

FREE MONEY

Written by

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Deep breathing.

Inhale. Exhale.

Heavier. Sharper.

Then...

A sudden retch.

FADE IN:

EXT. STARBUCKS - MORNING

The street is blanketed in snow. MAXINE, 29, is bent over, vomiting beside the Starbucks.

INT. STARBUCKS - MORNING

Maxine, frazzled and overworked, juggles a dozen coffee cups, each precariously balanced in carriers.

Maxine looks down at her cell, which buzzes constantly. Her face shows stress and a sense of urgency.

MAXINE
(to herself)
Deep breath. Deep breath.

She takes a deep breath.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
You got this. You got this.

Maxine adjusts the carriers, but coffee splashes out, staining her sweatshirt.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
(to herself)
I hate this fucking shit.

EXT. STARBUCKS - CONTINUOUS

Maxine bursts out of the coffee shop, weaving through pedestrians. She spills more coffee as she hurries.

MAXINE
(to herself)
Fuck me.

She glances at the spilled coffee and tries to clean it off, but only makes it worse. She sighs heavily, her frustration palpable.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Stay cool. Stay cool. Run the show!

Maxine sets the carriers on a parked car, then pops the lid off one cup and spits into it.

EXT. FILM SET - MORNING

Maxine arrives at the set, coffee sloshing around in the carriers. She sees a CREW MEMBER waving her over.

CREW MEMBER

What took so long?

Maxine shrugs.

MAXINE

Your matcha latte...

Maxine hands him the cup she spat in. He snatches it and the rest of the carriers without a word or a thank-you.

Maxine, with a smug grin, takes off her stained sweatshirt, ties it around her waist, and smooths her ponytail.

INT. CAFE - MORNING

GUS, 34, looks like it's his first day on the job, though it isn't. He's visibly struggling with a tray loaded with coffee cups. His uniform is wrinkled, and he's clearly out of his depth.

Gus moves unsteadily through the cafe, his eyes darting around anxiously.

YOUNGER MANAGER, 22, shouting from behind the counter with a smirk:

YOUNGER MANAGER

All right, Gus, let's hustle!
Remember: It's always "Yes, sir!
Yes, ma'am!"

Younger COWORKER #1 rolls his eyes, annoyed.

COWORKER #1

Dipshit, we've got a fucking line
out there! What the fuck?!

Coffee dribbles from the edges of the tray as Gus stumbles. Younger Manager sighs.

YOUNGER MANAGER

Whoa, whoa. Easy! You're spilling coffee everywhere, Gus!

COWORKER #2

For fuck's sake. Why are you so slow?

GUS

I-- I'm sorry.
(to himself)
Fuck me.

Gus's face turns red with embarrassment. He fumbles with the tray, trying to regain control. He drops a few cups, and coffee spills onto the floor.

YOUNGER MANAGER

No! No, no, no!

COWORKER #2

You fucking idiot!

Gus hurries to clean it up, but his movements are clumsy.

INT. CAFE - MOMENTS LATER

A CUSTOMER, a woman in her 50s, taps her foot impatiently. Gus, hands shaking, approaches to take her order.

GUS

Yes, ma'am?

CUSTOMER

I've been waiting forever. Why are you ignoring me?

GUS

Sorry, ma'am.

CUSTOMER

I have a job to get to! You think this is funny? Are you messing with me?

GUS

No-- no, ma'am.

CUSTOMER

You've got quite the sense of humor, don't you?

GUS

I don't understand, ma'am.

CUSTOMER

I'm so good at being manipulated.

GUS

What-- I-- I'm not--

CUSTOMER

I should just take a nice, long swim with the fishes.

GUS

It's-- it's just coffee, ma'am.

She laughs bitterly.

CUSTOMER

"Just coffee?" Right. Just coffee...

She shakes her head, scoffing.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

I hate money, you know? I have so much of it, and for what? I'm a very lonely woman... it's hard. Everything is so hard. Sometimes I wish I had done it all differently. But this is it...

GUS

I really don't understand, ma'am. I don't know-- I...

CUSTOMER

You know, you're pretty easy to talk to. You're a good listener. Hey, what's your name, kid?

GUS

G-- Gus.

CUSTOMER

It feels like you care. I care too, Gus. You're sensitive, right? You look it.

(MORE)

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

You've been avoiding it, haven't you? Thinking about it a lot.

GUS

Uh... what? Avoiding what?

CUSTOMER

You know... hoping it would all go away, right? There's only one way to make that happen...

Gus stares at her. She stares back. It's intense.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

You don't have a lot of time...

She leans in.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

I can see it on your face... you hear it ticking, don't you?

COWORKER #2 (O.S.)

Where the fuck is Gus?

YOUNGER MANAGER (O.S.)

Gus!

GUS

I-- I have to go, ma'am.

She looks hurt, eyes drop. She avoids eye contact.

CUSTOMER

I... I'll have a tall latte, scrambled eggs, and, um, a toasted croissant.

Her anger suddenly flares, directed more at herself than at Gus.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

Do you hear me? Toasted croissant!

Gus nods quickly, trying to manage his nerves. He starts to walk away, but:

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

Come back! Come back!

GUS

Yes, ma'am?

CUSTOMER

Forget it! Forget it! Gimme my
check!

GUS

Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am.

He nervously scribbles the check, then stops.

GUS (CONT'D)

You didn't order anything, ma'am.

CUSTOMER

What is it with you kids? I just
wanted coffee!

Gus looks dazed, like he's thinking, "What the fuck just
happened?"

Gus rushes back to the counter, where his manager and
coworkers continue to shout at him.

EXT. ASTORIA - NIGHT

Astoria's streets blend old-world charm with modernity.
Classic homes stand alongside sleek, new condominiums.

INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

Mold stains the walls. The floor is grimy. Musty air fills
the room, dimly lit by flickering fluorescent lights. The
space is cluttered and worn.

Maxine and Gus are slumped on the couch, looking completely
drained. Gus sits behind Maxine, his legs wrapped around her
as he massages her neck. Maxine, seated in front of him, is
massaging Gus's feet with tired hands.

MAXINE

I didn't think today could get any
longer.

GUS

Yeah, today felt like a week. Need
anything?

MAXINE

I'm okay. How's the cafe?

GUS

Further deterioration.

Maxine leans back against his chest.

MAXINE

I'm really proud of you. I know
it's a lot.

Gus kisses the side of her neck.

GUS

How was work?

MAXINE

Great. Cool.

GUS

Yeah, right.

MAXINE

It's-- it's just... I'm trying not
to be a bitch about this. I should
enjoy it, right? At least I'm on
set, surrounded by creative people.
But... I don't want to be dramatic,
but it's kinda gross. It's awful
watching them do what I want to be
doing.

GUS

It's normal to hate them. It would
be nice to--

MAXINE

Well, I...

Maxine looks like the cat that ate the canary.

GUS

What did you do?

MAXINE

I... I kinda spit in a crew
member's cup.

GUS

No. No!

MAXINE

Yes, yes!

GUS

I'm very proud of you, too.

They laugh, but it fades into a long, existential silence.

MAXINE
We deserve better.

GUS
Yeah.

Staring straight ahead, both are lost in thought.
From upstairs, a loud voice breaks the silence.

MOM (O.S.)
Maxine!

Maxine and Gus look at each other and sigh.

MOM (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Gus!

No answer.

MOM (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Would you answer me?

MAXINE
Mom!

MOM (O.S.)
Dinner!

Maxine and Gus barely react. They exchange a look of resigned fatigue, their bodies sagging deeper into the couch.

MAXINE
I don't think I can eat right now.

GUS
Let's just... stay like this.

They remain entangled on the couch. Another shout from upstairs:

MOM (O.S.)
Dinner!

MAXINE
All right, Mom!

But they don't move.

MONTAGE: SIMULTANEOUS CHAOTIC WORKDAY

INT. CAFE - DAY

Gus's shift at the cafe:

-- Gus juggles multiple trays: He stumbles through the crowded cafe, struggling to balance trays of food.

-- Gus scrubs a sticky table.

-- Gus accidentally bumps into another waiter, causing a drink to spill all over a customer's lap. Gus makes apologetic gestures while the customer shouts.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

At the same time, Maxine's chaotic day:

-- Maxine is seen frantically managing multiple phone calls.

-- Maxine, panic, searches through a pile of disorganized script pages. Her face shows stress as she realizes something important is missing.

-- Maxine rushes to help set up for a scene. She clumsily assembles equipment, bumping into other crew members and causing a minor commotion.

END MONTAGE

INT. SUBWAY TRAIN - NIGHT

Maxine and Gus sit in a semi-empty train car. They glance at each other occasionally but remain silent, too drained to speak.

GUS
How was today?

MAXINE
Good stuff.

They catch each other's eyes, sharing a look that says, "Yeah, right."

GUS
Great?

MAXINE
Huh-huh.

They share a chuckle. Silence returns. Maxine fiddles with her bag strap. Gus looks out the window.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Gus... we have to talk about it.

