

**A MAGNOLIA SALVATION**

Created and Written

by

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**NEW ORLEANS MOVING PICTURES Co.**

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A MAGNOLIA SALVATION

FADE UP:

SFX: A LIGHT BREEZE PLAYS WITH DRAPES...

FADE IN:

CAMERA: GRACEFULLY MOVES OUT-TO-IN THROUGH A NEW YORK BROWNSTONE WINDOW ADORNED WITH COTTON DRAPES. A CANDLE FLAME PASSES BY...

INT. NEW YORK BROWNSTONE APARTMENT - NIGHT

A cavalcade of TCHOTCHKES decorate the apartment. A place for everything. Everything in its place.

Neat. Modern day. Old in New York flavor shows the apartment charm.

A WOMAN sleeps.

CU: A MAN'S HAND HOVERS AND MOVES OVER A SLEEPING WOMAN.

CU: SHE ROLLS OVER. HER EYES SPRING OPEN IN FRIGHT.

She flings straight up in bed.

City lights radiate through the bedroom window. Her silhouetted nude figure bounces out of bed.

A light smoke has begun to choke the air.

COUGHS.

She runs into the living room. Raw. Nude. Panicked.

SFX: FIRE ALARMS. SMOKE DETECTORS. DOOR BANGING.

A struggle ensues. The drapes ablaze, fight to live. The flames fight to breathe.

She valiantly attacks the beastfire!

COUGHING.

Tries to save the apartment. Save herself.

The flames bite back. She concedes, to escape alive.

CONTINUED:

SFX: FIRE TRUCKS AND SIRENS ON THEIR HIGH HORSE. FULL SPEED.

WS: NEW YORK CITY BLOCK LINED WITH BROWNSTONES. FIRE LEAPS FROM THE APARTMENT WINDOWS TRYING TO ESCAPE. TRYING TO LIVE.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. NEW YORK TIMES CITY DESK/WAR ROOM - DAY

The OVERNIGHT CREW is cleaning up an empty newsroom.

FRANCIS MCGILL, (early 60's), exquisitely dressed in suit and bow tie of times past, walks the floor. Coming to work. Reading the morning edition in one hand. Drinking his seven dollar coffee in the other.

He flips the lights on to his office. Ignites the GLOW BOX with the MAGIC STICK.

CANDY KANE, (late 20's), bright-eyed blonde, in her TV news uniform, TV make-up and hair, delivers the TV bleeding of the day.

CANDY KANE (TV)

(to off-camera)

And the church still hasn't answered Bill. Thank you for that report, Bill Larson.

(changing gears)

Uh, let's see. Where are we? Yes. This morning's commute is another grind. Late last night, early this morning, a brownstone in Washington Heights narrowly escaped a disastrous catastrophe when an upper level apartment caught fire and sent almost fifty tenants out into the streets--

He mutes the glow box. Closed Captions appear. He peers into the screen. Catches something. That brownstone looks very familiar.

He bolts around his office door. Down the passageway. Fast.

INT. NEWS REPORTER'S OFFICE - DAY

Francis flings the door open, ignites the light switch to reveal a BLANKETED MOUND on the sofa.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM  
(groans)  
Turn the lights off.

FRANCIS  
Sam?! Jesus!

SAMANTHA "SAM" LANCASTER, (mid-30's), journalist and photographer for the New York Times, is buried under blankets. Crammed into the sofa cushions.

FRANCIS (cont'd)  
Sam! What-- Was that-- Where--

SAM  
(muffled under the blankets)  
What! Leave me alone. Turn the lights off. Go away.

He extinguishes the lights, as the flouros beam into the office between the window blinds. The newsroom starts to breathe with NEWSPAPER WORKERS.

FRANCIS  
Sam! What happened?

SAM  
My fiance dumped me.

FRANCIS  
No. What-- Wow. Really?

SAM  
(stomping her feet)  
Yes. He dumped me. What an ass!

FRANCIS  
What happened to your apartment?

SAM  
(moaning)  
I was stupid... To think... He...

FRANCIS  
Sam. Look at me.

SAM  
No.

FRANCIS  
Sam! Damn it!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Pause.

She slowly reveals herself. Make-up smeared all over her face like a 3-year-old Crayon drawing.

FRANCIS (cont'd)

Damn.

SAM

(whips blanket over her head)

Go away! I'm calling-in sick!

FRANCIS

You can't.

SAM

Why not?!

FRANCIS

You're already at work.

Pause.

Sam slowly reveals her spackled face again. Whoa.

MARSHA, (late 30's), Francis' assistant, just another newspaper worker bee, clothes that clash to high heaven, pokes her head into the dark office.

MARSHA

Hey, Francis?

(looking at Sam)

Whoa. What the hell?

Marsha catches a wiff of smoky dankness. Sam ducks back under the blankets like a frightened child.

FRANCIS

Marsha? Give me a minute.

MARSHA

Okay.

(waves)

Hey, Sam.

SAM

(muffled)

Hey, Marsha.

Marsha strolls off. Stops. Looks between the thin blinds.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

FRANCIS

Marsha?

MARSHA

Okay. Okay.

Francis closes Sam's office door. Darkness. Flouros. Cold.

FRANCIS

Sam. Look at me. What happened last night?

Sam comes up for air. Again.

SAM

My fiance dumped me. We went to dinner. At my favorite Italian place, Pacini's... And he dumped me right in the middle of everyone!

(stomping her feet)

That bastard!

FRANCIS

And that's it?

SAM

(angry, crying)

We hadn't had desert yet! That's it!

(pauses)

I was supposed to be married.

FRANCIS

I get that. What happened to your apartment?

SAM

It burned.

FRANCIS

I can sort of figure that part out. I am the city desk senior editor, you know. You work for me. It's my journalistic instinct. Forty-five years. Awards--

SAM

Okay. Okay.

(sniffles)

What's my assignment today, boss?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

FRANCIS

Your assignment today is to tell me  
what the hell happened last night.  
What happened to your apartment?

(pause)

Do I need to get N-Y-P-D involved?

SAM

(bursts out, crying)

Yes! Have them arrest that bastard!  
That lying bastard! He dumped me!

FRANCIS

So... Your fiancé dumps you. Goes  
to your apartment. Burns it down?  
Is that what I'm getting? That's  
it?

SAM

No.

(pause)

I think I drank too much.

FRANCIS

Apparently so from the looks of  
things.

SAM

(childlike)

I fell asleep. And... I must  
have... Left a candle burning.

(cries)

Everything's gone. It's just stuff.  
I don't need stuff in my life. I  
was supposed to get married.

FRANCIS

Hell. Sam. I'm sorry. We need to  
get you cleaned-up.

SAM

(smearing her face,  
sniffles)

I just need a minute. What's my  
assignment?

FRANCIS

Your assignment is to get yourself  
cleaned-up. That's your assignment.  
You can use the executive showers.  
I'll give you my key.

Marsha comes back around. Knocks. Opens the door.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

MARSHA

Francis?

FRANCIS

Marsha? Can this wait? Please. For the love of gawd?

MARSHA

Sam? Call on line three.

PHONE LINE number three is blinking on Sam's desk. Waiting.

FRANCIS

Take a message, please, Marsha?

MARSHA

She said it's Beth Lancaster.

Sam sits up right away. At attention. Spackle and all.

FRANCIS

Who?

SAM

My mother. Rather my adopted mother.

Francis motions Marsha to scam. She saunters off, closing the door.

FRANCIS

I thought your mother was dead?

SAM

She is to me.

FRANCIS

She's your adopted mother?

No answer. Francis marches over to the phone.

SAM

(to Francis)

NO!

FRANCIS

Francis McGill. Editor. City desk. How can I help you?

She zips up real quick. His face stares at Sam. Her face stares at Francis.

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED: (6)

FRANCIS (cont'd)

Yes. She's not in today. Can I give her a message?

(writing a note)

Okay. Francis. Francis McGill. I'm her boss. I run--

(pause)

She hung up.

SAM

Funny how that happens.

FRANCIS

Here. This is her number. The number she gave me.

Sam reluctantly takes the NOTE and just stares. Blank.

FRANCIS (cont'd)

What's wrong?

SAM

I haven't spoken to her in five years.

FRANCIS

Whoa. She said she saw the news and knew that was your apartment.

She sits there. Uncomfortably. He stands. Uncomfortably.

FRANCIS (cont'd)

Here. Here's my key. Go get washed up. I'll send Marsha out to get you some clothes.

SAM

Thanks. Nothing clashy, please.

FRANCIS

Sam? You'll be okay. You're family here. We'll work something out. Don't know, yet. Besides. Don't you have some comp time banked? Miss 'I Never Take Time Off.'

SAM

Yes.

FRANCIS

Good. You can take that time and I'll throw in some more.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (7)

Sam's situation starts to take hold of her. Slowly.

FRANCIS (cont'd)  
Where does your mother live?

SAM  
In hell.

FRANCIS  
Great. Is that a city?

SAM  
New Orleans.

FRANCIS  
What? New Orleans is a great place.  
I love New Orleans. Been there many  
times.

SAM  
No. She does.

FRANCIS  
Listen. Sam... You can tell me to  
butt out--

SAM  
Butt out.

FRANCIS  
But... My daughter hated me till  
the day she jumped off that bridge.  
(chokes up a little)  
I can only pray to God... When she  
was falling... She hoped... Wished.  
I would be there to catch her.  
(tears in his eyes)  
I will take that to my grave. I  
pray in church on Sundays for God  
to give me the strength to live my  
life... To live my life... To give  
me the strength to do better in  
life. Be a better father.  
(composes himself)  
Go to New Orleans. Go see your  
mother. Adopted mother. If she is  
the person you... If she is the  
person you think she is... At least  
you will have some closure in life.

Sam stares up at Francis. His fatherly advice sinks in.

CONTINUED: (8)

FRANCIS (cont'd)

I wished I had closure with my...  
My little girl. She meant the world  
to me. God only knows I just didn't  
have the ability to show her as  
much.

Sam jumps up and hugs Francis.

SAM

You're the closest thing I have  
ever had to a father in life. Mine  
didn't have the common decency not  
to leave my mom... And I... Alone.

FRANCIS

Maybe all that pain is misguided.  
You can hate your father for  
leaving you. She might be your  
adopted mother... Just don't hate  
your mother for his actions.

He holds her at arms length.

SAM

(sniffles)

Okay. You're right. He was the real  
bastard. Maybe you're right.

FRANCIS

If I'm wrong? You always can come  
back home.

SAM

Home?

(pause)

Home.

FRANCIS

Now go get cleaned up before I get  
a call from human resources about  
some harassment claim. From my  
star, award-winning reporter.

Sam giggles. She sniffles.

SAM

Pulitzer.

FRANCIS

My Pulitzer Prize reporter.

She looks down at the note. The phone number.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (9)

FRANCIS (cont'd)

I'll have maintenance come clean  
your office. Get that smoke smell  
out of here. Damn.

Francis turns to leave and looks back at Sam. She's staring  
at her desk phone. Waiting. Frozen.

FRANCIS (cont'd)

Do it. Please? Do it for yourself,  
if anything. You owe it to  
yourself.

She smiles and nods 'okay.' He opens the door.

FRANCIS (cont'd)

Like the man says, *'I'm the train  
they call the City of New Orleans.'*  
(he walks away singing)  
*'I'll be gone 500 miles when the  
day is done.'*

CUT TO:

s: SAM'S FACE AS SHE STARES OUT THE WINDOW OF A TRAIN CAR.

MX: JOHNNY CASH SINGING "THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS."

INT. PASSENGER TRAIN CAR - DAY

Sam peers into her LAPTOP. At her CAMERA and BAG. The tools  
of her trade. Just, sitting.

SAM (V.O.)

All I ever wanted in life was to be  
a writer. A journalist.  
Storytelling... Telling stories was  
in my soul. Is, in my soul. I'll  
never know how it got there. And  
along the way, if you got some  
awards for that... That was fine by  
me. At least we raised the curtain  
on a church scandal. Had some  
politicians go to jail. Cops...  
Made people think about their  
lives. Maybe those hurt souls can  
find some comfort in life knowing  
somebody cared enough to tell their  
story. I don't know where I'm  
heading in life. Now.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM (V.O.) (cont'd)  
 Don't know where to go. I guess  
 somehow I'm going there.

She, just, can't. Puts her tools away. Enjoys the ride.

To the city of New Orleans.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEW ORLEANS TRAIN STATION - DAY

Sam steps off her carriage. Crowded waypoint for TRAVELERS to New Orleans. Not so big city she's used to. But, somehow this is where she's going. It feels just right.

She absorbs the city from the station.

Her journey starts with the first step.

SAM  
 (sotto voce)  
 Come on, feet. I need ya.  
 (pause)  
 Hi, New Orleans.

