

WHEN WHISPERS TURN  
TO SCREAMS

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BLACK SCREEN

A deep, mature woman's voice; the CLATTER of a typewriter in the BG.

WOMAN (V.O.)

It's been already two years, a long time, but still not enough to remember and understand why we decided to end it all.

(beat)

If Henry was alive, I think he would be blaming the politicians. A vague memory tells me that he hated them. Yes, politicians were probably the main culprits for the disaster.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

FADE IN:

A hand holding a paintbrush retouches a canvas painted in blue and gray tones.

WOMAN (V.O.)

But that's not important anymore. The only important thing now is that little girl..

(beat)

She shows up every night for some days now. I haven't dared to look at her face since the first time.

It's a cloudy day. Small waves break gently against a rocky shoreline as some seagulls play above the water.

SUPER: SOMEWHERE ON THE EAST COAST.

WOMAN (V.O.)

Her facial features were horribly disfigured, as if burned. I could scarcely distinguish her eyes, but I could feel them. There was hatred in them, a deep and terrible hatred.

Next to the rocky shore, a middle aged woman with straw-colored hair tied up in a bun and tired look paints a picture on an easel. It is KAREN, 60.

Skillfully, Karen paints a calm, gray sea on which an old sailboat is aground, fifty yards from the shore.

KAREN (V.O.)

I think she wants something from me, and that's why she haunts me restlessly every midnight. There is no physical way to run away from her; wherever I go, she chases me. My only option is to take refuge in my own inner, my unconsciousness, like an ostrich hiding its head in the sand.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

A living room shrouded in darkness. The only light comes from an old Super 8 projector showing a silent family film on a projection screen.

Curled up and blanketed on a couch, Karen watches the film as she sips a cappuccino coffee.

KAREN (V.O.)

Fear is the main reason why I haven't been able to look her in the eye again, but not the only one. I also feel sorry for her. Although she doesn't belong to this world anymore, she seems to be suffering in a terrible way. A haunted soul looking for answers that I can't give.

PROJECTION SCREEN - A tall and handsome man, YOUNG HENRY, 40, holds a LITTLE GIRL, 5, in his arms while kissing her cheek. They both smile at the camera.

KAREN (V.O.)

I had a little daughter, but I barely remember her. I'd give the rest of my life just to remember her name. Something tells me she also died with much suffering.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Night falls on the coast. Fifty yards away from the shore stands a two-story mansion built with white cobblestone and a gray tiled roof. A narrow path coming from the main door leads to the natural breakwater.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The living room again, well-lit now. It's a spacious and cozy room decorated in a classical style.

Seated at a desk in a corner of the living room, Karen types on an old typewriter.

KAREN (V.O.)

Besides this mysterious night visitor, I haven't seen anyone for these two years. I'm afraid at the thought of being the only human alive on Earth. But I'm even more afraid to wonder the reason. Why was I the chosen one to survive?

Karen finishes typing, pulls the typed sheet out of the typewriter and places it face down on a pile. Then she looks at a digital clock on the desk.

The clock shows 23:50.

Karen stands up, turns over the pile of sheets and leaves.

The top sheet of the pile, a title page that reads: "MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR".

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM/HALL - NIGHT

It's a medium sized bedroom also decorated in a classical style. Karen, in her nightgown, is seated on the edge of a double bed with a pill bottle in her hands. She takes out four pills from the bottle, reaches for a glass of water from a nightstand and swallows the pills.

A GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the upper floor.

Karen places the glass back on the nightstand and stands up.

INT. HALL - NIGHT

Karen steps into a hall decorated with seascape paintings and vases full of flowers.

The ghostly moan again. It has a childlike pitch.

Karen approaches the far end of the hall, where a wood staircase leads to the upper floor. She stops at the stairs and looks up.

The moan again, now with slow, heavy FOOTSTEPS.

Karen keeps her gaze on the pitch-dark top of the stairs and nervously grabs the handrail. Then she places her foot on the first step...

Seconds go by in silence. Then more moans and footsteps, both coming closer.

After some hesitating, Karen lowers her gaze and sighs. Then she lets go of the handrail, removes her foot from the stairs and steps back into her bedroom.

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen opens the nightstand's drawer and pulls out a chloroform bottle and a handkerchief.

Moans and footsteps keeps coming closer, now coming down the hall stairs.

Karen pours some chloroform onto the handkerchief and lies down on the bed. Then she covers her mouth and nose with the soaked handkerchief and inhales deeply...

The footsteps approach the bedroom's door, which slowly starts starts opening...

Karen's eyelids start to weaken. A few instants later, she falls asleep.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

HENRY, 70, the same man of the Super 8 family film but now older, nervously removes some five-gallon water bottles from the trunk of a white car.

HENRY

I just heard it on the radio,  
they're ready to retaliate. It  
could happen at any time.

Henry hands us the water bottles.

HENRY

Take them to the basement, lock the door and don't open it until I'm back, okay? We need some more water.

Henry closes the trunk, gets back in the car and speeds away.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. MANSION BASEMENT - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

After locking a reinforced door, Karen picks up the bottles and walk down some stairs leading to a basement filled with water bottles, canned food and an electric generator.

She places the bottles on a long iron table and turns to look up at the closed door, her breathing is restless.

A distant, low BUZZING sound starts approaching. While it comes closer and louder, Karen's breathing quickens...

A thunderous ROAR explodes as a bright, dazzling light blinds everything.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Karen wakes up suddenly in her bed, panting and drenched in sweat. After sitting up and calming herself down, she turns to the window.

Early morning sunlight rays come into the room, landing on her face. She sighs, relieved.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

Carrying a box of watercolors and paintbrushes, Karen walks through the path that leads to the rocky shore.

Once there, she places the art tools on a wooden stool and removes the cloth covering the seascape painting...

The painting has been torn to shreds, as if a sharp-nailed hand had ripped the canvas from top to bottom.

Karen watches it, astonished.

KAREN

Damn bitch...

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY (MINUTES LATER)

Carrying a new canvas under her arm, Karen comes back to the rocky shore.

After removing the ripped canvas from the easel, Karen places the new one and sits on the stool. Then she opens the box of watercolors and starts painting the seascape again.

EXT. CHAPEL - DAY

It's a small, rustic chapel with leaded glass windows

INT. CHAPEL - DAY

A cockroach runs along the central aisle of the chapel. Once it reaches the first row of benches, it stops next to a woman on her knees.

It's Karen, who prays in a low voice. When she finishes, she crosses herself, stands up and walks up a holy water font. She watches it.

Although the water has a cloudy appearance, Karen dips her fingers into it and crosses herself again. Then she fills a small bottle with holy water and slips it into her cardigan pocket.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Seated at the typewriter desk, Karen empties the bottle into a holy water vessel and stirs the cloudy water with an aspergillum.

Holding the vessel, she stands up and starts sprinkling the living room with blessed water. As she does, she prays in a low voice.

KAREN

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name...

EXT. MANSION SURROUNDINGS - DAY

Karen sprinkles holy water while she walks along the outer wall of the mansion and keeps praying.

KAREN  
Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,  
Hail our life, our sweetness and..

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Karen sprinkles her entire bedroom with holy water as she keeps praying.

KAREN  
Blessed are you among women, and  
blessed is the fruit of your  
womb, Jesus.

INT. HALL - DAY

Karen keeps sprinkling holy water as she slowly climbs the hall stairs leading to the upper floor.

KAREN  
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray  
for us sinners, now, and at the  
hour of our death..

Karen stops in the middle of the stairs and puts down the sprinkler. Then she raises her eyes toward the top of the staircase and hesitates, scared.

KAREN  
Amen.

Karen lowers her gaze and drops the aspergillum into the holy water vessel. Finally, she turns around and leaves downstairs.

EXT. SUPERMARKET FAÇADE - DAY

A small car stops in front of the dusty façade of a supermarket.

Karen gets out of the car, covers her face with a medical mask and enters the supermarket.

INT. SUPERMARKET - CONTROL ROOM - DAY

Karen's hand inserts a compact disc into a CD player.

Karen, her nose and mouth covered by the mask, presses the 'play' button on the CD player and leaves.

INT. SUPERMARKET - AISLE 1 - DAY

Karen walks through an aisle with shelves holding canned and bottled food as Bill Withers' SONG "Lovely day" fills the supermarket.

SONG

"When I wake up in the morning,  
love, and the sunlight hurts my  
eyes..."

Karen picks up those products whose expiration dates have not passed and places them into a shopping cart.

INT. SUPERMARKET - AISLE 2 - DAY

Karen walks through another aisle, this one filled with imperishable food.

SONG

"...and something without warning,  
love, bears heavy on my mind. Then  
I look at you, and the world's  
alright with me..."

Karen grabs some packages of rice and beans from the shelves and puts them into the shopping cart.

INT. SUPERMARKET - FISH SHOP - DAY

Karen, with her face mask down, coughs a couple of times and pulls her mask up again. Then she walks out of the frame while pushing the shopping cart.

SONG

"Just one look at you. And I know  
it's gonna be..."

A small fish counter filled with rotten fish is revealed in the BG.

INT. SUPERMARKET - AISLE 3 - DAY

Karen walks through an aisle with household cleaning products. She pushes her shopping cart while picking up scourers, sponges, dusters...

SONG

"A lovely day... A lovely day..."

INT. SUPERMARKET - AISLE 4 - DAY

Karen walks through a personal care aisle while picking up toothpastes, soaps and smelling some colognes.

SONG

When the day that lies ahead of-

The Muzak stops playing. Silence falls.

Karen, confused, puts back to its shelf the cologne she was smelling and turns back to the control room.

A DULL THUD, not far from her. She startles.

INT. SUPERMARKET - AISLE 5 - DAY

Karen carefully turns the corner into an aisle filled with candy.

At the opposite end of the aisle, she notices a HUMAN FIGURE standing still with his back to her. A man?

Karen, shocked, stares at him. Then she pulls down her face mask.

KAREN

(shyly)

He... Hello?

The human figure doesn't react.

Cautiously, she starts walking down the aisle, her eyes filled with hope.

KAREN

(louder)

Hello?

There's no answer. Karen keeps walking forward, faster now.

KAREN

Hey!

No response. Karen, almost running, reaches the end of aisle.

KAREN

(jubilant)

Thanks God! You can't imagine how long I've been looking for-

It's just a mannequin. Dressed as an elegant, mustachioed chef, it advertises a brand of sausage.

Karen gapes at the cook dummy, almost embarrassed. Then she lowers her gaze to look at the tray the mannequin is holding.

A stack of sausages to taste... rotten and crawling with worms.

Karen steps back, disgusted. Then she retches a couple of times and slightly vomits. Once recovered, she pulls her mask up again and leaves.

The Muzak resumes.

SONG

"A lovely day... A lovely day..."

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Living room in darkness. Karen watches another family film while sipping from another cappuccino coffee.

PROJECTION SCREEN - A nice, dyed blonde woman, YOUNG KAREN, 30, funnily poses on a street of New York while smiling at the camera.

KAREN (V.O.)

The effects of radioactivity, or whatever God wants it to be, didn't affect me as much as the others, but day after day they are also weakening me.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

A small ulcer on Karen's chin; her thin fingers apply a medical ointment on it.

