

VENGEANCE

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Draft: 5.25.18

BLACK.

A GLOW, tiny and white and rectangular, lights up in the center of the screen. The light starts moving slowly. It takes a moment to realize it's a phone. We are very, very high above:

EXT. OIL FIELD - WEST TEXAS - NIGHT

Auto-timed gas flares -- burn-off from drilling -- suddenly kick up in the distance and illuminate the scene.

A young woman, ABILENE, 20s, has just woken up in the middle of a vast oil field. She knocks past red cups, and other debris of a party. She is struggling to stay conscious.

She texts "Help." Tries again. "Help." "Help." Goes through green every time - "Message Send Failure." Waves her phone in the air again to find reception.

Back to the extreme bird's eye view: she passes out briefly -- screen is black again. Then resumes consciousness: phone back on, a white spot again waving in the air; resumes crawling to find a spot that might have reception.

Back to ground level: she turns on the phone to record video of where she is. We see what the phone records: party debris... dirt... then at the last second a pair of cowboy boots approaching, and the phone abruptly hits the dirt, as if violently kicked, bringing us again --

TO BLACK.

OPENING TITLES to "Abilene," the sweet, brief version sung by Waylon Jennings. Then:

INT. BROOKLYN APARTMENT - NIGHT

A contemporary party in Brooklyn. An impressive and upbeat scene. We weave through the party, landing on BEN MANALOWITZ, 30s, bright and ambitious, pitching his heart out to ELOISE (20s-30s, African-American, sophisticated and warm), as they navigate through the room.

BEN

We think of America as a completely divided country. Red states and blue states, of course -- but also blue cities within red states, and red neighborhoods in those blue cities. So we've assumed it's our geography that's dividing us.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

But we're missing something deeper.  
We're not separated by space. We're  
separated by time.

Eloise is interested.

BEN (CONT'D)

We always assumed that technology  
would give us freedom over space --  
flying cars, telecommuting to  
virtual offices. That hasn't  
happened. What technology has done  
instead is divide us by *time*. We  
don't watch movies or TV at the  
same time. You don't have to live  
in the moment, and why would you,  
when you have every moment in the  
past to choose from? And can save  
any moment for later? We don't even  
have conversations at the same  
time: if someone texts you "hello,"  
you can write back in a minute, a  
week, or never.

ELOISE

Right.

BEN

The reason we're so disconnected is  
because we're all living on our own  
time -- literally. We're not living  
through a shared era anymore. We  
didn't even name our decade.

ELOISE

Isn't it the aughts?

PARTYGOER

Or the 00's?

BEN

One: you had two different answers.  
And second: that was the last  
decade. What's this one? It should  
be the teens, right? We give things  
a name so we can have a common  
reference point. But we stopped  
doing that with time. Now we're not  
on the same timeline anymore --  
we're on individual timelines.

PARTYGOER

Like Facebook!

BEN

Exactly! This is actually kind of a private conversation, but -- yes. And that's the root of what's going on in America right now. We literally -- literally -- live in "divided times."

A beat.

ELOISE

That's great.

BEN

Yeah?

ELOISE

That is brilliant. That could define our era.

BEN

Right? Okay, tell me the truth, though. This is for Ira Glass, this is my shot, I don't want to Aaron Burr this --

ELOISE

No, no. This is real deal. I'll tell him to expect something great.

She smiles and walks away. Ben is thrilled.

EXT. BROOKLYN PATIO - LATE NIGHT

Ben is now with his friend JOHN, 30s, strikingly good looking, with a beautiful view behind them. The party is dying down. They're both texting.

JOHN

All right, it's 1:30, let's see who's awake.

Ben's phone dings.

BEN

Got one. "Emily Toronto."

JOHN

Nice.

BEN

(still texting)

Eh, let's see what all the options are first.

JOHN

Let me tell you something. We, right here, are the true romantics of our age. We're out here looking for someone that might inspire us to a new level we haven't yet imagined. People who commit to something because they assume things could never get better? That's the *opposite* of romantic thinking.

BEN

Hundred percent.

JOHN

And it's an incredible time to be alive.

John's phone dings.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Erica Question Mark.

(typing)

"Heyyyy, yourself."

(back to monologue)

It turns out people never actually wanted to own a shelf full of albums -- people just wanted to be able to hear any song they wanted at any time. Same with cars: we don't need a car, we need to be able to get anywhere at any time.

BEN

Hundred percent.

JOHN

Same is true with relationships. It's insanely inefficient to expect to "own" one person who's expected to fulfill every single thing in your life, when you can have the most supportive person in your life *here*, the smartest person *here*, the best sex *here*, the best advice *here*, the second best sex *here*, the person who makes you laugh the most over *here*, etc.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

The old way of dating was like driving a U-Haul around New York City your whole life because you never knew when you might have to move a couch. Now, whatever you need -- there's a person in your phone for that.

BEN

Hundred percent.

JOHN

And yet people say guys like us are "afraid of commitment." And we gracefully accept the misnomer with a self-deprecating shrug, because we're too polite to finish the sentence: "afraid of commitment to mediocrity."

BEN

There's no such thing as fear of commitment. Fear of commitment is fear of regret.

JOHN

Hundred percent. Or "fear of intimacy." Please -- I'm intimate with everyone.

They keep texting, phones keep chiming with options. Ben turns contemplative for a second.