Walks around. Buys a few things. A NEW ORLEANS ZEPHYRS ball cap makes her feel part of the locals.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RURAL LOUISIANA FARM HOUSE - DAY

Sam pulls her RENTAL CAR up to a narrow, dirt entrance road. That farm house looks miles away.

CU: REPORTER'S NOTE PAD. 3645 HIGHWAY 18. LANCASTER.

Stops. Second thoughts. She puts the car in reverse and drives off back down the narrow two-lane highway.

Old plantation houses seem to wave at her as she passes by.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY - DUSK

Sam meanders off the highway. Pulls under a huge magnolia tree. Green grass ripples underneath.

She stops the engine. Starts to sob.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM  
 (banging the steering  
 wheel)  
 Why?! Why?! Why?!

She stares. Into the windshield. Into nothing.

SAM (cont'd)  
 Why did you leave me? Why? What did  
 I do?

EXT. THAT ROADSIDE MAGNOLIA TREE - DUSK

Sam gets out. Sits under the pleasant magnolia tree.

SAM (V.O.)  
 All I can remember as a kid was the  
 smell of sweet magnolia trees in my  
 neighborhood. Funny how today it is  
 the only thing which can give me  
 comfort. Solace. I have no idea why  
 my father chose to have a child and  
 then just up and leave me. Leave  
 the mother of that child. Leave me  
 with some other woman. Why would  
 any parent have children and just  
 abandon them?

She falls asleep under the comforting limbs of that tree.

CU: A MAN'S HAND HOVERS AND CARESSES HER HAIR.

SFX: A PASSING CAR HORN FROM THE HIGHWAY SNAPS HER AWAKE.

Sam rolls over with grass in her hair. Watching the sun set  
 over the Louisiana countryside. The sweet smell of that  
 magnolia tree comforts her.

INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - NIGHT

Sam drives back down the small highway to her mother's  
 house. Combs at the grass in her hair through the mirror.

It is the longest drive of her life. To her.

EXT. RURAL LOUISIANA FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

Sam pulls down the long, tight dirt road to her mother's  
 house. An adopted mother's house. A house she has never  
 been to, much less seen in pictures.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SFX: THE CICADAS ARE OUT IN FULL FORCE. SINGING FOR HER.

She composes herself. Gets out. The long walk up to the screen door.

EXT. RURAL LOUISIANA FARM HOUSE/FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Before Sam is even to the steps, the screen door slowly creeks opens.

Out steps ELIZABETH "BETH" LANCASTER, (late-50's), dressed straight from a Norman Rockwell imagination. Her hair is perfectly did. The dress is straight from the Rockwell catalogue, too. And, a cook's apron to boot.

BETH  
Samantha? Samantha darling, how  
I've missed you so.

Sam stops at the foot of the steps. Those steps look twenty-five feet tall.

SAM  
Hi, mamma.

BETH  
Well, come on in before the  
skeeters start scootin' in on ya.  
I've made us a nice dinner. Have  
you eatin' yet?

SAM  
No. No I haven't.

BETH  
Come on in and you can tell me all  
about that New York and your job.

Beth leans over to hug Sam. They embrace. It is not warm.

BETH (cont'd)  
It's so good to see you. Come on in  
now. That must've been some trip.

INT. BETH'S FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

True to her form, Sam sees her mother's house is also straight from the Rockwell catalogue. A place for everything and everything in its place.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

An inviting DINNER awaits with CANDLES placed around as sentries on patrol.

INT. BETH'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

After her first bite, Beth reaches across the table, opens a box and pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

She lights one. Takes a deep drag. Not even asking.

As Sam finishes each plate, Beth asks...

BETH  
Are you done with that?

SAM  
Yes.

Beth grabs the plate, marches to the kitchen with cigarette hanging. Begins hand-washing. Clanking.

She returns as Sam finishes her glass.

BETH  
Are you done with that?

Pause.

SAM  
Uh, yeah. Sure.

Beth repeats her routine. Again.

She returns to the dining room after several wash trips. The dinner is finished. Finally.

Very large small talk ensues.

BETH  
Would you like a Martini?

Before Sam can answer...

BETH (cont'd)  
I always have a Martini after  
dinner with guests.

Sam figures, this is where turkey is going to be talked,  
so...



CONTINUED:

SAM

Momma? Can I have a whiskey and beer?

BETH

Well... I thought the New Yorkers liked Martinis?

(pauses)

Whiskey and beer it is.

Beth brings back a cold ABITA AMBER, the WHOLE BOTTLE OF JAMESON and GLASS.

SAM

I don't know. I sorta of gravitated to whiskey and beer. Being a journalist, I guess. Part of the job.

BETH

(puffing away)

How is the newspaper business, darlin'?

SAM

It's going well. It has its ups and downs.

BETH

I saw on the satellite T-V news there was a house on fire in New York--

SAM

How did you know it was my apartment?

BETH

When I got all those letters back stamped 'Return To Sender.'

(pauses)

I knew.

SAM

I... I just wasn't in a good place in life.

BETH

Newspaper business? Mind if I smoke?

She already has been. So, she lights another before...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM  
It's your house.

BETH  
Darlin', it is all I could afford  
after...

SAM  
After what?

Pause.

BETH  
I'm glad you weren't hurt darlin'  
in that fire. Were you hurt?

SAM  
Momma? After what?

BETH  
Did they say what caused the fire?

SAM  
My fiancé dumped me. I got  
hammered. I fell asleep. My  
candles... The next thing I know is  
I'm in a burning brownstone hell  
box buck naked fighting my drapes.

BETH  
A fiancé? You didn't tell me you  
were--

SAM  
After what, momma?

BETH  
Darlin', you shouldn't fall asleep  
with candles--

SAM  
(slams hand on table)  
AFTER WHAT MOMMA?!

The glasses on the table are rattled.

BETH  
You weren't adopted.

Big pause. Let that sink in.

CONTINUED: (3)

SAM

Why can't I get a straight answer  
out of you?!

BETH

I'm not one of your interviews! You  
treat all--

SAM

Look! I'm sorry! Okay?!

Beth puffs hard on that cigarette. Crams it out,  
unfinished. Lights another.

SAM (cont'd)

What are you not telling me?

BETH

Your father was a deadbeat.

SAM

I know that! That's why I'm  
adopted?!

BETH

No.

SAM

Then what? What are you not telling  
me? Now I do sound like I'm doing  
an interview.

BETH

I am your mother. Your biological  
mother. Yes.

SAM

Then you lied to me my whole life?!

BETH

No. No, now... I--

SAM

What is wrong with you people? Why  
can't I get a straight answer?

BETH

I don't like being yelled at in my  
own home. I won't--

SAM

Then fine. I'm out.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

Sam gets up to go to the door.

BETH

(sobbing)

I am your mother. I am not your adopted mother. I gave birth to you.

SAM

(incensed, staccato)

Then why in the hell would you ever tell me I was adopted?!

BETH

I need another Martini.

SAM

Great. I need another beer. And a whiskey. Or, two.

BETH

(pointing)

Your bottle.

Sam swipes at the whiskey bottle. Stomps outside to the porch. The candle flames bend, try to grab after her.

EXT. BETH'S FARM HOUSE/FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Sam swigs straight from the bottle, swinging on the porch bench.

Beth comes out and hands her a beer.

BETH

Wash it down with this, sweetie.  
Won't burn as much.

Sam gulps the beer.

BETH (cont'd)

Your father and I were to be married. I got pregnant with you before... Before we went to church.

SAM

So why would you tell me I was adopted?

BETH

I didn't want him to find you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM

So?! He's a dirtbag. And a deadbeat. Wait. Did you, or didn't you get married? Wait. Didn't want him to find me?

BETH

Newspaper business, huh?

SAM

It's what I do! I don't know how to do anything else.

BETH

Yes. We got married. I was eight months on with you.

SAM

Do you have pictures?

BETH

Why? You don't believe me? Do you?

SAM

No. No, I'm sorry. It's just people take pictures of their marriage day. Supposed to be happy. I thought--

BETH

I destroyed them all.

SAM

Gawd. This bottle isn't going to be enough.

BETH

(puffing away)

After you were born, he couldn't handle being a father. I had to do everything. He was gone most of the time. Work, he'd say.

SAM

What did he do?

BETH

He left us! Don't you get it?! That bastard left us!

SAM

Now I know where I get my short fuse from. Wait. No.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM (cont'd)

I didn't mean that. I don't know what I mean. What was his profession?

BETH

Chasing other women. That was his profession. Bastard.

SAM

Gawd. How did the two of you ever meet? Much less have sex.

BETH

He was a part-time preacher.

SAM

Part-time? Gawd. A preacher?

BETH

He was a carpenter and a part-time preacher.

SAM

What am I missing here? He was a carpenter, part-time preacher, full-time bastard?

BETH

And he chased women.

SAM

Now I don't even want to know how you two met.

BETH

(throws Martini glass)

He was a woman-chasing bastard!

Sam jumps as the GLASS shatters against the front porch post. Funny, how it has glass scars of rage, past.

SAM

(sinks in)

You didn't want me to find him. Didn't you?

(pause)

Momma? You didn't want me to find him?

BETH

(concedes)

Yes. He's a bastard.

CONTINUED: (3)

By this time, the two of them are completely blasted. And wiped out. This very large small talk is exhausting.

BETH (cont'd)

I'm going to bed. I've had enough interrogating for one night. I made a bed for you in the guest room.

SAM

I don't interrogate. I interview. I interview, momma.

BETH

Call it what you want. Newspaper business.

Beth turns and falls flat on her face. Rockwell dress and all.

SAM

Momma! Gawd.

Sam helps her up and to bed. As best she can.

Sam comes out of her mother's bedroom and surveys the damage. Only to stumble to her guest bed.

She leadfoot-marches back out into the living room. Blows out the candles. One-by-one. Stumbling.

INT. BETH'S FARM HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

Sam is sound asleep. Half-dressed. Half-slobbered.

CU: A MAN'S HAND HOVERS AND CARESSES SAM'S HAIR.

CU: SAM'S EYES SPRING OPEN.

She pops up out of bed half-naked. Still half-slobbered.

Smoke fills her bedroom. Not this again.

She runs into the dining room. The house is dying. A fire is living.

Sam runs into her mother's bedroom, filled with smoke. The bed burns bright orange. Cigarettes.

She struggles to drag Beth out. The flames chew back.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM  
 (screaming)  
 Momma! Get up! Momma! The house is  
 on fire!  
 (coughing uncontrollably)  
 Momma! Get up!

Sam drags her mother's body out into the yard. Smoking.  
 Beth is black as soot. And more black. Smoking.

SFX: FIRE TRUCKS AND SIRENS ARE ON THEIR HIGH HORSE. AGAIN.

Sam collapses from the struggle. Not again. Her head keels  
 over. Please not again.

Help arrives.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CHARITY HOSPITAL/BURN UNIT BED - NIGHT

Sam's head lies next to Beth's bandaged body.

Beth is hooked-up to the medicine machine. Dying.

Sam cries to herself on her mother's bed.

CU: A MAN'S HAND HOVERS AND CARESSES SAM'S HEAD.

SFX: THE MEDICINE MACHINE FLATLINES. BELLS. BEEPS.

A MALE NURSE, (early 40's), dressed in his nurse gear, runs  
 into the room. Looks over the medicine machine.

MALE NURSE  
 (rapidly into intercom)  
 Code Blue Burn Three. Code Blue  
 Burn Three.  
 (to Sam)  
 Ma'am. You have to step back.

TWO NURSES and a DOCTOR rush in.

The DOCTOR, (early 40's), in her doctor's gear, grabs the  
 chart. Looks up to the medicine machine. Back at the chart.

SAM  
 What? What is it doc?  
 (crying)  
 Please tell me! What's wrong?!

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

MALE NURSE

Ma'am. Please step out of the room.

SAM

I'm her daughter! What is it doc?!  
Do something!

MALE NURSE

Ma'am! You have to step back out of  
the room or I'll have to get  
security.

DOCTOR

Your mother had a D-N-R in-place.

SAM

(forcefully)  
Then un-D-N-R her! Please! She's  
all I have!

DOCTOR

I can't. I'm sorry. She has a Do  
Not Resuscitate order in-place and  
I'm bound by--

SAM

Please!  
(sotto voce)  
Please. Please. Please.

Sam falls back to a chair.

FLATLINE.

DOCTOR

I'll call it. Six-forty-two.

MALE NURSE

Six-forty-two.

One of the nurses pulls a sheet over the body. The other  
picks-up.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry for your loss.

The medical team begins to leave.

SAM

Doc! Can I get a blood draw?

DOCTOR

Uh...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM

She's dead. I am her only next of kin. That body is mine. I want a blood draw.

DOCTOR

(to the nurses)

Okay, miss.

The doctor motions to one of the nurses.