It's a medium sized bathroom decorated in a classical style. Standing at the mirror, Karen smears the medical cream on her face and arms.

KAREN (V.O.)

I truly don't think I'll survive much longer. Health deterioration and loneliness will end up fully overcoming my survival instinct. It's unavoidable.

She starts brushing her hair. A clump of hair falls out.

KAREN (V.O.)

I guess they used some kind of new and sophisticated weapons of mass destruction. Only humans and some mammals perished; the rest of the species, nature, cities, houses... all of that remained intact.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Seated at the desk in the corner, Karen types on her old typewriter.

KAREN (V.O.)

The ultimate aim of our enemies, if they weren't also wiped off the map, could be to move here to repopulate this land, to expand their empire on the ashes of ours. Nothing new.

Karen watches the digital clock on the desk. It shows 23:50. She pulls the typed sheet out of the typewriter and places it on the pile. Then she locks the pile in a desk's drawer.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (MINUTES LATER)

Seated on a couch, Karen takes out four pills from her bottle, reaches for a glass of water from a coffee table and swallows the pills.

The digital clock, now on the coffee table, shows 00:00.

A GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the upper floor. Then slow and heavy FOOTSTEPS.

Karen slowly places the glass back on the table and stays alert.

Moans and footsteps come closer, now coming down the hall stairs.

Karen grabs a handkerchief and a chloroform bottle from the coffee table.

Moans and footsteps keep coming closer. She watches the little girl through the living room's ajar door...

Standing barefoot with her back to Karen, the little girl wears a white nightgown and is bald, her scalp burned.

Karen's lips tremble, as if she wanted to speak to the girl but she hadn't the courage to do it.

As the little girl approaches the bedroom, Karen pours some chloroform onto the handkerchief and lies down on the couch. Then she inhales the soaked handkerchief...

The girl enters Karen's bedroom. Karen falls asleep.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. MANSION BASEMENT - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

Karen slowly opens her eyes and stands up, staggering. Then she turns to the stairs and starts climbing them.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - EXT. PATH - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

Karen walks down a sand path near her house. There's no one around. Her step is quick, so is her breathing.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - EXT. ROAD - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

Karen reaches an empty road. Henry's white car is stopped in the middle of it. Some braking marks on the pavement indicate that the car abruptly stopped.

She runs up to the car and peers into it. Then she jumps back while suppressing her shout.

Henry is at the wheel, motionless, his body fuming as if burned from inside out.

Karen falls to her knees and bursts into tears.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - EXT. SMALL TOWN STREET - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

Karen nervously runs through a narrow street. She sees something on the ground and stops. It's a dog, dead.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

KAREN'S P.O.V.

Karen reaches a playground where a couple of CHILDREN are lying face down on the ground.

She approaches the children and grabs one of them by the shoulder, forcing him to turn around..

He's dead, a stream of smoke coming out of his mouth.

Karen steps back while screaming in horror.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - EXT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Karen wakes up suddenly in her bed, panting and drenched in sweat. After sitting up, she tries to calm herself..

A puff of smoke comes from under the sheets as something moves under them. Slowly, Karen lifts up the sheets..

KAREN'S P.O.V.

The dead children quickly crawl towards her.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Karen wakes up screaming in the couch, the place where she fell asleep the night before.

After calming down, she looks around the room. There's nobody. Everything seems in place.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

Karen walks through the path leading to the rocky shore where stands the seascape painting, now covered with a blanket tied with chains around the easel. She unlocks the chains from the easel, removes the blanket covering the painting and watches it..

The painting is intact. Karen smiles proudly and shifts her gaze to the sea..

Her smile freezes. Then her expression turns to seriousness..

The aground sailboat is now almost completely sunk, only the top of its sail is visible.

Karen looks back at the painting, where the sailboat is totally visible.

She clenches her teeth and starts to get red in the face with anger. Then she removes the canvas from the easel and throws it against the rocks.

She does the same with the easel, two of its legs break. Finally, she leaves.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Seated on a couch, Karen looks through a photo album while sipping from another cappuccino coffee.

PHOTOS - Color photographs of a young and elegant Henry posing while smoking a big cigar, dining at an Italian restaurant, firing a gun at a shooting range, etc.

Karen gently runs a finger over the photos while staring at them as if they had a secret to tell. Then she turns a few pages in the photo album.

PHOTOS - Color photographs of the same little girl in the Super 8 family film, Karen's daughter, celebrating her sixth birthday, First Holy Communion, etc.

Karen sadly smiles while looking at the photographs. Then she flips back and forth the photo album's pages, as if searching for something.

KAREN

What's wrong with you? Were you never a baby?

She returns to the first page of the photo album.

KAREN

Were you born so ugly that we didn't take any picture of you?

Karen stops flipping pages and looks at a photograph of the little girl posing with a serious expression.

KAREN

Hey, don't look at me like that, I was just kidding.

(smiling)

Pretty sure you were the most beautiful baby in the world.

Karen kisses the photo.

INT. HALL - DAY

Holding the vessel and the aspergillum, Karen nervously stands in the middle of the stairs. She raises her eyes toward the top of the staircase.

After some hesitation, she starts sprinkling holy water as she climbs the stairs leading to the upper floor.

KAREN

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name...

INT. HALLWAY/SECOND-FLOOR BEDROOM - DAY

Karen finishes sprinkling a narrow hallway with blessed water and enters a sober bedroom comprising a bed, a big closet and a dressing table with mirror.

KAREN

Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,  
Hail our life, our sweetness...

She sprinkles with holy water every corner of the bedroom as she keeps praying in a low voice.

Once she reaches a large window that occupies part of the far wall, she peers out and stares at the sunken sailboat in the distance. She clicks her tongue...

A THUD coming from the opposite wall. She spins around.

One of the closet's closed doors starts shaking as if someone was trying to open it from inside.

Karen stares at the door in fear. Then, with her back against the wall, she inches her way to the bedroom's entrance.

The closet's door keeps violently shaking...

Terrified, Karen keeps slowly approaching the bedroom's door; her unsteady breathing accompanies each step she takes...

Unable to stand the tension any longer, Karen stops and pulls out the chloroform bottle and a handkerchief from her cardigan pocket. Then she pours chloroform onto the handkerchief.

The door stops shaking. Then it slowly opens with an eerie CREAKING SOUND. It remains ajar.

Karen nervously stares at the dark gap of the closet's ajar door. The bottle and a handkerchief tremble in her hands...

The doors fly open. A seagull flies out from the closet while loudly SQUAWKING.

Karen screams, scared. The seagull flies away through the open window.

After recovering from the scare, Karen remains still for a few seconds. Then she falls to her knees and bursts into tears.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Karen is sitting at her desk with her face still teary. The old typewriter has been replaced by a couple of two photo portraits of Henry and her daughter. But there's something else on the desk: her sleeping pill bottle, a glass of water and a gun.

She stares at the gun in silence. Then she keeps it in a drawer, opens the bottle and pours a dozen pills on the desk.

She grabs the photo portraits and kisses them. Then she looks down at the pills, hesitating.

Karen takes four sleeping pills, reaches for the glass of water and swallows them.

She takes another four pills and swallows them. Then she grabs the last four sleeping pills and...

Strange NOISES coming from outside the house. It sounds like someone banging on wood.

Startled, Karen springs to her feet. Then she puts back the glass and the pills on the desk.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Karen gets out the house and scans the darkness around her...

There's someone next to the narrow path leading to the natural breakwater.

It's a thin, YOUNG WOMAN, 30, wearing a black French beret. She's trying to repair the easel by tying its broken legs with ropes.

Shocked, Karen watches her in silence. Then she takes a step forward.

KAREN  
(shyly)  
He... Hello?

The young woman, crouched down and with her back to her, doesn't react. Karen starts walking down the path.

KAREN  
Hello...

The young woman doesn't answer. Karen keeps getting closer...

The sleeping pills start to take effect. She soon begins to feel dizzy. Making a supreme effort, she tries to talk again.

KAREN  
Hello...

The young woman stops her task and stands up. Then she glances around, as if trying to find who is talking to her.

KAREN  
(weak)  
Here...

Karen collapses to the ground.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

A small, sober room with peeled walls and no windows comprising a few chairs, a table and a large wall mirror. The only light comes from a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Seated at the table, a beefy man with strong hands and a black beard, BISON, 40, skims through a newspaper.

Harrowing SCREAMS break the silence. They seem to come from a nearby room.

Karen shifts her gaze to a closed door in the opposite corner of the room. More screams are heard.

She turns her gaze then to Bison, who impassively keeps reading the newspaper.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen wakes up in her bedroom. Someone carried her to the bed. After sitting up, she looks at an analog clock on the nightstand.

The clock shows three o'clock in the morning.

Karen jumps out of the bed and looks around in fear. Then she nervously starts rummaging her cardigan pockets, but she doesn't find what she's searching for.

INT. HALL/LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Karen cautiously walks over to the door to the living room, it's ajar and the light is on. She peeks out.

The chloroform bottle and the sleeping pills stand on the coffee table at the far wall of the living room.

Karen takes a breath and goes inside. Fearing the possible presence of the little girl, she silently crosses the living room.

When she arrives at the coffee table, she reaches for the pills...

A hand tightly grabs Karen by her wrist. She turns while suppressing her shout.

It's a smiling brunette woman with intensely blue eyes and soft features. She wears a black French beret and some small ulcers partially cover her face. It's the young woman who was repairing the easel, GINA, 30.

GINA

Hello.

Karen gapes at her, wide-eyed.

INT. HALL - NIGHT

Standing at the hall stairs, Karen keeps her eyes on the top of them while sipping from a cappuccino coffee.

KAREN

She comes down every night at the same time, twelve o'clock; step by step, slowly, moaning like a lost soul.

Next to her, Gina smells another cappuccino coffee that stands on the flat pilaster of the stairs.

GINA

She could be another survivor.  
Have you tried talking to her?

KAREN

Yeah, the first time I saw her,  
but she didn't answer. She just  
looked at me with her disfigured  
face while trying to grab me. She  
chased me for hours. No matter  
how much I ran away, she always  
caught me up. It was as if she  
was able to teleport. She only  
left at dawn.

GINA

Well, yes, she certainly doesn't  
seem very open to dialogue.

KAREN

She came back the next night, and  
this time she did manage to grab  
me. She scratched my arm. Trying  
to escape, I tripped and hit my  
head. I lost consciousness. When  
I came to, it was already dawn  
and I was alone. She had gone. I  
figured that, for some reason,  
she couldn't hurt me if I wasn't  
conscious. And that's when I came  
up with the idea of the sleeping  
pills and the chloroform.

Gina slurps a teaspoonful of coffee while Karen climbs  
down a few steps.

KAREN

Maybe something terrible happened  
in this house many years ago. You  
know, some kind of tragedy, and  
maybe-

GINA

-Maybe you should look for a more  
logical explanation first.

KAREN

She's not of this world, of that  
I'm sure. I don't know who she  
is, or where she comes from, or  
what she wants, but she's not  
like us at all.

Gina slightly stirs the cappuccino coffee with the teaspoon.

GINA

Whoever she is, she obviously has taken this night off. Perhaps my presence here-

KAREN

(looking at the coffee)

-No, you're ruining it.

