. It connects with Mark - HITS him in the side of the face.

Mark CRUMPLES to the ground.

Shocked, Peter watches Mark struggle back up. Mark reaches an arm up to grab Peter, when --

El steps forward from the grass. They raise their foot up, HIGH above Mark's face.

PETER
(screams)
NO!

El STOMPS down to kick Mark in the jaw.

They grab Mark by the collar, raise their other fist - PUNCHES his face in. Then AGAIN. And AGAIN. BONE cracks!

And El stops...

Wide-eyed, Peter watches them, paralyzed in shock.

Mark's face is bloodied and disfigured. He whimpers.

El lowers their bloodied fist. They stand, stumble backwards. They slow their shaking breath. They lift their hands. Their fist is bruised and swollen.

They look up to meet Peter's gaze. Peter holds in his terrified SOBS.

EL
 (out of breath)
 He was going to hurt you.

Peter can only stare back wordlessly with utter fear.

Mark groans. He rolls over to his side. He chokes up blood and teeth into the dirt. He drags himself away from Peter and El, slowly, painfully.

That's when Peter notices Felicia at the backdoor. They LOCK EYES. Felicia's face is pale with fear.

PETER
 Mom...

Felicia SLAMS the door shut.

PETER (CONT'D)
 No, wait!

Peter steps over Mark, but realizes he's still stuck in the trap.

Mark cowers as Peter bends over. Peter uses his hands to once again pry the trap open. He frees himself, and heads towards the house.

Through the window, Felicia backs away. She watches him from inside. She looks terrified.

Peter arrives to the backdoor. He tries it. It's locked.

PETER (CONT'D)
 Mom...? Open the door.

Felicia shakes her head coldly.

FELICIA
 What've you done, Peter?

PETER
 Please!

Peter RATTLES the door.

PETER (CONT'D)
 Why won't you open the door? Mom!

FELICIA
What did you do to Mark?!

Peter's voice grows desperate. He BEGS.

PETER

Mom. It's me! It's me... I just
want to talk, please... MOM!

Felicia stands frozen, her eyes trained on Peter through the window.

She swallows her fear. She unlocks the door. She opens it to face Peter.

FELICIA

I thought you were long gone by
now.

Felicia studies his face. He's covered in scratches and dirt from running through the forest.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Why on earth did you come back?

Face to face with Felicia, Peter is suddenly unable to respond.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Come in then.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Felicia backs away as Peter walks into the living room. The space feels suddenly unfamiliar. He looks about him as if in a daze.

Felicia eyes his hands. While afraid, she's careful to keep her composure.

FELICIA

What is it you want?

Peter blinks. He realizes he doesn't fully know.

PETER

What else are you hiding from me?

Peter's voice is small, scared.

FELICIA

You saw it all for yourself.

(beat)

I told you never to go in my
office. I told you it was for your
own good.

Peter stares at Felicia in disbelief. She can't meet his gaze.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 I know what it looks like. I don't expect you to forgive me... But everything I've done - everything, it's been for your own good.

PETER
 For my own good?

FELICIA
 You'll thank me later.

Peter can't believe what he's hearing. He blinks in dazed confusion.

PETER
 But you lied to me. All my life.

Felicia shakes her head.

FELICIA
 (firmly)
 Out there is a toxic, depraved world. That I've never lied to you about.

PETER
 No, it's not out there, mom.

Felicia grimaces, knowing he's right. She turns her gaze away.

FELICIA
 I've raised you with nothing but time and guidance to focus purely on your art. I won't apologize for it. Is that what you want from me?
An apology?

Peter doesn't know what he wants. He clenches his jaw shut in frustration.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 A life untainted. Eighteen years to find and create yourself. You don't know how it is out there... Barren. Do you realize that most people spend entire lifetimes, dreaming for what you have?

PETER

How?! How would I know that? I
don't know anything. I - I don't
even know why I paint!

Peter tries to steady his voice that shakes slightly. He's confused, angry. He can barely see straight.

PETER (CONT'D)

What're they for? For your art
project? Because that's what I am,
right? An experiment? What am I...?
I --

FELICIA

No, Peter. You're my son!

PETER

But I saw it, mom. It's all in
there. I saw everything. I saw what
I am. Your puppet... That's it,
right?

Felicia's careful facade is breaking. She shakes her head in denial.

FELICIA

What do you want me to do?! I was
glad when you left! Why did you
come back?

Peter can't say. He blinks back tears. He moves towards Felicia. She JERKS away, as if afraid of his touch.

Peter takes note of Felicia's reaction. He turns. He heads into the office.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Peter? Where're you going?

Felicia rushes after him.

INT. FELICIA'S OFFICE - DAY

Peter storms inside.

On the floor, organized in piles of folders, are the archives and recordings of his life. And in the far corner - his painting.

Felicia follows behind. She watches Peter's every move.

FELICIA

Your paintings are your own, Peter.
They come from you. They're yours!

Peter stares at the inky BURNED LANDSCAPE of the painting.
The central FIGURE stares back.

PETER

But I only painted because you made
me.

(beat)

What other choice did I have?

Peter gazes at Felicia through his tears, in search of an
answer. She doesn't have one.

Peter sees in a corner of the office, a supply of PAINT
THINNER gallons.

FELICIA

You're right.

(beat)

You've been fooled all along. But
we're all fools, Peter.

Felicia stares at the painting behind Peter.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

Look, I've been fooling myself,
thinking I could pull off this
project, being a mother.

Felicia lets out a long, shaky breath.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

We're cursed. There's no escaping
it. An endless cycle. Doomed to be
repeated, over and over...