Sam is frozen.

SAM

(commands)

I want it done now. I want that draw.

DOCTOR

Okay. Okay. Just calm down.

SAM

I am calm. I...

She passes out back into the chair.

CU: SAM'S FACE. STRAINED. PEACEFUL.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - DAY

Sam is asleep in her rental car. The sun prods her awake.

She sits up, parked in front of what used to be her mother's house.

Ashes and scarred wood, now. Fire has done its near best.

SAM (V.O.)

If there ever was a time in my life I could call 'the worst time of my life'... At least I still have a job. I hope. After having been burned out of my own apartment, fire still seems to have a way of slapping me in the face. Maybe I should've been a firefighter.

She digs through her BAG. Ah, some ENERGY BARS. And, a half-filled BOTTLE OF WATER.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM (V.O.)

Someone once said, 'Whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.' Well, kill me dead now. Kill me now. Just don't burn me to death. If I didn't know then, then I certainly know now, there is no god. Or I pissed someone off in a previous life. A week ago, I'm getting married. Now everything I have in life is burned. Had in life. What a way to die. Burned to death.

EXT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - DAY

Sam gets out of the car and stretches. Destruction surrounds her. Surveys the damage.

SFX: A HORN BLARES FROM A PASSING CAR.

Sam waves back. Looks down and notices her pants are undone. She's showing the world her drawers. She's a mess.

Trying to put herself back together, she looks over at the scorched corpse of wood and home.

Stares at it. Stares long.

Her intuition tells her to go look. Closer.

Amazingly she finds the EMPTY WHISKEY BOTTLE. Did she drink the whole thing?

The corpse draws her in. In to look. Look for something. Anything to make sense of it all. Her life.

EXT. BETH'S BURNED DOWN FARM HOUSE - DAY

Like a kid looking through a junk pile, a burned-out junk pile that is, Sam traipses through death.

Nothing. Nothing but death surrounds her.

She starts to weep. Sniffles.

Stumbles into the charred mess.

SAM

What the H?!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Her foot is caught by something metallic.

She sits up and sees a SCARRED METAL BOX at her feet.

Bent. Burned. Battered.

Sitting in all that ash, she hammers the box open with a ROCK. At least the rock survived.

It pops open!

She sees a book. A SCRAP BOOK of sorts. Charred, but intact.

CU: SHE OPENS THE BOOK AND THE MARRIAGE PICTURES LEAP OUT AT HER. HER MOM. HER DAD?

SAM (cont'd)

What...

Her mother had a scrap book after all.

SAM (V.O.)

As a journalist, you interview thousands upon thousands of people over your career. You get to develop a sense, when they lie to you. A politician. A clergyman. A con man. It comes with the job. I think cops get the same. You can also tell who has a great poker face. And who doesn't. My momma never had a great poker face. Funny how you want to believe your own mother. Your own father.

CU: ELIZABETH AND WILLIAM LANCASTER. MAY 20, 1971. ST. LOUIS CATHEDRAL.

SAM

(sotto voce)

So, that's what a bastard looks like.

Sam picks herself up out of the ashes and heads back to her car. She smells of smoke. Soot.

She grabs her bag and goes looking for the corpse's WATER SPIGOT.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM (cont'd)

Now how did all that fire not melt  
this damned hose? Must be holy  
water.

She looks around. Drags the HOSE out behind a big magnolia  
tree, strips down and takes a hose shower.

SAM (cont'd)

Great. All I need now is a truck-  
full of good ole boys...

Right on cue, a PICK-UP TRUCK drives by with... A TRUCK-  
FULL OF GOOD OLE BOYS.

They don't even see her, but she sees them and freezes.  
Whew. They're gone.

EXT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - DAY

Sam throws her bag in the backseat, grabs the burned metal  
Pandora's box and heads out down the highway.

Her Street Journalism 101 cred kicks-in. Grabs her MOBILE  
PHONE.

SAM

(on her mobile)  
Hey dad? Uh, boss?

FRANCIS (PHONE)

Sam! Where the hell are ya? Did you  
make it to New Orleans?

SAM

(rambling)  
Yeah, signal's not too good out  
here in the boonies. Yeah, I'm here  
in New Orleans. My mom burned-up in  
a fire, don't ask, and I need you  
to do something for me.

INT. FRANCIS' OFFICE - DAY

Francis just sits there. Mouth wide open. Sam's voice on  
the phone.

SAM (PHONE)

Boss? Francis?!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

FRANCIS  
(coming to)  
Uh, yeah. I'm here. Fire away.

SAM (PHONE)  
Don't say fire.

FRANCIS  
Uh, yeah. Sorry.

He's writing away. Shakes his head.

MATCH CUT TO:

CU: SHE FILLS OUT A FORM. A DNA BLOOD TEST FORM.

EXT. POST OFFICE - DAY

Inside her rental car, at the side of a MAILBOX, Sam agonizes over the FORM. A test which should prove Beth was her mother. Or, not.

She takes a DNA SWAB of her mouth. PACKAGES it up.

Rolls Beth's BLOOD VIAL in her hand. Packages it up.

SFX: THUD! THUD! THUD!

Sam jumps!

SAM  
Shit! Shit!

A POLICE OFFICER, (mid-20's), pounds on her trunk.

POLICE OFFICER  
No parking! This ain't a writing zone! Let's go!

SAM  
(startled)  
Yes! Yes! I'm sorry, officer. I was just--

POLICE OFFICER  
Just, nothing. Drop your mail and move. Let's go!

She jumps out, runs up to the mailbox. Hesitates. It's now or never. Tosses the package in.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Back in his fully-emblazoned POLICE CRUISER, the officer pulls away from the curb.

SAM  
 (as he's passing)  
 Sorry. I'm sorry.  
 (sotto voce)  
 Jackass.

The cruiser flips on its OFFICIAL LIGHTS.

SFX: SIREN! POLICE HORN!

SAM (cont'd)  
 Oh, shit.

He flips a U-ey and speeds off. Thank gawd.

SAM (cont'd)  
 (looking around)  
 Jackass.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. PHIL'S COFFEE SHOP - DUSK

Sam is in full swing. Her laptop out. Her camera hanging out of her bag. She's a mess.

She has been sitting outside there all day.

Her mobile rings.

SAM  
 Yeah. Boss?

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 Sam?

SAM  
 Yeah?

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 Are you sitting down?

SAM  
 I found out I wasn't adopted!

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 I know. I think. That's good.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM

How did--

FRANCIS (PHONE)

I found your father.

SAM

I... Uh... You did?

FRANCIS (PHONE)

He's not alive, Sam. I'm sorry.

SAM

Oh. Well... Okay then.

It's not okay.

INT. FRANCIS' OFFICE - DUSK

Francis leans forward in his CHAIR. A DOCUMENT in front of him. A concerning document.

FRANCIS

Look. It's better if you see this.

SAM (PHONE)

See what?

FRANCIS

I'm going to email it to you.

(pause)

Sam?

SAM (PHONE)

Yes?

FRANCIS

Just be prepared.

SAM (PHONE)

For what? Be prepared for what?

FRANCIS

Check your email. I gotta go.

Francis hangs up.

EXT. PHIL'S COFFEE SHOP - DUSK

Sam just sits there. Her mobile still in her hand. Hanging.

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

SAM  
(sotto voce)  
Okay. I'll be prepared.

Checks her email. Nope. Checks again. She keeps checking her email. The WiFi goes down.

SAM (cont'd)  
Damnit! Damnit!

Sam gets up with her laptop, starts walking around. Her laptop becomes a Geiger Counter looking for a signal.

Hits refresh. The email comes in.

She pauses to open the attachment. Stares at the screen.

SFX: CAR HORN BLASTS!

Standing in the middle of the street blocking traffic.

SAM (cont'd)  
Sorry! Sorry!

Sam runs out of the street and sits back down to safety.

She stares at the screen. Too long. Way, too, long.

CU: HER LAPTOP - ATTACHMENTS: POLICE REPORTS ARCHIVE. FIRE INVESTIGATOR'S ARCHIVE. TIMES-PICAYUNE ARTICLE ARCHIVE.

CU: UNZIP. SCREEN DISPLAYS A TIMES-PICAYUNE ARTICLE DATED JUNE 25, 1973. 29 KILLED IN QUARTER BLAZE.

She absorbs the article. Stunned silence.

SAM (V.O.)  
As if my life couldn't get any weirder. My father... 'Reverend Bill Lancaster's body seen in the window of the Upstairs Lounge after a horrific fire. June 24th, 1973. Scene of French Quarter fire is called Dante's Inferno, Hitler's Incinerators, Blood, Moans. Arson possibility raised.'

Sam leans back in her chair. Exhausted. Stares into the bright blue sky. Puffy clouds from heaven.

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM  
 (tears, sotto voce)  
 Happy birthday to me.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. BILL LANCASTER'S CHURCH (1973) - DAY

The sun is shining down on a small church. A CONGREGATION of followers. Followers of a faith.

**TITLE CARD: SUNDAY. JUNE 17, 1973. NEW ORLEANS.**

CAMERA: MOVES IN THROUGH THE CHURCH DOOR. DOWN THE AISLE. SPIRITUALLY.

REVEREND WILLIAM "BILL" LANCASTER, (mid-40's), dressed in his Sunday best. Sunday preacher best. Sam would be so proud of her father.

BILL  
 And so sayeth the Lord. Amen.

The CONGREGATION follows, "Amen."

BILL (cont'd)  
 Before we go today... I want to...  
 (pause)  
 I want to address the recent happenings, the recent hatred, that has become a news item.  
 (pause)  
 The fire bombings.

Bill finds it difficult to address his following. The congregation is small. Small in a small church.

BILL (cont'd)  
 We have all read in the papers about the fire bombings of our fellow churches around the nation. Some say it is because of who we are. What we believe. I can see some of our congregation... Some have chosen not to attend today. Maybe out of fear.

He stops. Looks around at the faces. They look back for guidance. Of any kind. Of a churchly kind.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BILL (cont'd)

(changing gears)

Have you ever been in love? A family member? A friend? I was in love with a woman, once. And we got married. Not far from here. In a church which might not... Doesn't accept us. Us. Today. For what we believe in.

We had a child. A beautiful baby girl. We loved her. Love her. My little girl.

But, my wife didn't want to be married to a preacher. To this day, I still don't know why. So, we divorced. I know. Another sin in the eyes of some. But life moves on.

And as my life changed. As my personal life changed. Changed for who I love today... A change some who have hatred in their hearts say is a sin... A sin to love another... I learned to become the person I am today. And some hate me for that. Hate you. Hate us.

From the congregation, someone yells, "We love you Reverend!"

BILL (cont'd)

And I love each and every one of you. No matter who you love. No matter who calls it a sin. Love... A sin? We are all God's children.

(changes gears)

And those who perpetrate crimes, fire bombings, on churches because of what we believe in... Who we are... Who we choose to love. They have hatred in their hearts and souls. We must find a way to forgive them. Maybe not now, or tomorrow. But... Maybe we can find a way to forgive their hatred. Forgive ourselves. Pray for them. That will make you a better... Churchgoer. A better person in life. Just be kind to each other. No matter who they love in return.

The congregation is frozen. "Amen!"

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BILL (cont'd)

Amen.

(pause)

Go in peace. May peace surround you  
and surround those who hate us for  
what we believe in. Peace be with  
you.

"And also with you," sayeth the congregation.

MRS. WILLIE INEZ WHATLEY WARREN, (59), dressed in her  
Sunday best. Anyone's charming next door neighbor. Walks up  
to the reverend.

MRS. WARREN

(tears in her eyes)

Oh, Reverend Bill. That was the  
most moving sermon I have ever  
witnessed. God bless you.

BILL

God bless you. Why thank you very  
much Mrs. Warren. I hope I said the  
right things. To the right people.

MRS. WARREN

Oh, Reverend! You did. Bless you.  
You are truly blessed. My sons  
Eddie and James would have loved  
this.

BILL

You should bring them one day. We  
accept everyone into our little  
church.

MRS. WARREN

Well...

(hesitates)

Well, they are afraid of what  
people will think and say about  
them. They need to keep their jobs.  
So, they are hidden.

BILL

I understand. If they want to come  
see me sometime, I could give them  
a private sermon. No one would  
know.

MRS. WARREN

Bless you! Bless you reverend. They  
are frightened.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

MRS. WARREN (cont'd)

With all the hatred out there. They avoid...

(she starts to cry)

They have been beaten up. They have been called frightening names. Nasty names.

BILL

How about this? Next Sunday, my good friend Phil Boudreaux has a social club where we meet. Away from the hatred. The Upstairs Lounge on Chartres and Iberville? Have you heard of it?

MRS. WARREN

Yes. I know they know that place.

BILL

Bring them there and they will be safe. I will talk with them.