GINA

(surprised)

What? Are you serious?

Karen nods, somewhat confused.

GINA

Oh, well, I guess then you'll want me to go away and leave you alone with that lovely girl...

Gina makes a move to leave, but Karen holds her back while laughing.

KAREN

I meant the cappuccino coffee, not you.

GINA

Oh, the coffee...

KAREN

Don't stir, don't touch the foam, don't add sugar... Just drink it.

They briefly laugh.

GINA

Sorry, I haven't drunk it in a long time. I've lost practice.

KAREN

Did you drink cappuccino?

GINA

Yeah, I loved it. Family customs, my grandparents were Italian.

KAREN

Great.

Karen downs her coffee in one gulp. Then she smiles, a foam mustache on her upper lip.

KAREN

Delicious.

They laugh. Karen wipes the foam from her mouth.

KAREN

What did you say your name is?

GINA

I didn't. You haven't asked my name yet.

KAREN

Oh, sorry, I guess I wanted to make sure you were a good girl first.

GINA

Gina. Gina Ricci.

KAREN

Karen. Karen Lombardi.

They shake their hands while smiling.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

Sunny morning. Karen, in her dressing gown and sipping from another cappuccino coffee, approaches the rocky shore, where Gina finishes repairing the easel.

KAREN

Wouldn't it be easier to just get a new one?

(smiling)

There are some great sales in stores this month.

Gina smiles back at her. Then she keeps tying with ropes the broken legs of the easel.

GINA

The easiest path is not always the best path.

KAREN

I'd say yes in this case.

Gina finishes her task and stands up. Then she wipes her hands with a rag.

GINA

My mother always said: "If you make a mistake, you have to pay the price" It's the fairest thing, and the best one for your conscience's sake too.

Gina hands the rag to Karen and places the fixed easel on the ground.

GINA

Better than new.

Gina picks up the canvas and places it back on the easel. It's completely ripped.

GINA

This is gonna be be harder to fix.

Karen steps back to observe the painting as Gina tries to flatten the canvas.

GINA

Why did you break it?

KAREN

The sailboat was no longer in the same position as in the painting. I couldn't bear it. It made me sick.

Unable to mend the canvas, Gina steps back to watch the painting too.

GINA

They say that nothing's the same as it was before. Do you think that the sailboat was the only difference between the seascape and your painting?

KAREN

The most obvious one, at least to me.

GINA

Are you sure? Look at the colors, the tones, the light... The sky and the sea are totally different now. You captured a succession of instants that will never repeat again, speaking pretentiously.

KAREN

(smiling)

An elegant way of telling me that you think it's crap.

Karen approaches the easel and removes the canvas.

GINA

No way! You're good at drawing. In fact, I think you should paint it again. But don't get hung up on the details, just try to do your best.

INT. SECOND-FLOOR BEDROOM - DAY

Gina checks the inside of the large closet while Karen stands at the door holding a couple of coffee cups.

GINA

She has to get in somewhere. Are there more rooms in this floor?

KAREN

Just a storage room and a small bathroom.

GINA

Let's take a look at them.

Gina takes a step towards the door, but Karen stands in her way and offers her one of the coffee cups.

KAREN

I already told you that she's not of this world. I don't know if she's a ghost, a demon or a damn alien, but I highly doubt she dug a tunnel to enter here.

Karen sighs in despair, places the cappuccino coffees on the dressing table and sits on the edge of the bed. Gina approaches the window and looks out at the seascape.

KAREN

What plans do you have?

GINA

(turning)

Plans?

KAREN

I'd like you stay here, at least tonight. For some reason, your presence chases that girl away.

GINA

I'm afraid that won't be possible.

KAREN

Why?

Gina turns back to the seascape.

GINA

I'm trying to find a person. I look for him at night, every night.

KAREN

Who? If you don't mind-

GINA

-It's a long story...

(beat)

My father and I had not spoken to each other for several years. The only thing I knew about him was that he had moved to this part of the coast. We were from New York.

KAREN

My husband and I too, I seem to remember.

GINA

A few months after the disaster, I decided to come. I've looking for him in small towns, villages, houses... That's what brought me here.

KAREN

Why do you think he's still alive?

GINA

Well, if my survival is due to genetics, it's very possible that he's still alive.

Karen stands up and takes a sip from her coffee.

KAREN

Why can't you look for him during the day?

GINA

He suffered from insomnia and he took long walks every night as a way to get to sleep. If he's still alive, he'll keep the habit. So, if I look for him at night, I'll have a better chance of finding him than if I search only during the day.

Karen sighs, resigned.

KAREN

Well, I guess I'll have to fend for myself then.

GINA

Why don't you try talking to her again?

KAREN

Are you serious? First, I'd have to dare to look her in the eye again.

GINA

Ask her what she wants. Maybe that way you'll solve the mystery. Also, what's your alternative? Would you rather continue sedating yourself every night for the rest of your life?

Karen lowers her gaze, hesitating.

GINA

You have to be brave.

Karen clicks her tongue. Then she downs her coffee in one gulp.

KAREN

I'll think about it.

Karen leaves the bedroom.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

An empty road. Karen and Gina stand next to a parked motorcycle.

GINA

I'll be back in a couple of days.

Gina gets on the motorcycle.

KAREN

One last thing, just a curiosity...  
Do you have any memory problems?

Gina purses her lips, puzzled. Then she shakes her head.

KAREN

I lost almost all memories prior to the day of the attack. It's as if a part of my memory has been erased. I only remember my childhood and some of the last months I spent here with my husband. It's strange.

GINA

It might something temporary, a kind of shock.

KAREN

I thought it'd be because of radioactivity, but you'd also suffer from it then...

GINA

Yeah, you're right. Anyway, don't get hung up on it. Be patient and you'll end up remembering even what you don't want to remember. Just a matter of time.

Karen nods, unconvinced. Gina flashes a broad smile and then she starts the motorcycle and drives away.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Night falls on the coast. Some lights can be seen in the lower windows of the mansion.

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM/HALL - NIGHT

Karen is seated on the edge of her bed with the pill bottle in her hands. She looks restless.

The chloroform bottle and the analog clock stand on the nightstand.

The clock shows twelve o'clock.

The GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the upper floor. Then slow and heavy FOOTSTEPS.

Karen jumps out of the bed and nervously walks toward the bedroom door.

Once in the hall, she looks up at the dark top of the stairs.

More moans and footsteps, both coming closer.

Karen opens the pill bottle while keeping her gaze on the stairs. She hesitates. Then she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, as if trying to gather courage.

Moans and footsteps keeps coming closer.

She closes the pill bottle and walks resolutely back to her bedroom.

Karen passes by an empty chair resting against the wall and keeps the pill bottle and the chloroform bottle in the nightstand's drawer. Then she turns around to walk back to the hall..

There's SOMEONE in the chair now.

A terrifying white-eyed OLD WOMAN, 80, with a pale and wrinkled face and messy gray hair.

The old woman jumps up in her chair while breathing in agony. Then viscous pink foam starts dripping from her mouth.

Startled, Karen jumps back and falls onto the bed.

Already standing, the old woman begins to convulse while throwing up more pink foam.

Karen, frightened, nervously looks around as if searching for something.

The moans and the footsteps keeps coming closer.

Karen reaches for the nightstand and pulls the chloroform and the pills from the drawer. Then she quickly crawls to the opposite side of the bed and huddles in a corner of the room.

The old woman starts lumbering towards her as she keeps convulsing; more pink foam dripping from her mouth.

Crouched in the corner, Karen tries to open the pill bottle but it slips from her hands. After picking it up, she gets to open it and swallows some pills.

The old woman keeps approaching her, step by step..

More moans and footsteps in the background.

Karen opens the chloroform bottle and pours some liquid onto her cardigan cuff. Then she inhales it.

The old woman keeps coming closer. She reaches one of her bone thin hands towards Karen, whose terrified expression begins to fade away..

Karen falls asleep.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The sober waiting room from the previous dream. Bison keeps reading the newspaper. There is no screaming anymore.

The door in the opposite corner opens. Two men enter the room, GRAY-HAIRED MAN, 50, stocky and calm; an YOUNG MAN, 25, slim and nervous.

They grab a couple of towels from a chair to dry their hands and faces.

YOUNG MAN

You see how he laughed? He was laughing his fucking ass off! I mean, has he gone crazy or what?

GRAY-HAIRED MAN

Sometimes it happens. Sometimes they laugh, other times they sing or say nonsense.

(MORE)

GRAY-HAIRED MAN (cont'd)  
 It's like a way of trying to  
 escape from reality. And a sign  
 that a good job is being done.

The gray-haired man approaches the table where Bison is reading the newspaper.

GRAY-HAIRED MAN  
 Your turn, Bison.

Bison leisurely closes the newspaper and stands up. Then he walks to the door in the corner, goes through it and closes it from the other side.

The gray-haired man drops his towel on the table and turns to look at Karen. He smiles.

GRAY-HAIRED MAN  
 Everything okay, ma'am?

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - DAY

Karen's hands nervously shake as she holds a cup of coffee.

It's a cloudy day. She is sitting on the front-porch steps of the house, her expression is panicked and confused.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - DAY

A white car travels along an empty road surrounded by lush trees and shrubs.

INT. CAR - MOVING - DAY

Karen is at the wheel, her expression is still anxious. As she nervously drives, she looks to both sides of the road as if searching for something.

EXT. FISHING VILLAGE STREET - DAY

Karen's car brakes suddenly in the middle of an empty street. She gets out of the car and looks around..

All the houses and shops are closed, making the village look dead. The wind blows strongly. There's no one in sight.

KAREN  
 Gina! Gina!

There's no answer.

KAREN

Gina! Gina!

Karen hears no response. She looks around again. Nothing.

KAREN

Gina! Gina!

The rustling of the wind is the only answer. Desperate, she falls to her knees and bitterly cries.

KAREN

Gina, please...

EXT. VILLAGE HOUSE FAÇADE - NIGHT

Night falls on the village. A small, typical house in the area stands next to a narrow road. Karen's car stops at the side of the road.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Karen is at the wheel, staring down at the dashboard of the car. The digital clock on it shows 23:40.

INT. VILLAGE HOUSE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

It's a small, dusty bedroom. Karen is sitting up in a double bed with her back against the headboard; the pill bottle and the chloroform on her lap. She seems nervous.

Right in front of the bed, the door of the room remains closed.

Karen opens the pill bottle, reaches for a glass of water and swallows some sleeping pills. Then she takes a deep breath...

The GHOSTLY MOAN coming from outside the bedroom.

Karen closes her eyes and sighs, resigned. Then she pulls out the chloroform bottle and a handkerchief from her cardigan pocket.

The moan again, coming closer...

Karen nervously looks around as she slowly opens the bottle.

The moan again, just from the other side of the door. The knob slowly starts to turn...

Karen pours some chloroform onto the handkerchief.

The doorknob keeps turning until it can't go further...

A HOARSE BREATHING SOUND. It comes from under the bed.

Karen straightens in fear

The hoarse breathing again, now louder. The bed begins to shake violently...

Karen quickly covers her mouth and nose with the soaked handkerchief and inhales deeply...

A few seconds later, she falls asleep.

The bed stops shaking. Karen's left hand falls off the side of the bed.