BEN

Do you ever wonder, though? If you decided to have something deeper with someone, if that would be more meaningful?

JOHN

Yeah. I do, sometimes. Right now, I'm casually dating eight or nine girls. But deep down, I wonder if I might be happier seriously dating just two or three.

Ben's phone dings.

BEN

"Brunette Random House Party."

JOHN

Random House the publisher, or a random house party?

BEN  
 (considers a long time)  
 It's 1:30, I'm fine either way.

JOHN  
 Let's get out of here.

BEN  
 What a time to be alive.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - LATER

An apartment decorated to indicate a modern, successful, intellectual, single thirty-something in New York. The right books, design, etc.

A knock on the door: BRUNETTE RANDOM HOUSE PARTY.

BRUNETTE RANDOM HOUSE PARTY  
 Hiiii.

BEN  
 Hey! How you been?

BRUNETTE RANDOM HOUSE PARTY  
 Oh, did I leave a bracelet here?

She rifles through some items on a table, including a bracelet or two.

BRUNETTE RANDOM HOUSE PARTY (CONT'D)  
 No... No... Eh, it's okay, it could  
 be a bunch of places.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - LATER

Ben and Brunette Random House Party watch a movie (Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet*). She wipes a tear and cuddles closer.

BRUNETTE RANDOM HOUSE PARTY  
 (wistful)  
 I wonder if I'll ever find love  
 like that.

BEN  
 (wistful)  
 Same.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - LATER

Ben and Brunette Random House Party (sleeping in a borrowed Pod Save America T-shirt) are deep asleep. Ben's phone rings. After many rings, he picks it up.

BEN

Hello?

The VOICE ON PHONE (whom we will meet later as TY) is intense and emotional, with a West Texan accent.

TY (V.O.)

Ben?

BEN

Yeah? Hello?

TY (V.O.)

I'm so sorry to be the one to have to tell you this. This is the worst phone call you're ever going to get in your life. Oh, God.

(deep breath)

Your girlfriend is dead.

BEN

Huh? What?

TY (V.O.)

Your girlfriend. She's dead.

BEN

Sorry, what did you say?

TY (V.O.)

"She's dead."

BEN

No. The first part?

TY (V.O.)

"Your girlfriend."

BEN

Yeah, I'm so sorry, I don't understand --

TY (V.O.)

We just can't make any sense of it.

BEN

Who is this?

TY (V.O.)  
This is her brother, Ty.

BEN  
Whose brother?

TY (V.O.)  
Your girlfriend.

BEN  
Who -- who are you talking about?  
I'm really confused.

TY  
Is this Ben Manalowitz?

BEN  
Yeah.

TY (V.O.)  
This is Ty Shaw. Abby's brother.

Ben opens his laptop. He types "Shaw" into Facebook.

TY (V.O.)  
I know this must be hard to  
process. I'm so sorry.

Ben sees the profile of a girl he recognizes. A beat as this news comes into focus for him: Ben's confusion turns to shock, and sadness, and awkwardness.

BEN  
Oh my God. Abby. Sure.  
(beat)  
I wouldn't have called her my -  
yeah. Oh my God.

BRUNETTE RANDOM HOUSE PARTY  
Shhhhhhh.

Ben covers the phone a bit.

BEN  
Ty, I'm so sorry.

TY (V.O.)  
Funeral's Sunday.

BEN  
Oh my God. Okay. Do you have an  
address where I can send flowers?

TY (V.O.)  
No need to send flowers.

BEN  
No, really. I definitely want --

TY (V.O.)  
Really, brother. I promise. There's no need. If you really want, there's a flower shop by the airport. We can just swing by there when I pick you up.

Ben realizes he's expected at the funeral.

BEN  
When you pick me up. Right.  
Funeral, Sunday.  
(beat)  
Okay, Ty, this weekend is really kind of -- I need to prepare for -- do you know who Ira Glass is?

TY (V.O.)  
You're breaking up, brother.

Ben looks at the Facebook screen again. "In a Relationship."  
He takes a breath, facing a wave of guilt.

BEN  
... Yeah. Of course.  
(then)  
Remind me where are you guys are, exactly?

TY (V.O.)  
You been to Texas before?

BEN  
(dammit)  
Texaaaas.  
(then)  
Okay. Are you near Austin?

TY (V.O.)  
We are not near Austin.

BEN  
Dallas?

TY (V.O.)  
Dallas ain't Texas.

BEN  
Houston?

TY (V.O.)  
Houston's another country.

BEN  
San Antonio?

TY (V.O.)  
That's another planet.

BEN  
El Paso?

TY (V.O.)  
That's offensive, that you'd think  
we'd be from El Paso.

BEN  
Why don't you just tell me where--

TY (V.O.)  
Have you heard of Abilene?

BEN  
No.

TY (V.O.)  
Really? You've never heard of  
Abilene? The city?

BEN  
No.

TY (V.O.)  
Well, Abilene's about three hours  
from Dallas.

BEN  
Got it.

TY (V.O.)  
And we're five hours from Abilene.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - A LITTLE LATER

Ben lies on the bed, awake, contemplating all of this.  
Brunette Random House Party is asleep next to him.

INT. TEXAS AIRPORT - DAY

Ben emerges at the terminal, a little ragged from travel. TY SHAW, rugged and tattooed and extraordinarily sensitive, deeply Texan, recognizes Ben instantly.