MRS. WARREN

Bless you. God bless you, reverend.

BILL

God bless you. Go in peace. You are loved here.

Mrs. Warren smiles and drifts away into the exiting congregation.

Whew. That was tough for Bill.

EXT. BILL LANCASTER'S CHURCH/FRONT DOOR (1973) - DAY

The congregation is milling about, moving along. Sunday service is over. Bill locks up. Even churches need to be locked.

TWO SHADOWS peer into Bill's church doorway.

SHADOW #1

We know who you are! You faggot lover!

Bill spins back into the door. Thud!

BILL

I mean you no harm. We do not have any money. I can give you food.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SHADOW #2

Fuck your food! You faggots going to burn in Hell!

BILL

Please. I mean you no harm.

SHADOW #1

(to Shadow #2)

Come on. A good Christian church don't allow no queers.

(to Bill)

Faggot preacher!

BLAAAMMM! From out of nowhere comes a haymaker punch!

YOUNG SMOKIE, (mid-20's), an ex-convict, a black man, roundhouse knocks out Shadow #1 straight away. Down he goes.

YOUNG SMOKIE

Git yo redneck racist ass outta hereya!

Shadow #2 starts in on Smokie.

SHADOW #2

Listen here you nigger!

BLAAAMMM! Smokie clocks him, too. But, Shadow #2 just goes down in pain.

SHADOW #2 (cont'd)

I'm gonna kill you nigger!

YOUNG SMOKIE

No ya not asshole! I done did my time. I ain't goin' back for no redneck pieces of shit! Now git! Before I change my blackass mind!

Shadow #2 picks-up Shadow #1 and they stumble away.

SHADOW #2

Fuck you! You nigger faggot!

YOUNG SMOKIE

Git yo ass outta here! And don't yas evers come back! If-inn ya know what's good for ya.

BILL

Smokie? You okay?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

YOUNG SMOKIE

Hells bells! Sorry. My language gets the best of me sometimes. Yus okay, reverend?

BILL

That's okay. You're forgiven, my son. Considering. I'm okay.

YOUNG SMOKIE

Yus shakin' reverend. I walk with yas home.

Smokie and Bill walk off down the sidewalk. Home. Safety.

EXT. LOWER GARDEN DISTRICT - DAY

Smokie is watching after Bill on a leisurely stroll back to Bill's house.

BILL

The Lord must've sent you at the right time there.

YOUNG SMOKIE

You jus' tell ole Smokie if-unn you need help. Y'all done right by me. Jus' tryin' to he'p out.

BILL

I haven't seen you in church in a while.

YOUNG SMOKIE

Well, reverend... I... I been called a queer lover by some mens on the boats. I jus' done want no trouble. Promised my mamma I ain't goin' back to prison for something I done stupid.

BILL

You seemed to handle yourself well there, Smokie. Maybe the Lord was giving you a test?

YOUNG SMOKIE

I hopes I passed His test, reverend. Really, I do. I done want to be in no bad things.

They arrive in front of Bill's small, bright house.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BILL

Do you remember Mr. Washington's funeral?

YOUNG SMOKIE

Yes, sir. Thinks I do.

BILL

I was the reverend, presided over the funeral. It was very nice. Mrs. Washington asked for me personally. When I was walking home afterwards, I was confronted by a man, much like today. An angry man. Full of hatred.

YOUNG SMOKIE

No? Reverend?

BILL

Yes, sir. You know what he said to me?

YOUNG SMOKIE

What he said?

BILL

Nigger lover.

YOUNG SMOKIE

That's a damned shame. Dat ain't right.

BILL

Smokie? Some people have hatred in their hearts. Their souls. Some live with it all their lives. Eats at them. Some... Find a way to the light. Out of hatred.

YOUNG SMOKIE

I done wanna hate them mens. They jus' done wrong by you.

BILL

Yes. Yes, they did.

YOUNG SMOKIE

Promised my momma and pops I want eva go back... Something stupid.

(pauses)

Ya thinks I can find the light?

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED: (2)

BILL  
 (pats him)  
 You already have, Smokie. You  
 already have.

YOUNG SMOKIE  
 God bless ya, reverend.

BILL  
 God bless you, Smokie. Go in peace.  
 Think about coming.

YOUNG SMOKIE  
 Yes, sir. Promise. I do.

Bill turns in, home.

Smokie saunters down the sidewalk. To the light.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. NEW ORLEANS CITY PARK (PRESENT DAY) - DUSK

An INTERRACIAL COUPLE walks hand-in-hand down the sidewalk.

Sam befriends a PARK BENCH. Worried. Keeps checking her  
 phone.

She finally dials.

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
*Francis McGill.*

SAM  
 Oh, hey! Boss?

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
*Leave a message. If this is urgent,  
 call the City Desk Hotline. Thanks.*

SAM  
 (perturbed she got  
 voicemail)  
 Hey. It's me. I... I've got to talk  
 with you. Call me back.

She just sits there. Waiting. Seems like hours go by.

SFX: RING!

CONTINUED:

SAM (cont'd)  
 (on her phone)  
 Hey! Boss!

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 Yes. You can.

SAM  
 Yes, what?

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 Oh, I have good news for you.

SAM  
 Good. I need some right about now.

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 I gave your office away to a new  
 reporter.

SAM  
 (incensed)  
 What?! You did what?!

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
 You won't need it anymore. So, yes.

SAM  
 Why did you give my office away? Am  
 I fired?

INT. FRANCIS' OFFICE - DUSK

Francis is on the PHONE behind his PAPER-COVERED DESK.

FRANCIS  
 No. And, yes.

SAM (PHONE)  
 Yes, what?

FRANCIS  
 Whatever you are about to say to  
 me.

SAM (PHONE)  
 You don't even know yet.

FRANCIS  
 Yes, I do. Do it for yourself.

CONTINUED:

SAM (PHONE)

I...

FRANCIS

You have an extra month of comp  
time I got added. That's four  
months of 'no you' in this office.  
Besides. I'm getting tired of the  
smoke smell.

SAM (PHONE)

But...

FRANCIS

Okay. Go ahead and ask.

Long pause.

SAM (PHONE)

I need to do this story.

FRANCIS

I know. We all need this story.

SAM (PHONE)

I...

FRANCIS

Sam? If you don't go find this  
story, those people who died in  
that fire are lost to time. Your  
father, will be lost to time. Go.  
Do. It. It's what you're good at.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS CITY PARK - DUSK

Sam is now standing on the park bench.

SAM

(crying)

Thank you.

FRANCIS (PHONE)

Oh, and I got human resources to  
drop that whole harassment claim.

SAM

(giggles, sniffles)

Gawd, I love you!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
Just check-in with me. And I want  
first crack at reading it.

SAM  
Promise.

FRANCIS (PHONE)  
Gotta go. News thing. Love you.

He hangs up before he hears her.

SAM  
Love you, too.

The sun is setting. It's Sam's day, today.

She looks down at her trusty reporter's note pad. Blank.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. LOWER GARDEN DISTRICT - DAY

Sam sashays down a narrow sidewalk, staring at her note  
pad. "Smokie" is circled. "Still alive?" Question mark.  
Underlined.

Looking for addresses. She finds one.

Stops. Breathes. Her journey starts with the first step.

She slowly opens the rusted iron gate. Slowly closes it.  
Walks up.

Knocks, timidly.

SAM  
Hello?

The window curtains move.

SAM (cont'd)  
Hello? Hi. My name is Sam.

A muffled voice hidden away.

SMOKIE  
Who is it?

CONTINUED:

SAM

I'm looking for Smokie. My name is Sam.

SMOKIE

He dea-yud.

SAM

Smokie is dead?

SMOKIE

Yeah. Who is it?

SAM

My name is Samantha. I'm with the New York Times newspaper--

SMOKIE

Go away. Ain't no Smokie hereya.

She steps back. Re-composes herself. Tries again.

SAM

I'm here about the Upstairs Lounge fire.

There is no answer back. She knows it's him. Maybe.

SAM (cont'd)

Mr. Smokie? My name is Samantha Lancaster. I am Bill Lancaster's daughter.

Long pause.

Several locks flip. The door slowly creeks opens.

SMOKIE, (late-60's), a bearded, burly black man, missing a leg, is in a MANUAL WHEELCHAIR. His eyes are different colors. One blue. One green. They have seen a lot.

SAM (cont'd)

Mr. Smokie?

SMOKIE

Who are you? Really?

SAM

Bill Lancaster's daughter. Samantha. I want to know about him. Sir, I'm here to know--

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SMOKIE  
You by yo-self?

SAM  
Yes, sir. Yes, I am.

SMOKIE  
Bill Lancaster?

SAM  
Yes. Please. Mr. Smokie. Bill  
Lancaster was my father. My name is  
Samantha Lancaster.

He eyeballs her. Up and down. And, again.

SMOKIE  
Well, now. Come on in.

She steps back as the elderly Smokie wheels back away from  
the door.

INT. SMOKIE'S HOUSE - DAY

Smokie's house is neat and everything is old. New Orleans  
old.

It's dark though cozy. The drapes are drawn. Almost  
nighttime inside.

SMOKIE  
Where's you hat?

SAM  
My hat?

SMOKIE  
You reporters gots to wear hats  
dontcha?

SAM  
No, sir. Just me. Wait.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out her New Orleans  
Zephyrs baseball cap. Fits just right.

SMOKIE  
(he smiles)  
He, he! Well, you don't look like  
no reporter I seen.

CONTINUED:

SAM  
Here's my I-D.

She hands him an official NEW YORK TIMES PRESS I.D.

He eyeballs the picture. Eyeballs her.

SMOKIE  
It look like you.

SAM  
It is me. I was much... Uh...

SMOKIE  
Youngas?

SAM  
(giggles)  
Yes. Youngas.

SMOKIE  
What is a New York Times?

SAM  
It's a newspaper, sir. A very big newspaper.

Smokie motions Sam to sit in the only CHAIR in the room. Everything else is a COUCH.

SMOKIE  
Well, well. Bill Lancaster had a daughter.

He leans in a little to look at her.

SAM  
Yes, sir. I just don't remember him. That's why I'm here.

SMOKIE  
My, oh my... You gots his eyes. I see him. I see him in your eyes.  
(nervously)  
You not gonna take any pictures? I don't want no pictures.

SAM  
No, sir. Mr. Smokie--

SMOKIE  
Friends call me Smokie. Just plain ole Smokie.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM

Smokie. Smokie it is. My friends call me Sam.

SMOKIE

(laughs)

He, he. Sam it is.

SAM

(hesitatingly)

Smokie. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. I may be a reporter... Granted, one without a hat, but--

SMOKIE

Your father dea-yud, miss. I sorry. Real sorry at dat.

SAM

Yes. Yes, I know. That's why I'm here. I just... I just want to find out more about him. I really didn't know him. I was only two.

SMOKIE

Right Reverend Bill was a mighty fine man. One of finest mens I ever met in my life. I'd do anything for him. Mm-hmm.

She's caught staring at his leg. His missing leg.

SMOKIE (cont'd)

I gots the diabetes. The doctors said I had to git it cut-off if-unn I wanted to live.

SAM

I'm sorry. My apologies. I'm just curious in nature. The reporter in me.

SMOKIE

Oh, it's a'ight Miss Sam. I gets along well. I reckon. God takes care of me. Don't know why, but he said my leg had to go. To live and all.

SAM

How did you know my father?

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED: (3)

SMOKIE

That Reverend Bill was a right fine man. Fine man, yes, indeed. Mm-hmm. What happened to him was a God's shame. That ain't right for him. Ain't right for nobody to be burnt up. Alive.

Sam sits there. Frozen.

SMOKIE (cont'd)

I sorry, Miss Sam. I didn't mean to be all forward and all.

SAM

No. That's okay. It's okay. It just seems--

SMOKIE

No. It ain't okay. It ain't right what done to him. Those mens, those mens in his church... They done right by me. Always. Mm-hmm.

(remembers)

When I was youngas, I gots myself mixed-up in some bad stuff. With some bad friends. Caused me to go to prison. Mm-hmm. I done my time, like I supposed to. Yes, I did.

SAM

What did you do, may I ask?

SMOKIE

Oh, I gots in with the wrong crowd, Miss Sam. They was selling drugs. I got arrested with them. Being po' and all, I ain't had no lawyer. They sent me to prison with them. Judge didn't give me but three years. Dat three years I had a long time to thinks. Thinks about my friends. Mm-hmm. Thinks what I wanted to be in my life. I promised myself, if-unn I had eva gotten out... I would never go back. Mm-hmm. I done never met with them friends eva again. Dat don't scare ya and all, done it?

SAM

No, sir.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

SMOKIE

(laughs)

That's good! He, he.

