

THE INCIDENT

Book Adaptation

Roger Wong

FADE IN:

EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - MORNING

A quiet suburban neighborhood. A 2019 black Jeep Cherokee backs carefully onto the driveway of a canary-colored, stucco, one-story home.

SUPER: 7:00 A.M.

INT. JEEP - CONTINUOUS

ROBERT HALL (60s), thoughtful, focused. Hands steady on the wheel. This is routine — muscle memory. But today, his mind drifts.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Dad used to back in everywhere.
Parking lots, driveways... didn't
matter. Never pulled in straight.

A quiet smile creeps onto his face.

ROBERT (V.O.)
He died five years ago.
Ninety-two. Went to sleep one
night and just... never woke up.

He finishes adjusting the Jeep perfectly into place.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Hell of a life, though. He was
steady. Loving. The kind of man
who made you feel like everything
was gonna be okay.

He sits for a beat, still in the car, still in thought.

ROBERT (V.O.)
And now I catch myself doing the
same things. Same moves. Backing
in. Same rhythm.

A flash of memory: YOUNG ROBERT, age 12, riding shotgun in a vintage car, looking up at his father.

YOUNG ROBERT
Dad, why do you always back in?

CUT BACK TO:

INT. JEEP - DRIVEWAY - PRESENT

Robert chuckles softly, shakes his head.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - MORNING

The black Jeep Cherokee finishes backing smoothly into place. The FRONT BUMPER is flush with the sidewalk. The REAR BUMPER exactly four feet from the garage. No backup camera. No mirror. Just years of muscle memory.

INT. JEEP - CONTINUOUS

ROBERT sets the emergency brake. His grip on the steering wheel - right hand flopped over at twelve o'clock, left at seven.

ROBERT (V.O.)
He used to say, "You never know
when you'll have to leave in a
hurry."

FLASHBACK - INT. OLD CAR - DAY

YOUNG ROBERT (12) looks over at his FATHER, practical and calm, guiding the car backward into a space.

FATHER

Son, I back in because you never know when you'll have to leave in a hurry.

YOUNG ROBERT (V.O.)
I figured it made sense... if you were robbing a bank... or your house was on fire...

BACK TO PRESENT:

ROBERT (V.O.)
Truth is, we copy our parents. Habits. Patterns. Even the way we hold the damn wheel.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

As if on cue, the driver's side door SWINGS OPEN and a THREE-YEAR-OLD BOY comes bursting into frame.

NICKY
Hi, Ra-Ra! I have something to show you! Hurry, Ra-Ra. You'll like it!

ROBERT
(Laughing)
Okay, okay, Nicky. Give me a second. I need to grab my lunch sack and cell phone. But I can't wait to see what you've got!

INT. HOUSE - FLASHBACK MONTAGE

- NICKY getting dressed with his mom's help.
- Chewing gummy bear vitamins.
- Drinking milk, nibbling on fish crackers.

- Peeking out the front window, face lit up.
- JEEP APPEARS in the driveway.
- NICKY tears out the front door in a blur of energy.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Some mornings, he's already done
everything before I even pull up.
Dressed, fed, vitamins - all of
it. But he still waits to eat with
me.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Robert steps out of the Jeep, still smiling at the little
boy tugging on his pant leg.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Ra-Ra. That's what he calls me.
Couldn't say Robert when he was
younger. It stuck.

NICKY
Come on, Ra-Ra!

Robert closes the car door gently. Looks down at his
grandson with genuine affection.

ROBERT (V.O.)
God, I love hearing that.

They walk toward the house together, hand in hand.

INT. KATY'S HOUSE - FOYER/LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Robert steps inside. Sunlight spills through the windows.
The sound of NICKY running ahead echoes down the hall.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I'm lucky. Not everyone gets this
kind of time with their grandkid.

He looks around – familiar space, family warmth.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Retired six years now. Thirty-four
years teaching middle school in
Renton. It was a good run... but
it was time.

INT. FLASHBACK - KITCHEN - RENTON, WA - DAY

ROBERT sits at the kitchen table. Across from him is his
WIFE, mid-50s, calm but firm.

WIFE
Robert, I'm moving to Hawaii. With
or without you.

ROBERT
What? What are you talking about,
honey?

WIFE
Just what I said. By the end of
the year, I'm gone. You can come –
or don't. Your call.

She's not bluffing. Robert sees it.

ROBERT (V.O.)
She wasn't angry. Just... decided.
And she meant it.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT - MONTAGE (FLASHBACKS)

- Robert staring out the window, alone.
- Boxes half-packed.
- Calendar marked: December - "Hawaii?" circled in red.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I couldn't do it. Hawaii's
beautiful, sure. But the cost of
living? Insane. Housing,
groceries, gas... no way.

INT. OFFICE - EVENING - ROBERT ALONE

He flips through a photo album. Pictures of family. Maps.
Closes the Hawaii brochure. Opens a U.S. map.

ROBERT (V.O.)
So... what now? My family was
scattered. Alabama. Palm Springs.
My sister way up north. My parents
- gone.

EXT. HARVEY, NORTH DAKOTA - SERIES OF SHOTS - DAY
(FLASHBACK)

- KATY and her family in front of a small-town hardware store.
- Snow blankets everything.
- Local diner with ONE customer inside.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Katy landed in Harvey. Softball
scholarship. Married a football
player. Three kids. Good people,
but man... that place? 1,700
people. No Thai, no Target, no

nothing. Winter from October to
March. Maybe longer.

INT. KITCHEN - HANFORD, CALIFORNIA - DAY (FLASHBACK)

- EMILY and her husband unpacking baby gifts.
- Sunlight, trees swaying, a mild breeze through the open window.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Emily settled in Hanford.
Teachers. Expecting their first.
Warm. Familiar. Made sense.

INT. KATY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - BACK TO PRESENT

Robert takes a deep breath. Smiles. He watches Nicky run into the next room.

ROBERT (V.O.)
So I packed up and moved to
Hanford. Left the rain behind.
Left a marriage. Found something
better.

EXT. HANFORD - VARIOUS LOCATIONS - DAY (MONTAGE)

A sweeping MONTAGE introducing Hanford, California:

- SUN blazes over rooftops.
- A Costco sign.
- Family-owned restaurants.
- Traffic flows smoothly through wide, open roads.
- People smile, wave, help each other out.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Hanford wasn't Renton, but that was the point. Sixty thousand people. Big enough for amenities – small enough for peace. And sun. God, the sun.

EXT. HANFORD STREET - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Robert's car is stalled on the side of the road. Before he can open the hood, THREE LOCAL GUYS show up and help him push it off to the curb.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Back in Renton? That would've earned me a horn and a middle finger. Here? I got help. Smiles. "Sir."

INT. SMALL HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Robert looks around a cozy, modest home. Moving boxes are half-unpacked. He gazes out a sunlit window.

ROBERT (V.O.)

I bought a place ten minutes from Emily. Waiting for my first grandchild to arrive. And yeah – I was gonna be the sitter. Full time.

EXT. LOCAL PARK - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A festive gender reveal party. EMILY and SPENCER pop a balloon – BLUE CONFETTI explodes. Cheers and applause.

ROBERT (V.O.)

It wasn't a burden. It was joy. Nostalgia. I raised two daughters. Now I'd help raise her boy.

INT. GARAGE - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Fold-out chairs. Laughter. Friends over. EMILY sits in a chair. SPENCER walks over quietly, places a blanket over her shoulders, then gently tucks her in.

ROBERT (V.O.)
She married a good one. Spencer.
Kind, steady. And gentle.

Emily smiles up at Spencer, warm and full of love.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

EMILY lays in bed, exhausted but glowing. SPENCER beside her. Family gathered. A NEWBORN BABY wrapped in a blanket in her arms.

SUPER: September 22 - 3:26 P.M.

ROBERT (V.O.)
And then came Nicky. Nicolas
Christopher Carlile. My grandson.

Robert stands nearby, gazing at the baby with a look only a grandfather can wear - pride, peace, joy.

ROBERT (V.O.)
No one - no one - was going to
love or care for that boy the way
I would.

EXT. BACKYARD - LATE AFTERNOON

Robert watches as EMILY gently rocks NICKY in a chair. He smiles to himself, hands in his pockets.

ROBERT (V.O.)

I'd done it once with my girls.
Now, I'd get to do it again –
maybe even better.

INT. EMILY AND SPENCER'S HOUSE - ENTRY/LIVING

ROOM - MORNING

Robert walks through the front door. NICKY grabs his hand, eyes bright with excitement.

NICKY
C'mon, Ra-Ra, it's over here!

ROBERT
(Laughing)
Nicky, what do you have to show
me? I can't wait!

INT. KITCHEN - SAME TIME

EMILY and SPENCER hustle through their morning routine – spreading mayo on bread, pouring coffee, pulling turkey from the fridge. The DOG waits expectantly by its bowl.

They hand off responsibilities like a well-rehearsed team: vitamins, coffee, feeding the dog, prepping Nicky's clothes – which are already laid out.

ROBERT (V.O.)
They never let me pick his clothes
anymore. One time I dressed him in
red shorts and a red T-shirt... I
thought it matched.

FLASHBACK - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Emily stares at Nicky in disbelief. Spencer tries to hold back a laugh.

EMILY

Dad! He can't go to the playground
looking like that!

ROBERT (V.O.)

Apparently I committed a fashion
crime.

BACK TO PRESENT - LIVING ROOM

Robert barely says good morning. Nicky is on a mission.