Karen's hand hangs languidly, the darkness under the bed in the BG...

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. WAITING ROOM/TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The same sober waiting room, but now empty. Karen stands up and approaches the closed door in the opposite corner...

A LOUD, ALMOST INSANE LAUGH erupts on the other side of the door.

After opening the door, Karen slowly climbs down some stairs into a dark basement. The only light comes from a bare bulb hanging above a long wooden table.

There's a man strapped to the table, his face sweaty and bruised. Paradoxically, he laughs convulsively. It's THE LAUGHING MAN, 45.

Coming from the back of the basement, Bison approaches the table while Karen stops in the middle of the stairs.

He takes a pair of cutting pliers from a pocket and yanks the Laughing Man's sweatpants down to his thighs.

The Laughing Man stops laughing.

Although Karen didn't get to see it clearly, Bison uses the cutting pliers on the Laughing Man's genital area.

The Laughing Man begins to howl in pain.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

A hand holding a paintbrush retouches a sailboat on a canvas, the same one that was aground days before.

KAREN (off)  
(resentful)

Not enough news for you? Not so bad, don't you think? It's only been a couple of days.

Next to the rocky shore, Karen paints the seascape again under Gina's watchful eye.

KAREN  
If you hadn't left, none of this would have happened.

GINA  
Are you blaming me for your nightmares too? I don't really think I'm that influential.

Karen stops painting and dips the brushes into thinner to clean them.

GINA  
Maybe both things are related?

KAREN  
(surprised)  
Related? What relation can there be between the ghost of an old woman who foams at the mouth and a guy who laughs out loud while being tortured?

GINA  
I don't know, that's why I'm asking you.

KAREN  
I don't think there's any relation at all.

Karen lowers her gaze and sighs. Then she raises her eyes towards Gina while holding her hands.

KAREN

(supplicant)

I can't take it anymore, Gina. I can't. If you don't help me, I'll end up going crazy.

GINA

That will never happen, Karen. Not while I'm here.

Gina gently kisses her on the temple.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

The women are sitting, face to face, on low stools. Karen applies a medical cream on Gina's face.

KAREN

Your ulcers are not like mine, they're drier. They look like burns.

GINA

Perhaps radioactivity affects us differently.

KAREN

Yeah, it's possible.

Karen stands up and washes her hands.

KAREN

Do you also suffer from hair loss? I'm losing clumps of hair daily.

Gina smiles resignedly.

KAREN

Oh, sure, how stupid of me. That's why you always wear that beret on.

Karen dries her hands and opens a medicine cabinet.

KAREN

You were lucky to meet me, I'm gonna give you something that you'll never forget.

Karen takes out a couple of ampoules from the cabinet.

KAREN

I keep these hair ampoules like gold. If it wasn't for them, I'd be as bald as an egg now.

Karen sits down next to Gina again.

KAREN  
C'mon, take off your beret.

GINA  
Don't worry, I'm fine.

KAREN  
(smiling)  
Don't be shy.

GINA  
No, it's not that, I'm just-

KAREN  
-C'mon, it'll just be a minute.

Karen reaches a hand towards Gina's head..

Gina tightly grabs Karen by her wrist while glaring at her.

GINA  
I told you no.

They stare at each other for several seconds, Karen in puzzlement. Then Gina lets go of her.

KAREN  
It's okay, it's okay..

Gina lowers her gaze in silence. Karen picks up the ampoules and opens the cabinet again.

KAREN  
(annoyed)  
So you're one of those girls  
obsessed with their looks..  
(beat)  
That's good. Maybe not the  
smartest attitude for these  
times, but it's okay.

Karen stands up, keeps the ampoules in the cabinet and leaves.

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen, sitting up in her bed with her back against the headboard, swallows a last sleeping pill with the help of a glass of water.

She hands the glass to Gina, who is seated on the edge of the bed, and looks at the clock on the nightstand. It's past twelve.

KAREN

Never fails. They fear you as much as I fear them.

They smile at each other.

KAREN

You're gonna leave again, aren't you?

GINA

I'd like to stay, but it probably wouldn't be good for you.

KAREN

Why?

GINA

I sense that my presence here is covering something up, something that you can only discover for yourself. I already told you, you have to be brave.

KAREN

I don't know, I don't see myself strong enough. I'm too scared.

GINA

You can do it, Karen. Trust me.

Karen nods, unconvinced. Gina takes her by her hand.

GINA

I want to apologize for earlier. I was a bit abrupt.

KAREN

Why did you get angry?

GINA

I don't know, maybe you were right. It's not easy to accept physical decline.

Karen yawns, already sleepy. Then she smiles.

KAREN

It's in the past.

Gina smiles back at her. Then she lets go of her hand and stands up. She heads for the door.

KAREN

Gina.

Gina turns around.

KAREN  
(weakly)  
Don't go, please...

Karen falls asleep.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

Bison drops the cutting pliers on the long table and cover with a cloth the genital area of the Laughing man, who keeps screaming.

After picking up a basin of water, Bison washes the pliers. The Laughing man stops screaming and begins to cry.

A deep, MALE VOICE emerges from the dark side of the basement.

MAN (off)  
Why did you stop laughing? C'mon,  
keep doing it. What was so funny  
a few minutes ago must still be  
so now.

The Laughing man keeps crying while Bison impassively continues washing the cutting pliers.

MAN (off)  
Oh, the pain, always the damned  
pain... Pain changes everything.

Bison finishes washing the pliers and returns to the back of the basement.

MAN (off)  
(to the Laughing  
man)  
I hope, from now on, you'll be a  
little more cooperative.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

Karen approaches the rocky shore, unlocks the chains from the easel and removes the blanket covering the painting..

There are a couple of white roses stuck to one corner of the canvas. Karen caresses them while smiling.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Living room in darkness. Karen watches another family film while sipping from another cappuccino coffee.

PROJECTION SCREEN - Karen's daughter happily runs around a playground. Young Karen enters the frame and gives the girl a cold hug.

Karen pauses the film projector just when Young Karen smiles at the camera. She stares at the screen, as if trying to find out something in her younger image.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Karen takes a shower. She rinses her soapy hair under the stream of hot water.

The shampoo runs down her forehead and into her eyes. She closes her stinging eyes and clicks her tongue.

After turning off the shower, Karen reaches for a towel and rubs her eyes. A few seconds later, she slowly opens her eyes again and blinks twice...

Karen's expression completely changes. It's like she just made a fascinating discovery.

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen is sitting on a single mattress in the corner of her bedroom. She swallows some sleeping pills with the help of water.

The empty chair stands in the opposite corner of the bedroom. Karen watches it in silence.

The GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the upper floor. Then heavy FOOTSTEPS.

Karen opens the chloroform bottle and puts it aside on the floor together with a handkerchief.

More moans and footsteps coming closer.

Karen pulls out some thick lens glasses from her cardigan pocket and puts them on. Then she shifts her gaze from side to side...

KAREN'S P.O.V.

The high prescription lenses make everything look blurry in the bedroom.

BACK TO THE SCENE

Karen takes off her glasses and stares at the empty chair.  
Moans and footsteps keeps coming closer.

She accidentally hits the bottle, some chloroform spills on the floor.

Karen looks away from the empty chair and stands up the bottle..

A HOARSE BREATHING.

Karen quickly returns her gaze to the chair.

The white-eyed Old Woman is there now. She stands up while pink foam starts dripping from her mouth.

Without wasting a second, Karen puts her thick lens glasses back on.

KAREN'S P.O.V.

Everything look blurry in the bedroom... But, surprisingly, the Old Woman approaching is perfectly clear.

BACK TO THE SCENE

Karen takes off her glasses, a look of astonishment in her face. She drops the glasses.

Moans and footsteps keeps coming closer...

The Old Woman keeps approaching...

Karen hesitates. Finally, she pours some chloroform onto the handkerchief and inhales until passing out.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

Young Karen stands in the middle of the stairs leading to the basement. Strapped to the long table, the Laughing Man keeps crying.

The deep, MALE VOICE emerges again from the darkness.

MAN (off)  
I'm running out of patience, bud.  
C'mon, don't be bullheaded, just  
give me a couple of names.

The Laughing Man doesn't answer. He closes his eyes and keeps crying.

MAN (off)  
Why do you insist on protecting them? You're here right now cause they gave us your fucking name. They betrayed you, stupid! It's your turn! You have to fuck them back!

The Laughing Man opens his crying eyes and screams in despair. The interrogator comes out then from the shadows and approaches the long table.

It's Young Henry, Karen's husband.

Young Henry places his hand on the Laughing Man's cheeks and gently massages them.

YOUNG HENRY  
Calm down, calm down, you have nothing to fear...

The Laughing Man, surprised, stops screaming.

YOUNG HENRY  
It's nothing personal against you. You're not an informant, you're a good guy. You just made a mistake, a serious one, but you can still fix it.

Young Henry brings his face closer to the Laughing Man's face and stares in his eyes.

YOUNG HENRY  
Don't make us hurt you more. We hate doing this.

Karen climbs down a few steps. A CREAKING SOUND...

Young Henry shifts his gaze towards the stairs, a look of surprise in his face.

The Laughing Man starts laughing again.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Karen wakes up suddenly in her bed, panting and drenched in sweat.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Seated on the couch and with her teary eyes, Karen looks through the photo album.

PHOTOS - The color photographs of a Young Henry posing while smoking, dining, firing a gun, etc.

KAREN  
Why, Henry? Why?

Karen runs a finger over the photos while crying.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

It's a windy morning. Some waves crash against the rocky shoreline.

Karen sadly watches a studio portrait of Henry. Then she tears it to pieces and drops them into a garbage bag that contains more photographs and some clothes.

She closes the garbage bag, throws it into the sea and watches in silence as the waves carry it away.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The living room is dark. Karen watches another the family film.

PROJECTION SCREEN - Young Henry plays with his daughter in a flowering garden.

Karen pauses the film projector just when Young Henry smiles at the camera. She stares at the screen.

KAREN  
(enraged)  
Burn in hell...

GINA (off)  
If that's the way you welcome  
your visitors, no wonder no one  
comes to see you.

Karen, surprised, quickly turns towards the door. Gina's smile disappears as soon as she notices her watery eyes. Then she moves her gaze to the screen showing an smiling Young Henry.

INT. CAR - MOVING - DAY

Karen is at the wheel, Gina occupies the front passenger seat.

GINA

What do you mean they're not just nightmares?

KAREN

I think I'm remembering through dreams. It's like my mind is spoon-feeding me my own past.

GINA

Henry had some business, right?

KAREN

I think so. But money didn't give him the right to... It's sickening.

GINA

What kind of businesses?

KAREN

I don't know exactly, I just remember flashes of things: night, bright lights, food, drinks, well-dressed people...

GINA

Lombardi is your married name, isn't it?

Karen nods, somewhat confused.

KAREN

What does it have to do with...?

GINA

Maybe we'll find out soon. Just keep driving.

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

PHOTO - A group of well-dressed men, some of them wearing double-breasted overcoats, leaving the New York Federal Courthouse.

GINA (off)

The Five Families. They ruled the organized crime business in New York for decades. But they went into decline in the nineties when many of them were arrested and imprisoned.