(changing gears)

You know what Reverend Bill and those mens did for me? I worked on the boats when I come outta prison. Mm-hmm. Had me no money. Had little stitch of clothes on me. Those mens at Upstairs Lounge got some money together and got me some clothes. Mm-hmm.

Smokie sits there. He starts to cry. An elderly man crying.

SAM

It's okay. I don't want to upset you. I'm sorry.

SMOKIE

No. It's okay, Miss Sam. I love them mens. But those mens gave me a chance when nobody give me no chance. I gots some clothes. One of them gots me a job at his company. Driving the deliveries. Best thing that eva happened to me. Mm-hmm. I needed someone to believes in me. I ain't had no one being I was adopted.

She reaches in her bag and pulls out some tissue.

SMOKIE (cont'd)

Thank ya. Might right of ya.

(pauses)

Your father done mean lots to me, Sam. I just an ole colored boy from New Orleans. And they done right by me. I ain't neva gonna forget dat.

The air clears a little. Smokie rolls over to his picture shelf. Grabs a PICTURE down.

SMOKIE (cont'd)

This-un my parents. My adopted parents.

He hands it to her. An ELDERLY WHITE MAN and ELDERLY WHITE WOMAN in a wonderfully-posed picture.

SAM

That's a beautiful picture of them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

SMOKIE

They alls I had in the world. My  
momma died why I's in prison. My  
daddy done bit time later. I hopes  
I ain't never broke they hearts. Mm-  
hmm.

SAM

I bet they were very proud of you.  
Parents that loved you.

SMOKIE

I bet ya right. Right, indeed. They  
always told me dat. They loved me.

SAM

Can you tell me anything about the  
fire? Were you there? What  
happened?

SMOKIE

Hate. Dats what happened, Sam. Some  
man gits all up in someone's face  
at the Upstairs and he done gits  
punched. They throws him out. He  
say, '*I'm gonna burn all you  
faggots out.*' Some shit like dat.  
(pause)

'Cuse for my language, Miss Sam.

SAM

It's okay. It was shit. I'm a  
reporter. I've heard worse.  
(pause)

So you were there? Saw this happen?

SMOKIE

No, ma'am. Jus-in what been told to  
me by my friends. Them mens. Them  
thats survived.

SAM

I read something about you in the  
paper back then. How you protected  
the flowers at the entrance. The  
memorial.

SMOKIE

(laughs)

Well, you don't look so old! He,  
he!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

SAM

(smiles)

No. I mean I read an archive, a copy of the newspaper from back then. At the library.

SMOKIE

Yes, un. Peoples were coming by and trashin' those flowers. I ain't had no money to gets more, so I's just made sure no one trash them.

(pause)

I cants read much. I can reads a delivery log.

(laughs)

He, he! Mm-hmm.

SFX: DOOR KNOCKS.

Sam jumps!

SMOKIE (cont'd)

It's okay, Miss Sam. Jus-in my friends making groceries.

SAM

Making groceries?

SMOKIE

Can you answers the door for me?

SAM

Yes, sure.

Sam goes over and opens the door.

AVERY, (late-60's), well-dressed in a seersucker suit, matching loafers, has a ROLLING-BASKET BRIMMING WITH GROCERIES.

TERRY, (late-60's), well-dressed, suit and tie, has some GROCERIES IN HAND.

AVERY

Well, hello, miss.

SAM

Hi.

SMOKIE

Avery! Terry! Y'all come meet Miss Sam. Come on in, hereya.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (7)

Sam holds the door open as Avery and Terry bring the groceries inside. They know exactly where they go.

TERRY

(shakes hands)

Miss, Sam. Very pleased to meet you. My name is Terry. He's Avery.

SAM

Pleased to meet you, Terry.

AVERY

(shaking hands)

Miss, Sam.

SAM

Avery, pleased to meet you.

AVERY

You from around here?

SAM

Uh, I'm just visiting. I'm from the New York Times--

SMOKIE

Miss Sam is Bill Lancaster's daughter.

Avery and Terry freeze.

AVERY

Reverend?

TERRY

Reverend?

Still frozen.

SMOKIE

Yes, sir. Miss Sam and I was...

Smokie begins to weep. Life has taken its toll.

SAM

I recently found out about my father.

AVERY

Sugah--

SMOKIE

She done know, Avery. Mm-hmm.

Pause. No one knows where to go from here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (8)

SAM

I was little. Only two. I think. I didn't know him well. At all, really. I just...

TERRY

It's okay, sweetie. I understand. Reverend Bill was the sweetest, kindest human being I have ever known.

AVERY

(peering)

Oh, look, Terry. She's got his eyes.

TERRY

My word. Avery? You're right. You have beautiful eyes, Miss Sam.

AVERY

Yes indeed. Reverend Bill's eyes.

SAM

Thank you. Thank you, both. How did you know my father?

SMOKIE

They was the mens I was telling you.

AVERY

(laughs)

Gawd! Smokie was a mess.

They laugh. Sam's reporter observes. Smiles a little.

TERRY

Your father would hold a social after church at the Upstairs--

AVERY

Gawd, I loved those.

TERRY

We all would go every Sunday. From five to seven you'd pay a dollar fifty for the cover--

AVERY

And a dollar for all-you-can-drink pitchers. They had the best beer busts.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (9)

TERRY

Fifty cents for the mug, because  
you had to bring it back.

SAM

Beer busts?

TERRY

Oh, yes!

AVERY

That was a fun.

TERRY (cont'd)

That was fun.

Terry sits down. Really quick.

AVERY

Miss Sam? Did you ever see... The  
picture?

SAM

Yes. Unfortunately. I've only seen  
my father in his wedding best,  
and...

TERRY

(blurting out; weeping)

There was that perverted man. That  
man! Michael socked him good.

AVERY

Please, Terry.

TERRY

No. He deserved it. Buddy threw him  
out and told him to never come  
back. He said those hateful words.

AVERY

Oh, Terry.

TERRY

He did. He burned us all. He killed  
them. My friends. God bless them.

SAM

Michael?

AVERY

Michael Bel Landry. He was burned  
bad. Real bad. He had six fingers  
and both thumbs amputated. That  
poor man. Bless him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (10)

TERRY

He stood up for everyone that night. He socked that evil man.

Sam notices Terry's hands. They are fire-scared. He catches her glimpse.

SAM

I'm sorry. It's the reporter. I always observe.

TERRY

I'm okay. I'll show you.

AVERY

No, Terry. Please.

TERRY

No. I'm okay.

Terry begins to unbutton his shirt. A well-pressed cotton shirt.

If he wasn't covered by clothes, save for his hands, you could not tell Terry was badly scared.

His chest, arms, neck, hands are completely fire-scared.

SAM

I'm sorry.

TERRY

No. It's okay. I'm alive. Thirty-two people are not. My friends. I get to live. Bob gets to live. Smokie...

SMOKIE

(laughs)  
Yes-un I lives!

Avery, Terry and Smokie laugh. An awkward laugh at that.

Sam looks down at her reporter's pad. "Smokie's alive?"

Mostly blank. But not the memories.

MATCH CUT TO:



EXT. PHIL'S COFFEE SHOP - NIGHT

Sam struggles to write in her note pad. The MEAL half-eaten. Her NEW ORLEANS WINE, half-drunk. She gawks at a blinking cursor on her laptop.

SAM (V.O.)

I have seen a lot of things in my career. Good and bad. I have seen my fair share, if fair is a word... Of dead bodies. Of every imaginable death. Even fire. Deaths. How these men were persecuted, burned alive is beyond... Is beyond? The things some humans do to others in hate... Somehow my problems don't seem like problems anymore. How they can still worship a god... A god that can allow so much hate in the world... Is beyond...

She flips her NAPKIN over her lap with a pop.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. NEW ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER HOTEL - NIGHT

Sam startles awake. The DRAPES blow in the window. It is calm outside. Inside Sam, it is turmoil.

She sits up in bed, grabs her laptop. It glows, silhouetting her nude figure against the moonlit drapes.

Her perfect back, perfect complexion of her skin contrasts what she has seen. Fire and hatred.

She types away. And away.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. UPSTAIRS LOUNGE (1973) - NIGHT

The bar is jumping. The laughter is infectious.

The early signs of Disco plays on the JUKEBOX.

The dancing is on.

CONTINUED:

**TITLE CARD: SUNDAY. JUNE 24, 1973. NEW ORLEANS.**

**TITLE CARD: UPSTAIRS LOUNGE**

A young SMOKIE enters from the stairwell, with a smile ear-to-ear.

BUDDY, (early-30's), the vibrant barkeep, grabs the mic.

BUDDY

And here comes Smokie!

Everyone claps! Smokie bows. "Hey, Smokie!" All around.

The music is blasting. Disco is evolving. It is 1973 after all.

YOUNG SMOKIE

Heya, Buddy! You need-un anything from me tonight?

BUDDY

Have ya some fun, Smokie! Have ya some fun.

YOUNG SMOKIE

I gots to head out to my boat. Jus-in seeing if-unn you need anything.

BUDDY

We good here! Sunday's are the best. Ain't dat right, Andy?

Sitting at the end of the bar is ANDY, (early-20's), clean cut, having a good time.

ANDY

Cheers!  
(to Smokie)  
We're blessed, Smokie!

Andy and Buddy clink beer mugs and drink.

YOUNG SMOKIE

(laughs)  
Yeah, you right. He, he!

And off goes Smokie to his boat. Reverend Bill shakes Smokie's hand as he heads out. Happy. A pat on the back.

Bill is waved-over by Buddy.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BUDDY  
Hey, Bill! Bill!

Bill looks over as Buddy points to Mrs. Warren in the corner, by the PIANO.

Bill waves back 'okay.'

BILL  
(over the music)  
Mrs. Warren. I see you're not dancing.

MRS. WARREN  
(laughs)  
Oh, Reverend, I'll let the kids do the dancing. Here's my two sons Eddie and James I told you about.

EDDIE HOSEA WARREN, (early-20's), clean cut young man, and his brother JAMES CURTIS WARREN, (early-20's), clean cut as well. Their mother is beaming proud they get to meet Bill.

BILL  
(shaking hands)  
Eddie. James. Please, call me Bill, here. Reverend is for when we're at church.

Eddie and James chat with Bill. He comforts them. Churchly. Paternally. Under the disco music.

SFX: BLAAAMMM! THE MEN'S ROOM DOOR SLAMS OPEN.

A DRUNK man, (early-20's), scruffy, dirty, belligerent, is pushed out of the men's room.

A scuffle ensues. He trudges over and grabs a BEER MUG off a table full of friends.

MICHAEL BEL LANDRY, (early-30's), tall, well-dressed, good looking, grabs at the drunk.

MICHAEL  
Hey! That's not yours.

DRUNK  
Fuck you, faggot!

Michael rises. Socks him. Real good. The drunk goes down.

Buddy jumps around the bar.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

BUDDY

Hey, asshole! Get the hell outta here.

The Drunk comes at Buddy. Buddy body slams him into the jukebox. It stops cold.

BUDDY (cont'd)

You're eighty-sixed outta here!  
Don't ever come back. I warned you  
before about your crap!

DRUNK

You're dead! Dead! I'm gonna burn  
all you faggots out!

BUDDY

Get the hell outta here before I  
drag you down to the street myself!

The Drunk staggers back. He backs up and out of the Upstairs. Down the stairwell.

BUDDY (cont'd)

You okay, Michael?

MICHAEL

(shaking hand)

Yes, I'm okay. Hurt my hand,  
though.

BUDDY

No worries everyone. He's banned.  
That's the last time I'm throwing  
him out.

(to Michael)

I'll get some ice for you.

(pause)

Dance, anyone?!

And with that, the disco jukebox jumps on cue.

The Upstairs vibe is vibing again.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NEW ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER HOTEL (PRESENT DAY) - MORNING

Sam slowly awakes. Looks around. Surveys.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM  
(sotto voce)  
Nothing burned. Good.

She smells herself.

SAM (cont'd)  
Gawd. I need a shower.

As Sam showers in a classic New Orleans CLAW-FOOTED TUB.  
Realizing today is the day. A visit is in order.

CU: SAM'S FACE IN THE SHOWER GLASS WINDOW TO THE COURTYARD.  
WATER TRICKLES DOWN THE GLASS. TEAR SHADOWS ON HER FACE.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS CEMETERY - DAY

Sam pulls the rental car up to the cemetery entrance.  
Frozen in the windshield. Just staring. Looks down at her  
reporter's note pad.

CU: NORTHWEST. LAKESIDE. PLOT 4. MARKER 24. LANCASTER.

SAM (V.O.)  
The easy part of my job is  
interviewing people. I love it. It  
excites me. I guess you could say  
'I was born with it.' I get to hear  
their side of the story. Sometimes  
those stories are happy. Sometimes  
sad. It's probably the sad ones  
which live with me most. I don't  
know why. How. But...  
How do you interview someone who's  
dead?