Gus leans back, rubbing his face.

GUS

Not now.

MAXINE

When?

GUS

I don't want to talk about it.

MAXINE

It's just... it all feels so hopeless.

Gus chews his lip.

GUS

We still haven't hit a turning point.

MAXINE

"Turning point?" What are you waiting for? You're supposed to do something about this now.

GUS

There's nothing else I can do.

MAXINE

You're the husband.

GUS

"Husband?" Is that my role? Is that what's expected of me? I thought we were equal. Is all this feminist blah-blah bullshit?

No response.

GUS (CONT'D)

What do you want from me?

MAXINE

I don't know. I-- I want you to make more money, Gus.

GUS

You're obsessed with money.

MAXINE

If being "obsessed with money" means getting out of the basement and-- and quitting our jobs, then I am definitely fucking obsessed.

GUS

You want to grab the sky with both hands.

MAXINE

We can change this.

GUS

You can't get blood from a stone, Max.

They look ahead, in silence.

INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

Maxine and Gus step into the basement. Despite everything, Gus is relieved they made it through the train ride and pushes aside his frustration. He gently places his arm around her. She shrugs him off.

MAXINE

It's wild how hard it is to talk about money with you.

GUS

I'm not getting in the ring with you right now.

MAXINE

Fuck off.

Gus's intention was to make peace, but now he feels completely backstabbed. He fights to keep calm.

GUS

Uh, well, let's... let's go to bed. We're both tired.

MAXINE

You never wanna talk about it.

GUS

I think it's not that important right now.

Maxine just stares at him.

MAXINE

Hmm. Look where we are...

She spins around, motioning toward the basement, a look of pure disappointment on her face.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

What do you mean, "Not that important?" What a stupid thing to say!

GUS

Don't get angry.

MAXINE

You're too calm about this.

GUS

I feel like Sisyphus.

Maxine laughs.

GUS (CONT'D)

Same damn boulder. Same damn hill. And we're still at the bottom. Stuck.

MAXINE

Uh-huh. You're so profound.

She rubs her temples.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

How much are eggs?

GUS

Here we go.

MAXINE

How much?

Gus exhales, stalling.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Come on.

GUS

I don't know. Um... seven-- no, eight dollars.

MAXINE

Exactly! How are we supposed to
move outta this shithole?

No response.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

You never want to risk anything.
Always holding back.

Gus looks away.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

You think life's just gonna wait
for you?

Gus says nothing, retreating into the bathroom, avoiding
confrontation. Maxine follows.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gus splashes water on his face, staring at his reflection in
the mirror. Maxine stands behind him, her eyes locked on his
in the glass.

The tension between them is palpable.

MAXINE

I don't want to live here anymore.

Maxine and Gus's stares linger.

EXT. ASTORIA - EARLY MORNING

Snow falls heavily, quickly covering the streets.

INT. BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

An alarm clock buzzes - 4 am. Maxine finally slams it off.

Maxine and Gus don't move.

MAXINE

Double shift.

GUS

Yeah.

INT. CAFE - EARLY MORNING

Gus, weary and disheveled, pushes through the door. He stumbles over a stray chair leg, catching himself with a grunt as he sets down a box of pastries.

Gus trudges behind the counter. He fumbles with the coffee machine, spilling grounds onto the floor. As he tries to wipe them up, he accidentally knocks over a stack of cups, which clatter noisily.

Kitchen doors swing open, Younger Manager storms in.

YOUNGER MANAGER

What now?

GUS

I'm sorry. I-- I-- I--

YOUNGER MANAGER

Don't destroy the place, dipshit!

Gus nods, struggling to hide his embarrassment. The rest of the waitstaff laughs.

EXT. FILM SET - EARLY MORNING

The cold air is biting, each breath a plume of frost. Maxine stands alone behind the set, her shoulders hunched. She blows into her hands and glances up at the set with a deep, resigned sigh.

MAXINE

(to herself)

Fuck.

Maxine suddenly doubles over and vomits.

INT. FILM SET - EARLY MORNING

Maxine slowly unfolds the chairs. She glances at her reflection in a nearby mirror - she looks tired and depressed.

INT. FILM SET - EARLY MORNING

The set is bustling with activity as a catered breakfast is being served. Crew members, actors, and production staff are gathered around, chatting and eating.

Maxine sits alone at a small table in the corner, intently focused on her laptop. She types away, deeply immersed in her screenplay.

Maxine glances up occasionally, sighs, and then returns to her work. Her stomach growls, but she remains absorbed in her writing.

INT. FILM SET - EARLY MORNING

The breakfast crowd has cleared out, leaving the set littered with used plates, cups, and napkins.

Maxine closes her laptop, stretching stiff muscles as she stands. She heads to the mess and begins clearing the dishes.

Sweat glistens on her face as she wipes down the tables, folds the chairs, and stacks them. The set slowly returns to order as she works silently.

She pauses, glancing up at the DIRECTOR and SCREENWRITER prepping for the next scene.

Maxine wipes her face, looking defeated.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE - DAY

Maxine, busy and stressed, sorts through papers when the PRODUCTION COORDINATOR, who looks like the first man ever inseminated by cholesterol and wears a smug, unsettling grin, slinks over to her.

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR
Hey, the trailer toilet is clogged.
Take care of it.

MAXINE
I'm a writer, you know.

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR
(almost to himself)
Not another one.
(to her)
Well, think of it as material for
your next script.

He walks away, scoffing.

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR (CONT'D)
It's filmmaking! Not a fucking
party!

Maxine's face tightens, her disgust barely contained.

MAXINE
Great. Okay. Cool.

INT. TRAILER BATHROOM - DAY

The small, dingy trailer bathroom is cramped and unpleasant. Maxine stands over the clogged toilet. She's covered in toilet water.

Maxine fumbles with the plunger, her face scrunching up in disgust.

The sound of splashing and gurgling fills the air.

Maxine wipes her brow with the back of her hand, clearly distressed by the mess.

MAXINE
Shit, shit, shit!

Maxine suddenly stops.

EXT. TRAILER - MOMENTS LATER

Maxine vomits behind the trailer. She gasps for air, leaning heavily against the trailer. Frustrated, she lets out a raw scream.

MAXINE
Fucking shit!

INT. SUBWAY TRAIN - NIGHT

The train is empty. Maxine sits alone in the back, tears streaming down her face.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Maxine stands in the shower, the hot water washing over her. She scrubs her skin and nails briskly, desperately trying to wash the stench off.

INT. CAFE - NIGHT

Empty. Exhausted, Gus drops a pile of dishes in the sink. He's about to take off his apron when the Younger Manager walks in.

YOUNGER MANAGER
Hey, the sidewalk needs shoveling.

Without a word, Gus grabs his coat, resigned.

EXT. CAFE - NIGHT

Gus, barely able to keep his eyes open, shovels the sidewalk. Suddenly, he slips and falls, lying flat on the ice.

The Younger Manager steps out, lights his cigarette, and looks at Gus, shaking his head.

YOUNGER MANAGER
You're terrible at this. You're
just... no good, man. Sorry-- I...
I have to let you go.

Gus just stares up at the sky, deadpan.

INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

Maxine sits on the couch, dead-eyed, holding a cup of tea. Gus limps in, exhausted.

GUS
Hey.

No response. Maxine doesn't even glance at him.

GUS (CONT'D)
You okay?

MAXINE
Mm-hmm. Fine.

Gus sits beside her, pulling off his snow boots.

GUS
What's wrong?

MAXINE
I got to do some fucking super-cool
stuff today.

GUS
What?

MAXINE
Unclogged a toilet. Got shit all
over me.

She covers her face, overwhelmed.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I can't do this anymore.

Gus chuckles.

GUS
Not exactly fun.

MAXINE
Fuck off.

GUS
I-- I'm sorry.

MAXINE
I'm literally in fucking shit, and
you think it's funny.

Gus reaches for her, but she swats his arm away.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Leave me the fuck alone.

GUS
What about me? I had a shitty day
too. No pun intended.

MAXINE
Don't divagate.

GUS
"Divagate?"

MAXINE
Look it up!

She scoffs.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Sorry, I forgot I'm smarter than
you.

GUS
Smarter?

MAXINE
That's a fact.

Loaded pause.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

I went to film school-- and I'm paying back \$60,000 in loans just to be a PA again! I'm almost thirty, and I'm right back where I started. And you got your student loan forgiveness!

GUS

Oh my God! I'm a teacher-- they forgave teachers' loans. Now that's my fault too!

Gus paces, limping.

GUS (CONT'D)

You're always harping on the same old shit. It's all you do now-- living in the past.

MAXINE

We don't have a future. Where the fuck am I supposed to live?

GUS

Did you even ask why I'm limping? No, it's always, "me, me, me!"

MAXINE

You're always limping.

GUS

Your endless attacks are so boring!

Oppressive silence.

GUS (CONT'D)

I got fired.