A dusty library. Karen is sitting at a library table with lightning, Gina is standing next to her. They both watch the photograph, printed in an old magazine.

GINA

Thousand of innocent people, cops and mobsters died during those years, and there were countless cases of torture too.

Karen slowly looks through the magazine as she carefully watches more photographs.

GINA

I can bring you more. There's a bookcase at the back-

KAREN

-No, thanks, I think I'm starting to remember more things. They're like flashes of memories...

Karen raises her eyes towards Gina.

KAREN

(confused)

It was a war, wasn't it?

GINA

Well, some called it that.

Karen looks back at the magazine.

KAREN

I remember Henry saying it was a war, a war to protect our family.

GINA

Perhaps he was somehow involved in all this. The tortured man that appears in your dreams-

KAREN

-Yeah, Henry asked him questions, he wanted information, names...

GINA

Do you remember when you left New York? Maybe it was when...

Karen closes the old magazine and rubs her face with her hands.

KAREN

I can't deal with this, Gina,  
it's just too hard for me to  
handle.

GINA

Don't worry, I understand. You'll  
have time to remember everything.

Gina leans over Karen and kisses her forehead.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

An elegant outdoor dining area decorated with shrubbery  
and withered flowers. Karen is sitting at a candlelit  
table set for two; a covered silver platter in the middle  
of the table.

Wearing a waiter's outfit and a funny fake mustache, Gina  
approaches the dining table.

GINA

Nothing better than a good feast  
to alleviate the misfortunes of  
life. Whenever you wish, ma'am.

Karen lifts the lid on the platter, revealing a juicy and  
appetizing meat with vegetables.

GINA

A feast cooked with packaged and  
canned products, of course.

KAREN

(smiling)

It looks really good.

Gina takes a seat at the dining table. Then she looks at  
her glass of wine.

GINA

Shall we make a toast?

KAREN

A toast? What do we toast to?

GINA

Let me think... A toast to the non-  
existence of ghostly girls and  
old women hell-bent on haunting  
the living.

A bitter smile twists Karen's face.

KAREN

Or what is the same, a toast to insanity.

GINA

Oh, c'mon, don't be gloomy. It's not easy to stay sane these days. Sometime I see things, too. In fact, right now I'm seeing a delicious platter of meat with vegetables.

Karen laughs. Then she begins to serve the food on the plates.

KAREN

Let's skip the toast, okay? I'm starving.

GINA

As you wish. By the way, who taught you that trick to unmask fake ghosts?

KAREN

My grandfather. He loved magic and spiritualism, and sometimes he also thought he saw ghosts. However, as he wasn't very sure of his own sanity, he used this trick: first, he rubbed his eyes until his vision was blurred, and then he looked at the presumed ghost again.

(beat)

If he saw it clear and sharp, then it was a mental image, just a hallucination; on the contrary, if he saw it as blurred as its surroundings, then it was indeed a ghost, or at least something that was physically there. I did the same thing wearing the thick lens glasses.

GINA

Did he ever see a real ghost?

KAREN

I don't think so. They were really nothing more than silly stories to scare his little granddaughter.

GINA

Well, at least you can be grateful to him.

Karen nods. Then she takes a bite of the meat.

KAREN

Mmm, this is exquisite. You didn't tell me you were such a good cook.

GINA

(smiling)

An inherited knowledge, too. You're not the only one who enjoyed a virtuous grandfather.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

Young Karen keeps standing in the middle of the stairs leading to the basement. Young Henry stares at her in surprise while the Laughing Man keeps laughing.

YOUNG HENRY

Karen!

Young Henry turns towards the dark back of the room and makes a gesture with his hand. Bison approaches the long wooden table.

YOUNG HENRY

(pointing at the Laughing Man)

Shut him up.

Young Henry walks over the stairs while Bison gag the Laughing Man with a belt.

YOUNG HENRY

(to Karen)

We're not finished yet. He acts crazy, but he knows what he's doing. Just a matter of a few minutes.

Young Henry gently takes Karen by her arm.

YOUNG HENRY  
C'mon, go back upstairs. I'll let  
you know.

Karen obeys.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

Sunny morning. Karen retouches on a canvas a new version of the sailboat painting. The sailboat looks brightness and full of color.

Karen shifts her gaze to the sea. The top of its sail is the only part visible of the sailboat. She smiles.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Standing at the mirror, Karen smears the medical ointment on her face and arms. She looks to be more lively, as if freed from a heavy burden.

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Seated on the edge of her bed, Karen looks through some magazines containing pictures and information about The Five Families.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - NIGHT

Karen watches the sunset while sipping from a cappuccino coffee.

INT. SECOND-FLOOR BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen is sitting on the edge of the bed. She nervously watches her own reflection in the mirror of the dressing table. The chloroform bottle sticks out of her cardigan pocket.

An analog clock on the dressing table shows twelve o'clock.

Karen anxiously looks around the bedroom...

The GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the adjacent hallway. Then heavy FOOTSTEPS...

Karen shifts her gaze to the bedroom's ajar door and watches the hallway through the gap...

The girl walks past the bedroom without looking inside and continues on to the stairs.

The moan and the footsteps again, now moving away.

Karen sighs, relieved. Then she looks back at the mirror...

The Laughing Man is sitting up in the bed, right behind Karen, staring at her through the mirror's reflection; deathly pale, crazy look, a strange giggle bursting from his lips.

Karen shouts in terror as she jumps off the bed.

The chloroform bottle slips from her cardigan pocket and shatters to the floor in pieces.

Seized with panic, Karen steps back as the Laughing Man follows her with his eyes; along with the bruises, his face is covered in bloody cuts.

The Laughing Man gets out of bed and stands up. Karen runs away in fear.

INT. HALLWAY/STORAGE ROOM - NIGHT

Karen runs down the hallway in the opposite direction to the stairs. She reaches a closed door and opens it. It's a small storage room with shelves full of boxes and other household goods.

After turning on a light bulb hanging from the ceiling, Karen quickly closes the door and pushes the barrel bolt to lock it...

It's stuck.

A LAUGHTER and FOOTSTEPS coming closer...

Karen pushes the bolt forward with all her strength, but it doesn't slide.

The footsteps keep approaching, the laughter becomes louder and louder...

Karen lets go of the door bolt and dries her hands on her cardigan. Then, desperately, she pushes the bolt with all her might.

The laughter and footsteps reach the other side of the door...

The bolt slides into the frame.

Karen steps away from the door and huddles in a corner of the storage room. She nervously pulls out some sleeping pills from her cardigan pocket and swallows them. Then closes her eyes and hides her head between her legs.

KAREN  
(whispering)  
They're not real, it's all just  
in your head..

A HARD KNOCKING at the door as it is shaken from the other side. More footsteps approaching...

KAREN  
There's no one there, they're not  
real..

The GHOSTLY MOAN and the old woman's HOARSE BREATHING join the laughter, forming a spectral chorus.

Karen covers her ears with both hands and grits her teeth, tears start rolling down her cheeks...

A few seconds later, the pills start to take effect. Her eyelids start to weaken. Then she collapses to the floor.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. WAITING ROOM/TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The sober waiting room, empty again. The silence is broken by SCREAMING. It comes from the basement.

Young Karen stands up, opens the closed door and slowly climbs down the stairs into the basement.

The Laughing Man, tied with ropes to a chair, cries in anguish. Just in front of him, there is a gagged old woman strapped to the long wooden table..

It's the ghostly Old Woman; her eyes, now normal in color, nervously glancing around.

Standing by the table, Bison holds an electric cattle prod connected to a battery.

Young Karen stops in the middle of the stairs and attentively watches.

Young Henry's voice emerges from the dark side of the basement.

YOUNG HENRY (off)  
I won't repeat it. Give me those names. Now!

LAUGHING MAN  
(in tears)  
I don't know anything! I've already told you a thousand times!

YOUNG HENRY (off)  
Go on, Bison.

Without any hesitation, Bison applies the cattle prod to the Old Woman's nostrils. She starts shaking on the table, her eyes rolling back.

The Laughing Man screams in despair while watching the torture scene. Once the discharge is over, the Old Woman remains motionless. She's still breathing.

LAUGHING MAN  
Leave her alone! You're killing her!

YOUNG HENRY (off)  
It's you who's killing her, idiot! Right now she must be cursing herself for giving birth to you!

The Laughing Man starts crying again.

YOUNG HENRY (off)  
C'mon, tell us what we want to know and we'll let you go. You're still in time to prevent your mom from suffering irreversible damage.

LAUGHING MAN  
I don't know anything, I swear. I'd have told you already if I knew anything else. I'd have told you days ago!

Silence reigns for a few seconds. Then Young Henry comes out then from the shadows, approaches the chair and pats the Laughing Man on the shoulder.

YOUNG HENRY

If you had studied acting, you'd have been a Hollywood star. What a pity...

Young Henry turns towards the long table.

YOUNG HENRY

Go ahead, Bison.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. STORAGE ROOM - DAY

Early morning sunlight rays come into the storage room, landing on Karen's face...

She wakes up suddenly, drenched in sweat. After sitting up, she looks around while trying to calm herself down.

EXT. DRUGSTORE FAÇADE - DAY

A old drugstore, with its somewhat deteriorated façade, stands on a corner of a street. It's a windy morning.

INT. DRUGSTORE - MEDICINE STORE - DAY

Small medicine store. Karen examines some shelves full of pharmaceuticals, balms, bandages, ointments...

Soon, she finds what she's looking for: a chloroform bottle.

After keeping it in her cardigan pocket, she continues looking for. It doesn't take long to find another bottle...

GINA (off)

"Escape has never led anyone anywhere."

Startled, Karen turns around. Gina is standing at the store door, watching her.

GINA

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

KAREN

What're you doing here? You scared me.

GINA

(approaching)

I saw you come in here. Just a fluke. It's still a small world after all.

Gina looks at the chloroform bottle that Karen is holding in her hand. Embarrassed, Karen keeps lowers her gaze and keeps the bottle in her cardigan pocket.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Karen and Gina walk along a path that opens up in a bushy forest.

KAREN

Yes, it's them, the old woman and the laughing man who laughs. They were mother and son. I remembered through my last dream how they tortured her to force him to speak. It was horrible.

GINA

And what did you do?

KAREN

I just looked. I guess I'd be terrified..

(touched)

I'm paying for it now. Something deep in my mind is making me pay the price for my cowardice.

GINA

What about the little girl? Have you dreamed of her?

Karen shakes her head. Then Gina stops and gently takes her by the arm.

GINA

You must try to communicate with them. It's the only way to solve all this. You must face your own demons.

KAREN

I can't do it. I've tried, but fear always defeat me.

GINA

It's not an option, it's a duty to yourself. You must do it.

KAREN

I can't..

GINA

You must do it, Karen!

Karen abruptly slips from Gina's grasp.

KAREN

I can't! Don't you get it? I can't do it!

GINA

Of course you can! All you have to do is stop hiding and act like a grown woman!

Karen lowers her gaze and sighs. Then she glares at Gina.

KAREN

It's so easy for you to give advice, isn't it? You don't have to go through what I go through every night, you just drop by here from time to time and pontificate on what I do or I don't do.

GINA

Listen to me..

KAREN

No, that's over. I should never have let myself be influenced by you.

GINA

Please, Karen..