TY

Brother.

Ty hugs Ben hard.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/TEXAS STATE HIGHWAY I-20 - A LITTLE LATER [DRIVING]

Ty drives his pickup truck on a long stretch of highway.

TY

So. You and my sister.

BEN

Yeah. Ty, I'm so sorry.

TY

I don't know what to do. What to focus on. I've never been through anything like this in my life.

BEN

(gently)

Well, I've heard one thing that helps is to share as many memories as you can. So the whole person becomes real to you again, not just the grief.

TY

Yes. Yes. Okay. What are your favorite memories?

BEN

Maybe you start.

TY

(thinks)

She loved... the road. Trees. I mean, I'm picking things right in front of me - but that's what she was like! She loved easily. She'd see something and just fall in love with it. That was Abilene.

BEN

That was Abilene.

TY

It doesn't make any sense. An opiate overdose? Does that sound like the Abilene you know?

BEN

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

TY

Me neither, brother. Me neither.

BEN

Where, or when, did it --

TY

Some party out in the oil fields, supposedly. I don't know, I wasn't there. I just got the call. Worst call of my life.

BEN

I'm so sorry.

TY

I mean, her being down here the past few weeks, all normal, hanging with us, at the factory, then all of a sudden this... It just feels so crazy.

More driving. Long silences. Signs dot the landscape: "Pray for Rain." "Cherish Life." "Watch For Blowing Dust."

TY (CONT'D)

How's stuff been going in New York?

BEN

Good! Busy, but good. Writing's going well. Producing a couple of podcasts that seem to be getting some traction. And I have a meeting with Ira Glass this week, so that's the big news.

TY

Very exciting. Who is that?

BEN

He hosts *This American Life*, the radio program. Big producer, too. Does a lot of the big podcasts. He's kinda my hero, so that's cool. How about things for you?

TY

You know, can't complain.

(beat)

Actually, fuck it. My sister just died, I got a lot to complain about.

A beat. Ben nods.

BEN

How much longer?

TY

Totally depends. Could be four hours. If we hit traffic, it could be four ten.

EXT. FUNERAL - DAY

A large outdoor service on a beautiful day. It's a real funeral, and as in real life, it is something of a shock to be suddenly witnessing one. Ben sits in a back corner. He notices a surprising number of guns.

SHARON, very early 40s, beauty hollowed by grief, powers through the end of her eulogy.

SHARON

...And while she could be quite a handful when she was a girl... I suppose that might have been the influence of her mother. Or her father. Or her step-father. Or her other step-father. Lord knows I've made some interesting choices.

Some affectionate laughter.

SHARON (CONT'D)

But whatever mischief she made, it always came from the best kind of spirit. A restless one. A searching one. A spirit that was finally starting to find what it had spent its whole life looking for. She was living in New York. She was finding her voice in music. And... she had finally found love.

Sharon gestures to a large blown-up photo of Abby and Ben. It's a drunken kissing picture from a photo booth. Ben notices "Soho House" printed on the bottom and cringes with guilt. Some "awwws."

SHARON (CONT'D)  
 (with great pride)  
 Ben Manalowitz. A successful writer  
 and a regular contributor to *New  
 York Magazine*.

BEN  
 (sotto, can't help it)  
*The New Yorker*.

SHARON  
 But even with all his success, he  
 always respected our daughter for  
 who she was. One time she called me  
 and said, "Mama, do you know how he  
 has me saved in his phone?  
 'Texas.'" That meant the world to  
 her.

Ben looks away.

SHARON (CONT'D)  
 (trying to outrace tears)  
 As short as her life was, she found  
 her voice and she found love and  
 that's all you can ask for and I'm  
 grateful for those blessings.

She walks back to her seat.

TY  
 Let's hear from Ben!

BEN  
 No, no. No, no. I couldn't.

A chorus grows for Ben to speak until he finally steps up.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 I mean... I never expected to be in  
 a situation like this. None of us  
 did.

Passionate nods and amens.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 I wish I had spent more time with  
 her. I'm sure we all feel that.

All of this plays as deeply profound. People seem to want  
 more.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 ... She loved music. I know how  
 much she loved music. And...  
 (reaching for anything)  
 She will always be a song in our  
 hearts.

This crushes. Tears and even applause.

EXT. FUNERAL - LATER

Sharon approaches.

SHARON  
 Oh, Ben. "A song in our hearts."  
 What a way with words. What a time  
 to meet you.

BEN  
 I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Shaw.  
 She was very, very special.

SHARON  
 I'm sorry for *your* loss. Oh, Abby  
 would tell us everything about you  
 two.

BEN  
 Really?

SHARON  
 How you'd wake up in the middle of  
 the night - 1, 2 A.M. - and you  
 just needed to see her right then.

BEN  
 (wants to die)  
 Right.

SHARON  
 And I warned her: honey, be  
 careful, that might not mean what  
 you think it means. Guys and girls  
 are different, and New York, it's a  
 very different place.

BEN  
 Yes. Thank you. That's good  
 parenting.

SHARON  
 But she knew you were different.

TY  
Heart sees heart.

Ty puts his hand to his heart, then to his eyes, then back to his heart.

SHARON  
It's just such a shock. She wasn't that kind of girl at all. Oh my word, I can't believe I'm using past tense to describe my daughter.

A BOY, 9 or so, hugs Ben's leg.