Sam walks up and down the cemetery GRAVE SITES. Searching.  
Aisle by aisle.

She looks down at her pad. Then, about-faces on a dime.

There it is. The HEADSTONE.

REVEREND WILLIAM LANCASTER

BELOVED BY ALL WHOM HE TOUCHED

THE WORLD IS A BETTER PLACE HAVING KNOWN HIM

July 1, 1928 - June 24, 1973

CONTINUED:

A fresh group of yellow CHRYSANTHEMUMS are POTTED next to his grave site. A walking CANE hides behind the headstone.

She neatly re-arranges them.

And sits.

SAM

Hi, daddy. It's Sam. I talked with Smokie yesterday. And Avery. And Terry. They said they miss you. Look! Someone brought you flowers. I wished momma hadn't lied. About you. I hate... Her for that. Momma passed away, daddy. I hope you two can make peace together.

(pause)

I promise to visit. Often. I'm working on a story. I hope you like it. I want to know you daddy. I don't know what I'm saying. I miss you, daddy.

She sits. It starts to SPRINKLE. Time to go.

INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - DUSK

Sam is driving back. Back to where? The RAIN washes away the dirt on the windshield. Tries to wash away the sorrow.

SAM (V.O.)

How do you interview someone who's dead?

It is New Orleans. Maybe I can get a voodoo witch doctor, or something. A seance.

(giggles through tears)

I never thought I would find a story where I would be a part of it. They always say, 'Don't become part of the story.'

Well, screw dat. As they say down here.

It's a long ride back to The Big Easy. A painful ride back.

INT. NEW ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER HOTEL - NIGHT

Sam soaks in that claw-footed tub. Soaks long.

Drinks her custom-made New Orleans ADULT BEVERAGE.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM (V.O.)

How do you interview someone that's  
dead? They never teach you that in  
J-school. Who? What? When? Where?  
How? Why? Where? Who? Something  
like dat.  
Who? Where are they now? Besides  
dead?

Closes her eyes, slowly slips under the water line.  
Gracefully.

Bubble. Bubble. Glub. Glub.

SFX: POLICE SIREN IN THE DISTANCE. HEARD UNDER WATER.

She springs up like a Phoenix from the ashes. Not ashes.  
Water. She springs up from the water.

SAM

(sotto voce; slurring)  
Who were the investigating  
officers? Where are they? Where are  
they?

She drags herself out of the tub. Drenched. A stark  
contrast to fire.

Saunters (stumbles) over to bed. Collapses.

SAM (cont'd)

(sotto voce)  
Where were the police?

INT. NEW ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER HOTEL - MORNING

Sam is bedded in the same place she passed out.

SFX: DING. GOES HER TEXT MESSAGE.

CU: HER MOBILE. MESSAGE FROM BOSS. "WHERE WERE THE POLICE?"

SAM

(sotto voce)  
That's what I was saying. Where  
were the police?

She surveys the carnage in her room. It's a mess as she.

SAM (cont'd)

I sure like the drinks they serve  
down here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Time to get ready for the day.

EXT. PHIL'S COFFEE SHOP - MORNING

Sam is halfway put together today. Sitting at an outdoor table adorned with a yellow Chrysanthemum.

The waiter BOBBY, (early-20's), clean cut, thin young pregnant girl, in complimentary black server's garb, serves Sam BREAKFAST.

BOBBY

Here's your pancakes. Extra maple syrup. Would you like more coffee?

SAM

Yes, please.  
(notices)  
When are you expecting?

BOBBY

Oh... Yes! My fiancé and I are so happy! Having a baby girl. Getting married in a month.

Sam pauses. Her life.

SAM

Congrats.

BOBBY

Thank you! Can't wait. We're eight months.

Her life. Again.

SAM

Hey? Do you know where Iberville and Chart-ress streets are?

BOBBY

Chart-ers. Chart-ers street. Don't ask me. That's the way it's pronounced down here.

SAM

Chart-ers street? Okay. Is the Upstairs Lounge still there?

Bobby looks stunned. Steps back a little.



CONTINUED:

BOBBY

Uh... Er... Um... Can you wait here just a sec? I'll get your coffee.

SAM

Sure. Thanks.

As Bobby walks back inside, Sam begins to eat. Wondering. What was that look?

From a side door behind steps, PHIL BOUDREAU, (late-60's), well-dressed, big white straw Panama hat, big white jacket, and that cemetery walking CANE, hobbles over.

His cane accidentally on purpose taps the table. Startles Sam.

PHIL

Are you the one looking for the Upstairs?

SAM

Uh, yes. Startled me. Iberville and Chart-ers streets?

PHIL

Ain't der no more.

SAM

The streets? Or, the Upstairs?

Phil stares at her.

SAM (cont'd)

The Upstairs?

PHIL

Why are you asking, miss?

SAM

(puts her hand out)

Hi. My name is Samantha Lancaster. I'm with the New York Times. I'm down here--

PHIL

The Upstairs is gone. Good day, miss.

He hobbles away. Doesn't shake her hand. She thinks. Fast.

SAM

Bill Lancaster was my father.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Phil stops dead in his tracks. Looks back at her.

PHIL

Bill Lancaster is dead, miss.

SAM

I know. I'm Sam Lancaster. His daughter.

Phil reluctantly hobbles back to her table. Leans in.

PHIL

My gawd. You have his eyes.

SAM

So I hear. Thank you. I never met him. Well, I was probably two when I last saw him. Here. Here's my I-D.

Digging through her bag, she searches for it.

PHIL

That's okay, miss. Your eyes are good enough for me. May I join you? I have a bad hip.

SAM

Oh! Yes! Please. Please sit.

He helps himself to a chair at her table.

PHIL

Please. Eat your breakfast. I pride myself in having the best breakfasts in town.

SAM

You're the chef?

PHIL

No, ma'am. I'm the owner. Phil Boudreaux.

SAM

Phil's Coffee Shop? Ah, got it.

PHIL

Sam? It is?

SAM

Yes, sir. Sam Lancaster. I'm down here doing a story...

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

SAM (cont'd)

Well, to be honest, I'm not doing a story. Wait. I took time off from work to... To find my father. Bill Lancaster. Yes. I know. Unfortunately, I know. Saw the picture.

PHIL

I'm real sorry, Miss Sam. Really I am.

SAM

It's okay. Not okay. Well... How do you know my father? Did you know...

PHIL

I used to own the Upstairs Lounge. Still do.

SAM

Oh, my gawd. You're the owner?

PHIL

God had nothing to do with it. It was just pure hate. Actually, the Upstairs was the happiest place in New Orleans. Just hate burned it down.

He looks down and away. It's coming back. That time.

SAM

Mister Phil? I'm sorry. I'm not here to cause trouble. I don't want to bring you any pain. I'm just here... I don't know why I'm here. I just want to know more about my father.

PHIL

I'm okay. Can't feel no more pain anymore.

(reflects)

I'll have you know, Reverend Bill Lancaster was the finest man I have ever had the pleasure of being in my life. It didn't matter what problems you had in life, he could always counsel you. Preach the word of God. And... Always with the Lagniappe. He was the genuine thing.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

SAM

Lagniappe?

PHIL

Down here, Lagniappe means a little something extra. He brought a little something extra into the world. That man sacrificed his life for those men. And women. He'd preach on Sundays and come over to the Upstairs and have a social. Yes, he would. A kind man, indeed.

SAM

Do you mind if I ask you about the fire? You don't have--

PHIL

That's okay. It was a long time ago. I can't feel no more pain anymore. Nobody around here wants to remember it.

(looks around)

Nobody I blame for remembering it either. Hell, sometimes I don't even remember it.

SAM

I don't understand. Why doesn't anyone want to remember it?

PHIL

Do you know what kind of bar the Upstairs Lounge was? What it was called?

SAM

I... Uh... I think.

PHIL

It was a gay bar. They called it a queer bar back then. Hell, now days no one cares. Nobody raises an eyebrow. They just say gay bar.

SAM

So, you had to be gay to get into the bar?

PHIL

(laughs)

Hell, no! Miss Sam, I ran a good bar. Hell, a great bar.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

PHIL (cont'd)

First in New Orleans to get a dancing license. I welcomed anyone and everyone. I had a lot of good friendships come out of the Upstairs. My wife used to say, 'It'd make me happy.' I miss my wife the most.

She looks at him with 'used to' stuck in her mind.

SAM

Your wife?

PHIL

Yes. Virginia Eugenia. Ginny. The only thing, person, who made me happier.

SAM

I'm sorry for your loss.

PHIL

Thank you, kindly. They should've change the name of the coffee shop to hers.

(laughs)

I don't feel no more pain anymore.

(pauses)

Buddy was the best manager I ever had. That man saved those people from burning. The survivors. God had a peculiar way of punishing him.

SAM

God? How so? Buddy?

PHIL

Buddy got a lot of people out of the Upstairs. He knew the safe ways to go. Some of them just froze. I figure they saw their lives flash in front of them. Fear must've froze them.

SAM

You said 'God had a way of punishing him.' Buddy. The manager?

PHIL

Buddy saved a lot of people that night, Sam. Got them down from the balconies. Then...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

Phil pauses. Sam doesn't know what to say.

PHIL (cont'd)

Then, Buddy goes around the corner,  
looks up and there...

(pauses)

There was Adam. Adam Thibodeaux.  
Sitting at the end of the bar.  
Burning. Burning alive. Buddy was  
screaming, 'Adam! Adam!' He  
couldn't hear him. Just sitting  
there. Burning. Till the fire hose  
knocked him down.

(looks down)

You ever seen a human being burn  
alive?

SAM

No. As a journalist I've seen--

PHIL

That man was Buddy's friend. I  
don't ever want to see my friends  
burn alive in front of me. Just  
sitting there. Helpless.

SAM

Do you know where Buddy is today?

PHIL

St. Mary's No. 3.

SAM

St. Mary's?

PHIL

Buddy passed away some time ago,  
Sam. Never forgave himself.

SAM

Why? He helped save those people?  
He must've been, must be a hero?

PHIL

He always blamed himself for not  
saving enough. Saving Adam. Took a  
damned toll on ole Buddy. That poor  
man. More than any man... Any one  
person could stand.

Sam looks down at her breakfast. One bite taken.

CONTINUED: (7)

PHIL (cont'd)

Look at me. What a host. I ruined your breakfast.

SAM

Oh, no. It's okay.

PHIL

(to the waiter)

Hey! Bobby!

Bobby comes over with some coffee.

BOBBY

More coffee, ma'am?

SAM

Yes, please. Thank you.

Bobby refills Sam's coffee mug.

PHIL

(to Bobby)

Comp Miss Sam's breakfast here. She's on me, Bobby. Her money's no good.

(to Sam)

Miss Sam? As long as you're in my shop, your money's no good.

Bobby turns from the sunny sidewalk table. Sam's napkin drops.

Phil, Sam and Bobby each bend down to pick it up.

MS: SAM AND BOBBY GRAB AT THE NAPKIN.

SAM

Ooppss! I've got it. That's okay. You are very kind. I can pay. Really.

BOBBY

Thank you, ma'am. I'll go get the check.

PHIL

You want to see the Upstairs?

Sam just sits. Frozen.

INT. UPSTAIRS LOUNGE (PRESENT DAY) - DUSK

Sam is led in by Phil to the remains of the Upstairs.

The door cracks open to a dark, burned-out hulk of a room.  
A bar. A lounge of yesteryear.

PHIL

You ain't superstitious are you  
now, Miss Sam?

SAM

I hope not.

She walks around. Looking. For what? She doesn't know.

SAM (cont'd)

Why haven't you done anything with  
the place? If I may ask?

PHIL

Oh, you can ask. I don't know. I  
can't bring myself...

(looks around)

In this place, my Upstairs  
Lounge... Thirty-two of my friends  
died. Some were later. Got burned  
alive. The survivors had to move  
on. Time does that to you. In this  
place, the greatest mass murder of  
gays in the history of the United  
States was perpetrated on people  
just like you and me. Just, they  
were hated for what they believed  
in. Who they loved. You gotta  
remember, Sam... This was 1973. I  
know that was well before your  
time, but--

SAM

I can understand. Hatred.

PHIL

I don't feel no more pain anymore.

(pauses)

You a Christian, Sam?

SAM

Uh, well, no. I don't know what I  
am. Agnostic, I guess. I just don't  
believe a god would allow this  
kind... This hatred. Funny coming  
from a reporter who's seen a lot.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

SAM (cont'd)

I don't know why I don't believe in god. In a god.

PHIL

I used to go to church on Sundays. Go to your father's church. He didn't care what you believed in. Everyone was welcome at his church. I'm not much of a Catholic or Christian. I just know I believe in a spiritual...

SAM

Existence?

PHIL

Yes. I'm spiritual. I guess you could say. A spiritual existence.