NICKY

Look, Ra-Ra, up there!

Nicky points to the Christmas tree, already set up in the
corner of the room. It glows warmly – ornaments sparkling.

ROBERT

Yes, Nicky, that Christmas bulb is
cool. Did Mommy and Daddy get that
one special for you?

NICKY

No, Ra-Ra, look up there. Don't
you see the elf up there?

Robert squints. Then he spots it – a twelve-inch elf nestled
in a high branch. Red hat, red suit, white collar, white
gloves. Blue eyes, broad smile.

ROBERT

Ah, I see it! That's neat. How did
the elf get up there?

NICKY

I don't know, Ra-Ra. I guess it
just climbed up there while I was
sleeping last night.

Robert smiles.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Emily bought the elf last week.
Every morning, it hid in a new
spot. Part of a countdown.
Chocolate candy came with it too.

MONTAGE - MORNING ROUTINES

— Nicky jumps out of bed, scanning the house. — Spots the
elf on a bookshelf — dances with joy. — Finds it tucked in a
plant — laughs and claps.

ROBERT (V.O.)

She never made it hard to find.
But he loved it. Every time.

Robert watches Nicky's face as he admires the elf.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Sometimes I wonder if he thinks
it's alive. Honestly, I hope he
does.

INT. FOYER - MOMENTS LATER

Emily and Spencer put on coats, grabbing keys and bags.

EMILY

Love you, Nicky!

SPENCER

Be good today, buddy.

NICKY

Love you! Bye, Mommy! Bye, Daddy!

HUGS all around as they head to the garage.

The garage door closes. Robert turns to Nicky.

ROBERT

So, Nicky, what would you like to do today?

MONTAGE - NICKY & RA-RA OPTIONS

– CHUCK E. CHEESE: kids laugh, lights flash, tickets fly.

– DEFY TRAMPOLINE PARK: Nicky soars into a foam pit.

– LIBRARY: Nicky “types” on a computer. Robert reads him a book.

– PARK: Ducks waddle near a pond. Nicky chases them, giggling.

– HOME: Paw Patrol plays on the TV. Toys cover the living room. Nicky pedals a tiny bike in the cul-de-sac.

BACK TO: LIVING ROOM

NICKY

Ra-Ra, can we go to Chuck E. Cheese?

ROBERT

Sure, Nicky. Let’s get you some breakfast, and then we’ll be on our way.

NICKY

Yeah!

Nicky sprints to the table, ready to eat and get the day started.

FADE TO :

INT. ROBERT'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Robert sits on the couch, smiling to himself. Nicky plays on the floor with toy dinosaurs.

ROBERT

Hey, Nicky... how old are you again?

Nicky stands, raises three fingers proudly.

NICKY

I'm this many, Ra-Ra! One, two, three!

He counts his fingers aloud. Then he stops, squints up at Robert.

NICKY

How old are you?

ROBERT

Sixty-four.

Nicky turns away dramatically, hand on his forehead like a stage actor in distress.

NICKY

Whoa, Ra-Ra... that's a big number.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Nicky bursts out of his bedroom completely naked.

NICKY

Hey Ra-Ra! What do you wanna play?

Robert stops in his tracks.

ROBERT

Nicky, I'll play whatever you want. But first... you need clothes, buddy.

Nicky looks confused.

NICKY

I'm not running around naked. I'm walking.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Robert kneels at the coffee table with Nicky's Etch A Sketch.

ROBERT

What letter is this?

He draws a big "F."

NICKY

That's an F!

ROBERT

Good job! F is for funny, football, fox...

NICKY

Or fart!

Nicky cracks up laughing. Robert shakes his head, laughing with him.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Nicky points at an ultrasound photo taped to the fridge.

NICKY
Is that me when I was in Mama's
belly?

ROBERT
Yep, that's you.

Nicky stares, eyebrows scrunched.

NICKY
Why is it so dark in there? Did
someone forget to turn on the
lights?

INT. CAR - DAY

Robert drives. Nicky sits in his booster seat, kicking his feet.

ROBERT
So, what'd you learn in preschool
today?

NICKY
Lions live in Africa.

ROBERT
The whole class learned that?

NICKY
I don't know what they learned.
That's what I learned.

EXT. BACKYARD POOL - DAY

The sun blazes. Nicky splashes in the shallow end. Robert lounges on the edge, clearly tired.

ROBERT

Nicky, wanna come inside? I've got ice cream. Or... Paw Patrol?

NICKY

Nope!

ROBERT

Candy? Trucks?

NICKY

Still nope.

Robert thinks. Then a spark hits.

ROBERT

Hey, let me see your fingers.

Nicky holds up his hands.

ROBERT

Oh my goodness. Look at these wrinkles!

Nicky's eyes widen.

NICKY

What's wrong?

ROBERT

If your fingers get too wrinkly, they might fall off.

Nicky bolts out of the pool.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Robert dries Nicky's hair with a towel. Nicky sips from a cup of milk.

NICKY

Ra-Ra, do fingers really fall off?

ROBERT

Nah. That was just... something
silly Ra-Ra said.

Nicky shrugs, back to his fruit snacks. Crisis averted.

EXT. FRONT YARD - DAY

A caterpillar crawls across the sidewalk. Nicky crouches
beside it, fascinated.

NICKY

Hey Ra-Ra, what's this?

ROBERT

That's a caterpillar. Wanna touch
it?

Nicky hesitates, then gently taps it with a finger.

NICKY

It feels fuzzy.

ROBERT

You can pick it up, if you want.

Nicky lifts it, holding it close to his nose.

NICKY

Can I keep it?

Robert thinks for a beat.

ROBERT

Sure... but we're headed to Chuck
E. Cheese. We can't take him in
the car. Let's leave him over by
the grass, and pick him up when we
get back.

NICKY

Okay!

EXT. PARK - DAY

Nicky zooms down a slide, races across monkey bars, swings high into the air. Robert watches from a bench, smiling and exhausted.

Another kid joins Nicky. They run off together, instantly friends.

Robert checks the time. Then leans toward the play structure.

ROBERT

Nicky! Want ice cream at Superior Dairy?

No answer.

ROBERT

Or a new toy? Remember the caterpillar?

Nicky runs back instantly, eyes wide.

NICKY

Let's go!

EXT. DEFY TRAMPOLINE PARK - DAY

NICKY bounces nonstop on a massive trampoline. Laughs echo. ROBERT sits nearby on a bench, eyes fixed on Nicky.

NICKY

Watch me, Ra-Ra!

Nicky leaps and spins mid-air.

NICKY

Watch this, Ra-Ra!

Robert claps and gasps dramatically.

ROBERT

Whoa! You're gonna hit the roof with that one!

INT. ROBERT'S JEEP - MOVING - DAY

Robert drives. Nicky sits in the back, bouncing with excitement.

ROBERT
There's a cow, Nicky.

NICKY
The cow goes moo!

ROBERT
Over there's a horse.

NICKY
The horse goes neigh!

ROBERT
Good job!

NICKY
The cow goes... meow!

Robert squints in the rearview.

ROBERT
What?

Nicky explodes with laughter.

NICKY
Gotcha, Ra-Ra!

INT. CHUCK E. CHEESE - LATER

Nicky dances around with a plastic top and two lollipops. A PRIZE TICKET slips from his pocket.

ROBERT
What'd you score?

NICKY
216 points! Look what I got!

ROBERT
You're gonna need a trophy shelf
soon.

EXT. EMILY'S HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

Robert parks the Jeep. He unbuckles Nicky and lifts him out of the seat.

ROBERT
Wanna ride or walk?

Nicky wiggles free from Robert's arms.

NICKY
I can walk on my own, Ra-Ra. I'm
three years old. I'm a big boy.

Robert nods, then gently grabs Nicky's hand. Nicky squeezes it.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

Robert's eyes snap open. Light cuts through the blinds.

He bolts upright, sees the time: 7:00 A.M.

ROBERT
Damn it.

He throws off the covers, swings out of bed, grabs clothes from the drawer blindly.

INT. ROBERT'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Robert grabs a sack lunch and water bottle from the fridge. His keys, wallet, and phone are already clutched in one hand.

INT. GARAGE - SECONDS LATER

He hits the garage opener, tosses everything into the Jeep, and starts the engine. The dashboard clock reads 7:09 A.M.

ROBERT
Eight minutes. Let's go.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

He hesitates, watches the garage door slowly shut. It finally locks.

ROBERT
Okay. Good.

INT. JEEP - MOVING - MOMENTS LATER

He speeds through green lights, focused. A RED LIGHT hits him.

ROBERT
Come on, not now.

Another red light.

ROBERT
You've got to be kidding me.

EXT. EMILY'S NEIGHBORHOOD - MINUTES LATER

Robert's Jeep turns into the cul-de-sac. The clock reads 7:18 A.M.

As he swings toward the driveway, his phone rings.

CALLER ID: Emily.

Robert ignores it. Throws the gear in reverse.

EXT. EMILY'S DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Robert reverses quickly. He's done this hundreds of times.

THUD. A high-pitched SHRIEK cuts the air.

Robert's left rear wheel rises slightly--then settles. His face goes pale.

ROBERT
What the hell...?

He slams the brake. Silence.

EXT. EMILY'S DRIVEWAY - MORNING

Robert kills the engine and steps out of his Jeep, lunch and water in hand.

He takes one step--then stops.

Lying beside the left-rear tire, sprawled flat on the concrete, is NICKY.

His tiny chest is crushed inward. Blood leaks from his nose, ears, and mouth.