Now Maxine paces, melting down.

MAXINE

What are you going to do?

GUS

I don't know. I don't know. I don't fucking know.

MAXINE

Oh God! We're never gonna leave this shithole. Fuck.

GUS

You think I'm a loser.

MAXINE

What?

GUS

Do you think I'm a loser?

Maxine's silence hangs heavy. Then:

MAXINE

We should just Bennifer it.

She lets out a sharp, bitter laugh.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Love is in the air.

This stings.

GUS

Bitch.

Maxine's face turns cold.

MAXINE

You wanna see "bitch," Gus?

She steps closer, her voice dripping with venom.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

You're a loser!

GUS

No--

MAXINE

Yeah!

GUS

How can you say that?

MAXINE

Because it's true. You can't get me out of this shithole. I see you. I see everything now.

A painful, stunned moment between them.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Are you happy now?

GUS

Very happy.

An excruciating silence lingers.

GUS (CONT'D)
Is this salvageable?

MAXINE
I don't give a fuck.

Her eyes locking onto his, full of contempt.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I hate you.

Another blow.

GUS
I hate you too.

Gus moves to put on his snow boots.

MAXINE
Don't fucking dare.

GUS
Don't start bossing me around.

MAXINE
We're talking.

Gus rubs his head, exhausted.

GUS
Talking? Just talking...

MAXINE
Yeah.

GUS
More like cutting each other's skin
off.

MAXINE
You know what? Actually, I dare
you. I dare you. I dare you.

GUS
There's nothing left to say, Max.
Just some resin in the gutter.

MAXINE
You can't just keep running away
from everything, Gus!

Gus slams the door.

Silence.

Maxine just stands there, alone.

EXT. STREET - ASTORIA - NIGHT

Gus, depressed, limps down the street, holding a coffee cup, dazed.

A DRUNK MAN, 50s, huddles around a trash can with a fire inside, warming his hands. He notices Gus and shouts over to him.

DRUNK MAN
Gotta cigarette?

Gus shrugs.

GEORGE
I don't smoke.

Drunk Man sighs.

DRUNK MAN
Fuck. No one smokes anymore. Damn shame.

Drunk Man sees the sadness in Gus's eyes.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)
What's wrong, man?

Gus limps over.

GUS
I... it's... it's stupid.

DRUNK MAN
It's that bad, huh?

Pause... Then Gus starts talking a mile a minute, clearly needing to vent.

GUS
I-- I don't think I... I'm just not good at this-- this-- life. I can't keep up with the rules.

DRUNK MAN
Rules?

Drunk Man cackles.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)
Rules are for fuckheads.

GUS
I don't even believe in myself
anymore. I don't. I-- I feel
like... this is it. Like...

Gus places his hand on his heaving chest.

GUS (CONT'D)
...like I might die.

Gus rubs his head.

GUS (CONT'D)
It's fucking nuts. Doesn't even
make sense anymore. Nothing makes
sense. How the hell did I fuck this
up?

DRUNK MAN
Hm. Hm.

GUS
It's just... there's nothing.
There's fucking nothing. I'm
nowhere.

DRUNK MAN
Stop it! What kinda bullshit is
this?

GUS
I'm bullshit. I'm all bullshit.

DRUNK MAN
No, no, no, no. Stop acting like
the king of bullshit!

GUS
I'm nothing but bullshit.

Drunk Man shoves him.

DRUNK MAN
All right. Shut up.

GUS
I'm-- I'm nothing!

Drunk man shoves him again.

DRUNK MAN
Shut up! Before I break your teeth.

Drunk Man takes a swig.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)
You're not fucking bullshit! Okay?

GUS
(under his breath)
I'm not bullshit.

DRUNK MAN
Louder!

GUS
I'm not bullshit!

DRUNK MAN
We're all trying to do our best!

He looks into Gus' eyes.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)
"A man can be destroyed but not
defeated!"

GUS
Wh-- what?

DRUNK MAN
Santiago! Fucking Santiago!

Gus laughs.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)
Hey-- what's so funny?

Gus points to his wedding ring.

GUS
I'm married to a writer.

They both chuckle, as if to say, of course.

DRUNK MAN
He's fucking outta luck for, like--
what-- forever. Nada. But he's
still got this... this fire in him,
you know? He's, like, totally beat
up, but he keeps going. I don't
know, man... he lost everything,
but he still... he still had that
fight in him.

Drunk Man looks at Gus.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)

He didn't quit, fuckhead. He kept on, even when it was all falling apart.

Drunk Man pours some vodka into Gus's cup and raises his bottle.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)

To Santiago! To the old fucking man who didn't give up. Even when the sharks... and the sea... and fucking life itself... tried to tear him down.

He looks into Gus' eyes.

DRUNK MAN (CONT'D)

You'll find yourself. You'll figure it out, kid... and everything will be all right.

Gus raises his cup.

GUS

To Santiago!

Gus takes a swig and coughs.

EXT. STREET - ASTORIA - NIGHT

Gus pauses, looks up at a deli's awning, considering something, then heads inside.

EXT. DELI - NIGHT

Gus exits the deli, slipping something into his pants pocket.

EXT. ASTORIA - DAWN

The sun rises over Astoria, casting light on the Hell Gate Bridge in the distance. Its steel structure catches the early light as it spans the East River.

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Maxine lies in bed, staring at the ceiling in the dim morning light.

Gus walks in, undresses, and lies down beside her. They both gaze up at the ceiling.

GUS
You used to make me feel confident.

MAXINE
And now?

GUS
Not anymore. You make me feel like
I'm not enough.

Devastating pause.

GUS (CONT'D)
You could walk into a room, and I'd
know exactly what you were
thinking... Now, I don't know
anything about you.

MAXINE
That makes me sad.

GUS
You cut me off cold... I'm afraid
of you. And that... that really
hurts. Because we had this amazing
connection. You made me feel so
good. I thought I could tell you
everything. I wanted you to know
everything.

He shifts slightly.

GUS (CONT'D)
You're all I've got.

She shifts slightly.

MAXINE
It was you and me against them.

Heavy pause.

GUS
I'm scared... I have trouble
sleeping. And-- I-- I wake up
screaming.

MAXINE
I know... I throw up every day
before work.

She lets out a deep sigh.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
We were confident. We weren't
afraid of anything.

GUS
We were consistent...

MAXINE
Free...

GUS
Happy...

MAXINE
We lost track of time...

A thick silence hangs between them.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Are we going to be okay?

GUS
We're going to be okay. I promise.

MAXINE
And if we don't?

GUS
Listen to me very carefully. I love
you so, so much.

Maxine puts her hand on his hand.

MAXINE
I love you too.

They fall silent, staring at the ceiling, each lost in their
own thoughts.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

Maxine moves exhausted through the apartment, gathering
clothes for laundry.

She picks up Gus's pants. Several scratch-off tickets fall
out of the pocket.

She picks up the tickets.

Pauses.

She grabs her keys and starts scratching off the tickets one by one.

With each ticket, her initial interest fades into growing disillusionment.

Suddenly, a subtle light of realization and skepticism appears in her eyes.

INT. BASEMENT APARTMENT - DAY

Maxine, holds the scratch-off ticket, staring at it.

Gus enters, frustrated.

MAXINE

Gus...

Gus rubs his neck.

GUS

I-- I didn't find anything.

MAXINE

Gus...

GUS

I-- I-- I'm sorry-- I'll try again tomorrow--

Maxine hugs him tightly.

GUS (CONT'D)

What is it? What's wrong--

MAXINE

Shh...

Maxine hands him the ticket. Gus looks at it, confused, having forgotten about it.

GUS

What?

MAXINE

Look...

Gus studies the ticket, taking a moment to realize what he's looking at.

GUS

What is this?

MAXINE
Restitution, Gus. For all we been
through.

GUS
You fucking serious? We won?

MAXINE
Huh-huh.

A long, surreal moment. It feels like the room is spinning
around them.

GUS
Feels sublime.

MAXINE
Sublime.

They take it in.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
This changes everything, Gus.

Gus picks her up and spins her around. He sets her down and
kisses her deeply. The kiss lingers, then:

GUS
Shall we make a baby?

Maxine pulls away.

GUS (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

MAXINE
I don't want that right now.

GUS
What do you want?

MAXINE
Really?

Gus looks confused.

GUS
Yeah.

MAXINE
I don't want to live here
anymore...

She glances around.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I wanna burn this place to the
ground.

GUS
And...?

Maxine opens her laptop, pulls up a file, and shows him her script.

MAXINE
I finished it...

GUS
We can do both.

MAXINE
I can't.

GUS
Why not?

Maxine pauses, thinking deeply.

MAXINE
I have to be true to myself...

She touches his face.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I can't fake it...

Maxine and Gus stare at each other for a long moment.

The tension is palpable.

Maxine takes the ticket from his hand and holds it up.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Freedom, Gus...

INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

Maxine and Gus pack a small travel bag, excited and rushed. She slips a champagne bottle into the bag.