KAREN

You have no idea what's going on in my life! I'm not gonna keep letting you-!

GINA  
-Stop, Karen! Calm down!

Gina grabs her again by the arm.

KAREN  
Don't touch me!

Karen gives her a hard slap across the cheek. Gina steps back, surprised.

After some hesitation, Karen runs to a nearby tree, curls up and starts crying.

Gina approaches the tree, squats down next to Karen and gently caresses her hair.

KAREN  
I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...

GINA  
Can you repeat it?

Karen turns to look at her in confusion.

GINA  
Repeat it, say it again.

KAREN  
I'm sorry... I'm so sorry.

GINA  
That's simply what you have to do: Ask them for forgiveness. This way, you'll also forgive yourself and perhaps you'll make peace with your conscience.

Karen nods, still somewhat confused. Gina stands up and leaves.

INT. SECOND-FLOOR BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen is sitting in a chair next to the empty bed. She swallows some pills and pours some chloroform onto a handkerchief. Then she wraps her hand around it.

The GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the hallway, then heavy FOOTSTEPS...

Karen shifts her gaze to the bedroom's ajar door and watches the girl walking down the hallway...

The LAUGHTER.

Startled, she looks back at the bed. The Laughing Man is there now.

Karen struggles to control her fear as the Laughing Man slowly sits up. Soon they are sitting face to face.

KAREN  
(nervous)  
I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...

Without stop laughing, the Laughing Man stares at her.

KAREN  
I was so young, I was scared... If  
I could go back in time and  
change everything.  
(beat)  
I'm sorry, I'm really sorry.

The Laughing Man's expression changes. He stops laughing and looks at her almost compassionately. Then he gently grabs her by the wrist.

Karen doesn't move, afraid, while he caresses her wrist with his thumb.

The Laughing Man smiles. It's a pleasant smile, almost an indulgent one. Karen smiles too, shyly...

But then his smile begins to turn into an odd expression, almost a mocking one. It soon turns into a hideous face...

And he starts laughing again, louder and more insane than ever. Karen gets scared.

The Laughing Man's thumb forcefully sinks into her wrist, tearing it; blood profusely flows.

Karen screams in pain as she tries to break free from his grasp, but she's unable to get it.

Finally, she covers her nose with the soaked handkerchief and inhales deeply. A few instants later, she collapses to the floor.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

From the stairs, Young Karen watches a couple of TEEN BOYS, 15, who remain tied to chairs back to back. Cloth sacks cover their heads.

A record player starts playing Bill Withers' SONG "Lovely day".

The Young Man and the Gray-haired Man approach the boys while lacing up some boxing gloves. Without saying a word, they begin to punch them on the head.

An instant later, Young Henry comes out from the shadows and impassively watches the beating.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The waiting room, empty again. The door in the corner opens. Young Henry, tired and sweaty, enters the room.

After approaching the large wall mirror, he takes off his undershirt and uses it to wipe his sweat.

YOUNG HENRY

Just a couple of kids, street niggas. They did small jobs for other families, nothing of too importance. But we caught them yesterday in our territory. It's suspicious.

(beat)

Maybe we can get some information out of them.

Young Henry grabs a white shirt from a chair and puts it on while looking at himself in the mirror.

The silence is broken by loud SCREAMS coming from the basement.

YOUNG HENRY

Yeah, it's always possible to get some information.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. SECOND-FLOOR BEDROOM - DAY

The morning light enters the bedroom. Karen, lying on the floor, wakes up. She quickly glances at her ripped wrist...

All trace of the deep wound has disappeared.

INT. KAREN'S BEDROOM/HALL/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Karen, drowsily, goes into her bedroom, lies down on the bed and pulls the blanket over her. In a few seconds, she falls asleep again...

FOOTSTEPS coming from the hall. They begin to approach, slowly and furtively...

KAREN  
(half opening  
her eyes)  
I'm sleeping, Gina... Could you  
come a little later?

Someone vigorously snatches the blanket, uncovering her completely. Karen sits up, startled.

KAREN  
What...?

Two middle-aged men stand at the foot of the bed, their eyes fixed on her: ASSAILANT 1, 50, bald and plump; and ASSAILANT 2, 40, red-haired and wiry.

They wear ragged clothes and carry hunting knives; their arms and faces covered with oozing sores.

ASSAILANT 1  
(to Karen)  
C'mon, stand up!

Karen, shocked, obeys while the Assailants watch her with disturbing intensity.

ASSAILANT 1  
Come closer, let us have a good  
look at you.

Karen obeys again.

ASSAILANT 1  
(to Assailant 2)  
What do you think?

ASSAILANT 2  
Drop-dead gorgeous.

ASSAILANT 1

(to Karen,  
smiling)

Have you heard? You're lucky, it seems that he likes you.

ASSAILANT 2

Hey, baby, why don't you come with us to a love nest that we know? You're gonna love it.

Unexpectedly, Karen's frightened expression turns to a defiant one.

KAREN

I'm not gonna go anywhere with you. You know why? 'Cause you don't exist, you're not really here, so you can't force me to do anything.

The assailants watch her in confusion. Then Assailant 1 slaps her with the back of his hand, making her fall on the bed.

ASSAILANT 1

Playing dumb won't help you, bitch. We don't care if you're totally nuts.

ASSAILANT 2

(smiling)

We're tolerant people.

Assailant 1 roughly grabs Karen and pulls her out of bed.

ASSAILANT 1

(dragging her)

Let's go!

Assailant 1 pushes her forward.

ASSAILANT 1

C'mon, bitch, we don't have all day!

Karen stumbles and falls by the bedroom door. Assailant 2 roughly picks her up.

ASSAILANT 2

Haven't you heard him?

Assailant 2 forcefully pushes her forward. She falls face down on the hall floor.

ASSAILANT 1  
(to Assailant 2)  
Hey, don't be so rude! We wanna  
keep her in one piece!

Karen raises her head and looks around; a trickle of blood running down her nose...

Her gaze stops at the typewriter desk in the corner of the living room. She slowly stands up, staggering.

ASSAILANT 1  
That's the way I like it! Good  
girl!

Still dizzy, Karen runs into the living room, opens one of the desk drawers and pulls out the gun that she kept there.

ASSAILANT 1  
Hey, what the...?!

Karen steps back into the hall while pointing the gun at the assailants.

ASSAILANT 2  
Damn bitch...

Assailant 2 brandishes his knife and takes a step towards her, but Assailant 1 holds him back by the arm.

ASSAILANT 1  
Wait, calm down, let me handle  
this.

Assailant 1 smiles at Karen while taking a short step towards her.

ASSAILANT 1  
It's okay, you win. I admit we've  
gone too far. Now put that gun  
away and we'll leave.

KAREN  
(serious)  
You're not going anywhere.

ASSAILANT 1  
C'mon, don't be resentful, we  
were just kidding...

Assailant 1 takes another short step towards her.

KAREN

Don't take another step.

ASSAILANT 1

Give me the gun and we'll forget everything, okay?

Assailant 1 takes another short step.

KAREN

This is my last warning: Don't take another step or I'll shoot.

ASSAILANT 1

(nervous)

That's enough, right? You already got what you wanted, you scared the shit out of us. That's great, congratulations. Now put the fucking gun away and let-

KAREN

(firmly)

-No one's leaving this house.

Assailant 1 wraps his fingers around the knife's handle and takes another step towards Karen.

ASSAILANT 1

Look, I'm not-

Karen shoots.

The shot hits right in the Assailant 1's forehead. An instant later, he collapses, dead.

Assailant 2 lunges with the knife at Karen.

ASSAILANT 2

Bitch!

Karen shoots again. The shot hits in the Assailant 2's neck. He falls to the floor, where he writhes in pain as he bleeds profusely.

Karen takes a step towards him and impassively watches him.

ASSAILANT 2

Damn whore...

Karen shoots at him again. The shot hits in the right shoulder of the Assailant 2. He howls in pain.

She shoots again, now hitting in his left shoulder; then the right leg, the left one, the right foot, the left one...

Assailant 2 rolls around screaming as blood spurts from his wounds.

Karen stops shooting and coldly watches him dying...

ASSAILANT 2  
Shoot me in the head, bitch! In  
the fucking head!

KAREN  
Not yet.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

As the morning makes its way along the rocky coast, a new SHOT is heard; then another one, another, and another...

Silence falls.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Karen, sweaty and dusty, uses a shovel to fill up a pit with sand.

GINA (off)  
Don't torture yourself. If it  
happened as you're telling me,  
then it was clearly self-defense.

Gina is sitting on a rock a few yards away.

GINA  
They'd have done the same to you  
after raping you. Or worse yet,  
you might have been turned into  
some sort of sex slave.

KAREN  
It's not about that, Gina, it's...

Karen stops working and turns towards Gina.

KAREN  
(ashamed)  
I think I enjoyed doing it.

Gina looks at her in surprise.

KAREN  
I could have killed the second  
man with a shot to the head, but  
I didn't. I just watched him  
bleed to death.  
(MORE)

KAREN (cont'd)  
And I liked watching it.

Gina stays silent, intimidated. Karen keeps filling up the pit.

KAREN  
It was a strange feeling, almost...  
almost familiar.

GINA  
Well, they say that everyone has  
a hidden sadistic side. You've been  
under a lot of pressure for the  
last weeks, maybe that's how your  
brain decided to release all that  
stress.

KAREN  
I don't know, I can't understand  
it.

Karen finishes her work. Gina stands up.

GINA  
(approaching)  
Shall we go?

KAREN  
Wait a minute.

Karen kneels by the pit and closes her eyes. Then she clasps her hands together and begins to pray quietly.

INT. HALL - DAY

Karen wipes the blood off the floor with a mop as Gina watches her.

GINA  
Did you take the pills before the  
hallucinations started?

Karen nods.

KAREN  
I also had chloroform on hand. I  
inhaled it as soon as the man  
attacked me.

GINA  
Maybe that's why everything went  
wrong. You lied to yourself, you  
didn't believe in what you were  
doing.

KAREN

Why do you say that?

GINA

Asking of forgiveness is not just a formality, Karen, you have to feel genuine remorse. Otherwise, it's pointless.

KAREN

But I really felt-

GINA

-Why did you take the sleeping pills then? Why did you have the chloroform on hand?

KAREN

I was scared. There was the possibility that everything could go wrong. In fact, that's how it happened.

GINA

Maybe your own fear was the cause of everything going wrong. Your conscience could interpreted it as a lack of sincerity.

KAREN

I don't know.

GINA

It's like learning to swim, you don't really learn till you jump into the water without a float.

Karen finishes washing the floor. Then she places the mop in a bucket and puts it aside.

KAREN

Perhaps you're right. Anyway, I feel like I'm going in circles. I thought of a new strategy, a kind of trap. It might work.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

The wind blows strongly. Karen and Gina watch the waves crashing against the coast as they stand by the rocky shore.

Karen pulls out from her cardigan pocket some chloroform bottles, some pill bottles and a small clear plastic bag.

GINA

Quid pro quo. I'll do as you ask if you you get rid of all this crap. Even though I still don't understand what your plan is.

Karen drops the pill bottles into the plastic bag.

KAREN

Well, it's not the most elaborate plan... but I hope it can give us a surprise.