SHARON (CONT'D)  
Don't worry, he's ours.

TY  
Are you coming back to the house?

Ben considers, then:

BEN  
I would love to. I really would. I just have a really big meeting tomorrow, and I should prep. And you know the airlines with these change fees --

TY  
You sure?

SHARON  
Ty, he just dodged a whole lifetime of dinners with his crazy Texan in-laws. He's not gonna start now.

TY  
Okay. All right. Fair enough.

SHARON  
Thank you for being here. You're welcome back anytime, our house is always open to you. Bless your heart that you could make it out here even for a minute.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY I-20 - LATER [DRIVING]

Ty drives Ben back to the airport.

BEN  
Thanks for all the driving.

TY  
 Anything for family.  
 (beat)  
 Can you believe not one of  
 Abilene's stepfathers showed up? I  
 mean, you made it all this way.  
 They can't make it from Midland or  
 Trumbull?

Ben shakes his head respectfully.

BEN  
 That's really disappointing.

TY  
 They oughta abolish Father's Day.  
 Change the name.

BEN  
 To what?

TY  
 They oughta have two holidays:  
 Mother's Day, and Motherfucker's  
 Day. That's all they ever did. And  
 that's who they tend to be.

BEN  
 Hallmark might have trouble selling  
 those.

Ty pauses, then cracks up.

TY  
 Man! Hallmark might--!! That New  
 York sense of humor, man. I love  
 it. Drier than a Mexican liquor  
 store on May 6th.

More driving.

TY (CONT'D)  
 I know it hasn't been long, but I  
 feel like you and me, we got a real  
 bond now. Like family.

BEN  
 Hundred percent.

TY  
 (intense)  
 Really? You feel that too?

BEN

Yeah.

TY

(more intense)

Promise? You really mean that?

BEN

Absolutely. My heart is completely with you.

TY

I knew it.

Ty abruptly pulls over to the side of the road.

TY (CONT'D)

Abilene was murdered. And the two of us are going to avenge her death.

BEN

What?

TY

We're going to track down her killer and deliver vengeance.

BEN

No one at the funeral said anything about a "killer."

TY

Overdose? At a party in an oil field? The girl never touched so much as an Advil in her life. You know that!

BEN

What do you think happened?

TY

(with total conviction)

Murder.

BEN

Did you call the police about this?

TY

In Texas, we don't dial 911.

BEN

...Not even for, like, a fire?

TY  
(conceding)  
Fire or ambulance, fine.

BEN  
Who do you think did it?

TY  
Could be anyone. Cartels. MS-13.  
Crime of passion.

BEN  
And why do you think this?

TY  
Gut.

BEN  
Right. What's behind that, though?

TY  
Nothing's behind gut. Gut's what's  
behind everything else. Otherwise,  
who are you?

BEN  
I really think this is something  
for the police.

TY  
You talk about "the police" like  
it's the same everywhere, like it's  
a national franchise, like  
McDonalds. We don't have the  
police. We have Mike and Dan. You  
grow up friends with Mike and Dan --  
they're the police. You have an  
incident with them back in Pee-Wee  
Football, no regrets -- they're  
just a couple of assholes.

BEN  
Regardless --

TY  
(intensity building)  
Let me explain how it works down  
here. I know something happened.  
But I've lived here my whole life,  
and no one's gonna open up to me,  
okay? But as luck would have it,  
Abby's boyfriend happens to be a  
brilliant journalist. It's fate.

(MORE)

TY (CONT'D)

You and me, we were the men in her life. This is on us. Let's do this.

BEN

Okay. As, like, a personal boundary -- I don't avenge deaths. It's just who I am. I don't live in a Liam Neeson movie.

TY

You know what, though, I was just thinking today, you look like a guy from a Liam Neeson movie. Which one was it? It was just on TV.

(beat)

Oh! *Schindler's List*. You look like a lot of guys in that, actually.

BEN

Yeah.

TY

That was my least favorite Liam Neeson movie. Huge downer.

BEN

Ty, I understand you're in a lot of pain.

TY

Yessir.

BEN

And have a lot of anger.

TY

Yessir.

BEN

And I know you feel you need closure.

TY

Yes, and I'm asking for your help. If we don't do this, it's like leaving her body in the middle of that field for the rest of our lives. I know you have it in you. Heart sees heart. Avenge Abby's death with me.

This is insane. But weirdly powerful.

BEN

Ty. I'm sorry. I gotta catch this flight.

INT. PUBLIC RADIO STUDIO - LOBBY - DAY

Posters framed on the walls: This American Life. Serial. Radiolab.

Ben taps a Moleskine notebook, eagerly awaiting his meeting. He reviews a cheat sheet of notes he's written to himself: 'Red State/Blue State: it's about time (title?). Haven't named decades - clue. Want to do something important about America. Don't be nervous -- CONFIDENCE!'

An intimidatingly stylish FKA Twigs-type ASSISTANT approaches.

ASSISTANT

Ira will see you now.

INT. PUBLIC RADIO STUDIO - HALLWAY - DAY

The assistant leads Ben down the hallway. We hear pre-lapped his pitch to Ira:

BEN (PRE-LAP)

We think of ourselves as living in a divided country. Red states, blue cities. But the answer to our division is not what we think. My theory is that --

IRA GLASS (PRE-LAP)

Stop. Stop right there.