MAXINE
We finally have a reason to
celebrate.

GUS
Are you sure about this? It's
dangerous. A storm's coming...

MAXINE
Schenectady is only three hours
away without traffic.

GUS
I don't know, Max.

MAXINE
No one's gonna be on the road
tomorrow. You'll see... everyone's
avoiding the storm.

GUS
What are we gonna tell your mom
about the money?

MAXINE
Nothing.

Maxine glances over, acting as if she's setting off a flare.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
She's gonna be shitting rockets
when she finds out.

GUS
How are we gonna get her to lend us
the car, especially with the storm?
She loves that thing.

MAXINE
Yeah, I know. She acts like it's
her third child.

GUS
Where's she gonna put all her
stuffed animals?

Maxine laughs.

MAXINE
I know all her cuddly confidants.

Maxine thinks, rubbing her temples.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
(to herself)
Wheels, wheels, wheels...

After a long moment.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

I got it... We'll just say your dad got Hemingway out again. Your mom asked us to come.

Gus sighs.

GUS

They couldn't stop screaming. Always fighting. Why are parents so fucked up?

MAXINE

We won't end up like them.

Gus chews his lip.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

GUS

It's just kinda messed up. After all she's done for us.

MAXINE

Whatever. Look. She's gonna want some of it.

GUS

You're not going to give her any? It's a lot of money.

MAXINE

Actually after the government takes half, it's not.

GUS

But she's letting us stay here for free.

MAXINE

We'll... buy her a new washer and dryer.

GUS

Pretty, awful.

MAXINE

I don't mean to make this all about us. But she owns this house, a car, and has a 401k for Christ's sake. We have nothing.

GUS
So, knife your mom?

MAXINE
What the fuck is this, the Salem
Witch Trials?

She gives him a pointed look, dripping with sarcasm.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
You're a Puritan.

GUS
You're a terrorist.

MAXINE
Welcome to the real world...

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAWN

Snow begins to fall lightly, the road gradually turning white. Dark clouds loom on the horizon.

INT. CAR - DAWN

The car is cluttered with stuffed animals. Maxine grips the steering wheel, glancing at the light snowfall through the windshield.

MAXINE
See? The storm isn't so bad.

Gus looks out the window at the gathering snow. He checks the clock on the dashboard.

GUS
It's only 6 am... the worst is yet
to come.

Maxine keeps her eyes on the road, unfazed.

MAXINE
We're good. Luck's on our side,
remember?

GUS
Buckle up.

Maxine glances at him for a moment, then back at the road.

MAXINE

By the way... I wanna move back to the East Village.

Gus shifts in his seat.

GUS

It's too expensive.

MAXINE

We lived there before COVID.

GUS

Yeah, but you were working at Viacom, and I was teaching. We were making enough money back then.

MAXINE

Hello, we can afford it again.

GUS

I'm tired of rented. I think we should buy something.

MAXINE

It's too expensive to buy anything in New York City.

GUS

I-- I was thinking we move upstate, get a little house on the Hudson... maybe Buffalo.

MAXINE

Are you serious?

GUS

Yeah.

MAXINE

Okay, I get it. The city is unaffordable, but we could still get a studio or a junior one-bedroom.

GUS

How are we going to raise a baby in a studio?

MAXINE

Mmm-hmm.

GUS

What?

MAXINE

I don't want to bring a baby into the world conservatives are creating.

GUS

Don't romanticize your choice-- don't lie to me, Max. It's complete Sarah Lawrence bullshit!

Gus sighs and leans back.

MAXINE

Okay, so here's the real question: who's actually going to have this baby? You? Because last I checked, only a woman carries a baby for nine months and pushes out something the size of a watermelon.

GUS

Do you see kids as part of our future someday?

MAXINE

Okay, so, I guess you don't understand? You're just a man.

Gus rubs his neck. This stings. But he let's it go, avoiding a fight.

GUS

I thought you wanted kids.

MAXINE

I do... later, when I'm ready.

GUS

But it gets harder later. A woman reaches a certain age... everything changes. What if we lose our chance?

He looks at Maxine.

GUS (CONT'D)

Are you scared?

MAXINE

Yeah, I'm scared. Are we... do you really think we're ready?

GUS

No one's ever really ready.

MAXINE

Do we even know what we're doing it for?

Gus gives her a look, surprised.

GUS

For love... it's something you just want because it's so intimate. It's forever.

MAXINE

Mmm-hmm. Let's just see where we are later.

Heavy silence.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

We good?

GUS

Uh-huh. But we're doing this, right?

MAXINE

Yeah, we're doing this. Uh, it just has to be this way for now.

She glances at him.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry you have to wait.

GUS

I can wait.

Gus stares at the falling snow.

MAXINE

You know, this is our first time away in a long time.

GUS

It's just one day.

MAXINE

I was thinking maybe we could go on a trip.

GUS

Where?

MAXINE

I don't know. Maybe Europe. You?

GUS
South America.

MAXINE
Not Europe? Really? I figured since
you're an art teacher, you'd pick
Italy... France.

Gus shakes his head.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
So, which part of South America?

GUS
Um, Peru, along the Ucayali River.

MAXINE
Why?

Gus lights up.

GUS
This indigenous group called the
Shipibo-Conibo have no internet.
Zero politics.

MAXINE
Wait, no political cults? No
"they're eating the dogs, they're
eating the cats" racist bullshit?

GUS
What a stupid idiot! He can't
function without lying.

MAXINE
It's pretty obvious he's the one
eating pets.

They share a laugh.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
So how do they keep it together
without tearing each other apart?

GUS
Uh, they make decisions together as
a community.

He turns toward her.

GUS (CONT'D)
You see, everyone gets a say.

Maxine chuckles.

MAXINE
Really? Everyone?

GUS
Yeah, they do. They keep talking it out until everyone agrees. It's all about respect.

Gus looks at her for a reaction.

MAXINE
Communism, huh? Holy shit!

She gives Gus a raised brow.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I see, Che... A revolution...
Idealism!

GUS
Fairness! Equality!

MAXINE
Delusion! Fantasy!

They share a laugh, but Gus's laugh is a bit empty. There's a hint of sadness; he feels she doesn't really get it.

GUS
I mean it.

MAXINE
I... I like it.

GUS
Yeah?

MAXINE
Sort of.

GUS
What do you mean?

MAXINE
Sure, fairness and equality sound great, but shouldn't effort count for something? Hard work deserves to be rewarded, right? You can't just give everyone a prize. That's not how the real world works. Everyone should earn their place.

They share a small smile. Gus looks away out the window. "Prize?" They just hit the jackpot on a scratch-off. The irony stings.

EXT. HIGHWAY RESTROOM STOP - MORNING

Maxine and Gus exit, each holding steaming coffee cups. Gus glances up, squinting at the falling snow.

GUS
It's getting thicker.

Maxine glances at the darkening sky.

GUS (CONT'D)
Should we turn back?

MAXINE
No. Don't worry. We'll make it.

Maxine takes a sip of her coffee, as if trying to convince herself as much as him.

GUS
(under his breath)
Dead people.

MAXINE
What?

GUS
You know, people die in blizzards.

MAXINE
Why do you have to overthink everything? You just beat it to death. It's depressing, you know?

GUS
I don't know... Maybe because you put a lot of pressure on me. You-- you rushed us into this trip, even when there were obvious warning signs.

MAXINE
Sorry, I can't help it. I'm excited.

She leans in and suddenly kisses his cheek. Gus looks surprised.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Gus smiles.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The snow is falling heavily, covering the road. It's icy and dangerous, with a few cars stranded along the side.

INT. CAR - DAY

Maxine and Gus drive in silence as the snowstorm outside intensifies. The windshield wipers struggle to keep up. Gus stares out the window.

MAXINE

What if we get into a car accident?
And one of us dies.

GUS

Don't say that.

MAXINE

No, seriously. What would you do
with the money?

No answer. She glances at him.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Really? I want to know.

Gus sighs.

GUS

Let's not do this now.

MAXINE

Why not?

GUS

It's silly.

MAXINE

Oh, come on.

GUS

I don't like this hypothetical. Why
are you even asking me?

MAXINE

I don't know. I just want to know what you'd do with the money without me. What would be the alternative?

Gus remains silent, clearly uncomfortable.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Please, let me know where your head's at, yeah?

GUS

I-- I just don't see the point.

MAXINE

You never want to talk anymore. Why is that?

GUS

Can we take a break, please?

MAXINE

Sure. Yeah, we've got tons of time, hours to take a break. Answer the question!

Gus shifts uncomfortably.

GUS

I-- I... I don't know. You're inside my head now. Can you stop?

MAXINE

Uh-huh, well, it's a simple question.

GUS

Simple? It's not binary. It's more of an existential conundrum.

Maxine snorts, suppressing a laugh.

MAXINE

"Existential conundrum?" Come on, it's black or white. What would you do with the money, Gus?