Karen drops the chloroform bottles into the bag.

KAREN

Until now, I've never experienced hallucinations in your presence. But this has always happened when you came before midnight...

(beat)

If you show up just after twelve o'clock, just when they begin... I believe something different could happen, something special.

GINA

But that would be like trying to trick your unconscious.

KAREN

Yeah, something like that.

GINA

You think that's possible? If your conscious mind knows that I'll come just after midnight, then your unconscious mind will know it too, and there won't be any hallucinations.

(beat)

You can't stop your left hand from knowing what your right hand does.

Karen ties up the plastic bag containing the pill and chloroform bottles.

KAREN

That's the key, I think they don't know very well what the other is doing. Sometimes it's like there are two different people inside of me.

GINA

Alright, as you want. It's for you to make your own decisions.

KAREN

Two minutes past midnight, okay?

Gina nods. Then Karen throws the plastic bag into the ocean. They watch it floating away on the waves.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Night falls on the coast. Some lights can be seen in the lower windows of the mansion.

INT. LIVING ROOM/HALL - NIGHT

Karen nervously stands by the couch. The living room's door is ajar.

The digital clock on the coffee table shows 23:59.

As if pushed by an automatism, Karen reaches into her cardigan pocket. Empty. She clicks her tongue and closes her eyes. Then she sighs...

The clock shows 00:00.

The GHOSTLY MOAN coming from the upper floor.

Karen opens her eyes and slowly approaches the half-open door of the living room.

The HOARSE BREATHING SOUND coming from Karen's bedroom.

Karen reaches the door and stops.

Heavy FOOTSTEPS going down the stairs.

The clock shows 00:01.

The LAUGHTER coming from the upper floor. It joins the moans and the old woman's breathing, forming a ghostly chorus.

Karen peers through the door crack. The front door is open, but no one is there. Gina hasn't arrived yet.

The clock shows 00:02.

The little girl finishes coming down the stairs and walks towards the bedroom's ajar door.

Karen opens the door a little wider and fearfully watches the girl. Then she shifts her gaze to the front door. No trace of Gina.

The little girl gently pushes the door open and takes a couple of steps into the bedroom. Then she stops.

From the living room, Karen turns towards the coffee table.

The clock shows 00:03.

She again shifts her gaze to the front door. Nobody. She opens the door a little wider...

The little girl, with her back to Karen, stands still in the bedroom's doorway. The old woman walks up and stops next to her. They both stand motionless.

Karen nervously watches them as the laughter and heavy footsteps come down the stairs...

The old woman suddenly turns toward the living room; her all-white eyes fixed on Karen

Karen startles. The old woman heads towards her while pink foam starts dripping from her mouth.

The little girl starts to turn around too...

Panicked, Karen leaves the living room and runs across the hall to the front door...

Someone grabs her by the arm.

It's the Laughing Man; his face covered in bruises and bloody cuts; his giggle bursting from his lips.

Karen shouts in terror as she tries to break free from his grasp.

After some tense moments, she manages to wriggle out of him and runs out of the house.

EXT. NARROW ROAD - NIGHT

Karen reaches a nearby road and gets into her white car. Soon it starts up and drives away.

INT. CAR - MOVING - NIGHT

Karen, still terrified, nervously drives. As she does, she looks for something in the glove compartment.

After a few instants, she finds a sleeping pill and swallows it. Then she keeps searching anxiously for more pills.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - NIGHT

Karen's white car leaves the narrow road, turning into a secondary road surrounded by lush trees.

INT. CAR - MOVING - NIGHT

Karen keeps going through the glove box. She empties it. Nothing. She closes her eyes.

KAREN  
They're not real, it's all just  
in your head..

An anguished GROAN coming from the back seats.

Karen open her eyes, startled. She looks up at the rear-view mirror...

The Teen Boys with their heads covered with bloody sacks fidget in the back seats while groaning in pain.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - NIGHT

Karen's white car brakes suddenly, leaving tracks on the asphalt.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Karen, frightened, opens the driver's door to get out..

One of the teen boys reaches out and grabs her by the shoulder. They struggle.

Finally, she manages to break free and quickly leaves the car.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - NIGHT

Karen runs away from the car and into the thick forest.

EXT. FOREST/RAVINE - NIGHT

Karen runs through the woods, avoiding some trees and looking back in fear.

Twenty yards ahead, she arrives at the edge of a ravine and abruptly stops. There's no way forward. She looks back again..

A CHORUS OF GHOSTLY VOICES comes from within the forest: moans, groans, laughter, hoarse breathing, screams..

Karen tightly closes her eyes and covers her ears with both hands.

KAREN  
They're not real, they're not  
real..

About twenty SHADOWY FIGURES emerge from behind the trees and slowly start approaching her.

Karen takes a couple of steps back. Then she trips over a rock and falls down the ravine.

She rolls down the ravine and lands at the bottom in a small stream.

Karen is lying on the ground, completely motionless. A trickle of blood running down her forehead.

DREAM-FLASHBACK - INT. WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

Young Henry buttons his white shirt in front of the mirror.

Young Karen stands up and approaches him. Then she hugs him from behind and rests her chin on his shoulder while looking at herself in the mirror..

Her expression is serious, tense, almost somber.

The silence is broken again by loud SCREAMS coming from the basement.

And Young Karen smiles. It's a strange smile, halfway between wistful and sadistic.

YOUNG KAREN  
World's like a jungle. And only  
the strongest survive the jungle.

YOUNG HENRY  
That's a great truth.

YOUNG KAREN  
They don't have a soul, do they?

YOUNG HENRY  
I couldn't care less. All I care  
about is our family.

YOUNG KAREN  
Yeah, family's everything.

YOUNG HENRY  
Another great truth.

More screams coming from the basement.

YOUNG KAREN  
No, they don't have a soul.  
They're demons, and we're angels.  
And the only way angels can  
destroy demons is by acting like  
them.

YOUNG HENRY  
(smirking)  
Good demons.

YOUNG KAREN  
Demons of God.

More screams. Karen widens her smile.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. RAVINE'S BOTTOM - DAY

Early morning sunlight rays lands of Karen's face. She  
keeps lying on the ground next to a small stream.

She slowly opens her eyes, her expression is shocked and  
confused.

EXT. FOREST PATH - DAY

Still dizzy, Karen walks down a narrow path surrounded by  
greenery; her clothes are dirty and torn.

A strong, dry COUGH coming from a nearby place.

Karen looks around and through the trees..

Just a few yards away, she notices a small lodge. The  
cough seems to come from there.

INT. LODGE - LIVING ROOM/BEDROOM - DAY

Karen cautiously enters the lodge and walks into the  
living room, where everything is dirty and messy.

The dry COUGH again. It comes from a nearby room.

After getting close to a wall table on which some old photo portraits are placed, one of them catches Karen's eye.

It's a portrait of Gina, smiling. She grabs the photo and watches it in surprise.

It's a photograph from the nineties, but Gina doesn't look any younger than she is currently.

Another strong, dry cough.

Karen shifts her gaze toward the back of the living room, where a door stands slightly ajar.

After placing back the portrait on the table, Karen walks towards the door and gently pushes it open...

It's a sober bedroom comprising a bed and little else. An OLD MAN, 85, with a wizened face and pale skin covered in sores is lying on the bed. He looks very sick and coughs again.

KAREN  
(shyly)  
He... Hello?

The Old Man looks up and watches her with indifference.

KAREN  
Are you related to Gina?

An expression of surprise on his face.

KAREN  
Gina Ricci. I saw her picture  
back there and-

The Old Man coughs a few more times.

OLD MAN  
(nodding)  
-Her father.

Karen smiles. Then she approaches him and sits on the edge of his bed.

KAREN  
She's alive! She survived too!  
And she's looking for you! She's  
been trying to find you for over  
a year!

Karen takes him by the hand.

KAREN

My name is Karen. Your daughter  
and I met a couple of weeks ago.  
We've become very close friends.  
She has helped me a lot.

The Old Man lets go of her hand.

OLD MAN

(harshly)

Go away from here.

Karen, surprised, stands up. He starts coughing again.

KAREN

Why do you get angry? She wants  
to make peace with you, she wants  
to forget everything.

OLD MAN

Go away!

Karen backs away, intimidated.

KAREN

Alright, as you like. I'll just  
tell her that you live here. I  
hope you'll be nicer to her.

The Old Man coughs again. Karen walks away towards the  
bedroom's door.

OLD MAN

She's dead.

Karen turns to look at him in shock.

OLD MAN

She died a long time ago, in the  
early nineties; in New York,  
murdered. You know, hard times.

KAREN

But... But that's impossible. She  
comes to see me almost every day,  
she's looking for you.

OLD MAN

I don't know what your point is,  
but my daughter has been dead for  
more than thirty years. That  
picture was taken a few days  
before her murder.

KAREN

But I-

OLD MAN  
-I told you she's dead!

Karen bows her head and keeps silent.

OLD MAN  
And now, please, go away and let  
this poor old man die in peace.

Karen obeys.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Seated at her desk, Karen stares at her gun inside an open drawer. Voices from the past resound in her mind.

YOUNG KAREN (V.O.)  
They don't have a soul, do they?

Karen takes the gun from the drawer.

YOUNG KAREN (V.O.)  
No, they don't have a soul.  
They're demons, and we're angels.  
And the only way angels can  
destroy demons is by acting like  
them.

Karen puts the barrel of the gun under her chin and places her finger on the trigger.

Her expression is a mixture of desperation and fear, some tears rolling down her cheeks...

A NOISE coming from outside the house.

Karen startles. Then she puts the gun back in the drawer.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Karen gets out the house...

Just a few yards from the front door, someone has set a table for two with candles and wine bottles; a covered platter in the middle of it.

Astonished, Karen approaches the table and watches it. Then she takes a couple of steps back and scans the surrounding darkness.

Nothing in sight. She returns her gaze to the table...

Gina is now sitting at the table, smiling. Karen jumps back, startled.

GINA  
Surprise!

Karen doesn't react, shocked into stillness.

GINA  
C'mon, What're you waiting for?  
Take a seat.

After some hesitation, Karen obeys.

GINA  
Forgive me for last night, I  
thought I saw my father. Just a  
false alarm, I think I'm starting  
to see weird things too.

Gina laughs while Karen watches her uneasily

GINA  
What's wrong? Why are you so  
serious? Something happened?

KAREN  
I was with your father this  
morning.

Gina stops smiling and looks at Karen in amazement.

GINA  
Really? How is he? Is he alive?

KAREN  
He's dying. Maybe by now he's  
already dead..  
(beat)  
Like you are.

Gina opens her eyes in surprise.

GINA  
What do you mean, Karen? I don't  
get it.

KAREN  
He told me everything. You've  
been dead for over thirty years.  
You were killed.

Gina is silent for a few seconds.

GINA  
And do you think that's true?

Karen nods.

GINA  
A ghost?

Karen nods again.

GINA  
Okay, maybe that's true. Try it  
and see.

Karen looks at her in confusion.

GINA  
The trick your grandfather taught  
you, don't you remember? Take a  
look under your napkin.

Karen, moving slowly, obeys...

The thick lens glasses.

GINA  
C'mon, put them on and look at  
me.

Karen's face contorts in panic. She hesitates.