Robert drops everything.

FLASH TO:

INT. EMILY'S KITCHEN - MOMENTS EARLIER

Nicky, already dressed, munches scrambled eggs at the table.

NICKY
I'm done, Mommy.

He gulps milk from a bottle, slides down from his chair, and runs to the front window.

EXT. FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

Nicky watches. Waits. No Jeep.

Back inside, EMILY closes the fridge.

EMILY
(to Spencer)
It's weird. Dad's never late.

SPENCER
Maybe traffic?

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Emily grabs her phone from the bedroom. Dials.

EXT. FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

Nicky's eyes light up – the black Jeep turns into the cul-de-sac.

He throws open the door and bolts outside, barefoot.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Robert pauses before backing in. He checks the clock: 7:18 a.m. His phone rings – he sees it's Emily.

He doesn't answer. Slams the Jeep into reverse. Accelerates.

THUD.

A faint, high-pitched SHRIEK echoes under the car.

The rear tire lifts, then settles.

EXT. LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

Emily lowers her phone.

A noise outside grabs her attention. She peers toward the door—it's open.

She steps out.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

She spots Robert standing beside the Jeep, unmoving, staring down.

EMILY

Dad?

He doesn't respond. She rounds the back of the Jeep.

Then Stops cold.

NICKY lies motionless, blood trailing from his body onto the concrete.

EMILY

Nicky! No! Oh my God!

She collapses to her knees, hands trembling over his lifeless form.

SCREAMS rip from her throat — raw, animal, unfiltered.

Robert remains still, blinking slowly, as if trapped in a fog.

INT. BATHROOM - SAME TIME

Spencer hears the scream. He bolts.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Spencer bursts out the door. Sees Emily kneeling. Sees Nicky.

He stumbles but catches himself. Pulls out his phone.

SPENCER
(into phone)
9-1-1. We need help. Now. Please.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - MINUTES LATER

A POLICE CRUISER and a FIRE TRUCK pull up.

PARAMEDICS rush with gear. They drop beside Nicky.

They check for a pulse. There isn't one.

They start CPR anyway. One tries compressions - the chest doesn't respond.

PARAMEDIC
Stop.

They cover Nicky with a red-and-white shroud labeled Hanford Fire Department.

They step away. One starts filling out paperwork.

Nearby, a POLICE OFFICER speaks quietly with Emily and Spencer.

EXT. CURB - SAME TIME

Robert sits curled on the edge of the sidewalk. Knees up. Head buried in his arms.

The second OFFICER approaches.

OFFICER
Sir? Can you tell me what
happened?

No answer.

The officer places a firm hand on Robert's shoulder.

OFFICER
Sir, I need you to speak to me.

Robert lifts his head slowly. His face is empty.

ROBERT

I killed my grandson. I'm sorry...
I killed him.

The officer flinches but keeps his composure.

OFFICER

Alright, sir. Just sit tight.

He walks off, shaken.

EXT. CURB - THIRTY MINUTES LATER

The officer returns.

OFFICER

Sir, I need to read you your
rights.

He begins reading the Miranda Warning, voice trying to stay professional, but cracking.

OFFICER

Do you understand these rights?

Robert nods.

OFFICER

Please stand up. I'm going to
place you under arrest and take
you to the station.

He gently places handcuffs on Robert.

Behind his eyes, the officer sees his own kids - eight and ten. Sees the face of their grandfather.

OFFICER

(quietly, to himself)
But for the grace of God...

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. POLICE TRANSPORT VAN - DAY

Robert sits handcuffed, staring blankly at the wall. The van hums, but his mind is somewhere else - distant.

INT. JAIL BOOKING AREA - MOMENTS LATER

A CORRECTIONS OFFICER snaps on latex gloves.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER
Squat down. Spread your cheeks.
Cough.

Robert blinks. Confused.

ROBERT
What?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER
You heard me. Let's move it along.
You've got a phone call and lunch
in thirty. It's turkey sandwiches
today. Better than the bologna
sludge we usually have.

Robert doesn't react. He complies, dazed.

INT. JAIL CELL - LATER

Robert sits on the top bunk, knees pulled in, staring up at the ceiling.

Inmates walk by, glance in. Some nod politely. One INMATE holds out a tray with an extra cookie.

INMATE
You good, old man? Want in on
cards later?

Robert doesn't answer.

The inmate shrugs, takes the cookie back.

INT. JAIL - MESS HALL - DAY (MONTAGE)

- Robert places untouched trays down.
- Other inmates swoop in, divide the food, barter.
- Robert returns to his bunk. Always silent.

INT. JAIL - DAY 4

A CORRECTIONS OFFICER approaches Robert's cell.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER
Hall. You've got a call.

INT. PHONE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Robert picks up the receiver. EMILY's voice comes through the phone.

EMILY (O.S.)
Hey, Dad. How are you doing?

ROBERT
Okay, I guess.

EMILY (O.S.)
I wanted to know if... you'd like
me to bail you out?

Robert pauses.

ROBERT
Um... thanks, Emily. But I think
I'll stay. It's not that bad. The
inmates are actually nice to me.

EMILY (O.S.)

Okay. I just wanted to let you know... we're not doing a funeral for Nicky. Just a private burial this Saturday. Spencer, the pastor, and me. We bought a plot at Kings River.

Robert closes his eyes.

EMILY (O.S.)

Afterward, we're having a wake at our house. Katy and her husband are flying in. Spencer's parents too. Just a few close friends. I thought maybe... you'd want to come?

Robert exhales slowly.

ROBERT

I... I appreciate that. But I shouldn't. I don't want anyone spending five grand on bail just so I can make everyone uncomfortable.

EMILY (O.S.)

I understand. I'll let you know how it goes. Katy might stop by to see you before she flies back.

ROBERT

Okay.

They hang up.

INT. JAIL CELL - LATER THAT WEEK

Robert sits alone again. Bunk above him empty. Food untouched on his tray. He stares at the wall.

KATY never visits.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

Robert stands before the JUDGE. His court-appointed ATTORNEY – privately hired by Emily – stands beside him.

JUDGE
Mr. Hall, do you understand the
charges against you?

ROBERT
Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE
And how do you plead?

ROBERT
Guilty.

Silence fills the courtroom.

JUDGE
The court finds the defendant
guilty of involuntary vehicular
manslaughter. Sentencing to
follow.

Robert bows his head.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

A quiet, heavy air fills the room. ROBERT sits beside his ATTORNEY, hands clasped tightly. The JUDGE reviews documents at the bench.

The DEFENSE ATTORNEY steps forward.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY

Your Honor, the tragedy before us was preventable. Mr. Hall should have slowed down. He should have checked his mirrors and backup camera. He should have been more careful.

The attorney paces slightly, then turns toward the bench.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY

But intention matters. There was no malice here. No recklessness. This is not a man who neglected his duties. This is a man who adored his grandson. Who cherished him. This was not criminal intent — it was human error. Tragic, yes. But accidentally.

He holds up a photograph — Robert and Nicky playing together.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY

We can no more criminalize this mistake than we could jail a child for spilling milk. The consequences were unthinkable — but the cause was not evil. I ask the court to remember that.

The judge listens carefully, nods almost imperceptibly.

The DEFENSE ATTORNEY steps back.

A COURT OFFICER signals. EMILY stands from her seat in the gallery, holding a crumpled piece of paper. She walks to the podium.

Robert watches her nervously, tears in his eyes.

EMILY

Your Honor, thank you for allowing me to speak.

She takes a breath, unfolds the paper.

EMILY

My husband, my family, our friends... we're devastated. Nicky was our world. Every night, I still cry myself to sleep where I used to cuddle him in my arms.

Her hands shake slightly.

EMILY

It's been weeks, but the pain hasn't gone anywhere. It probably never will. But I'm not here to punish anyone. I'm here to stop that pain from growing.

She glances briefly at Robert.

EMILY

My father didn't mean to hurt Nicky. That's a fact no one can dispute. We all know it. Sending him to prison won't heal us. It will only make it worse.

She steadies her voice, firm now.

EMILY

Judge, please. Don't add salt to the wound. I lost my son. Please don't make me lose my father too.

She steps back from the podium, eyes brimming.

Robert lowers his head.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

EMILY walks back to her seat. She passes ROBERT, just fifteen feet away. Their eyes meet. Her expression flickers—a mixture of grief and grace. Her eyes try to smile, but her mouth trembles with sorrow.

Robert blinks. He can't tell what she's feeling.

The JUDGE sits up straighter, trying to stay composed. His eyes glisten. He clears his throat.

JUDGE

In twenty-two years on the bench,
I don't believe I've presided over
a sadder case. My duty is to serve
justice—for the victim and the
family.

He shuffles papers, places them neatly aside.

JUDGE

But what is justice here? Has it
already been served?

He looks directly at Robert.

JUDGE

Mr. Hall has suffered—and will
suffer—for the rest of his life.
He has no prior record. Impeccable
driving history.

A beat of silence.

JUDGE

Therefore, under the sentencing
guidelines for involuntary
vehicular manslaughter in the
state of California, I hereby
sentence Mr. Hall to: thirty days
in jail with credit for time
served, a \$5,000 fine, and
suspension of his driver's license
until completion of a
court-approved safety course.

The gavel falls.

JUDGE
Good luck to you, Mr. Hall.

EXT. JAIL - DAY

EMILY's car idles at the curb. ROBERT exits the facility, holding a small plastic property bag.

He opens the door and gets in.