SAM

My father believed more than me. Maybe if he were alive today, that would be different. I don't know.

PHIL

Hatred is a pretty evil thought, Sam. Hatred can consume you.  
(looks around)  
I know what hatred can do to people.

Sam takes it all in. Looks over at the boarded-up window where her father took his last breath. She walks to it.

She starts to cry. A strong cry.

PHIL (cont'd)

Sam? You should be proud of your father.

SAM

I am. I miss my daddy. When the only two pictures of your daddy is on his wedding day... And, when he's...

PHIL

Well, darling. You can always say 'hi' to me. The reverend would be mighty proud of a daughter who went looking for him. I saw you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM  
Thank you, Mister Phil.

PHIL  
Phil.

SAM  
Yes. Phil. Thank you.

PHIL  
Where you headed off to now?

SAM  
I don't know. Everyone else is  
dead. Can't interview dead people.

PHIL  
Except one more.

Sam full stops.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - NIGHT

CU: SAM'S FACE.

Driving mad into the night, a mission calls for Sam.

SAM (V.O.)  
I don't think I've ever been so  
lost in my life. After what I've  
been through in the last two weeks,  
I surprise myself at my alcohol  
intake. They do make such good  
drinks down here.  
After all that pain, what amazes me  
is the strength, the resilience of  
the people I have met. Who knew my  
father. How they get through each  
day knowing what they...  
Phil was my last interview.  
Everyone else was dead. Until he  
told me about Detective Van Mayer  
changing his name. I would've  
changed my name, too.

EXT. JOHNSON FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

Sam pulls off the highway in the dead black of night.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CU: HER NOTE PAD. 12113 HIGHWAY 301. JOHNSON.

The MAILBOX number 121-- is obliterated. Distinct BULLET HOLES decorate it.

SAM  
(sotto voce)  
This is it. Now or never.

She pulls down the dirt road to a farm house in the distance. A long distance.

A man is sitting on the front porch, rocking in a CHAIR. An OXYGEN TANK sits next to him.

Retired DETECTIVE JAMES "JIMMY" VAN MAYER, (late-70's), in farmer overalls, breathing through the tank and tubes, SHOTGUN next to him, stares into the distance. He hides behind the name Johnson.

Sam stops and gets out. Stands there.

SAM (cont'd)  
Mister Johnson?

VAN MAYER  
Yes, ma'am? How can I help you?

SAM  
Uh, I'm here doing a census study.

She walks up. He stops rocking. Sam pulls out her New York Times I-D and waves it.

VAN MAYER  
Census? At night? You got the wrong place, missy.

She moves closer. Flips her note pad over.

SAM  
No. No. 1-21-13 Highway 301.  
Johnson. You are Mister Johnson?

He slowly reaches back for his shotgun. His age fights him.

VAN MAYER  
You best be on the road, missy. No Johnson here.

SAM  
I know you're Van Mayer. Detective Jimmy Van Mayer.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

VAN MAYER

You better get the fuck outta here  
or you're going to wish--

SAM

Wish what?!

Sam rushes over, grabs the shotgun and heaves it over the  
yard.

VAN MAYER

I'm gonna call the sheriff!

SAM

Oh, I don't think the sheriff will  
be coming.

VAN MAYER

Who are you, bitch?

SAM

I'm Bill Lancaster's daughter.

Van Mayer's eyes wide open.

SAM (cont'd)

Yes, I know I'm a bitch. My fiancé  
developed that bad habit one night.

VAN MAYER

I'm an old man.  
(coughing)  
You better leave.

SAM

I'm not leaving until I get  
answers. The truth.

VAN MAYER

I ain't got no answers. Got no  
truths. Fuck off.

SAM

Funny. He said that, too.

Trying to diffuse the situation, Sam sits at the foot of  
the porch steps.

SAM (cont'd)

Listen. I'm not here to cause you  
any trouble. I--

CONTINUED: (3)

VAN MAYER

Then you best be leaving.

SAM

I want to know what happened to the investigation?

VAN MAYER

(defiant)

I don't remember nothing.

SAM

Yes. Yes, you do. My father was burned alive by some asshole who killed a whole hell of a lot of good people that night. You were the investigating officer. Detective Van Mayer.

VAN MAYER

My name is Johnson.

SAM

Yeah, I could see why you picked 'Dick.'

VAN MAYER

(looks away)

I don't know nothing.

SAM

My father and those people were burned alive, Mister Van Mayer. Murdered. You were assigned the case. I read all your reports. The fire investigator's. You dropped the case. I just want to know why?

Van Mayer just sits there realizing he's got no where to go.

VAN MAYER

It wasn't my call.

SAM

Call?

VAN MAYER

I was told to stop.

SAM

Stop the investigation? You were told, by who?

CONTINUED: (4)

VAN MAYER  
(looks away)  
I don't remember.

SAM  
(desperate)  
I bet you'll remember if I turn  
your oxygen off?

VAN MAYER  
Fuck you!

Sam jumps up, runs over and yanks the oxygen tube outta his face.

VAN MAYER (cont'd)  
Help! Help! She's trying to kill  
me!

SAM  
(enraged)  
Scream! Scream all you want! You're  
gonna die without oxygen just like  
my father and those people.

VAN MAYER  
(begging)  
Please! I need my oxygen.

Sam realizes she doesn't want him to die, maybe not now.

She hooks him back up.

He takes a deep breath. Thinks.

VAN MAYER (cont'd)  
(gasps)  
They told me to stop the  
investigation. I had orders--

SAM  
But you had a suspect. Several  
witnesses. Evidence. Why the hell  
would you stop?

VAN MAYER  
I had orders. He killed himself  
anyway. Guess he couldn't live with  
what he done.

SAM  
Well... That was mighty kind of  
him.

CONTINUED: (5)

VAN MAYER

No one to arrest. End of investigation. That was my orders.

SAM

You could've written it up that way?

VAN MAYER

You know nothing about cops. How we work. We follow orders. City Hall--

SAM

The hell I do! My work has sent many cops and politicians to prison. Amazing what the truth does to people when confronted with it. You said 'City Hall.' What did they tell you?

VAN MAYER

You can't do nothing to me. That was long ago. I'm retired now.

SAM

Listen. Jimmy. I know you changed your name. I just want to know what happened. My father--

VAN MAYER

Don't you get it, missy?! I had orders! Stop the investigation!

(pause)

That was a queer bar anyhow. Them faggots didn't deserve to...

SAM

To live?

VAN MAYER

Nobody gave no two shits about no queers!

SAM

So thirty-two people get torched alive, the police department doesn't give a shit, City Hall doesn't give a shit and you just say, 'Fuck it?'

VAN MAYER

Pretty much. They said they was just a bunch of queers anyway.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

SAM

Don't you mean faggots?

VAN MAYER

Same thing.

SAM

I pity you, Jimmy. You're just an ole man sitting out here waiting to die. Those people didn't have that chance in life.

VAN MAYER

Fuck you! I didn't kill them!

SAM

You got me there. Yes, sir, you did. Got me. But, you could've saved their memories. Their memories.

VAN MAYER

Fuck you.

SAM

Yeah, fuck me. Fuck the truth.

VAN MAYER

Ain't nobody cared about--

SAM

Oh, people cared. The right people cared. The very right people.

Sam goes to storm off. Frustrated.

SAM (cont'd)

(looking back)

Now I know what a living hell looks like.

VAN MAYER

Fuck you!

She marches back to her car.

VAN MAYER (cont'd)

(gasping)

Ain't nobody cared about a bunch of queers! Nobody!

She slams her door and drives off. Dirt, rocks flying.



INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - NIGHT

It is dark, dark. The engine hums. The DASHBOARD LIGHTS-UP  
Sam's face. Her pain. Her anger.

SAM (V.O.)

Of all the things I've seen in my  
career, I can honestly say now,  
I've stared into the face of  
hatred. Hatred for another human  
being. Human beings.  
Those people... Those souls.  
Deserved better. A better story in  
life.  
I guess I finally found out how to  
interview someone who's dead.

She looks up in the rearview mirror. A mission calls her.  
Again.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Sam pulls off the highway to make a sweeping U-turn.  
Drive back down the highway a different way.

EXT. BETH'S FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

Sam drives into the long dirt road to the house.  
Pulls up in front of the black wooden corpse.  
She wanders around, finds a STICK of surviving wood.  
Wraps it in burned remains of CLOTH. Anger consumes her.

SFX: ZIPPO LIGHTER LIGHTS THE TORCH

CU: HER FACE IS AGLOW IN FLAMES. SHADOWS.

She hunts for timber. Anything to burn. Scrapes of death to  
burn.

SAM

(screams)

I hate you! You lied to me! God I  
hate you!

She torches the makeshift pile of what's left.

It burns. Billows flames. Tears of anger emerge.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM (cont'd)  
 (sotto voce)  
 How do you interview someone who's  
 dead?

Standing in the flickering flames, she spies something.

Another METAL BOX. Burned. Battered. Beaten.

Without a care of fire, Sam slowly steps into the flames.

Fights to drag that metal box out.

Success! Smoking, simmering the box weeps.

She stands there. Kicks the box open.

LETTERS! Letters fly everywhere.

Picks one up.

CU: FROM: BILL LANCASTER, 1825 TULANE AVENUE, NEW ORLEANS, LA  
 70112 TO: SAMANTHA LANCASTER, 3645 HIGHWAY 18, VACHERIE, LA  
 70090

Letters to her from her father.

She panics. Begins to look around for anymore letters.

Some are scattered. Some are in the metal box.

The letters are singed. Yet, intact.

CU: A LETTER IN HER HAND. SHE WIPES THE SOOT FROM IT.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. NEW ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER HOTEL - NIGHT

Sam is sitting half-dressed on her bed. Half together.

The letters are spread out all over.

As if a giant puzzle is being reconstructed, she  
 meticulously arranges them.

SAM  
 (sotto voce)  
 April, 1972. January, 1973. May,  
 1973.

CONTINUED:

She sips from her New Orleans BEVERAGE, grabs a DINNER KNIFE from a PLATE on her NIGHT STAND.

With slow, anthropological precision, she opens them. One by one.

She reads.

BILL (V.O.)

April 24th, 1972. My dearest Samantha. I saw you today. You are so very pretty. You have your mother's spunk and God blessed you with my eyes. I had not seen you since Christmas time six months ago. My how you have grown...

MONTAGE: SAM READING DIFFERENT LETTERS.

BILL (V.O.)

January 2nd, 1973. My dearest Samantha. I saw you today. You are so very pretty. I have lost count of the letters I have written to you. I write every week and the mail hopefully arrives on time. I don't even know if your mother has thrown them all away. I pray to God everyday for you and your mother, even though she only lets me see you sometimes. It seems when I have just enough money to pay my bills, she comes calling. God gives me the strength to know I am providing for my daughter and her mother. You look very healthy, so maybe that's God's way of telling me you're okay. You laughed with me today... Giggled.

The church is coming along and we are building a great congregation of wonderful people. Maybe one day when you are older you can come see what I have built. What God has built.

Sam grabs another letter. Opens it very carefully to not tear the envelope.

BILL (V.O.)

May 1st, 1973. My dearest Samantha. I saw you today. You are so very pretty.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BILL (V.O.) (cont'd)

Your birthday is around the corner and I had a little extra left over from last month to buy you more clothes. You were wearing that pretty blue dress I bought. Your mother had the courtesy of dressing you in it when I stopped by... One day I hope you will understand my decision and hers to divorce. And one day I pray forgiveness. She did not want to be married to a preacher. I cannot blame her. I have come to ask forgiveness from her today. Again. God takes a lot but gives a lot in return... Your birthday is soon. You will be two. Some say the 'terrible twos.' I laugh... I pray one day you will come visit me when you are a young woman... God bless you. God bless your mother and give her strength. Love, your father. Bill Lancaster.

Sam just sits there on her bed. Exhausted. Drinking.

SAM

(to the ghost in the room)

You bitch. You extorted money from him, didn't you? God I hate you. I will never forgive you for stealing him away from me.

She collapses back onto the bed. Good night, sweet Sam.

EXT. PHIL'S COFFEE SHOP - MORNING

Sam has her routine down. Bobby the waitress serves her those wonderful PANCAKES. Extra MAPLE SYRUP.

Phil steps out the side door behind her, in his same Sunday best.

PHIL

I hope my warning was appropriate?

SAM

Oh! Hey, Phil! Why, yes. Yes it was. What a bigot! I can honestly say I've interviewed someone who's dead, now. Cross dat off my bucket list.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Phil laughs.

SAM (cont'd)

He was blinded by his own hatred.  
Now he has to live with himself for  
the rest of his life. What a  
miserable existence that must be.

PHIL

Not many people round here know he  
is still living. He's the one who  
stole all the money out of my safe  
after the fire.