Suddenly blurts:

GUS

A farm. I want a farm. And-- and a garden, all right?

Maxine laughs.

MAXINE

A garden?

GUS

Yeah, a garden.

MAXINE

You wanna be a gardener now?

GUS

I don't know. Maybe.

Gus pauses.

MAXINE

Well...

GUS

I... I want to grow stuff. Uh, there are like all these different vegetables and flowers, right? Each one needs different things. Some need more sunlight, more water, more nurturing... Um, I think we're like... like a bunch of vegetables and flowers.

She raises an eyebrow, amused.

MAXINE

Huh-huh...

GUS

Um, yeah, sort of... We all have different personalities and opinions, right? But if we don't figure out how to make it work together... it falls apart.

Maxine desperately holds back laughter.

MAXINE

So, um, uh, you're saying we're like plants?

GUS

Yeah, maybe. We all need care and attention. If we don't, we'll just fade away.

Maxine leans into sarcasm.

MAXINE

Oh, so like you're like a fragile orchid?

GUS

How'd you figure?

MAXINE

You... you need soft light, the right humidity, specific attention... and time.

Gus absorbs the playful jab.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

And me? What kinda plant am I?

GUS

Spicy pepper.

MAXINE

True, true.

They share a laugh.

GUS

But you're also like... corn.

MAXINE

Corn? Are you drunk? Are you spiking your coffee, Gus?

GUS

No, no, hear me out.

MAXINE

Seriously?

GUS

Corn is strong, tall... admired for its height and beautiful ears.

Gus gently touches her ear, smiling.

GUS (CONT'D)

Uh, did you know that in Native American culture, corn is, like, really important? It symbolizes life... strength.

He reaches for her hand.

GUS (CONT'D)

You're the strong one. You push us forward.

Maxine glances at him, teasing.

MAXINE

Still think you're drunk.

Gus smiles.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Maxine's mom's car inches forward in bumper-to-bumper traffic. The highway is now a even more slick, icy blanket. Treacherous.

INT. CAR - DAY

Maxine grips the wheel, frustrated. Gus stares out the window.

MAXINE

Shit. We're barely moving.

Gus leans forward, squinting at the line of cars ahead.

GUS

There's an accident up there.

Maxine strains to see through the falling snow, red and blue emergency lights flashing faintly in the distance.

MAXINE

Fuck. Of course there is. This is a nightmare. We'll be stuck for hours. Great. Just fucking great.

GUS

This wasn't the smartest move. We should've never left today. It's dangerous. We should've waited. Now we're gonna be stuck in this mess all day.

MAXINE

Well, uh, why didn't you stop me?

GUS

I-- I had no choice, really. You nailed me to a cross.

Maxine laughs.

MAXINE

Wow, uh, crucification time! So,
I'm Pontius Pilate now.

GUS

No, no.

Maxine chuckles, as if to say, Sure.

MAXINE

That's a relief.

GUS

I don't wanna fight.

He rolls his eyes playfully.

GUS (CONT'D)

We don't want an avalanche.

MAXINE

Ha, very funny. You can't tell
jokes. so stop.

GUS

You used to be fun.

MAXINE

You're immature.

GUS

"Oh, I'm Max. Just a grown-up here
— totally important because I write
stuff."

Maxine side-eyes him.

MAXINE

And you want kids? I'm not about to
raise two-- I'm not going to bring
another life into this.

GUS

Oh, come on. Can't take a joke but
always shoot from the hip.

MAXINE

You-- you really want to do this
right now?

GUS

I'm just saying...

MAXINE

Fine, whatever. Just sit there and be useless, as usual. Why don't you figure something out?

Heavy silence. Broken by Maxine tapping the steering wheel impatiently as the car in front moves a few feet before stopping again.

GUS

Maybe we should take the next exit. Get off this death trap.

MAXINE

And go where? Everything's covered in snow and ice.

GUS

Anywhere but here. We're not getting through this.

MAXINE

Oh, brilliant idea. That-- that's smart. Let's just drive into a snowbank instead.

GUS

You know what? You wanted to do this, so here we are. If it was up to me, we wouldn't be here.

Maxine sighs, shaking her head.

MAXINE

Can you stop repeating yourself? The whining is like chalk on a blackboard.

GUS

What are we even rushing for? The money isn't going anywhere.

Maxine clenches her jaw, her eyes focused ahead, not responding. Gus rubs his temples, the tension between them thick.

GUS (CONT'D)

Whatever. Just take the next exit. We're not getting anywhere like this.

Another car slips on the icy surface ahead, fishtailing slightly before straightening out. Maxine tightens her grip on the wheel.

MAXINE

Fine. Fine, let's get off before we end up in "an avalanche."

Gus looks out the window.

EXT. EXPRESSWAY - CONTINUOUS

Maxine veers slowly toward the upcoming exit ramp.

EXT. SIDE STREET - CONTINUOUS

Maxine navigates the car through the narrow, snow-covered, dark side streets. The snow swirls around them, the expressway disappearing behind.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

They drive in tense silence. Then:

MAXINE

I hope this isn't worse.

GUS

At least we're not stuck in traffic.

MAXINE

I just hope we make it before they close.

GUS

We will... we're moving now, slowly.

They drive through the snowy streets, unsure of what's ahead but desperate to keep going.

EXT. SIDE STREET - DAY

Maxine and Gus drive in silence, both still cooling off.

MAXINE

Should we get back on the highway now? What does the GPS say?

Gus checks the GPS on his cell.

GUS

Uh, the accident been cleared.

Maxine veers left.

GUS (CONT'D)
Come on, come on. It's coming up.

MAXINE
There's ice everywhere. You want me speeding now?

GUS
We need emotional support.

He grabs one of the stuffed animals and squeezes it to death, taking out his frustration.

GUS (CONT'D)
This feels good. I think I found a job I'd enjoy.

Maxine side-eyes him.

MAXINE
Jesus, stop being a kid.

The exit passes them by.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Uh, fuck-- we-- we missed the exit.

GUS
Because we're fighting all the time.

MAXINE
Why is that?

GUS
I don't know.

MAXINE
Everything is going our way.

She glances at him.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I thought you'd be happy. What's wrong?

No answer. She glances at him again.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
What's the matter with you? You look pale. Cheer up, we're rich!

GUS
That money just makes me feel
guilty.

MAXINE
For what? Having good luck? No more
suffering for us!

Gus looks out the window.

GUS
All I see is human pain...

MAXINE
What?

GUS
Why is there so much suffering?
Anger? Rage? Loneliness?

MAXINE
All right, relax.

Shakes her head.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
You're always thinking about
strange, deep stuff. Always in an
existential state of mind.

GUS
Why is there so much suffering?

MAXINE
How's that any of your business?

GUS
I-- I mean it.

MAXINE
Gimme a break.

GUS
Tell me.

MAXINE
No, I cannot.

GUS
Oh, come on.

MAXINE
How am I supposed to know? I don't
even know how to peel an onion.

GUS

What's the meaning of life?

MAXINE

Oh God! Don't get carried away.
You're such a gemini.

GUS

What's that got to do with
anything?

MAXINE

You're always thinking--
questioning everything.

GUS

What a human weakness. Yeah, maybe
I'll learn something.

MAXINE

Okay. If the world has any meaning,
this is it.

Gus half-laughs, shaking his head.

GUS

Winning a million dollars?

MAXINE

Yep. Life is... dumb luck.

He raises an eyebrow and leans back, crossing his arms.

GUS

You're so sensible.

MAXINE

So, what is it?

Gus looks down, lost in thought.

GUS

Maybe the meaning of life is just
being content with what you have.

A long silence stretches between them.

MAXINE

Are you okay?

GUS

Yeah.

MAXINE

You sure? You're in an odd mood.

GUS

I... I just wish we were home.

MAXINE

You mean basement...

Gus sighs.

GUS

I-- I just wish we were in bed, curled up, binge-watching some silly show instead of being stuck here on this road, tearing each other apart. We could've waited out the storm for a few days.

MAXINE

This is big, Gus. Our lives are about to change. I just couldn't wait. You know me... I follow my gut, even if it means jumping off a cliff.

GUS

More like a hurricane... unpredictable.

Maxine shoots him a look.

MAXINE

No more weather metaphors, okay?

Maxine takes his hand. Gus looks at her for a moment, forcing a smile.

INT. CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Maxine and Gus drive when a deer suddenly steps onto the road.

MAXINE

Aw, fuck!

GUS

Whoa, whoa.

MAXINE

Hold on, hold on!

GUS
Jesus fucking Christ!

The car halts abruptly.

A long, tense silence.

Heavy breathing.

Their eyes shut.

Gus opens his eyes.

GUS (CONT'D)
Are you okay?

MAXINE
Shit! Uh... Yeah, yeah. You?

GUS
Yeah, fine.

MAXINE
Oh my God! How bad is it? Is-- is
it dead?

GUS
It exploded.

MAXINE
What?

Maxine opens her eyes.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Fuck.

