

A MAGNOLIA SALVATION

Created and Written

by

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A MAGNOLIA SALVATION

In a world...

FADE UP:

SFX: A LIGHT BREEZE PLAYS WITH DRAPES...

FADE IN:

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

INT. WASHINGTON D.C. BROWNSTONE APARTMENT - NIGHT

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

Neat. Modern day. Old in Washington D.C. flavor shows the apartment charm.

A WOMAN sleeps.

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

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

WS: WASHINGTON D.C. BLOCK LINED WITH BROWNSTONES. FIRE LEAPS FROM THE APARTMENT WINDOWS TRYING TO ESCAPE. TRYING TO LIVE.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. WASHINGTON GLOBE CITY DESK/WAR ROOM - DAY

The OVERNIGHT CREW is cleaning up an empty newsroom.

FRANCIS MCGILL (60's-80'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 (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 Jefferson 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. 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 crap politicians go to jail. Bad cops... Made people think about their lives.

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. Been a long time.

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

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BETH'S 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.

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. BETH'S 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.

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. BETH'S FARM HOUSE/FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

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

Out steps ELIZABETH "BETH" LANCASTER (60'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, momma.

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

SAM
No. No I haven't.

BETH
Come on in and you can tell me all
about that Washington D.C. 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.

And, on and on, she goes.

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.

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...

SAM

Momma? Can I have a whiskey and
beer?

BETH

Well... I thought the D.C. people
liked Martinis?

(pauses)

Whiskey and beer it is.

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

Let the drinking begin.

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
Washington--

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...

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 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

That must have been a sight.

SAM

My next door neighbor... He got an
eye full.

BETH

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

SAM

After what, momma?

BETH
Sweetie, 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.

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?! I've had a
bad week.

BETH
We all have bad weeks.

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

SAM
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.

Whoa. Timeout.

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? Why am I even here?

BETH

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

SAM

Then fine. I'm out.

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

It's a wonder I didn't get fetal alcohol poisoning. Or maybe I did?

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

Now I know where I got my tolerance
from.

Sam gulps the beer.

BETH

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. I
was--

SAM

So?! He's a dirtbag. And a
deadbeat. Wait. Did you, or did you
not, 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. 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.

They both drink. In unison.

BETH

He was a part-time preacher.

SAM

Part-time? Gawd. A preacher? Now I know there is no god.

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.

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. Fresh sheets.

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. With fresh sheets.

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.

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 (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 (20's) and a DOCTOR rush in.

The DOCTOR (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?!

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...

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. Like mother like daughter. Maybe I should've been a firefighter.

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

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. Notices she's not wearing any pants. 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?!

Her foot is caught by something metallic. Down she goes.

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.

(MORE)

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

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.

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

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?!

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 (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.

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. BOUDREAUX'S CAFE - 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.

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. BOUDREAUX'S CAFE - DUSK

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

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.

A beat-to-hell car is sitting at the light...

DRIVER

Hey! Get the hell out of the street! This ain't Mardi Gras!

SAM

Sorry! Sorry!

The road-raged Driver tears down the street.

SAM (cont'd)

Asshat.

SFX: CAR SLAMS ON ITS BRAKES.

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.

SAM

(tears, sotto voce)
Happy birthday to me.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. REVEREND BILL'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 (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.

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!"

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.

(MORE)

MRS. WARREN (cont'd)

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. 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, Phil Boudreaux has a social club where we meet. Away from the hatred. The Upstairs Lounge on Chartres and Iberville? Edge of the Quarter. 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. REVEREND BILL'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.

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 (20's) an ex-convict, strong, fit, 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. Shadow #2 goes down in pain.

SHADOW #2 (cont'd)
I'm gonna kill you nigger!

YOUNG SMOKIE
No ya ain't 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?

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 (1973) - DAY

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

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

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

BILL

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 momma 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 don' want to be in no bad things.

Bill's small, bright house has arrived.

BILL

Do you remember Mr. Adam's funeral?

YOUNG SMOKIE

Yes, sir. Thinks I do.

BILL

I was the reverend, presided over the funeral. It was very nice. Mrs. Adam's 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 don' wanna hate them mens. They jus' done wrong by you.

BILL

Yes. Yes, they did.

YOUNG SMOKIE

Promised my momma and pops I won' eva go back... Something stupid.
(pauses)
Ya thinks I can find the light?

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!

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.
Marsha hovering around.

FRANCIS
No. And, yes.

SAM (PHONE)
Yes, what? No, why?

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.

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.
History needs 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.
(MORE)

FRANCIS (cont'd)

Your father, will be lost to time.
Go. Do. It. It's what you're good
at.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS CITY PARK - DUSK

Tall as a monument, Sam stands 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!

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 has been 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?

SAM

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

SMOKIE

He dey-yud.

SAM

Smokie is dead?

SMOKIE

Yeah. Who is it?

SAM

My name is Samantha. I'm with the Washington Globe 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.