INT. EMILY'S CAR - MOVING - DAY

They drive in silence.

Robert looks out the window. Emily grips the wheel.

ROBERT
How's Spencer doing?

Emily shakes her head slightly, as if waking from a fog.

EMILY
He's okay. Back at work... helps
keep him busy. I'm still at home
for now.

Robert swallows.

ROBERT
Emily, I'm so... so sorry.

Emily nods slowly.

EMILY
I know, Dad.

A beat.

EMILY
Well... here we are.

She pulls up in front of Robert's house.

ROBERT

Thanks. Say hi to Spencer for me.

EMILY

I will.

He steps out. She drives away.

Robert watches her car until it disappears around the corner. His eyes linger.

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Robert sinks into his old lounge chair. The silence is crushing.

He stares at the hallway.

IMAGINARY SOUND:

NICKY (O.S.)

I'm fast, Ra-Ra! You can't catch me!

ROBERT (O.S.)

Oh yes I can!

FLASHBACK - INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - VARIOUS ROOMS - DAY

- NICKY races through the hallway. - Robert chases him, laughing. - Nicky bolts into a bedroom. Robert "misses" him. - They do laps around the kitchen island. - Both tumble to the living room floor, giggling.

LATER - COUCH

Nicky sits on Robert's lap. They read Pete the Cat and the Lost Tooth.

ROBERT

What do you think the Tooth Fairy will bring him?

NICKY

Hmm... maybe a toy?

They flip the page.

ROBERT
Let's find out.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Nicky drinks milk. PAW Patrol plays on TV.

ROBERT
I like Marshall the best. What
about you?

NICKY
I like Rubble... no, wait...
Chase!

They laugh together.

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - BACK TO PRESENT

The room is empty now.

Robert stares at the hallway. The couch. The cabinet.

He goes Silent.

He slams his fist into the chair's armrest. Winces. Tears
begin to fill his eyes.

He leans forward. Shoulders shake. He sobs—quietly at first.
Then harder. His body convulses.

His cries become sharp, raw.

He presses his hands over his face. Tears stream through his
fingers.

Finally, exhausted, Robert slumps back in the chair. Eyes
open. Blank.

He stares at the ceiling.

INT. BUFFALO WILD WINGS - BAR - DAY

The BARTENDER places Robert's drink in front of him.

BARTENDER

Okay, sir. That'll be right up.

She walks away.

Robert watches her, expression tightening. He mutters under his breath.

ROBERT

What the hell are you so happy about?

He scans the restaurant, hollow.

INT. DRIVER SAFETY CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

The INSTRUCTOR walks across the front of the class, energized.

INSTRUCTOR

Want to avoid a ticket? Be courteous. Admit what you did. Officers deal with liars all day - honesty is a breath of fresh air.

Robert crosses his arms.

ROBERT

(mutters)

Could've covered this in ten minutes.

People laugh, the mood loosens. Robert doesn't.

INT. CLASSROOM - LATER

The INSTRUCTOR holds a stack of papers.

INSTRUCTOR

Alright folks, that wraps it up.
Early dismissal today. But don't
leave without your completion
certificate.

People shuffle out. Robert watches the Harley guy head to
the parking lot.

EXT. PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

The Harley roars to life. The rider speeds out, blowing the
stop sign.

Robert stares after him, jaw set.

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Robert paces. Agitated. He stops. Sits. Then stand again.

INT. ROBERT'S KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Robert yanks open a pantry door. Scans the bottles. Grabs a
Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay.

He pours a glass. Drink it in one go.

Pours another.

INT. ROBERT'S LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Half the bottle is gone. Then the rest.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Stares
forward.

Eyes glassy.

ROBERT

(snarling)
Where were you, God?

He hurls the empty glass against the wall. It shatters.

He grabs the armrest of his chair and slams his forearm into it-hard.

Again.

INT. ROBERT'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

Robert sits slouched in his lounge chair, jaw clenched, face twitching.

ROBERT
(to the ceiling)
You're fake. You're nothing.

He screams.

ROBERT
I hate you! God is NOTHING!

He sobs. Collapses forward. Then leans back, spent. Still trembling.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Robert lies awake, fists clenched.

His legs twitch beneath the covers. His eyes flutter but never fully close.

He grits his teeth, grinding. Jaw locked.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

DIGITAL CLOCK: 6:32 a.m. Robert bolts upright in bed.

He takes a deep breath. Exhales. His eyes are bloodshot. His body is depleted.

He collapses backward onto the mattress, staring at the ceiling. He doesn't move.

His phone on his chest, he stares at it. Hesitates.

His hand trembles as he picks it up. He dials.

INTERCUT - ROBERT / EMILY (V.O.) - PHONE CONVERSATION

EMILY (30s)

Hello?

ROBERT

Hello, Emily? This is your dad.

EMILY

Oh, um... how are you?

ROBERT

Well, okay, I guess. I mean, I have good days and bad days. Probably more bad days, though.

(pause)

But I was wondering how you and Spencer are doing.

EMILY

The same as you. More bad days than good, but we're making progress.

ROBERT

That's good.

(beat)

Emily, I haven't seen you in weeks. I used to see you almost every day. Would it be possible to see you, just for a little while?

EMILY

Um, yeah, okay, I guess so. Um...
you could come over for dinner
tonight. We're just having
meatloaf and boxed mashed
potatoes.

ROBERT
Okay, great. What time?

EMILY
Around 5:30.

ROBERT
Okay. See you then.

END INTERCUT

Robert sets the phone down. His hands tremble. He clasps
them together, leans back, exhales hard.

His mind churns. Regret, fear. Doubt creeps in.

INT. ROBERT'S BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Water runs. Robert scrubs his face, brushes his teeth. His
movements are mechanical, desperate to feel normal.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - EVENING

Robert parks in the driveway. Not the usual reverse park—he
drives straight in. He notices it.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Never backing in again.

A shadow of a thought creeps in...

ROBERT (V.O.)
Dad always backed in. Said it was
faster if you had to leave in a
hurry. What garbage.

His expression changes—darkens.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Maybe if I hadn't copied him,
maybe if I'd just pulled straight
in... maybe Nicky would still be
alive.

He exhales, shakes it off. Pushes the guilt away—but it
lingers.

INT. EMILY & SPENCER'S HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - EVENING

EMILY opens the door. She smiles. It's polite but
restrained.

She hugs Robert. It's awkward, distant—like a forced gesture
between strangers.

ROBERT
Hi. Good to finally see you.

No response. Emily closes the door without looking at him.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Quiet. No sign of SPENCER.

ROBERT
Um... Emily, where is Spencer?

EMILY

He's in the bathroom shaving.
He'll be out in a minute.

ROBERT
Okay, may I use your hallway
bathroom?

She nods. Robert walks down the hall, hesitant.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

He passes doors. One is cracked open, NICKY'S ROOM. Robert stops.

Emotion hits like a wave.

INT. NICKY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Robert enters slowly. The room is neat. Preserved. A shrine.
His eyes scan the walls. Photos.

- Nicky with Emily and Spencer at Disneyland.
- Nicky with his friend Jason, riding bikes.

Robert steps closer to the bed. Look above it. An Empty space.

ROBERT (V.O.)
The picture of me and Nicky at
Chuck E. Cheese... gone.

He exhales. Leaves the room.

INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Cold water on his face. Red eyes. He blinks hard. A knot tightens in his throat.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Robert walks in. EMILY stands waiting.

EMILY
Are you okay, Dad?

Robert sits on the far end of the couch, unsure, distant.

EMILY
Hey, Dad! What's wrong? Looks like
you saw a ghost.

ROBERT
Emily, I... I-

INT. HALLWAY - SAME TIME

SPENCER enters. He walks in like a man onstage. A smile that
doesn't quite reach his eyes.

He extends a hand.

SPENCER
It's good to see you again.

Robert stands, shakes his hand.

The gesture feels absurd.

ROBERT (V.O.)
We only ever shook hands at the
wedding and that \$20 football bet.

EMILY
Dinner's ready.

Before anyone can speak more, they all head to the dining
table. Timed perfectly.

INT. DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Robert eats fast, eyes on his plate. Meat loaf, mashed potatoes. Ketchup, butter, salt, pepper.

He keeps busy.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Maybe it's a stall tactic. So
Spencer doesn't have to talk to
me.

But Robert knows he has to speak.

He sets down his fork. He Looks at Spencer.

ROBERT
Spencer... I've already said this
to Emily, but I want to say it to
you as well.
(beat)
I just want you to know how sorry
I am for what happened. I know it
might sound contrite. I know it's
not enough to just say I'm sorry,
and it'd sound conceited to say I
miss Nicky as much as you.
(pause)
But that's the way I feel.
(quiet)
My God, I'm so sorry, Spencer.

Silence.

Spencer chews slowly. Stops. Puts down his fork. Sips water.
Looks at Robert.

SPENCER
Yes, you're right. There's no way
you can know how I feel, or what
I've been through since Nicky's
been gone.
(beat)
I'll be honest. At first, I truly
hated you. Nicky's gone because of
you.
(pause)

But... I know you loved Nicky too.
I'm sure you've suffered a lot.

(beat)

You just need to give me more
time.

(struggling)

I think you and I can... can...
well, you know what I mean.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - NIGHT

Driving home. Silence. Robert stares out the windshield,
lost in thought.

ROBERT (V.O.)

What did Spencer mean? That he'd
tolerate me again? Maybe let me
come over for football games...
holidays?

Hope flickers. Then fades.