PETER

What're you talking about?

FELICIA

And over... Those fires outside. I
see them, even here. They're in
you.

Felicia now wears an empty, defeated look. It sends a chill
down Peter's spine.

Seeing him frightened, Felicia laughs. But her eyes wear the
same, defeated gaze.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 Your purpose was to extend mine!
 But we're cursed to live this
 life... A life of suffering. I
 couldn't escape it, even through
 you. I couldn't!
 (beat)
 I should've known it would taint
 even you.

Felicia steps up close to Peter. Peter FLINCHES as she raises her hands. But she takes his face gently. She puts her arms around him and holds him.

Peter shakes in fear. He can barely move. Tears drip down his face.

Felicia lets Peter go. She catches sight of the gallons of PAINT THINNER.

FELICIA (CONT'D)
 But there's a way to stop it.

Confused, Peter watches helplessly as Felicia walks to the paint thinner. She hoists up a gallon, opens it. She begins to POUR it over her archives... And over the painting. The thinner MELTS the painted figure in the center.

Peter shakes his head in disbelief. He sobs --

PETER
 Mom, NO! Not that one, no!

Peter reaches forth to stop Felicia - but she holds the paint thinner up between them - as if threatening him.

PETER (CONT'D)
 (sobs)
 What're you doing?!

FELICIA
 Give me back the lighter, Peter.

Peter has no idea what she's talking about.

PETER
 Mom, don't! It was all for you. The
 paintings - I did it all for you!

FELICIA
 The lighter, Peter. You give it
 back to me, now.

PETER

(sobs)

I don't know what you're talking
about --

FELICIA

LIAR!

Peter is in tears, frozen like a child again. Felicia screams at him with unabated rage.

FELICIA (CONT'D)

I know you took it! It was right here on the desk yesterday. You lie to me one more time, Peter and I'll - I'll burn this whole house down!
After everything I've done to protect you, to create you!

A metallic FLICK resounds. A small FLAME ignites from the lighter.

From behind Peter appears EL. They TOSS the lit lighter towards Felicia.

Felicia drops the paint thinner in surprise. The liquid SPILLS OVER HER -- just as the lighter hits, and --

FELICIA ERUPTS INTO FLAMES.

Her expression turns from rage to terror. She opens her mouth wide to SCREAM - her face contorted in horror. Her mouth a gaping hole.

The fire illuminates Peter and El. They watch the roaring flames in shocked awe.

The flames spill passed Felicia onto the archives, the painting. They all BURST into flames.

Felicia becomes engulfed in the fire. She continues to STARE at Peter - and from terror, her expression goes CALM.

Felicia's eyes fixed on Peter, she stops screaming.

Horrified, Peter can't move.

Felicia LUNGES towards him --

And passes him by. Peter turns to see Mark behind him - his face BLOODIED. He limps towards Peter from behind.

Felicia HURLS HERSELF onto Mark - ENGULFS HIM IN FLAMES.

Mark struggles from beneath Felicia - but she's pinned him down. He JERKS in pain - a final, blood-curdling SCREAM.

Felicia and Mark burn to death.

Peter watches this, frozen. The fires mount around him.

EL
Peter.

Peter stares at his mother's burning body.

EL (CONT'D)
PETER! We need to leave!

El grabs Peter's hand and yanks him out of his daze.

They pull him by the hand, and run out of the office.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The office burns.

El pulls Peter towards the backdoor. It's open. They run through it - out into the backyard.

EXT. BACKYARD MEADOW - DAY

Led by El, Peter runs through the tall grass of the meadow.

A loud CRASH from inside the house as it burns. Peter turns to give it one final look.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

Peter and El make it out to the lake. It's serene, calm. Barely a ripple.

They run along the shore towards the other forest.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Peter and El run through the forest. Trees whirl by.

Peter clutches at El's hand. He watches them run before him.

Peter's shocked tears continue to flow. They leave streaks on his face.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The narrow 2-lane HIGHWAY stretches through the dense forest.

A single car RUSHES past and drives into the distance.

El steps out of the forest, followed by Peter. Out of breath, he looks about him in a daze.

El confidently climbs up the hill. They step on to the highway. Peter stoops over to catch his breath.

EL
Hurry, Peter.

Peter straightens up. He follows El onto the tarmac.

Peter looks in both directions. There's not a car in sight.

Up ahead of him, El begins to walk up the road.

Peter watches them.

Something stops him from following. A few paces ahead, El stops and turns.

EL (CONT'D)
Come on, Peter.

Peter stares ahead of him. His heart POUNDS in his chest.

EL (CONT'D)
Let's go. Don't be afraid.

Peter frowns. His stares at El in confusion...

He looks down. There's something clenched in his hand, tight. He opens his hand...

It's the lighter.

Peter's hands shake...

A bright red scar from Felicia's trap marks his arm.

Peter winces, lifts his other hand. The knuckles are bruised and bloodied.

EL (O.S.) (CONT'D)
What's wrong, Peter?

Slowly - cautiously - Peter lifts his gaze to meet El's.

They wait for him patiently.

Behind them, the empty road stretches for miles...

A loud HUM from above. Peter looks up.

A PLANE flies up above - crosses the sky away from him - disappears into the distance.

Peter takes a deep breath. He looks down at El again.

He pockets the lighter.

Slowly, Peter grins.

El grins back. They reach out a hand towards him.

Peter grasps their hand in his.

They take a step forward.

Then another, and another.

And another. Together, they walk up the highway.

We hear something, faint, from far away.

A voice? Sirens...?

Then a heavy CLICK of a camera shutter.

END.