INT. PUBLIC RADIO STUDIO - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Ben sits across from Eloise and his hero IRA GLASS, the iconic host of This American Life.

IRA GLASS

This is a theory. Okay?

ELOISE

It's a great theory.

IRA GLASS

But a theory's not a story.

BEN

Okay, but to me, a theory is a story. A story of why America --

IRA GLASS

No. Stories are personal.

Ira turns to Eloise.

IRA GLASS (CONT'D)

Every white guy in New York thinks he can shit out a podcast.

ELOISE

Ben hosts a really smart interview show, "All Talk with Ben Manalowitz," he writes for the New Yorker--

IRA GLASS

(to Ben)

Do you have a story or not?

BEN

I'm sorry, I was planning to prepare more, I was just at a funeral all weekend --

IRA GLASS

Oh my God.

ELOISE

I'm so sorry.

BEN

No, no, it's fine, it wasn't anyone important. Someone I was hooking up with, kinda. Not a big...

They stare at him. This is landing awkwardly.

IRA GLASS

(confused)

...But you were at the funeral?

BEN

Well, the family maybe thought it was more serious than I did. You know how it is.

They don't. Ben gets an idea to dig himself out of this.

BEN (CONT'D)

So, this family. They're in small town Texas. They lost their daughter to an opiate overdose. Very sad.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

But the family -- her brother,  
specifically -- won't accept it's  
an overdose. He says it was a  
murder.

ELOISE

Based on what?

BEN

*That's* the story.

They're interested.

BEN (CONT'D)

This is a family who can't accept  
the new American narrative they're  
living in. Of small towns  
crumbling, of opiates, of closing  
factories. So they put themselves  
in the old narrative: heroes and  
villains, murder and vengeance.  
Where everything can be solved with  
a gun. This is an existential crime  
story, about the death of American  
identity. This is *In Cold Blood* -  
but there are no killers. It's not  
about who killed her; it's about  
what's killing them.

This clicks.

ELOISE

(turning to Ira)

I'd produce it.

IRA GLASS

We could put a little money into  
it, see what happens.

(to Ben)

Stay with the family. Get close to  
them. Find the music of it.

BEN

I will.

IRA GLASS

Every story is personal. So, you're  
the story. You, going to Texas, for  
this story? Is the story. Or  
there's no story. Unless that's the  
story. So, that's the story. Good?

BEN

Hundred percent.

Eloise nods in agreement.

INT. BEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ben packs for Texas.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY - DAY [DRIVING]

Ty drives Ben back to the house.

TY

I knew you'd be back, brother!

BEN

So, here's the plan. I'll stay with you for two weeks. You tell me everything you can about Abilene, her life, your life, and why you think what you do. And we follow the story wherever it leads.

TY

Love it. And then we kill him.

BEN

No. Then we put it on the podcast.

Ty considers.

TY

That's even better. That's actually brilliant.

BEN

I'm glad you think so.

TY

Because once people on Reddit hear what happened, they'll kill him for us.

Ben takes a deep breath.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - EARLY EVENING

A single-story middle class home with acres of parched earth behind it. Sharon is finishing preparing a casual dinner.

TY

Look who's back!

SHARON

Ben! You made it! We are so happy to see you.

BEN

Thanks for having me back.

SHARON

(gesturing)

Please. We have this empty seat at the table, we can use all the distraction we can get. Can I get you anything?

BEN

What's the WiFi situation?

SHARON

It'll kick in, it's just temperamental. Did you get a chance to meet everyone before?

Two sisters - PARIS, 24, dressed in black, and KANSAS CITY, 17, dressed provocatively, with a blue check mark tattoo - are at the table on their phones.

SHARON (CONT'D)

These are my very talented daughters. This is Abilene's sister Paris, she's 24 fixin' to be 25. She's going to be a famous filmmaker.

PARIS

Nice to meet you.

BEN

Nice to meet you, Paris.

SHARON

And this is Kansas City. She's 17 fixin' to be 18. She's going to be our famous--

KANSAS CITY

Just famous.

SHARON

K.C., I told you, those are not our values. You have to be a famous something.

KANSAS CITY

A famous celebrity.

SHARON  
Bless your heart.

BEN  
(to Sharon)  
These are really your daughters?  
You all could be sisters.

SHARON  
Aw, you are so sweet.

KANSAS CITY  
You think I look this fucking  
old?

Ty carries over the chubby nine-year-old BOY we saw at the funeral.

TY  
And this is El Stupido.

BEN  
Sorry?

TY  
This is El Stupido.

BEN  
That's what you call him?

TY  
It's okay, he doesn't speak  
Spanish.

BEN  
(to El Stupido)  
And how old are you?

EL STUPIDO  
Nine.

BEN  
Fixin' to be 10?

El Stupido looks blankly to Ty, who nods.

EL STUPIDO  
Yessir.

SHARON  
Come on, have a seat.

Ben sits down, on someone.

GRANNY (O.S.)  
You forgot someone.

A very small OLD WOMAN is sitting there. Ben jumps back up.

BEN

So sorry --

TY

And Granny, of course. Great  
Granny, technically. Granny for  
short.

BEN

Nice to meet you, Granny.

People start informally beginning dinner.

SHARON

Do you cook much at home, Ben?

BEN

Yeah, actually. Have you heard of  
Blue Apron?

SHARON

I have not, what is that?