SAM

You have got to be kidding?

PHIL

No, ma'am. I knew when he got the  
combination from Buddy, when he was  
still in shock, I knew it was him.

SAM

May I ask?

PHIL

Let's just say he's living in it  
right about now.  
(laughs)  
Best money I ever spent!

They laugh.

PHIL (cont'd)

Where are you headed next?

SAM

I don't know. I have interviewed  
the living.  
(giggles)  
And the dead.

PHIL

Yes, you have. Well, this is New  
Orleans. We have dead people  
walking around down here all the  
time.

They share a laugh, again.

PHIL (cont'd)

Could I be so bold as to invite  
you?

CONTINUED: (2)

SAM

Invite me to where?

EXT. NEW ORLEANS CHURCH - DAY

Sam and Phil stand outside. Waiting.

A bright sunny day has blessed this church.

PHIL

Now, hear me out, Sam. I will be going to church today and if you want to join, you can sit in the back. Like I did when I was in school.

SAM

I...

PHIL

You'll be okay. All you have to do is just listen. The reverend is a mighty fine man.

SAM

Okay. Church it is.  
(laughs)

I'm going to church today. First time in my life.

He shows her into the church like a New Orleans Sunday gentleman.

INT. NEW ORLEANS CHURCH - DAY

The church is packed. Filled to the pews end. Sunday best is everyone.

PHIL

Why don't you sit here? I am going to go say 'hi' to someone.

SAM

Yes. Of course. Here.

She hesitates.

PHIL

It's okay. Everything's going to be okay, Sam. You will be loved here.

CONTINUED:

SAM

No. It's okay. I'm good.

She sits in the very last pew. On the end. By herself.

Phil walks down the aisle. And away.

The church grows silent.

Up to the lectern comes a preacherman. And a man of the cloth.

The PREACHER, (late-60's), dressed in a nice Sunday suit and tie, steps up.

PREACHER

When I came to church this morning  
to prepare for our services today,  
it appears a voice, maybe God...

They laugh. "Amen," sprinkled about.

PREACHER (cont'd)

Maybe God was telling me today  
should be different. Today should  
be a day where I were to choose to  
do something different. So, I am  
sorry to say, I did not prepare a  
sermon.

The silence is deafening.

PREACHER (cont'd)

I prayed a little for guidance and  
I heard, 'Everything's going to be  
okay.' Whew! Thank you, Lord.

Laughs. "Amen," again.

PREACHER (cont'd)

I know the papers and the media  
like to print horrific things. Oh,  
and yes, they do print good things,  
too. So, to all you in the media,  
our followers here today, you're  
off the hook.

Sam giggles with the laughs around her.

CAMERA: MOVES TO SAM. SHE'S TRANSFIXED.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. NEW ORLEANS CHURCH (1973) - DAY

MS: BILL LANCASTER IS STANDING BEHIND THE LECTERN.

CU: SAM'S FACE. TRANSFIXED.

The 1973 congregation is transfixed.

BILL

Sometimes in life, bad things happen to very good people. And some feel there's not a damned thing...

(looks skyward)

They can do about it. The ones who live, feel helpless.

The ones who die? They cannot feel helpless. The living feel for them. Sometimes a lifetime of pain surrounds them. To live with this pain is self-destructive. They carry the burden of pain for the dead.

The dead, on the other hand, wished they just had one more chance at life. Lord knows I have presided over many a funeral. And the one thing I shall never forget... Are the wishes the dead could just have one more day with the living. One more day.

Hatred can eat at one's soul for a lifetime. Until one day, you're not there anymore.

Bill Lancaster turns and looks at his daughter.

With tears in her eyes, Sam absorbs all while she can.

BILL (cont'd)

You don't have to forgive those who have caused harm to you in life. But... You should find it, in your soul, to forgive yourself. Forgive yourself for feeling that anger and pain. It's okay to have those feelings. Don't let them consume you till the day you pass from this mortal coil. You might not get the chance for that one last day. In the name of the Lord, I pray, amen.



CONTINUED:

The congregation answers a warm, "Amen!"

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. PHIL'S COFFEE SHOP (PRESENT DAY) - DUSK

CU: SAM IS TEARFUL. FORGIVEN. BY HERSELF. STARING AT HER LAPTOP SCREEN.

SAM  
(sotto voce)  
Amen, daddy.

Sam's journey is coming to an end. Journalists write. So she does.

SAM (V.O.)  
On June 24th, 1973, the worst mass murder of gays was perpetrated in the United States. The city was New Orleans. The location was the Upstairs Lounge. The date just happens to be this reporter's second birthday and the date of death of my father. That fateful day, my father was in the Upstairs after his usual Sunday services. He was a preacher. A man of the cloth. A kind man by all counts. This reporter has come to know her father only through the interviews of his friends. The ones who survived this horrible crime. We have grown since the 1970's as a society in America to accept people for who they are and who they care to love. My father loved everyone who came to his church. To the dying breath he took, I know they loved him back. In the weeks to come, this reporter will author an investigative series on the Upstairs Lounge and how thirty-two men and women were burned alive for nothing more than hatred.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SAM (V.O.) (cont'd)

The resulting disaster of a political cover-up, church denial, and a distorted police investigation makes this tragedy, this crime, more painful for right thinkers, the survivors, and even this reporter.

Hopefully the readers and society as a whole can learn about this horrific historical event forgotten by time.

And, maybe learn to love one another just a little bit more.

CU: A COFFEE SHOP CHECK IS DROPPED DOWN ON HER TABLE.

Bobby, the waitress is standing, hovering over Sam.

BOBBY

Excuse me, ma'am. I'm sorry. But you left in such a rush the other day, I didn't get a chance to give you your check.

Sam stares uncomfortably at Bobby.

SAM

Uh, yes. I'm confused. I thought Phil said it was on him?

BOBBY

Oh! My bad. Let me just go get Mister Phil.

SAM

Yes. Okay. Sorry.

Turning the corner of Phil's Coffee Shop is PHIL BOUDREAUX, JR., (mid-50's), shaved head, clean and neat black chef's outfit. Walks up to greet Sam.

PHIL JR.

Hi. Ma'am? My name is Phil. Bobby said you wanted to see me? Is there something wrong with your pancakes?

SAM

(flummoxed)  
I... Uh... Er...

PHIL JR.

I will be more than happy to remake your pancakes, ma'am.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

PHIL JR. (cont'd)  
I pride myself in good home  
cooking. We all do.

SAM  
You're Phil? Phil's Coffee Shop?

She looks around. Anywhere. Somewhere.

PHIL JR.  
Yes, ma'am. I'm the owner.

MONTAGE:

PHIL  
No, ma'am. I'm the owner. Phil  
Boudreaux.

Sam looks stunned. At the empty seat across from her.

PHIL JR.  
Have been for twenty-three years.  
Family business, and all.

SAM  
But? There's another Phil? Phil  
Boudreaux?

PHIL  
I'm real sorry, Miss Sam. Really I  
am.

PHIL JR.  
Well, ma'am. You must be talking  
about my pops. Phil Boudreaux, Sr.  
He done passed away some years ago.

PHIL  
I'm okay, Sam. Can't feel no more  
pain anymore. This is New Orleans.  
We have dead people walking around  
down here all the time.

END MONTAGE.

PHIL JR.  
Left it up to me to run the family  
business. That's him, right up  
there in the picture.

Phil, Jr. points inside through the window. Displayed for  
all time, an aged FRAMED PORTRAIT OF PHIL BOUDREAUX, SR.  
hangs in stately pose.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

PHIL (V.O.)

It was a long time ago, Sam. I can't feel no more pain anymore. I guess you could say. A spiritual existence.

It's the Phil that Sam met. Her guardian angel. A good angel, indeed. His job is done.

PHIL JR.

That's my momma, right there. Ginny. Ginny Boudreaux.

From inside, VIRGINIA "GINNY" BOUDREAUX, (early-60's), exquisitely dressed to run the coffee shop, notices Phil, Jr. and waves back through the window.

PHIL (V.O.)

I miss my wife the most.

SAM

(sotto voce)

Oh, my...

Phil looks down and catches a glimpse of Sam's New York Times I-D.

PHIL JR.

New York Times? Hey? You down here doing a review of our little coffee shop? WOooo...

SAM

(still flummoxed)

I--

She can't stop him now.

PHIL JR.

I'll have you know we serve the best walnut and maple syrup pancakes in the south. Family recipe, and all.

Ginny comes outside to see what Phil, Jr. is fussing about.

GINNY

Yes, Phil. You need something, hun?

CONTINUED: (4)

PHIL JR.

Momma, I was just telling this nice reporter lady here we won First Place in the South Eastern Louisiana Regional Pancake Cook Off Jamboree. She's from the New York Times.

GINNY

Why, yes. Yes we did. First Place twelve years in a row.

PHIL JR.

Would you like to see our ribbons?

SAM

I... Uh... No, thank you, Mister Phil. I'm sure you have the best ribbons I have ever eaten. Uh...

(pauses)

I'm certain your pops would be mighty proud of you.

Sam looks back to Phil, Sr.'s picture.

GINNY

Phil, Senior, built this for us. Still use our family recipes to this day. He surely is missed.

PHIL JR.

WOooo! Howdy! New York Times! You let me know if you need anything, ma'am. In fact, I'll pick up your check, if ya don't mind?

(turns back)

Hey, Bobby!

Not this again.

SAM

Oh! No! Mister Phil!

(scrambling)

I have an expense account. I'll pay for the other day's and today's.

Thank you very much.

(to Bobby)

Miss Bobby? Here's a hundred.

Covers everything.

BOBBY

Thank you. I'll bring you your change. Right away.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

SAM

Nope. Nope. Keep it. Y'all have been nice to me.

BOBBY

Oh! My! You are too kind.

(pauses, tears)

I'm... I'm going to buy my little girl a pretty dress when she comes. Yes, I am.

SAM

(smiling)

I'm sure she'll look very pretty.

PHIL JR.

Come on Bobby. Let's let the nice reporter lady do her job.

(holding his hand out)

Phil Boudreaux, ma'am. Owner and proprietor. Family business.

GINNY

Ginny Boudreaux. I'm the momma round here.

SAM

(shaking hands)

Pleased to me you Mister Phil. Miss Ginny. My name is Sam Lancaster.

PHIL JR.

That's B-O-U-D-R-E-A-U-X. Gotta put the X at the end. You see? Cain't get us mixed up with the other Boudreauxs. If you know what I mean? You heard me?

SAM

Yes, sir. Won't forget.

GINNY

(to Phil, Jr.)

Come on, Phil. Let's let her be.

(to Sam)

If you need anything, sugah, just ask.

SAM

Why thank you. Yes, ma'am.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

PHIL JR.

WooHoo! Bobby! We're going to be in the papers.

BOBBY

Yes!

Ginny laughs. Checks on the other guests.

Sam turns back to gaze at Phil, Sr.'s portrait.

SAM

(sotto voce)

Thank you very much.

Phil, Jr. grabs some DISHES from Bobby's hands, chatting-up all the customers on the way back in. To make more coffees and more pancakes.

Sam turns her attention back to writing.

SAM (V.O.)

They teach you in J-school to never become part of the story. How can you not when your history tells you to? My daddy has a lot of guardian angels watching over me. Don't ask me how. I just know. I miss my daddy.

She picks-up her mobile. Sends a message to her Boss.

SAM: Hey, Boss? U get first crack. Chk UR email.

FRANCIS: Great! U good down there?

SAM: Yes. The Lagniappe is just wonderful.

FRANCIS: ???

SAM: Chat with me after.

FRANCIS: k

The TABLE rumbles a bit.

And down sits TYLER, (early-30's), strong and handsome. Let's leave it at that.

TYLER

Hi. Pardon me. My name is Tyler. I know you don't know me. But--

SAM

Wait!

Sam looks to the heavens for a sign.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (7)

SAM (cont'd)  
 (sotto voce)  
 Please be real.

Sam slowly moves her hand across the table to his. She tests his human skin for realness.

TYLER  
 Oh, I'm real all right. Saw you at church today. Didn't want to come up and scare you. Saw you sitting there all alone.

She looks up into the bright blue sky.

SAM  
 (sotto voce)  
 Thank you, God.

TYLER  
 I hope I'm not intruding. I just thought if I didn't come say 'hi' to ya, I never would.

SAM  
 (smiling)  
 Hi.

WS: CAMERA PULLS BACK AND AWAY FROM THE NEW FRIENDS.

SAM (V.O.)  
 My daddy taught me the greatest sin in life was to hate yourself. Hate others. It's okay to be angry. To be mad. Just be kind to yourself. Or, one day, that hatred will consume you. I don't know where I'm going in life, now. But, I do know where I've been. Maybe this is A Magnolia Salvation.

FADE OUT.

-- THE END --