ROBERT (V.O.)

But how long will that take?
Weeks? Months? Years?

He drives through the night. Quiet.

ROBERT (V.O.)

I called Emily. I set this in
motion. But maybe she didn't
really want it. Maybe she felt
obligated.

A long pause.

ROBERT (V.O.)

I should stay away. Let them reach
out. If they want to.

He nods to himself.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Sunlight filters through the blinds. ROBERT sits up in bed, face twisted in anger. He throws off the covers, storms across the room.

ROBERT
(under his breath)
Goddamn it. Goddamn you.

He paces, rage boiling over.

ROBERT
Screw you, God! You let him die!
What kind of sick bastard does
that?

His voice echoes in the quiet house. He stops.

A shift. Silence.

Something inside clicks. His breathing slows. He sits on the edge of the bed, hands in his lap. Conflicted.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Robert stares into space. His thoughts spiral. Then—an idea forms. Wild. Desperate.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Maybe I was wrong about God.
Maybe... He's still there. Still
powerful. Still listening.

He looks upward. A tear threatens.

ROBERT (V.O.)
God can do miracles... right?

Beat.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - LATER

Robert kneels beside the bed. Hands together. Eyes shut tight.

ROBERT

Bring him back. Please... I'll do
whatever you want. I'll serve You.
Preach. Read the Bible every day.
Just... bring him back.

His face softens. A strange warmth washes over him.

He breathes in. At peace.

INT. ROBERT'S CLOSET - MOMENTS LATER

He digs through boxes. Old photos, keepsakes. His hand lands on a dusty Bible.

He pulls it out, wipes it clean. Holds it close like treasure.

INT. KITCHEN / LIVING ROOM / BEDROOM - MONTAGE

- Robert flips through the Bible at the kitchen table.
- Eats a sandwich with one hand, reads with the other.
- Kneels again in prayer, lips moving fast.
- Drinks water, rubs his eyes, keeps reading.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Clock reads 8:30 p.m. Robert collapses into bed. He exhales-peaceful.

Eyes close.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING

Birds chirp faintly outside.

Robert wakes slowly. Calm... until his eyes scan the room.
Still, stillness. Reality hits.

He sits up. Scoffs. Shakes his head.

ROBERT (V.O.)
What was I thinking? Time travel?
Resurrection? That's Stephen King
territory...

He laughs—a single bitter chuckle.

INT. CLOSET - MOMENTS LATER

Robert slides the Bible back onto the shelf. He Sets the
placeholder paper inside. He Gently closes the door.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

He sits on the edge of the bed. Not angry—just empty.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I'm not mad, I tried. I wanted to
believe. But it's not happening.
Not for me.

Beat.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Maybe being mad at God's a waste
of energy anyway. Doesn't fix
anything.

Robert stares out the window. Quiet.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Religion won't fix this. Nothing
will. I'm on my own.

He exhales.

FADE TO:

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - SERIES OF SHOTS - DAY INTO NIGHT

- Robert stares blankly at the TV.
- Flips through an old paperback on the couch.
- Fries eggs. Eats in silence.
- Showers slowly, mechanically.
- Reads the newspaper without focus.
- Sits, stares out the window.
- Lies down. Naps.

INT. ROBERT'S LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Robert paces.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Missing someone only feels good if
you know you'll see them again.

He stops. Looks at a photo of EMILY on a side table.

ROBERT (V.O.)
It's anticipation. The build-up.
That's what makes missing them
bearable. Maybe even beautiful.

Beat.

He shifts his gaze to another frame—a picture of NICKY.

ROBERT (V.O.)
But missing someone who'll never
come back...
(beat)
That never stops hurting.

He swallows hard. His face tightens.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Robert lies in bed, wide awake. Eyes open in the dark.

ROBERT (V.O.)
No prayer. No miracle. No fixing
it.

Beat.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Only thing that ends the pain...
is me.

INT. KITCHEN - NEXT MORNING

Robert washes a coffee mug. Looking out the window.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I need out of this house. I need
to see someone.

EXT. BUFFALO WILD WINGS - EVENING

Robert parks. The sky's going dark. Friday night crowd
building inside.

INT. BUFFALO WILD WINGS - BAR AREA - CONTINUOUS

The bar is nearly empty.

— An ELDERLY COUPLE eats wings in silence.
— Two YOUNG GUYS laugh loudly at the far end of the
horseshoe bar.

Robert sits at the opposite side. Alone.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Okay. Not great. But it'll fill
up. Someone'll talk.

The DOOR OPENS. A MAN (50s, jittery energy, slightly off) enters, drops into a stool just one seat away from Robert. He wears a Harley-Davidson tee and half a smile.

He fumbles through a backpack, pulls out his wallet.

BARTENDER (O.S.)
Hey guys, what can I get you?

The bartender barely looks drinking age.

MAN
Uh, what kinda beer you got on tap?

The bartender turns. Five taps, clearly labeled, gleam under the lights.

BARTENDER
Those five.

MAN
No Michelob Ultra? No Sam Adams?

BARTENDER
Nope. But we got Michelob in bottles.

MAN
Okay... I'll take a Heineken.
(smirks)
You should tell your manager about getting Michelob on tap.

BARTENDER
Will do.
(turns to Robert)
And for you, sir?

ROBERT
Glass of your house cabernet.

BARTENDER
Coming up.

The man wiggles on his stool, fiddling with his wallet, his face shifting through invisible arguments.

He turns.

MAN
So, you're a wine drinker, huh?

Robert offers a polite smile.

ROBERT
Not really. Just felt like wine today.

MAN
Yeah? I like a drink every night.

He LAUGHS suddenly, loud, sharp. Slaps the bar. Robert flinches.

ROBERT
Yeah, well... I've never had more than two days of drinking in a row. Even when I was younger.

The drinks arrive. The man stares at Robert like he's an alien.

MAN
You're kidding, right? Never more than two in a row?

He launches into a monologue. Words pour out fast.

The man leans in, warming up like a late-night radio host who's finally got a live mic.

MAN

Man... I remember my first real drink. Sophomore year. We snuck a bottle of Jack into the woods behind Jeremy Conway's place. I puked behind a tree and still went back for more.

He chuckles, already nostalgic.

MAN

Then came the keggers. Jesus. Every Friday night, you knew where the party was by the line of cars parked on the lawn. Red solo cups, cheap beer, someone always bringing that Boone's Farm crap for the girls.

Robert sips his wine, eyes focused forward, trying not to encourage him.

His arms fly. He reenacts wild nights

Robert sips silently, cornered. Eyes wander.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Alcohol's his best friend. His life story. His legacy.

He nods. Feigns interest.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Definitely an alcoholic. Maybe functional. Probably not.

MAN

College was nuts. I was the guy who knew a guy who always had a fifth in his dorm fridge. Ever play Edward Fortyhands? They tape a 40 ounce to each hand, you can't pee 'til both are empty.

He laughs, loud and alone, rocking back in his stool.

MAN

And after college? Shit. That's when it really started. You think drinking in school is wild, try dealing with sales quotas and idiot managers all day. Happy hour saved my damn life.

Robert shifts slightly in his seat.

MAN

Monday through Thursday was just maintenance, vodka soda, couple beers at home. But Friday night? That was release. Dive bars, sports bars, didn't matter. If it poured, I was there.

He takes a dramatic swig of his beer, then points at Robert like he's delivering the moral of a story.

MAN

One time, I woke up in a bathtub in Pasadena. No clue how I got there. My shoes were gone, wallet still on me, and my contact lenses were in a cup with someone else's toothbrush.

Robert raises his eyebrows, managing a tight smile. The man barely notices.

MAN

I'm tellin' ya, alcohol's been a hell of a ride. It's not just drinking. It's history. Culture. Tradition.

He leans closer, like they're sharing a sacred truth.

MAN

You can trace your life through the bottles. I can remember every

breakup, every job, every Super
Bowl... by what I was drinking
that night.

Robert nods politely, still silent, feeling the weight of
every word pile up like empty bottles on a bar floor.

INT. BAR - LATER

Robert sets down his empty glass.

MAN

So anyway, I passed out in the
tub, and I wake up—

ROBERT

Hey, sorry. I gotta go. My wife
and I are headed to someone's
house for dinner.

The man shrugs, leans back.

MAN

Yeah, I get it. Women always ruin
your fun, don't they?

Robert doesn't respond.

He throws a ten dollar bill on the bar and walks.

INT. BUFFALO WILD WINGS - FRONT DOOR - MOMENTS LATER

Robert pushes open the door. Pauses. Looks back.

The man is already mid-chug on beer number two. His eyes
scan the bar for someone else to trap.

Robert watches him. Still. Quiet.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I came here to not be alone.
(beat)
Maybe I'm just like him.

He steps out.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Maybe worse.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Robert wakes up. Something's off.

He lies still, staring at the ceiling. His chest rises and falls with a slow, heavy breath.

ROBERT (V.O.)
It's loneliness. But not like
before.

He sits up. Rubs his hands over his face. There's a restlessness in his body.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Coffee brews. Robert leans on the counter, arms crossed. Thinking.

ROBERT (V.O.)
It's not just missing Emily... or
Nicky.
(pause)
It's the absence of touch. Of
intimacy. Of her.

His eyes shift. Something awakens.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - LATER

He pulls out his phone. Types:
"Where do prostitutes hang out in Fresno?"

Click. Scroll.

His eyes dart across the screen. Craigslist. News articles.
Police sting operations. Motel 6. Pep Boys. Blackstone
Avenue. It's all there.