BEN

They deliver recipes and  
ingredients one meal at a time, so  
it's not wasteful.

SHARON

For one person?

BEN

Yeah.

SHARON

(intrigued)

One person. A home cooked meal,  
just for one person.

BEN

Exactly.

SHARON

(upbeat)

Well, that sounds sad!

KANSAS CITY

Mama, can you pass the wine?

SHARON

You can have wine when you finish  
your tequila.

GRANNY  
 (to Ben)  
 You're from Texas.

BEN  
 Oh, no, I'm not.

GRANNY  
 I'm sorry. That you're not from  
 Texas.

She's done this bit before.

SHARON  
 Have you been to Texas before?

BEN  
 Yes, actually. I was in Austin once  
 for South By Southwest.

GRANNY  
 Fer *whut*?

BEN  
 (louder)  
 South By Southwest. It's an annual  
 festival in Austin--

GRANNY  
 Fer *whut band*? You don't just go to  
 South By, you go to see a band,  
 don'cha?

BEN  
 Oh. No, I was on a panel about the  
 future of podcasting.

GRANNY  
 About *whut*?

BEN  
 (putting iPhone + mic on  
 table)  
 Speaking of: would you mind if I  
 recorded this?

PARIS  
 Not at all.

KANSAS CITY  
 I love being recorded.

GRANNY  
 You wanna hear the story of Texas?

BEN

Please.

Granny speaks into the recorder.

GRANNY

1836. Texas was a part of Mexico. Made up of settlers then, English-speaking white folk. They weren't getting along with the government, what else is new. The Texans want to do things their own way, what else is new. Well, put everyone's two favorite things together, government and Mexicans, guess what happens.

Ben glances at the recorder.

GRANNY (CONT'D)

Generalissimo Santa Ana brings in 7,000 Mexican soldiers to fight just 186 Texan rebels at a place called The Alamo.

BEN

And the Texans won. It's really inspiring.

An awkward silence.

EL STUPIDO

The Texans didn't win, Ben.

GRANNY

They teach math where you're from? 7,000 against 186?

EL STUPIDO

7,000 is more, Ben.

GRANNY

It was a massacre. Unspeakable cruelty.

BEN

I'm so sorry.

TY

But it was all part of God's grander plan for us. That's what led to the Battle of San Jacinto --

SHARON  
The capture of Santa Ana --

TY  
And, as your people say, "yadda  
yadda yadda," Texas became an  
independent Republic.

Granny is now softly weeping. She reaches her hands out to Ben for support, who takes them.

GRANNY  
We lost so many good men.

BEN  
(trying to make a joke)  
Um, hey, look on the bright side -  
now you have Alamo Rent-A-Car, the  
Alamo Drafthouse...

She cries harder.

SHARON  
(to Ben)  
Too soon.

BEN  
(to self)  
Too soon.

Ben's iPhone on the center of the table goes off with a text.

EL STUPIDO  
(reading)  
Who's "Equinox Girl Cute"?

BEN  
Friend.

EL STUPIDO  
Who's "Paris Review Party Asian"?

TY  
Very good reading!

The phone keeps chiming.

BEN  
(re: phone, embarrassed)  
I guess the WiFi just kicked in--

EL STUPIDO  
Who's "Natalie Raya"? Who's "Katie  
Raya?"

GRANNY

Raya?

BEN

(re: phone, embarrassed)

Let me put that on "Airplane" --

Ben silences the phone.

GRANNY

Thought Raya was supposed to be exclusive.

Granny and Ben stare at each other for a beat, trying to figure the other out.

SHARON

So what do you think of this place so far?

BEN

(overly polite)

I love it.

PARIS

You love it?

KANSAS CITY

*What?*

KANSAS CITY (CONT'D)

You know this town doesn't even have its own Snapchat filter? Holliston, where the rodeo is, that's a three-filter town.

SHARON

But no place to raise a family.

TY

Ben, you gotta understand something 'bout this place. This is the most wretched, godforsaken stretch of land on the face of the Earth. And I would never leave. You know what I mean?

BEN

Yeah. That's how I feel about Twitter.

TY

(to family)

Ben's gonna help us figure out what happened to Abilene and set it right.

(MORE)

TY (CONT'D)

I was saying we should go out and solve it with a .45, but Ben brings a whole new perspective to the situation.

GRANNY

Can't solve something like that with a .45. It's not as simple as one person. It's the whole system. The whole system.

BEN

What do you mean, Granny?

GRANNY

It's the breakdown of society. It's the school system. It's government. Pharmaceutical companies. It's the breakdown of church, and family, and public education. Of people taking care of each other. A whole lot of people are responsible for what happened to Abilene. It's a society-wide problem.

BEN

I think your Granny's very wise.

GRANNY

You're gonna need a 12-gauge, couple'a AR's, a Wesson automatic, a sidearm for safety --

BEN

No, no, I don't think we should do that.

GRANNY

Yeah, I didn't think you had the balls. First cousin to Moses Rose over here.

EL STUPIDO

Are you gonna help us, Ben?

All eyes on Ben.

BEN

I have a very specific set of skills, acquired over the course of my career. I can ask the right questions. I can get people talking. I can draw thematic connections.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

And I have an intuitive sense of narrative. So whoever might or might not be responsible for what happened, I will find this person, or societal force. And then?

(beat)

I will define him, or her, or them, or it -- vividly, and unforgettably.