Hidden in the shadows, SMOKIE (60's-70'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 not here to bother--

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 in the doorway 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
Saints ball cap. Fits just right.

SMOKIE

(he smiles)

Go Saints. He, he! Well, you don't
look like no reporter I seen.

SAM

Here's my I-D.

She hands him an official WASHINGTON GLOBE 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 Washington Globe?

SAM

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

Smokie motions Sam to come in, 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.

SAM

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

SMOKIE

(laughs)
He, he. Sam it is.

SAM

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

SMOKIE

Your father dey-yud, Sam. 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 that man. 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 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?

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, 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, Sam. They was selling drugs. I got arrested with them. Being po' and all, I ain't got no lawyer. They sent me to prison with them. Judge didn't give me but three years.

(MORE)

SMOKIE (cont'd)

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 evuh gotten out... I would never go back. Mm-hmm. I done never met with them friends evuh again. Dat don't scare ya and all, don' it?

SAM

No, sir.

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, 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 evuh 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 don' mean lots to me, Sam. I just an ole colored boy from New Orleans. And they done right by me. I ain't nevuh gon' 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.

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.

And, now, it comes to this.

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, 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. That's how--

SMOKIE

(laughs)

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

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

TERRY (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.

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 Washington Globe--

SMOKIE
Miss Sam hereya is Bill Lancaster's daughter.

Avery and Terry freeze.

AVERY
Reverend?

TERRY
Reverend?

Still frozen.

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

Smokie begins to weep. Life has taken its toll, today.

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.

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.

AVERY

From five to seven you'd pay--

TERRY

A dollar fifty cover.

AVERY

A dollar fifty cover.

TERRY

And a dollar for all-you-can-drink
pitchers.

AVERY

They had the best beer busts.

TERRY

Fifty cents for the mug--

AVERY

Because you had to bring it back.

SAM

Beer busts?

TERRY

Oh, yes!

AVERY

That was fun.

TERRY

That was fun.

Terry sits down. Really quick.

AVERY

Sam? Did you ever see...

TERRY

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.

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.

AVERY
We're alive.

TERRY
Thirty-two people are not. Our
friends.

AVERY
Our friends.

TERRY
I get to live. Avery gets to live.

AVERY
Yes.

TERRY
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:

CU: SAM CROSSES OUT THE QUESTION MARK

EXT. BOUDREAUX'S CAFE - 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.
(MORE)

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

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

The DRAPES blow in the window. Sam startles awake. 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...

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 (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' 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 THIBODEAUX (20's) clean cut, having a good time.

ANDY

Cheers!

(to Smokie)

We're too blessed to be stressed, 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.

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 (20's) clean cut young man, and his brother JAMES CURTIS WARREN (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 pre-disco music.

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

A DRUNK man (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 (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.

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! 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 - MORNING

Sam slowly awakes. Looks around. Surveys.

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. CAUSE SHADOWS OF TEARS 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

A fresh group of yellow CHRYSANTHEMUMS are POTTED next to his grave site. A peculiar walking CANE tries to hide 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 finally make peace together.

(laughs)

You made me.

(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.

SAM (V.O.)

How do you interview someone that's dead? They never teach you that in J-school. Who? What? When? Where?

(MORE)

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

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 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, really 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 MAKER.

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
in this town.

Time to get ready for the day.

EXT. BOUDREAUX'S CAFE - MORNING

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

The waitress BOBBY (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.

Pointing to her laptop map...

SAM

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

BOBBY

You mean Chart-ers? Chart-ers street?

SAM

Chart-ers street? Uh, yes. I grew up here, but was sent, moved away when I was young.

BOBBY

(happily)
Oh, yes. Yes, I do.

SAM

Is the Upstairs Lounge still there?

Bobby looks stunned. Steps back a little.

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 all about?

From a side door behind steps, PHIL BOUDREAUX (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

Uh... 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 Washington Globe. 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.

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 god. 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? Here?

PHIL

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

SAM

Boudreaux's Cafe? Ah, got it.

PHIL

Sam? It is?

SAM

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

Sam, please. My friends call me Sam.

PHIL

Ah, yes. Sam.

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 god. 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?

PHIL

My friends call me, Phil.

SAM

I'm sorry.

PHIL

That's quite alright. I have been called worse in this town.

SAM

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, he could always counsel you. Preach the word of the Good Lord. And... Always with a splash of Lagniappe. A little something extra. He was the genuine thing. 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! I ran a good bar. Hell, a great bar. First in New Orleans to get a dancing license. Welcomed anyone and everyone. 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 changed the name of the cafe 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.

(MORE)

PHIL (cont'd)

I figure they saw their lives flash in front of them. Fear must've grabbed hold of them.

SAM

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

PHIL

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

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 Andy. Andy Thibodeaux. Sitting at the end of the bar. Burning. Burning alive. Buddy was screaming, 'Andy! Andy!' 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?

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 Andy. 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.