Maxine pinches him.

GUS
Fuck!

MAXINE
It's not funny.

GUS
I'm sorry.

Maxine stares at the deer, clearly unnerved.

MAXINE
Shit. It happened so fast. I didn't
see it.

Gus watches the deer as it crosses. Lost in thought for a moment.

GUS
(almost to himself)
The deer and the wolf...

MAXINE
Huh?

GUS
The deer and the wolf!

Maxine gives him a pointed look.

MAXINE
I'm sorry, what?

GUS
Uh, wolves are always chasing deer,
trying to catch them, right?

Maxine doesn't respond. She slowly pulls away.

GUS (CONT'D)
The deer is always one step ahead,
using the forest to its advantage -
dodging and weaving to stay safe.

Maxine remains silent.

GUS (CONT'D)
Uh, what's interesting is the
wolf's power comes from the
chase... the deer's strength is in
its ability to evade, to use its
surroundings. It's not about out-
muscling each other. It's about
survival... strategy.

Maxine chuckles.

MAXINE
Are you being serious now? Are you
hard-balling me?

GUS
No, no. We're caught in a power
struggle... constantly trying to
outmaneuver each other, right?

Gus looks at Maxine, cautiously continuing.

GUS (CONT'D)

Maybe what we need is to stop the chase. Find a way to make it work without always fighting.

Maxine gives him a sideways look. Gus carefully adds:

GUS (CONT'D)

And, uh, I think I'm like the deer... you're the wolf... yeah?

MAXINE

Yeah. Uh-huh. I'm like the big bad wolf.

They share a small, quiet laugh.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

You're giving me a brain hemorrhage now.

GUS

Hemorrhage?

MAXINE

You're insane.

GUS

Oh, come on.

MAXINE

You know I hate the rope-a-dope.

GUS

Look, uh, maybe if we stop focusing on who's in control, uh, and start figuring out how to work together, we might actually find a way through this.

The air between them softens, less charged.

GUS (CONT'D)

Are we good?

Maxine smiles.

MAXINE

Huh-huh... I don't know what's going to happen, but I have a feeling it might get a little bloody.

GUS
Guess I'm gonna wake up in Siberia
with no fucking throat!

Maxine playfully hits his arm.

MAXINE
Shut the fuck up.

GUS
Oooh, I'm hungry now.

MAXINE
How about we see if we can find a
nice beef bourguignon?

GUS
Hmmm... *The Cook, the Thief, His
Wife & Her Lover*... Hey but without
the side of revenge.

They both laugh.

INT. CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Maxine and Gus drive. Snow heavily taps against the
windshield. They're in silence for a beat, before Gus brings
up the movie again.

GUS
Remember when we first saw *The
Cook, the Thief*...?

Maxine smiles.

MAXINE
How can you forget the glorious
Helen Mirren?

GUS
Sublime.

Pause.

GUS (CONT'D)
Their relationship... It's how its
all just excess. I mean, Albert...
he's completely unchecked. All ego,
all power. Everything he touches,
he destroys.

MAXINE

Georgina isn't exactly a victim. She's complicit in her own way. The affair, the revenge... she's pulling the strings. It's like, um, a twisted chess game. They're both playing their parts.

GUS

Yeah, Albert's like-- like the embodiment of pure control, right? He dominates every space he's in. And Georgina? She's always resisting, but she doesn't outright challenge him until it's all gone to shit.

MAXINE

It's... it's more like she's waiting for her moment. She knows she can't win a power struggle with force alone, so she uses other ways.

GUS

Like us... sometimes.

Maxine chuckles.

MAXINE

I'm not exactly lording over you like Albert.

Pensive pause.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

But yeah, I-- I guess we do our own version of fucked-up shit.

GUS

Yeah, we do get stuck in those loops. Power plays, manipulation...

MAXINE

Less gourmet, more fast-food dysfunction.

A share chuckle.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Well, at least I'm not plotting to cook you up for dinner, right?

They laugh together for a moment. Then go back to their own thoughts. Maxine seems a bit bother.

INT. DINER - DAY

Maxine and Gus sit in a empty diner, barely eating. They just stare at their plates.

GUS
How's your burger?

Maxine looks down at her almost untouched burger.

MAXINE
"Looks like cat food for
constipated French rabbits."

They both laugh.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
How's your bloody steak?

GUS
Uh, not bad. I like it.

MAXINE
Masochist.

GUS
Ha. Yeah. Maybe.

Silence. Maxine looks distant, lost in thought.

GUS (CONT'D)
Tell me what your thinking.

MAXINE
You think we're really like them?

GUS
Like who?

MAXINE
You know, like Albert and Georgina.

GUS
In a way, yeah. You're like
Georgina... strategic.

MAXINE
Huh.

GUS
What about me?

MAXINE
Um, maybe like how Albert wants to control the chaos around him, but he does it in a really manipulative way.

GUS
"Manipulative?" Really?

MAXINE
Forget it.

GUS
No. Please go on.

MAXINE
Yeah?

GUS
Yeah.

MAXINE
Uh, you're always playing the victim. You let me, like, make all the decisions because... you're too afraid to make any yourself. But when things go wrong, it's my fault. Instead of saying, "I told you so," you just jump in to fix everything. It feels like you're saying it anyway, and... it makes you feel good.

GUS
I-- I-- I'm not trying to fix everything.

MAXINE
Yes you are. You hide behind your need to help, but it's just a distraction... you're scared. It's like you live inside this shell, and all your self-doubt clouds everything.

Gus looks taken aback.

GUS
I just thought you wanted to take charge.

Maxine expression shifts into resignation.

MAXINE

Just forget it, Gus, okay?

GUS

No.

MAXINE

It's not this, it's not that. I don't even know what it is anymore. It's just exhausting.

A tense silence hangs between them. Gus breaks it, thinking he'll kill the tension.

GUS

But there's a certain elegance in how Albert and Georgina fall apart, right? It's all planned, even the dysfunction. Their rebellion is so calculated... it's almost art.

MAXINE

Yeah, well, I don't think our fights are art.

GUS

Isn't it whatever we want it to be?

MAXINE

It's a shitstorm for sinking relationships.

Gus chuckles.

GUS

Like the *The Bride of the Wind*?

Maxine laughs.

MAXINE

Now you're comparing us to Kokoschka's painting... a couple sinking into chaos.

GUS

No... they are overwhelmed by passion.

Maxine gives him a look; there's a hint of a smile.

MAXINE

Or circumstances?

Gus locks eyes with her, a silent plea for understanding, as if asking her to meet him halfway.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Well... maybe next time we fight,
we should have Mozart's *Requiem*
Mass playing in the background.

GUS

Lacrimosa?

Maxine nods, a smirk forming.

MAXINE

Of course.

The tension between them loosens slightly.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Have a little faith in me. You're
not ending up on a plate.

GUS

Sure.

They share a laugh.

GUS (CONT'D)

It feels like... everything's
aligning.

MAXINE

You think so?

Gus nods.

GUS

Like the universe is pushing us in
a certain direction...

There's a lingering silence, like unfinished business.

INT. CAR - DAY

Maxine and Gus drive slowly, the roads growing icier.

MAXINE

What if we die on this road?
Wouldn't that be ironic?

GUS
Kinda depressing. Especially after
all we've been through... COVID,
losing our jobs.

MAXINE
The constant fighting.

GUS
We've been through a lot.

MAXINE
You know, every time I see a car
accident, I can't help but think
about how fragile life is.

Lost in thought.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Like in Godard's *Weekend*, where
everything spirals out of control
after that crash.

Gus chuckles.

GUS
Weekend is batshit crazy.

MAXINE
Um, the whole world feels post-
apocalyptic now. Doesn't it?

GUS
Yeah, I guess. Everyone has gone
mad.

MAXINE
Is that where we're all headed?

GUS
It's sad how the world has changed
after COVID.

MAXINE
It's always been fucked up. We just
didn't see it.

Heavy silence.

GUS
Speaking of those moody French
movies, have you seen *The Fire
Within*?

Maxine shakes her head.

MAXINE

No, I don't think so.

GUS

You definitely haven't watched it.
If you had, you'd never forget it.

MAXINE

What brought that up?

GUS

I'm not sure.

MAXINE

Tell me about it.

Introspective pause.

GUS

Uh... it's about this guy, a
recovering alcoholic in rehab. He
decides he's going to kill himself,
right? Then he, um, spends the day
visiting old friends, reconnecting.
You think he's finding hope, but
then-- then he still kills himself
the next day. Just like that. Then
the screen goes black. The end.

MAXINE

I love french films!

GUS

I know, right.

They both laugh.

MAXINE

Keep going...

GUS

The ending is so, so abrupt. One
moment, he's connecting with
people, and the next, he's gone.
It's haunting. I thought he had
turned a corner, you know? But
then... he just did it.

Loaded pause.

GUS (CONT'D)

Um, when I saw it the first time--

MAXINE

How many times have you seen it?