Everyone nods, disappointed, but polite.

SHARON

Bless your heart.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ty shows Ben the room.

TY

I guess we have a guest room now.

He pauses, overcome with feeling.

TY (CONT'D)

You know what a diorama is? What am I talking about - you're a writer, you probably make dioramas all the time.

BEN

I know what they are.

TY

This is like if you made a diorama of a book called "Sadness."

BEN

Ty, I can't imagine.

TY

(shaking it off)

Rest up good, we'll meet up in the morning and start to solve this.

BEN

See you in the morning. Good night, Ty.

TY

Good night. Love you.

BEN  
... Love you too.

Ty leaves.

Ben settles into Abilene's room. It's charming, it's sad, it's the room of a real person. There are photos up of Abilene and her siblings, and several of Abilene and Ben.

On the bedside table is a bag marked by the police. Ben opens it: it's the items recovered from Abilene at the party. A purse, and some stray items: coins, a Pez dispenser, her cell phone. Ben tries some passwords on the phone to no avail.

Ben lies on the bed and opens his laptop. Many windows open: email, messaging apps, documents.

Messages from John: "Coming to this thing tonight? Fashion week afterparty [jpeg invite]" Ben responds: "I wish. In TX for research." Another chat pops up from Sara(h)(?) Conde Nast Party (hot): "Hey! Missed your last text. Free tonight? [sly emoji]" Ben sighs, then closes that window too.

Ben types "Abilene" into his computer's search. A lot of conversations come up. Ben scrolls through them.

And she sort of comes to life.

ON THE LAPTOP SCREEN:

A: *Hi hi. Am I bothering you again?*

B: *No just writing what's up?*

A: *I just like talking to you. And also I think I want to cover this song. Will you tell me what you think? [link]*

B: *your voice would sound great singing anything! [kiss face emoji]*

A: *Just click it!*

B: *sorry bad connection. I'm sure it's great! [big smile emoji]*

A: *UGH. fix your router your connection is always [dead face emoji]*

B: *Haha will do. gtg xx*

A: *Will you listen though? I love your opinions.*

B: *Will do. xx*

Ben now clicks the link. It's her cover of "I'm So Lonely I Could Cry." It plays under the rest of the scene as Ben keeps scrolling through other conversations.

A: *Hi from Texas! Here's me and my family. They all want to meet you. [more photos]*

B: *so cute*

A: *[blushing emoji] How's writing going?*

B: *you know. Same. Come back to NY and make out with me.*

A: *I will on Friday! Can we do something fun this weekend?*

B: *Hey... you around?*

A: *Huh?*

B: *Oh, sorry, typed that by mistake. I have a lot of writing this wknd so not sure but let's play by ear*

A: *Facetime?*

B: *Sorry bad connection. See you soon?*

A: *Yes!*

The whole thing is a little hard for Ben to take. Ben closes the window. Googles "Moses Rose." Wikipedia: "Louis 'Moses' Rose was, according to Texas legend, the only man who chose to leave the besieged Alamo in 1836 rather than fight and die there."

A window pops up from Eloise: "Hey! How's it going so far? FaceTime?" Ben responds: *sorry, bad connection. Soon?*

Ben closes the computer, stares in the dark.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben unpacks a Chemex coffee maker from a travel case. Kansas City enters.

BEN

Good morning, K.C. Would you like some coffee?

KANSAS CITY

Sure.

BEN

How do you take it?

KANSAS CITY  
Uh... in the *mouth*?

Ty enters.

TY  
Ready?

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY - DAY [DRIVING]

TY  
I'mma take you to one of my  
favorite spots to chill out.

BEN  
Great. Show me everything.

EXT. SHOOTING RANGE - PARKING LOT - DAY

Ty's truck pulls into the parking lot.

INT. SHOOTING RANGE - FRONT DESK - DAY

Ty walks Ben to the front desk of a shooting range. Loud gunfire all around. Ben is uncomfortable. The DESK CLERK hands them both paper targets, printed with a man in a sombrero.

BEN  
I don't -- I don't feel comfortable  
with this one.

TY  
What's wrong with it?

BEN  
I don't want to deliberately -- do  
you have non-sombrero?

The Desk Clerk pushes forward a target of a woman with an afro.

BEN (CONT'D)  
No. No.

DESK CLERK  
What's wrong?

BEN  
I want just a regular white guy.  
Just a regular guy.

DESK CLERK

These people aren't regular to you?

Two employees, an AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN and a MAN IN A SOMBRERO peek over to see what the commotion is about. Ben grabs the original target.

EXT. SHOOTING RANGE - SHOOTING AREA - DAY

Gunfire all around.

TY

You really never shot a gun before?

BEN

Tell me absolutely everything about gun safety, okay? I just really need to err on the side of safety.

TY

Line up your sight here. Get your non-dominant thumb on the outside of your grip.

BEN

Got it.

TY

And remember the Alamo.

BEN

(beat)

How important is that?

TY

Most important part.

Ben puts the gun down.

TY (CONT'D)

What? What is it?

BEN

I forgot the Alamo.

TY

What? Granny went over the whole thing just last night.

BEN

I remember what happened -- just, why is it important right now?

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

Did something go wrong with their guns or something? Did their guns jam?

TY

Are you for real right now?

BEN

I just want to super err on the side of caution, okay?