GINA  
(serious)  
Put the glasses on, Karen.

Fearfully, Karen puts the glasses on and looks up at  
Gina.

KAREN'S P.O.V.

The strong prescription lenses make everything look  
blurry...

But Gina's image is perfectly clear.

BACK TO THE SCENE

Karen throws the glasses to the ground.

KAREN

No, it can't be true... You... You don't...

Gina nods.

KAREN

It doesn't make any sense. If you were like them, you'd only show up after midnight, you'd attack me, you'd-

GINA

-There's something that makes me different from them... The pain.

Gina stands up while Karen, bewildered, watches her.

GINA

I was lucky, my pain was more emotional than physical. In a way, you had mercy on me.

(beat)

That's why I've never been a threat to you, you don't feel as guilty about my death as you do about the others.

Gina's eyes moisten with tears.

GINA

You made them suffer a lot, you can't even imagine how much.

KAREN

But I... I just looked, I didn't... Well, yes, I supported them, but I... I-

GINA

-You were even worse than them, Karen. Much worse than them.

KAREN

No, I didn't-

GINA

-And as for Gina, we should start talking about her in the third person. After all, I'm just a product of your mind, a part of you. I am yourself.

KAREN

I don't believe you. If you're just another hallucination, how could I know about your... about Gina's father?

GINA

It's simple. Unlike the others, you got to know her very well.

FLASHBACK - INT. COLLEGE CAMPUS - DAY

Sunny day. Gina and a group of COLLEGE STUDENTS are sitting on grass outdoors while talking, studying, laughing...

GINA (V.O.)

She had nothing to do with your world; in fact, she hated it, she just wanted to run away from all that.

(beat)

But she couldn't help being the daughter of who she was. And that made her a target in your war.

Young Karen approaches the group and asks them something. They talk.

GINA (V.O.)

It was easy to gain her trust and tricked her. You managed to know everything about her life and, of course, you got out of her all the information you wanted to know. But information is never enough.

Young Karen takes a seat on the grass next to Gina. They smile at each other.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Karen looks down, ashamed.

KAREN

Please stop...

GINA

Although there's something that honors you. When her time came, only God knows why, you showed unusual mercy. Maybe you didn't see her as evil as the others.

Gina approaches Karen and grabs her by the wrist.

GINA

Don't you remember, Karen?

FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

Young Karen climbs down the stairs into the basement, where Gina, gagged and tied with ropes to a wood chair, shrieks in pain while Bison burns her forehead and cheeks with a cigarette.

YOUNG HENRY (off)

All right, enough already. Let's see if her memory's improved

Bison moves away as Young Henry approaches the chair and removes Gina's gag.

YOUNG HENRY

Anything new to tell us?

Gina doesn't answer, she just cries in pain.

YOUNG HENRY

C'mon, I'm sure that Don Carlo Ricci's favorite girl knows much more than she's letting on.

Young Karen approaches them. Young Henry turns to her, confused.

YOUNG HENRY

(to Karen)

We're busy, don't you see? C'mon, go back upstairs. You'll have time later to vent to her.

Young Karen doesn't move.

YOUNG HENRY

Didn't you hear me? Go away!

With a quick movement, Karen reaches for Young Henry's holster and pulls out his gun. Then she grabs Gina by the hair and shoots her in the upper back of the head.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Gina lets go of the wrist of Karen, who looks at her in shock. Then she turns around and takes off her French beret, revealing...

A bleeding wound on the upper back of her head.

Karen watches it in horror.

GINA

Yes, she was lucky. Too bad you weren't so generous with the others.

(turning)

You didn't even use the interrogation as an excuse, you did it for the sheer pleasure of it, no questions asked.

Unable to stand it, Karen covers her face and breaks into tears. Gina again grabs her by the wrist.

GINA

C'mon, we're not done yet.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - NIGHT

Someone gently runs a finger over the sailboat in the painting.

GINA (off)

Somehow, you were born again after the disaster and your amnesia. You recovered all the purity lost at some point in your youth.

The finger belongs to Gina, standing next to Karen by the rocky shore.

GINA

But the deepest part of your mind kept remembering your past and it couldn't leave things like that. As I told you once, if you make a mistake, you must pay the price. It's the fairest thing. That's what you've been doing so far.

KAREN

(crying)

This is just a nightmare, a damned, endless nightmare. But I'll find a way to wake up..

(beat)

Everything will go back to the way it was, no war, and Henry will be by my side again.

GINA

You're right about something.. It's up to you to put an end to this.

KAREN

What do I have to do?

GINA

Just a few minutes left until midnight. You just have to go home and.. Well, they'll know what to do with you.

KAREN

Why didn't you tell me everything before? Wouldn't that have been easier?

GINA

Yes, but also unfair. What you have suffered so far, all those nights of terror, is only a first payment: you've feel the same fear those people felt the night they were kidnapped.

KAREN

What's the second payment?

GINA

You'll have to suffer what they suffered in that basement.

KAREN

(scared)

What will they do to me?

GINA

Probably, just what you're thinking right now.

Karen lowers her gaze, resigned to his fate.

GINA

Just go home, it's that simple.  
Go home and accept what will  
happen.

KAREN

(looking up  
again)

And the little girl? Who's she? I  
haven't dreamed of her yet, I  
don't know-

GINA

-Her daughter, Gina's daughter.  
Just a baby when you stole her.

Karen, absolutely appalled, covers her face while Gina  
turns towards the sea and watches it.

GINA

But there's something else about  
her, something that you'll only  
be able to remember when you  
enter your house.

KAREN

What?

Gina doesn't answer. She just turns to Karen and bitterly  
smiles.

GINA

Goodbye, Karen.

Gina fades away completely. Karen is left alone on the  
rocky shore.

INT. HALL - NIGHT

The front door opens slowly. Karen cautiously enters the  
hall, looking from side to side... Nobody.

A digital clock on a wall table shows 23:57.

FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The Teen Boys remain tied to chairs back to back. Cloth sacks cover their heads.

Young Karen, nervously breathing, approaches them. Then she furiously starts hitting their heads with a shovel.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. HALL/KAREN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Shocked by the memories crossing her mind, Karen walks towards her bedroom door and slowly opens it.

FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The Old Woman is gagged and strapped to the long wooden table, eyes closed, an expression of agony on her face...

Standing by the table, Young Karen grabs the electric cattle prod connected to a battery and savagely drives it into the Old Woman's heart.

The Old Woman begins to shake on the long table, her eyes rolling back. Then the gag breaks off and a viscous pink foam starts dripping from her mouth.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. HALLWAY/SECOND-FLOOR BEDROOM - NIGHT

Karen, her expression almost contorted, walks down the second-floor hallway. She stops by the bedroom.

FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

The Laughing Man is strapped to the long table, sweaty and bruised, and laughing convulsively.

Young Karen approaches him. She grabs a pair of cutting pliers and starts making deep cuts along his body and face. He howls in pain.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Karen, her face expressionless, keeps walking down the hallway.

FLASHBACK - INT. TORTURE BASEMENT - NIGHT

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

A rapid succession of faces of tortured people; faces bloodied or disfigured by bruises. They all screaming in fright and pain.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

After reaching the end of the hallway, Karen looks out a closed window. Waves crash against the rocky shoreline.

A small, ghostly HAND grabs her by the arm.

LITTLE GIRL

Mommy...

Karen's eyes widen extremely.

FLASHBACK - INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

PROJECTION SCREEN - Karen's daughter happily runs around a playground. Young Karen enters the frame and gives the girl a cold hug.

FLASHBACK - INT. LITTLE GIRL'S BEDROOM - DAY

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V.

A colorful children's bedroom with pink wallpaper and white chest of drawers.

Standing by the bed, Young Karen watches the LITTLE GIRL, 8, sleeping peacefully on her back. She wears a white nightgown and her long hair braided.

FLASHBACK - INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Seated on a couch, Karen flips back and forth the photo album's pages, as if searching for something.

KAREN

What's wrong with you? Were you never a baby?

FLASHBACK - INT. LITTLE GIRL'S BEDROOM - DAY

YOUNG KAREN'S P.O.V

Standing by the bed, Young Karen keeps staring at the Little Girl, but now holding a gallon bottle of some clear liquid.

After some hesitation, she empties the contents of the bottle over the Little Girl's face.

YOUNG HENRY (off)

Karen!

Karen looks up at the bedroom door, where Young Henry stares at her in horror.

AGONIZING MOANS while a thick smoke covers the room.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Karen, motionless, an absent expression on her face, keeps staring at the sea...

The Little Girl is just behind Karen, her face hidden in the dark.

A group of SHADOWS starts approaching down the hallway.

KAREN

They're demons, Henry.

Several pale hands grab her by the arms and shoulders.

KAREN

And we're angels.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

Night falls on the coast...

All the lights in the house turn on suddenly.

INT. HALLWAY/STAIRCASE - NIGHT

The Shadows drag Karen along the hallway and the stairs while she screams in horror.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

Karen is dragged down the staircase leading to the basement.

A few instants later, strapped to the long iron table, Karen vainly struggles trying to get free.

Man and woman hands holding cutting pliers menacingly approach Karen's face.

KAREN

No, please! I beg you! No!

Ignoring her plea, they start making deep cuts along her face. She screams in pain.

The Little Girl picks up from the floor a gallon bottle containing a clear liquid and brings it to the long table.

KAREN

(weak)

No, no, no...

The gallon bottle is emptied over Karen's face. Within seconds, her face begins to grotesquely dissolve as she howls in pain.

A pale hand turns on a battery.

Another pale hand drives an electric cattle prod into the heart of Karen, whose face is already almost dissolved in acid.

Karen starts convulsing frantically. A few seconds later, she stops moving.

The shadows move away from the table.

EXT. MANSION FAÇADE - NIGHT

All the lights in the house turn off.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

It's a sunny morning. Small waves break gently against a rocky shoreline as some seagulls play above the water.

INT. MANSION - DAY

Hall, living room, Karen's bedroom, second-floor bedroom, basement...

They are all empty, no human presence around.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - DAY

Karen is sitting on a rock while watching the ocean.

KAREN (V.O.)

Someone once said that life speaks to us in whispers, and that if we don't listen, it speaks to us louder; and that if we still don't pay attention, it ends up screaming in our ears.

Karen's expression has changed, now it's serene, almost happy. She looks like a new woman.

KAREN (V.O.)

I don't know how everything would have turned out if, from the beginning, I hadn't felt like a victim. Anyway, this is not something that makes me feel remorseful. In fact, I even think it's better that things happened this way.

Karen gets up and walks to the easel. Then she partially removes the blanket covering the painting and picks up her box of watercolors.

MAN (off)

¿Hello?

Karen spins around, startled.

A BEARDED MAN, 60, stands at the end of the narrow path leading to the natural breakwater. He flashes a cheerful and sincere smile.

Karen watches him in silence. She pulls out her thick lens glasses from her cardigan pocket and puts them on.

She keeps staring at him for several seconds. Then she takes off his glasses and hesitates...

And she smiles. It's a happy and relieved smile.

KAREN

Hello.

Karen leaves the box of watercolors on the ground and starts walking towards him.

A gust of wind completely removes the blanket covering the painting. The new, unused canvas remains blank, totally white.

THE END