GUS

Quiet a few times. It messed me up for a while. I've never seen anything like it, you know? Growing up, American films always offer this hope at the end, tying everything up with a bow. Not this film. It's raw... no redemption arc, no happy ending. Just the harsh reality that sometimes... people don't make it.

MAXINE

Yeah, the happy ending cliché. I hate it. Like we all get a nice rainbow at the end. There's no neat resolution; it's just... life, messy and unresolved.

She looks at him.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Why do you think he did it?

GUS

Um... I guess he tries to reconnect with life all day, but there's this— this weight he can't shake off. No matter what he does, he's stuck in his pain... like realizing that no matter how hard he tries, he's still trapped.

MAXINE

Like your dad?

GUS

Yeah, but it's not his fault.

Gus pauses, lost in thought. Maxine glances at him repeatedly, deeply affected by what he's said.

MAXINE

So, you think that's why it stuck with you?

GUS

Yeah, no... I mean, in that moment, I realized life doesn't always give you a happy ending.

Maxine considers this.

MAXINE
Do you still believe that?

Gus looks down, vulnerable.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Did you stop taking your medication
again, Gus?

GUS
(almost to himself)
It just sometimes... I mean, it's
easy to put on a front. But deep
down, there's that struggle. It's
scary to think about what might
happen when someone can't bear it
anymore...

A moment of silence hangs between them.

MAXINE
I don't fucking believe it!

Maxine slams on the brakes.

GUS
What are you doing?

The car skids on the icy road.

Black.

A scream.

INT. CAR - SECONDS LATER

Maxine screams. Gus looks like he's a heartbeat from a
stroke.

GUS
Jesus Christ, Max! What the fuck?

MAXINE
You stop fucking taking your meds!

GUS
Don't overreact, okay?

Maxine hits him a few times.

GUS (CONT'D)

Ow!

MAXINE

Fuck you!

He grabs her fist.

GUS

Will you please not turn this into
a tragedy?

Their eyes lock. The intensity is palpable.

MAXINE

I need you... with me. I know I can
be intense, and I act like I can
stand on my own... but I can't.

Gus pulls Maxine into his arms, kissing her with desperation. They cling to each other, as if this is all they've ever wanted or needed.

EXT. PARKING LOT - LATER

The parking lot is buried in snow. It's empty, except for Maxine's mom's car.

INT. CAR - DAY

The car windows fogged over. Maxine and Gus lay naked in the backseat.

MAXINE

Did you like it?

GUS

You're an artist.

MAXINE

The magic of collaboration is
undeniable.

GUS

We're such good chefs.

MAXINE

Creating masterpieces.

GUS

We should open a restaurant.

MAXINE
What would we call it?

They think.

GUS
The Scream.

MAXINE
The Last Supper.

They both laugh.

GUS
I've missed you.

Maxine sighs.

MAXINE
Why are we so shitty to each other
sometimes?

GUS
I think... we stopped listening to
each other.

MAXINE
Yeah... we forgot how to
communicate.

GUS
I just wish...

MAXINE
What?

GUS
Our words are just so fucked up.
Excruciating.

MAXINE
Words are just dust, Gus...
fleeting. We're not in a courtroom
yet.

She kisses his hand.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Listen, we shouldn't be so hard on
each other. I'd really love to see
one couple who has it all figured
out. None of this is supposed to be
easy. Okay?

GUS

Okay.

Pensive pause.

MAXINE

What is marriage...?

GUS

Change... constant change.

MAXINE

Right, right change.

GUS

So, what happens now?

MAXINE

I don't know. I think... steps...
just steps.

They take it in.

GUS

Tell me about your script. I'm very
proud of you.

A subtle smile lingers on Maxine's face.

GUS (CONT'D)

What? What is it?

Maxine blushes.

GUS (CONT'D)

You don't trust me?

MAXINE

No, it's not that.

GUS

Then, what?

MAXINE

Uh, writers always write about
themselves.

GUS

Yeah. But who really writes about
anything other than their own
lives?

He looks at her.

GUS (CONT'D)
What's it about?

Maxine pauses, clearly uncomfortable.

MAXINE
Um, it's called *What a Beautiful State We Are In...* A double entendre... the beauty of New York and our state of mind.

GUS
"Life is a state of mind."

MAXINE
Right... we all see the same truth, but our perception distorts it.

A moment.

GUS
Go on...

Maxine smiles.

MAXINE
Um... it's about two strangers, Cass and Row, who are forced to evacuate their East Village apartment due to...

GUS
Carbon monoxide...

MAXINE
They take off on a day-long adventure across the city...

GUS
Falling in love.

Gus looks at her.

GUS (CONT'D)
The story of how we met.

MAXINE
The story of Us.

They stare off into space.

EXT. LOTTERY CENTER - SCHENECTADY, NY - DAY

The wind howls as snow swirls around Maxine and Gus outside the Lottery Center. The windows are dark, and the "CLOSED" sign hangs prominently on the door. Maxine bangs on the glass, frustration mounting.

MAXINE

But it's not four yet! Let us in!

Gus stands back, checking his cell, squinting through the snowfall. He shakes his head.

GUS

It's-- it's closed due to the storm.

Maxine turns red.

MAXINE

Gus, did you even check if they were open today?

Gus looks away.

GUS

I forgot.

Maxine whirls around.

MAXINE

Oh my God! Your only job was to research and check the GPS!

Gus runs a hand through his hair, exasperated.

GUS

I-- I thought it would be open.

MAXINE

August!

GUS

Maxine!

Maxine rubs her head.

MAXINE

This is not happening. This not happening.

She kicks at a mound of snow in frustration, sending a spray of white powder into the air.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Great, so now what?

Gus steps closer, trying to remain calm amid her anger.

GUS

Let's just figure out a plan--

MAXINE

A plan? What plan? We're stuck in the middle of nowhere!

Gus narrows his eyes, struggling to keep his cool as he does a quick search on his cell.

GUS

There's a motel nearby. We have champagne... It'll be like a second honeymoon.

MAXINE

What, are you fucking insane? You know what happens to people who stay in motels?

Maxine, pretending to be Norman Bates, brandishes an imaginary knife, letting out a shrill, playful screech.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Eeee! Eeee! Eeee!

GUS

Could be fun. We can pretend to kill each other like in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Maxine huffs, her breath visible in the cold air as she takes a moment to collect herself, looking back at the locked door.

MAXINE

I'll kill you first.

GUS

Very romantic.

The anger fades as they share a laugh. Maxine scoops up some snow and forms a snowball.

GUS (CONT'D)

Now, be nice!

MAXINE

Nice?

GUS

Nice.

MAXINE

Like a nice gesture?

GUS

Okay, for the record, you asked for it.

MAXINE

For the record?

GUS

Huh-huh.

Maxine readies to throw the snowball, a big smile on her face.

GUS (CONT'D)

Okay, okay. Wait, stop!

MAXINE

Stop?

GUS

I'll be respectful, uh, if you are...

MAXINE

Respectful, that's very difficult. Make me a proposal...

GUS

A very indecent proposal?

Maxine hits him with the snowball.

GUS (CONT'D)

Ow! No you didn't.

MAXINE

Yep, yep.

Gus tackles her like a football.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

You shit!

Maxine rubs snow in his face. They kiss.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Gus steps out of the motel, a small ice bucket in hand. The cold air nips at his cheeks as he makes his way to the ice machine.

The dim glow of the motel sign flickers overhead, casting eerie shadows as if the heavens are watching his every move.

As Gus approaches the machine, something catches his eye.

A CAT with a plastic container stuck around its neck stumbles awkwardly across the parking lot, mewing pitifully.

Gus stares at the Cat. Emotional. Takes a breath.

Gus drops to his knees, approaching the Cat with a slow, deliberate crawl to avoid startling it. He gently rubs the Cat's back.

GUS

Shhh, it's okay. It's okay...

Gus pulls out his pocketknife from his keychain and carefully begins to cut away the plastic, his hands steady and precise.

The Cat's tense body starts to relax as Gus works meticulously.

GUS (CONT'D)

Easy now. Easy. Easy...

As the plastic falls away, freeing the Cat. Gus gently scratches its chin. He starts humming softly.

GUS (CONT'D)

Hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm...

Their eyes meet. It's emotional and raw. Gus's eyes start to well up, overwhelmed by the moment's profound simplicity.

The Cat, now free, suddenly wriggles out of Gus's grip.

The Cat darts off.

Gone.

Gus remains on the ground, the night feeling heavy and still as he sits there, lost in thought.

INT. MOTEL - NIGHT

Gus walks in with the ice, dazed.

MAXINE
What's wrong?

GUS
I just saved a Cat.

MAXINE
Wh-- what?

GUS
See... this Cat had its head
stuck...

Gus starts frantically searching around the room for something - anything!

MAXINE
Gus, I-- I don't understand.

Gus opens drawers, rifles through his bag, looks at every surface.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Gus - What are you doing?

GUS
I need something to get the Cat to
come back.