He sets the phone down.

ROBERT (V.O.)
This is insane.

But he doesn't stop.

INT. BATHROOM - 7:00 P.M.

Water runs. Robert shaves, showers. Cologne.

INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

He dresses: collared shirt, cargo shorts, sandals. Checks
his phone.

ROBERT (V.O.)
75 degrees. Good enough.

He glances in the mirror. Pauses.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Why the hell am I dressing up for
this?

A flicker of guilt. He ignores it.

Grabs his wallet. Pulls out ten twenties.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - NIGHT - 8:10 P.M.

He drives. The sun sets behind him. Streetlights flicker on.

He exits at Shields Street, makes the turn onto Blackstone Avenue.

EXT. BLACKSTONE AVENUE - NIGHT

The strip is alive.

Women in stilettos and miniskirts strut deliberately on the sidewalk. Eyes scan each car.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Jesus...

He slows near a Motel 6. A couple girls linger outside. A man leans against the wall nearby watchful.

At Fresno City Inn, the scene repeats. More girls. More shadows.

Robert drives on.

He spots Pep Boys ahead. Two girls stand near the curb. He pulls over slowly.

One petite blonde, barely covered, too young—approaches. She leans into the passenger window, her voice dry, worn.

PROSTITUTE
Hey there. You lookin' for a date?

Robert hesitates.

ROBERT
Um... yeah. I guess so.

PROSTITUTE
Either you are, or you're not.
Which one is it? I ain't got a
lotta time to waste.

A scar marks her cheek. She reeks of cheap perfume and cigarettes. Her tone sharpens.

PROSTITUTE
So what'll it be? You want a date
or not?

Robert freezes. His gaze locks on her face. A long beat. Something snaps.

INT. ROBERT'S POV - TIME SLOWS

He sees her, too young. Worn out. Desperate.

And then, he reflected in the passenger side mirror. A sixty five year old man paying a teenager for sex.

BACK TO SCENE

His desire evaporates. His face tightens with disgust. He opens his mouth but she cuts him off.

PROSTITUTE

What's your damn problem, man?
Speak up, or move on.

ROBERT

No. I... I don't think I'm
interested in a date.
(beat)
I just want you to be careful. And
safe.

She recoils, confused. Then rolls her eyes and turns away.

Robert drives off.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - LATER

Clothes hit the floor.

He collapses into bed, pulls his knees to his chest. Eyes close. Fetal position.

CUT TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Robert lies on his back, breathing steady, eyes closed.

Then his eyes open. He recalls events from the nights before.

Suddenly he gets up, walks to the wardrobe and takes out a towel and starts to scrub the floor, hard.

Few minutes later.

The floor is very clean, he leans back panting. Then he looks around, the room looks normal but something's off.

He doesn't move at first. Just listens.

ROBERT (V.O.)
No dream. No sound. But someone's
here.

He turns his head slowly to the bedroom door.

A SMALL FIGURE stands just inside the room. About three feet tall. A soft glow surrounds it.

Robert blinks. Focuses his eyes. He sees Nicky standing calmly. The light hugs his shape like a halo.

Robert gasps but not from fear. From joy. Pure, raw joy.

He stares. Frozen. Breath caught in his throat.

ROBERT (V.O.)
It's him. It's really him.

NICKY takes a step forward.

NICKY
Hi, Ra-Ra! Will you come out to
the living room and play with me?

Robert shoots up, overwhelmed.

ROBERT
Yes! Yes, I will!

He throws back the covers.

Nicky turns, walks into the hallway. The glow follows.

Robert jumps to his feet only in boxers. Doesn't care. He moves fast, still half in awe.

He pinches his arm.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I feel it. I'm awake.

He reaches the door pauses.

The hallway light is off. So are all the lights in the house.

ROBERT (V.O.)
No... the light wasn't from the
hallway.

He steps into the hallway. Bare feet on cool tile.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dark. Robert flips on a lamp. Warm light floods the space.

No Nicky. Robert's eyes search wild but hopeful.

He smiles, playing along.

ROBERT
Hey Nicky. Where are you? I'm
gonna find you!

He walks to the couch, lifts a cushion.

ROBERT
Hmm... under here?

Moves behind the couch.

ROBERT
Maybe behind the couch?

He laughs softly, caught up in the memory.

INT. PANTRY - MOMENTS LATER

Robert swings the door open.

ROBERT
Found you, Nicky!

Empty.

He hurries to the coat closet.

ROBERT
Hey! Got you!

Also empty. His smile fades. Concern creeps in.

KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

He opens every cabinet. Every drawer.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Where the hell did he go?

He stares at the back door.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

Dark. Still. Distant dog barking.

ROBERT
Nicky? You out here?
(pause)
Come back in, buddy. It's cold.
You win, okay? I just want to see
you.

No answer. Just the barking dog.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Robert closes the door. He Looks around. Starts to break.

ROBERT

Nicky, please. Come out. Game's over. I need to see you.

Nothing. He slumps onto the couch. Silence.

His eyes dart. Thoughts spiral.

ROBERT (V.O.)

He walked down this hallway. I saw him.

(pause)

Could he have gone out the front door?

INT. ENTRYWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Robert opens the front door.

Dark street. Empty sidewalk.

ROBERT

Nicky?

Only the wind answers. He shuts the door. Slowly.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Robert sits, still. Thinking. Processing. Aching.

After a long beat, he switches off the lamp.

INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

He falls onto the bed. Pulls the covers tight.

Eyes stay open. Hope flickers.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Maybe he'll come back.

He watches the doorway. Waits.

A minute passes. Nothing.

He exhales, long and deep.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I know what I saw.

Beat.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Let them think I'm crazy. I've
been right before.

He closes his eyes.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Robert sits quietly, staring at nothing. A cup of tea cools
beside him.

ROBERT (V.O.)
It happened. I know it happened.
Nicky was here.

He breathes slowly. His face is worn but calm.

ROBERT (V.O.)
He was okay. He wanted to play. He
came to tell me... I didn't fail
him.

Robert smiles faintly, eyes misty.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Robert paces slowly. Stops. Sits on the bed.

ROBERT (V.O.)
God sent him. Just for a moment.
To help me heal.

He stares out the window.

ROBERT (V.O.)
No one else has to believe it. I
know what I saw.

A flicker of doubt flashes across his face.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Even if part of me... wonders.

He exhales. Shakes it off.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Robert types into his phone. A contact name: RICK.
He hits call.

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

RICK (O.S.)
Hello?

ROBERT
Is this Rick?

RICK (O.S.)
Yeah. Who's this?

ROBERT
You don't recognize my voice? It's
Robert.

RICK (O.S.)
Well I'll be damned. What a
surprise! How you doing, stranger?

ROBERT
Not bad. Got a little
downtime—thought I'd come visit.

RICK (O.S.)
Absolutely! Got two guest rooms
now. Take your pick.

ROBERT

Great. I'll book a flight and let you know.

RICK (O.S.)

Perfect. I'll stock the fridge.
Baseball season's heating up.

ROBERT (V.O.)

"Catch up" doesn't sound so great... but we'll see.

END INTERCUT

EXT. SEATTLE - RICK'S NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Robert drives through the familiar cul-de-sac. The houses, hedges, and driveways are unchanged.

His car pulls into Rick's driveway.

EXT. RICK'S PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

Robert stands before the door, smiling. He gives three rhythmic knocks.

RICK

Look who it is! Get in here!

INT. RICK'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Fridge packed. Wings, corn dogs, chips, popcorn. Wine, beer. Whiskey on the counter.

The game's on. Two guys sink into armchairs, beers in hand.

SERIES OF SCENES - "THE GOOD OLD DAYS"

- They argue over strike zones.
- Raise glasses to Mariner's home runs.
- Devour snacks mid-inning.
- Recall their kids growing up together.
- Debate robot umpires vs. human judgment.

Laughter echoes. Comfort returns.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING - LAST DAY

Coffee brews. SportsCenter hums in the background. Robert sips slowly.

RICK

You know, Robert... I heard about Nicky.

Robert freezes.

RICK

Emily told a friend. It got to my son. Then to me.

(quiet)

I'm... really sorry. I hope you've found some peace.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. ROBERT'S FACE - CLOSE UP

Color drains. His hand trembles. Coffee spills on his lap.

ROBERT

Y-yeah. I wondered if you knew.

(pause)

Thanks for your support.

INT. FRONT DOOR - MOMENTS LATER

Robert grips his small suitcase. Rick stands nearby.

RICK

It was great seeing you. Come back anytime. Football season's coming.

Robert forces a smile.

ROBERT

Thanks. I'll be in touch.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Robert drives off. Sees a MOTHER pushing a stroller.

FLASH: NICKY in a stroller, giggling.

INT. AIRPORT - GIFT SHOP - MOMENTS LATER

A stuffed bear on display.

FLASH: NICKY'S BED. covered in plush toys.

INT. PLANE - LATER

A BABY cries in the row behind.

FLASH: NICKY laughing, reaching for Robert's face.

INT. PLANE - ROBERT'S SEAT - CONTINUOUS

Robert stares straight ahead, glassy-eyed.

ROBERT (V.O.)

I'm not okay. I thought I was, but
I'm not.

He swallows hard.

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

He drops his bags. Walks inside. Silence.

ROBERT (V.O.)

Is this how it's going to be?

(pause)

Is this what life is now?

He sits on the edge of his bed, head in hands.

ROBERT (V.O.)