PHIL (cont'd)

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

SAM

Oh, no. It's okay.

PHIL

(to the waitress)
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

(to Bobby)
Ooppss! I've got it.
(to Phil)
(MORE)

SAM (cont'd)

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 - DUSK

The remains of the Upstairs Lounge greets Sam, led in by Phil, lumbering with his cane.

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, Sam?

SAM

I hope not.

Looking. She walks around. 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... Some died later. Some got burned alive. The survivors had to move on, Sam. Time does that to you. In this place, the first 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 of... This hatred. Funny coming from a reporter who's seen a lot. 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.

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

Yes, you can. And one more.

Sam full stops.

MATCH CUT TO:

CU: SAM'S FACE.

INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR - NIGHT

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 in New Orleans. After all that pain, what amazes me is the strength, the resilience of the people I have met. Who knew my father.

(MORE)

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

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/ROAD - NIGHT

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

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.

EXT. JOHNSON FARM HOUSE - NIGHT

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 (70's) shirtless, 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 the car, right in front and gets out. Stands there.

SAM

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 Washington Globe 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.

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--

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

Fuck you.
(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?

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!

He gasps. And gasps. For air.

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. Lead suspect kills himself. Case closed. Nothing to see here. Move along.

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 dirtbag 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)

(MORE)

VAN MAYER (cont'd)

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, eh, 'Fuck it?' Two shits get cancelled out with a fuck it.

VAN MAYER

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

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. Neither did my father.

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. History cannot survive time with lies. The least you could've done is saved the truth.

VAN MAYER

Fuck you. I had orders. I followed orders. I did my job.

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!

SAM

Yeah. Fuck me. Fuck history. Fuck
the truth. Three fucks for luck.

She marches back to her car.

VAN MAYER

(gasping)

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

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

Van Mayer waits to die another day.

INT. SAM'S RENTAL CAR/HIGHWAY - 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. My father deserved better. 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. Scraps 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.

SAM (cont'd)
(screams)
I could've had a life with daddy!

It burns. Billows flames. Tears of anger emerge.

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.
Before they are burned.

Some are scattered. Some are in the metal box.

The letters are singed. Yet, intact.

MATCH CUT TO:

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

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.

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 a few 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. 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...

(MORE)

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

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. BOUDREAUX'S CAFE - 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.

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?

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 come on in. Sit in the back if that suits you. Like when we were in school.

SAM

I...

PHIL

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

SAM

Okay. Church it is.

(laughs)

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

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.

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 preacher man. PREACHER (60's) dressed in a nice Sunday suit and tie.

PREACHER

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

They laugh. "Amens," sprinkled about.

PREACHER (cont'd)

Maybe God was telling me today should be different. Today should be a day where I should 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. "Amens," 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.

(MORE)

BILL (cont'd)

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.

The congregation answers a warm, "Amen!"

MATCH CUT TO:

CU: SAM STARING AT HER LAPTOP SCREEN. MOUTHS 'AMEN.'

EXT. BOUDREAUX'S CAFE (PRESENT DAY) - DUSK

Sam sits, tearful. Forgiven. By herself.

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

SAM (V.O.)

On June 24th, 1973, the first mass murder of gays was committed in the United States.

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 Boudreaux's Cafe is PHIL BOUDREAUX, JR. (40'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. I pride myself in good home cooking. We all do.

SAM

You're Phil? Boudreaux Cafe?

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.

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 (60's) exquisitely
dressed to run the family cafe, 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 Washington Globe I-D.

PHIL JR.
Washington Globe? Hey? You down here doing a review of our little cafe? 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?

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 Washington Globe.

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! Washington Globe! 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.

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 he'rd 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.

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 divine.

FRANCIS: ???

SAM: Chat with me after.

FRANCIS: k

The TABLE rumbles a bit.

And down sits TYLER (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.

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. You'll die a slow
death.

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 --

INT. NEWS REPORTER'S OFFICE - DAY

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

SAM

(groans)

Turn the lights off.

FRANCIS

Sam?! Jesus!

SAMANTHA "SAM" LANCASTER (40's) journalist and photographer
for the Washington Globe, 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 fiancé 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!

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 (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 smokey 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.

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 fiancé 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 dessert yet!
(MORE)

SAM (cont'd)

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?

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 the police 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...
(MORE)

SAM (cont'd)

I must have... Left a candle
burning.

(cries)

Everything's gone. It's just stuff.
I don't need stuff in my life. I
need marriage in my life.

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.

MARSHA

Francis?

FRANCIS

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

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.

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.

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.
(MORE)

FRANCIS (cont'd)

(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.

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 me... 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 snuffles.

SAM

Pulitzer.

FRANCIS

My Pulitzer Prize reporter.

She looks down at the note. The phone number. Gone.

The note is backwards. Francis flips it over for her.

FRANCIS (cont'd)

I'll have maintenance come clean your office. Get that smoke smell out of here. Damn. I got to change my shirt.

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:

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

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