MAXINE
Don't be ridiculous.

GUS
I can't just leave it behind.

Gus searches the mini-fridge and pulls out a box of crackers.

MAXINE
Crackers? Seriously?

GUS
Yeah, it'll work.

Gus shakes the crackers, determined.

GUS (CONT'D)
Come with me.

MAXINE
No.

GUS
Please...

MAXINE

You're gonna freeze out there for a stray?

GUS

I just have to make sure it's okay, all right?

MAXINE

What are you going to do with the Cat when you find it?

Gus stops, realizing he didn't think this through.

GUS

I... we'll keep it.

MAXINE

No, no! I don't want a Cat.

GUS

But I want it. I'm not going to fuck this up.

MAXINE

What's that supposed to mean?

GUS

I don't want my life going to the trash can.

MAXINE

Is that how you feel?

GUS

I just want to keep the Cat, Maxine.

MAXINE

What does the Cat have to do with any of this? With us?

Gus rubs his head.

GUS

Because... because life matters more than money, Max. You can always make more money, but that-- that Cat, it's alive. It's real, in this moment. You can't replace that.

MAXINE

What are you saying?

GUS

We're greedy bastards. We want, we need. We want, we need... when we already have so much.

MAXINE

We have nothing!

Gus looks at her as if she's a stranger – Who is this woman I used to know?

GUS

Who are you?

MAXINE

What do you mean?

GUS

You-- you don't want to have a baby with me. Now you won't even let me keep the Cat, Max. Why won't you let me have this? It's all I'm asking. I'm letting you do whatever you want with the money.

MAXINE

"Letting me?" I-- I thought we wanted this together.

GUS

I-- I don't care. I don't want the money.

MAXINE

So why did you buy those scratch-offs, huh? Huh?

GUS

For you. I bought them for you, Max. So you would be happy. But you're still not happy. It's not enough because you're torn... a ripped page.

MAXINE

Asshole. Really? A writing metaphor? How trite. Is that all you've got?

GUS

I have nothing left.

MAXINE

So, then, what do we do?

GUS

I don't know. I just don't want to fight anymore. I'm exhausted, tense, and we've been on the road all day arguing. I just want to find the Cat.

Maxine glares at him.

MAXINE

Wow, you care more about that stray than us...

Before Maxine can continue, Gus rushes back out into the cold with the crackers. She covers her face, defeated.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Gus steps outside, clutching the box of crackers. The snow swirls around him as he scans the area, calling out softly.

GUS

Cat? Cat?

He turns around.

GUS (CONT'D)

Where are you, Cat...?

Gus kneels down, shaking the box slightly to make a noise, hoping to lure the Cat out.

Slowly, the Cat appears from behind a snowbank.

Its wide eyes glint in the darkness.

Gus's face lights up as he spots the Cat. His voice filled with warmth.

GUS (CONT'D)

Oh, Cat... there you are... I knew you'd come back...

As the Cat cautiously approaches, Gus eyes well up - this moment feels cathartic, as if he's reconnecting with a part of himself he lost.

GUS (CONT'D)

It's okay... it's okay, Cat... It's going to be okay...

Gus feeds the Cat a cracker. It feels like they're already long-time friends.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - DAWN

The sun slowly rises, casting a warm glow over the snow-covered ground.

INT. CAR - DAWN

Gus is asleep with the Cat in his arms.

The Cat stirs, gently nudging Gus's face with its paw, as if to wake him.

Gus opens his eyes, he smiles as he locks eyes with the Cat.

GUS
Hungry, huh?

EXT. DELI - MORNING

Gus pours milk into his coffee, then fills a small bowl to feed the Cat.

EXT. MOTEL - MORNING

The morning sun casts harsh light on the rundown motel. Gus stands outside with the Cat in his arms, his posture tense.

INT. MOTEL - MORNING

Gus steps inside, the Cat nestled in his arms. Maxine sits on the bed.

MAXINE
It's that bad?

GUS
Yeah.

Gus puts the Cat on the bed.

GUS (CONT'D)
Is there a world where we... uh, is it possible we could, you know, actually talk? Like, about things... in a normal way?

MAXINE
You wanna talk to each other in a "normal way?"

GUS

Right.

MAXINE

So, you want to talk about the bad
shit? You think you can handle it
without running off, Gus?

Maxine stares at him.

GUS

Yeah.

Maxine pulls out the champagne bottle they packed.

MAXINE

Okay. I'm up for a champagne
crucible.

She pops the bottle, fills two cups, and hands one to him.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Judgment day... Who's getting hung?

GUS

Cheers.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

Cheers.

They both down it - liquid courage.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

I actually do have to say one
thing... I'm impressed.

GUS

Because I haven't fled.

MAXINE

Bingo.

Heavy pause.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

I can't lean on you anymore.

GUS

Have you ever?

MAXINE

I can't lean on something that
isn't solid.

This hurts.

GUS

In the end you never trusted me
enough to know I would've done
anything for us.

MAXINE

But you never did anything.

Gus has entered his "fuck around and find out" arc.

GUS

Fuck you!

Maxine looks stunned.

GUS (CONT'D)

Grossed out?

MAXINE

Disgusted.

GUS

What's the point?

MAXINE

What are you saying, Gus?

GUS

We're tilting at windmills.

MAXINE

I don't even know what to say to
that.

They lock eyes.

GUS

You tried to break me, but you
failed. I won't be suckered by you
anymore!

Gus screams. Maxine has never seen him like this. She stands frozen, almost in shock, unable to move.

INT. MOTEL - LATER

Maxine and Gus sit on the bed in silence. After a long moment:

MAXINE

We've hit a squall.

GUS
We literally got stuck in a
snowstorm.

MAXINE
We sure did crash.

They both laugh, the tension slowly starts to dissipate.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
And?

GUS
We'll keep fighting. We'll keep
getting stuck.

Gus stands and starts packing his bag.

MAXINE
I just keep thinking about the
things we haven't said yet.

She takes a step closer, searching his eyes.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
Socks off...?

Gus hesitates, then nods.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I sabotage... maybe I'm just too
selfish. Not built for love, or for
anyone...

She sighs.

MAXINE (CONT'D)
I can't stand being alone, but I
stay distant.

GUS
I'm afraid I'll always be... stuck.
Trapped. That I don't have what it
takes to move... forward.

A moment. She hesitates, then touches his hand.

MAXINE
But Gus, you are moving forward.

Gus gives her a tender look.

GUS
We're both moving.

A heavy, long cathartic silence hangs between them.

MAXINE

What would it take for you to
change your mind?

Gus pauses, thinking.

GUS

Nothing. I'm not happy. Are you
happy?

Maxine shakes her head.

GUS (CONT'D)

We keep going around in circles.

MAXINE

Maybe we just need a break.

GUS

We can't keep doing this. We've
done everything except draw blood.

Maxine looks devastated.

MAXINE

Deal's off. I don't like this--
I don't really think I can
do this. I feel sick.

GUS

I can't be here anymore.

MAXINE

Life gets hard, not easy...

She locks eyes with him.

MAXINE (CONT'D)

We're complicated, August. We're
unconventional.

GUS

We're toxic, Maxine.

MAXINE

We're not perfect.

GUS

We're strangers.

Painful pause.

MAXINE
I don't know you anymore.

GUS
I don't either.

MAXINE
Maybe we've just changed.

GUS
We want different things.

MAXINE
Do you still love me?

Gus pauses.

GUS
Love takes a lot of work.

MAXINE
We weren't careful.

GUS
We let it slip away.

Reflective pause.

MAXINE
It all feels so weird.

GUS
We feel weird.

They lock eyes.

GUS (CONT'D)
Time to let go.

MAXINE
How do we do it?

GUS
Actually it's pretty simple.

Maxine's eyes well up. Gus wipes her tear.

GUS (CONT'D)
You know, this is really all
very, very good. Imagine we had
kids.

MAXINE

I'd have turned out like Medea.
Riding off in a chariot...

GUS

That would have been really
traumatic.

They share a quiet laugh.

Gus looks away, his conviction palpable.

MAXINE

You, um... wow. Really leaving,
huh?

GUS

Yeah.

MAXINE

And me? What will become of me?

GUS

You're a force. You could take on
an army all by yourself.

MAXINE

I'm no winner, Gus.

Gus smiles.

GUS

You're a born winner, Max.

Maxine smiles back. Then:

MAXINE

The money?

GUS

It's yours.

MAXINE

No!

GUS

It's yours.

MAXINE

What will you do?

Gus looks at the Cat.

GUS
I'll be okay.

A heartbreaking silence.

MAXINE
I'm so sorry.

GUS
I'm sorry too.

A moment.

GUS (CONT'D)
I, um... I have to go.

Gus picks up the Cat and looks at Maxine one last time. Her expression is hard to read, somewhat wistful.

Gus walks away. Maxine remains still.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

Gus stands with the Cat in his arms, looking ahead, a sense of freedom and peace on his face.

FADE OUT.