There's a way to end this.

His eyes rise. Distant. Cold.

ROBERT (V.O.)

One way. Simple. Like a death-row
shot. Just fall asleep... and
don't wake up.

Beat.

ROBERT (V.O.)
But how? Who would do it?

A long pause.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I can't shoot myself. I can't
hang. I can't jump.

A quiet beat.

ROBERT (V.O.)
I'm... too scared.

He leans back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

ROBERT (V.O.)
So I'll live. I'll endure.

A tear rolls down his temple.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Even if I don't want to.

FADE TO BLACK.

A WEEK LATER

FADE IN:

EXT. GLAD TIDINGS CHURCH - EVENING

A small, modest church. The sun sets behind it.

A car pulls into the near-empty parking lot.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

ROBERT is tense, stares through the windshield. He checks the time on the dash - 5:50 p.m.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Five minutes from home. That's a
plus, I guess.

He exhales, rubs his hands together.

ROBERT (V.O.)
Support group. For grief. Still
feels...off. Not my thing. But
I've got nothing else.

He shuts off the engine, grabs a notepad, and steps out.

INT. CHURCH - SMALL ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Seven metal chairs sit in a circle. Fluorescent lights buzz above. Nervous energy hangs thick.

ROBERT enters. He nods at the few already seated. Nobody talks. Nobody makes eye contact.

He chooses a chair. Sits.

CINDY (50s), warm smile, casual clothes, greets each person one by one. She fumbles with papers near her chair.

Silence.

ROBERT (V.O.)
It felt like waiting for a judge.
Like we were about to get
sentenced.

Then—

CINDY
(smiling gently)
Welcome to Glad Tidings. I'm
really glad you're here. It takes
guts to walk in that door. So
thank you.

A beat. The tension softens.

She holds up a DVD case.

CINDY
We'll start with something simple.
A short video by David Kessler—on
the stages of grief. Twelve
minutes. Then we can talk, if you
want.

She places the disc in a player.

VIDEO PLAYS

We hear the narrator faintly under Robert's thoughts

NARRATOR (O.S.)

The five stages: denial, anger,
bargaining, depression,
acceptance...

ROBERT (V.O.)

All of it hit home. Except
acceptance. That one felt out of
reach.

BACK TO ROOM - MINUTES LATER

CINDY clicks off the video.

CINDY

So-thoughts? Comments?

ROBERT lifts his hand. But a woman speaks first.

WOMAN (30s)

I thought it was good. But I'm
miserable all the time.

(pause)

How do we get to the acceptance
part?

CINDY

(smiling gently)

Good question.

A calm discussion begins. Others speak. Cindy listens.

CINDY

There's no timeline. But things
help. Journaling. Letting thoughts
out. Sitting with them. Even the
bad ones. Over time, it can take
the sting out.

ROBERT (V.O.)

It wasn't magic. But it made
sense.

CINDY

Also, try remembering the good stuff. The details. The small things. Quietly, to yourself.

LATER

CINDY

Okay. That's our hour. You all did great. I hope to see you next Monday. Same time.

She smiles sincerely. Everyone begins to stand.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Engine on. Robert sits, hands on the wheel.

ROBERT (V.O.)

It was only one hour. But it helped. Cindy helped. These people... they got it. I felt a little less alone.

He stares at the building.

ROBERT (V.O.)

But what happens if we have to share why we're here?

His jaw tightens.

ROBERT (V.O.)

It's easy to say someone else died. Harder to say... you were the reason.

He pulls out of the lot.

CUT TO:

INT. GLAD TIDINGS CHURCH - SMALL ROOM - EVENING

Seven people sit in a circle. Tension in the air again. Some avoid eye contact. Others fidget with their hands.

MIKE, a soft-spoken man in his 40s, shares his story. His voice cracks. His eyes water. He looks away, blinking fast.

A woman across the circle wipes her eyes. A few others shift in their chairs.

CINDY

(tearing up, but steady)
Crying is part of healing. Don't
fight it. Let it out. Cry hard,
cry loud – it's good for you.

She scans the group with care.

CINDY

It's not weakness. It's release.

Robert sits still. His face hard, jaw tight. His fingers press together. He watches Mike wipe his face with a sleeve.

CINDY

You need to let it out. Whatever's
in there... let it come up.

Robert blinks slowly. He nods – once.

The tension slowly fades. Mike exhales and leans back. The others shift, more at ease.

CINDY

Alright... before we go, I have a
little assignment.

Everyone sits up, curious.

CINDY

Write a letter. To the person you
lost. Say what you need to say.
There's no right or wrong. Don't
hold back.

The group listens closely.

CINDY

Next week, if you want, you can
read it. Or talk about it. Or say
nothing. That's up to you.

She gives a warm, quiet smile.

CINDY

It won't be easy. But it's
important. Please, try.

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Robert sits at the table. Blank paper in front of him. Pen in hand. He stares.

He shifts. Looks around. Puts the pen down. Picks it up again. Nothing.

His eyes fill with tears. He sniffs. One tear slips. Then more.

He covers his face with his hands. Shoulders shake.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Robert sits on the couch. Crying hard now. His body curled, like he's shielding himself. Tissues clutched in one hand.

He breathes in deep bursts. Sobs echo through the room. Then slowly... it passes.

He wipes his face. Looks up. Eyes red. Breathing settles.

A pause.

He stands.

INT. DINING ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Robert writes furiously. Pen scratches across the page. No hesitation.

He doesn't stop. Doesn't blink.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER

The letter sits in front of him. He reads silently, lips moving faintly. Tears stream again, but his face is calm.

He exhales and closes his eyes. Holds the letter to his chest.

CUT TO:

INT. GLAD TIDINGS CHURCH - SMALL ROOM - EVENING

The group of seven sits in a circle. The atmosphere is quiet, expectant. Papers clutched. Eyes forward.

CINDY stands in the center, smiling warmly.

CINDY

Good evening, everyone. Did you
write your letters?

A few soft laughs ripple through the group.

CINDY

Don't worry. I'm not grading them.

Laughter grows a little louder. A few sigh in relief.

CINDY

Writing helps. It's a release. It
gets what's inside... out.

(beat)

Anyone want to share how it felt
to write the letter?

ROBERT suddenly raises his hand - then blurts out.

ROBERT

Yes. I do.

The group turns, surprised. Robert straightens in his seat.

ROBERT

I felt better after writing it.

(beat)

I don't know why... I just did.

CINDY

That's the power of writing,
Robert. It helps you process pain.
It can comfort you.

A few heads nod. Someone murmurs agreement.

MARGARET (30s), pale and tense, shifts in her seat. She
clenches a crumpled tissue in one hand.

MARGARET

It didn't help me.

Silence. She lifts her head, voice rising.

MARGARET

It made me angry. I couldn't stop thinking about him. That he's gone. That I'll never see him again.

She stands quickly, face red with frustration.

MARGARET

I ripped that damn letter up and threw it in the trash.

She covers her face with her hands. Her body shakes slightly, ready to bolt.

CINDY steps forward gently.

CINDY

Margaret. That's okay.

Margaret freezes. Cindy's voice stays soft but sure.

CINDY

Anger is part of grieving. We all go through it. That reaction? It's normal. It means you're facing the truth... even if it hurts.

Margaret slowly lowers her hands. Her breath catches. She lets out a small, broken sound – but holds back the tears.

She looks around, embarrassed.

CINDY

You're not wrong. Or broken.
You're healing.

Margaret nods once. She eases back into her chair. Half a smile flickers. The group exhales. A shared tension breaks.

CINDY

Whatever you felt... anger, sadness, comfort, confusion – it's all part of the process. Some of

you felt more than one thing.
That's okay too.

People begin to speak.

GROUP MEMBER #1
I felt calm. Writing helped me say
what I couldn't before.

GROUP MEMBER #2
I didn't write much. But even that
little bit helped.

Another WOMAN clears her throat. She holds a folded letter
in both hands.

WOMAN
I want to read mine.

Cindy nods. The room falls quiet.

WOMAN
It's for my mom. She died of a
heart attack. I never got to say
goodbye... or thank her.

She reads. Her voice shakes.

WOMAN (READING)
"Thank you for raising me. For
teaching me to be strong. For
loving me even when I didn't
deserve it. I miss you every
single day."

A few group members wipe tears. Robert stares at the floor,
hands clasped tight.

Others share. A quiet rhythm builds — grief, honesty,
healing.

CINDY (LATER)
Thank you, everyone. No homework
next week.

The group chuckles.

CINDY

But... I do have a surprise for
you. A good one.

Curious looks. Whispers.

CINDY

I hope to see you all next Monday.
Have a blessed week.

People begin to stand and gather their things. Smiles. A
softer tone now fills the space.

INT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Robert walks toward his car, still thinking. He stops, looks
back at the church.

He gets in, starts the engine — then pauses, glancing out
the window.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

He speaks softly, to himself.

ROBERT

A surprise, huh?

He nods. No way he's missing next week.

FADE TO:

INT. EMILY AND SPENCER'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

ROBERT sits on the couch. Across from him, EMILY and SPENCER
sip coffee. The room is calm, quiet.

EMILY

(smiling faintly)

Hey, Dad... remember when Nicky was
born? His head was all pointy? He
looked like one of the Coneheads
from Saturday Night Live.

She laughs softly, her eyes wet but warm.

SPENCER walks over and hugs her from behind.

SPENCER

I remember that. Good thing it rounded out... or SNL might've cast him.

ROBERT

(chuckling, awkward)

Yeah. "Conehead Baby: Live from New York..."

They all laugh. It's light. It's real. But under it, a weight lingers.

Robert smiles, but his fingers tighten around his mug.

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - EVENING

The group filters in, buzzing with quiet chatter. ROBERT, MARGARET, and others take their seats.

GROUP MEMBER #1

What do you think the surprise is?

GROUP MEMBER #2

Maybe a guest speaker?

GROUP MEMBER #3

A game night?

The door opens. CINDY walks in with a man and a young girl.

CINDY

Alright, everyone. This is my husband, ERIC, and our daughter, BETH.

(smiling)

They're the surprise. Sorry if you were expecting a celebrity.

Polite laughs. A few smiles.

CINDY

I brought them for a reason. I met Eric at a grief support group here... almost eleven years ago.

She sits. ERIC steps forward.

ERIC

Evening. I was twenty-five when I lost my fiancée, Toni. We met at Fresno State. She never made it to the wedding.

The room stills.

ERIC

Her friend, the one driving her... started drinking. Swerved into traffic. Hit a semi. Neither survived.

A pause. Eric keeps smiling – not out of joy, but to keep steady.

ERIC

I lost it. I lost my job. Couldn't function. I was angry all the time. Depressed. But little by little, I started to pull out of it.

Group members listen intently.

ERIC

The group helped. But what really helped... was me. I had to decide I wanted to survive. I had to put in the work.

Beat.

ERIC

That's when better things started happening.

Applause breaks out. Even ROBERT claps – slow but sincere.

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The applause fades. The group is quiet again.

CINDY smiles at her daughter.

BETH, confident and cheerful, steps forward. Her ponytail bounces.

BETH

I just wanna say... I wouldn't be here if my parents didn't meet at grief group.

Laughter erupts. Everyone needed it.

Robert laughs too, wiping at the corner of his eye.

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - END OF SESSION

CINDY

Thank you for letting me bring my family. If you want to talk to Eric or Beth, please do.

She holds up her hands.

CINDY

Also... we're halfway through our eight sessions. Let's give ourselves a hand.

Applause, louder now. Whistles. Joyful energy fills the room.

People mingle, smiling and talking. Some head toward Eric. Others pair off.

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - LATER

BETH stands alone, sipping a juice box. Robert walks over.

ROBERT

Hey, Beth. That joke? About being here because your parents met? Pretty solid delivery.

BETH

(grinning)

I know. It works every time.

They share a laugh. In the background, the group continues chatting, lighter than ever.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

INT. ROBERT'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Robert paces the room, phone in hand. He stops, breathes, and dials.

PHONE RINGING
(1 ring... 2... 3...)

Robert hits END CALL.

His eyes widen. He realizes: Her phone will show the missed call.

He starts pacing again, nervous. Mumbling to himself, working through what he'll say.

Fifteen minutes pass. No call back.

ROBERT
(sighing)
Something's wrong.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING

His phone rings, waking him.

EMILY (V.O.)
Hey, Dad. I saw you called
yesterday.

ROBERT
Yeah... I haven't heard from you in
a while.

EMILY (V.O.)
I know. Been busy. But hey—we
wanna have you over for dinner
tonight.

ROBERT
Of course. Around five?

EMILY (V.O.)

Yep. We have something to show
you... and tell you. In person.

Click.

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - EVENING

CINDY stands before the group.

CINDY

Welcome to our fifth session. Eric
sends his thanks. Every time he
shares, it helps him hold on to
acceptance.

Group members nod.

CINDY

Talking helps. Telling your
story—even the hard parts—can
lighten your burden.

She scans the room.

CINDY

Eric blamed himself for the
wedding time. Thought if it were
different, Toni would be alive.
That guilt was heavy.
But telling his story... over and
over... gave him freedom. You can
get there too. Anyone willing to
share tonight?

A long silence.

Cindy waits, then adds—

CINDY

It takes courage. But you've all
been brave just by showing up.

ROBERT

(clears throat)

Cindy... I'd like to tell my
story.

Cindy nods gently.

CINDY

Go ahead, Robert. We're listening.

Robert's hands tremble. He wipes sweat from his palms.

ROBERT

I watched my grandson, Nicky. I
was their day care. I loved it—he
was everything to me.

He pauses. Swallows.

ROBERT

One morning I was late... I drove
too fast... backed into the
driveway.

Beat.

ROBERT

I didn't see him. He ran out to
greet me. I... I ran him over.

The room stills. One gasp. A murmur—"Oh my god."

Robert bows his head, hands limp at his sides.

CINDY

Robert... thank you. That was
brave. Sharing helps. The more you
share, the lighter it gets. One
day it won't hurt this much.

Robert looks up. He sees faces filled with compassion, not
judgment. Someone smiles. Another nods.

ROBERT

Thank you... all of you.

His voice cracks. He breaks down, sobbing. Members rush to
him. Hands on his shoulders. Hugs.

ELLA wraps her arms around him.

ROBERT

(sobbing)

I feel... like something just
lifted.

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - NEXT MORNING

Phone rings again. Robert groans awake. It's Emily.

EMILY (V.O.)
Hi, Dad! Sorry if I woke you...
but we want you over for dinner.
I'm making my special mac and
cheese.

ROBERT
With the sharp cheese?

EMILY (V.O.)
And the creamy mozzarella.

ROBERT
(laughs)
I'll be there.

EMILY (V.O.)
Good. We need to show you
something.

INT. EMILY'S HOUSE - EVENING

Emily greets Robert at the door, grinning.

EMILY
You're probably wondering what we
need to tell you. Come on.

She leads him down the hall. Stops outside a closed door.

INT. GUEST ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Emily opens the door. A freshly painted pink room. Robert
steps in, takes it in slowly.

ROBERT

That's a bright color. What is it?

EMILY

Bubblegum. It's pink.

A crib in the corner. Lace canopy. Stuffed animals. A white dresser. Soft curtains.

Robert stops.

Above the crib: "OCEAN" in large wooden letters.

ROBERT

Why does it say "Ocean"?

EMILY

That's her name, Dad. Ocean. I'm due in two months.

Robert's eyes tear up. He hugs her tight.

ROBERT

Congratulations, Emily. That's... beautiful.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER

Dinner is served. Laughter, old stories. Emily giggles nonstop.

ROBERT

I actually thought you had an overeating disorder.

SPENCER

(laughing)

That's one way to make mac and cheese taste better—guilt.

They all laugh. But Robert's smile fades. He grows quiet.

He looks between them. Then finally asks—

ROBERT

So... what are your plans for Ocean's day care?

Silence.

Emily and Spencer both go still. Spencer sets down his fork.

EMILY

Dad... we talked about this. We
want you to watch her.

SPENCER

If you're willing.

Robert stares... then starts laughing. It builds.

ROBERT

You're serious?

They nod.

Robert laughs louder, full of relief and joy. It fills the
room.

ROBERT

Life, huh? Never what you think
it'll be.

CUT TO:

DAYS LATER

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - NIGHT

The final session. The circle is full. There's a sense of
calm. Familiarity. Healing.

GROUP MEMBER #1

Cindy, you've helped all of us...
but you never told us your story.

CINDY

(sits forward, calm)

I had a twin sister. Sadie.

(beat)

In high school, she dated a guy
none of us liked. He was
possessive. Hated her friends.
Hated her plans.

The group listens closely.

CINDY

Sadie got into Fresno State. He had no future plans. When she broke up with him, he threatened suicide.

Eyes widen.

CINDY

A few weeks later, she left for her job at Black Bear Diner. He was waiting in the parking lot.

(beat)

Shot her three times. Then shot himself.

Gasps. Silence follows.

CINDY

You might remember—it made the news here in Hanford.

Cindy sits back, composed. Peaceful.

ROBERT

You talk about it like it's... normal.

CINDY

It's part of me. It always will be. But I've learned to carry it differently.

INT. SUPPORT GROUP ROOM - LATER

The group is thinning out. ROBERT and ELLA (60s) remain. They chat softly, eyes warm.

ELLA

I almost didn't come to the first session.

ROBERT

I almost didn't come to any.

They share a small laugh. Ella's smile fades, just a bit.

ELLA

Watching her that day...
(swallows)
I smelled the smoke. Ran to the
kitchen. Forgot the bath...

Robert gently places his hand over hers.

ELLA
She slipped under. I never even
heard a sound.

They sit in stillness. He squeezes her hand.

ROBERT
Want to grab something to eat?

ELLA
(smiling)
Took you long enough to ask.

MONTAGE - EMILY'S MATERNITY LEAVE

- Emily holds baby OCEAN, glowing.
- Robert visits often, bottle in hand, burping cloth over shoulder.
- Robert fumbles with diapers, laughs with Emily.
- Spencer snaps a photo of Robert napping with Ocean on his chest.
- The three adults share dinner around the kitchen table, easy and light.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

6:00 a.m. Alarm blares.

Robert sits up immediately, alert. His clothes are folded at the foot of the bed. Lunch bag packed.

He moves with purpose.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Engine on. The dashboard clock: 6:15 a.m.

Sunrise spills across the sky. The Sierra Nevadas glow in the distance.

EXT. EMILY'S HOUSE - FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

Robert parks. He stops and looks up at the house.

He takes a deep breath, hand on the wheel. His eyes mist up, but his lips curve into a smile.

INT. EMILY'S DRIVEWAY - MOMENTS LATER

He drives straight in, steady. Confident.

This time, nothing holds him back.

FADE OUT.