TY

The Alamo is where Texas showed its true heart. When that massacre went down, Texas didn't retreat. Texas didn't say,

(“mature liberal” voice)

“Oh, how sad, what a complicated world, let's all be sure not to have Mexiphobia.” We said, “Remember the Alamo.” By the time of the Battle of San Jacinto, one month later, Texas won the war in eighteen minutes flat. Texas invented vengeance.

Ben focuses, aims, and fires.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY - DAY [DRIVING]

BEN

I saw Abilene's phone in her bedroom. You don't have any idea what her password is, do you?

TY

Called every Apple Genius Bar in the state. They said no one can get into the phone, not even the FBI.

BEN

Oh, that's good to hear.

(catching himself)

I mean, in the larger scheme of things. Privacy, encryption.

Suddenly Ty swerves towards an oncoming car which swerves towards him. Then they swerve away.

BEN (CONT'D)

What was that?

TY

That's what we do when we recognize someone in town. Our way of saying hi. It's either that, or this. "Hi-sign."

Ty does a tiny little index-finger wave.

BEN

I like that one. Subtle.

Ty cracks up.

TY

"Subtle." I like that about you, brother. That's one thing we don't get too much of down here.

EXT. OIL FIELD - DAY

Ty continues to show Ben around. Now we're at a vast expanse of an oil field. Ty drinks a beer. Ben records Ty.

TY

There's really two versions of life out here. Boom times, everybody's rich, and busy. Bust times, everyone's gone. High school even cuts in half. It's always either boom or bust.

BEN

What's it right now?

TY

Kinda in between. It's in between a lot, too, tell 'truth --

A stringy, intense man, CRAWL, sneaks up and TACKLES Ty.

TY (CONT'D)

Crawl! There you are, fucker!  
There's our worm.

CRAWL

This the guy you're gonna avenge Abilene with?

TY

Yup.

BEN

Just going to investigate it.

Crawl grabs the recorder and speaks directly into it.

CRAWL

Let me save you some time.  
Sancho. Sancho. Murdered.  
Abilene. End of investigation.

BEN

Who's Sancho?

CRAWL

Mexican drug dealer. Oxy, meth --  
you name it, he's got it. Not crazy  
about his prices, though.

TY

Of course it was Sancho--

BEN

Why "of course"?--

TY

Ben needs to make a whole podcast.  
He needs details. Twists, turns,  
comic relief - which is probably  
you, fucker! Then it ends with  
Sancho. Boom!

CRAWL

Are you sure it should be a  
podcast? I gotta say, I think this  
would make a damn good movie.

TY

Good luck finding someone ugly  
enough to play you.

CRAWL

Fuck you!

TY

Fuck you!

CRAWL

Fuck you!

TY

Fuck you!

They start wrestling while standing up.

BEN

So, Crawl? Crawl? Tell me more  
about Sancho.

CRAWL

I've known Abilene since we were knee-high to a grasshopper. Girl never touched so much as an Advil. Girl was not trouble. If she was, I'da known it.

TY

Crawl knows trouble.

CRAWL

(intense)

I know trouble.

Crawl stares at Ben a beat too long.

CRAWL (CONT'D)

Then out of the blue, they find this angel -- this *angel* -- dead of an oxy overdose at a party thrown by a Mexican drug dealer? And more 'an that, Sancholo's been obsessed with Abilene since middle school. Ob-sessed.

TY

Called our house to talk to her every night since seventh grade.

BEN

Really.

TY

Every night.

BEN

And you haven't talked to the cops about any of this?

CRAWL

(dismissive)

Mike and Dan?

Ty gestures: see?

CRAWL (CONT'D)

Everything's an accident anyway to those lazy fucktards. Drug accident, gun accident. Keeps their stats healthy, keeps highway funding.

BEN

You know where I can find this guy,  
Sancho?lo?

CRAWL

Assume he'll be at the rodeo  
Friday.

TY

Everyone'll be there.

CRAWL

(to Ty)

This is really the guy you wanted  
to avenge her with? I'm like a  
brother to you.

TY

He's like a brother-in-law. And  
he's smart. You'd make some stupid  
mistake and get caught, fucker.

CRAWL

(to Ben)

You ever even been in a fight?

BEN

(beat)

You mean, like, physical fights? Or  
like comments sections? Because  
things can get pretty int --

Crawl leaps at Ben with a fake punch -- a flinch test. Ben  
ducks, flinches hard, fails the test.

CRAWL

(laughs, to Ty)

Yeah, good luck with him.

(to Ben)

You know where you are, son? Want  
me to show you a map?

Crawl bends down his pinky and ring finger so that his hand  
makes the shape of Texas.

CRAWL (CONT'D)

Welcome to Texas.

He rotates the "map of Texas" so that it becomes a finger  
gun, and aims it at Ben.

CRAWL (CONT'D)

You. Are. Here.

Crawl "fires" at Ben. Ben is unnerved. Ty tries to smooth it over.

TY

Aw, you don't have to worry about Crawl. He wouldn't hurt a fly.

Crawl keeps staring at Ben.

CRAWL

Never understood that phrase. I would *never* hurt a fly. Never. I'd kill a fly. But what kind of sick fuck would hurt a fly? Make it feel pain?

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY - DAY [DRIVING]

Ty drives. Ben records.

BEN

Interesting character.

TY

(laughing)

I'll give you that. I'm used to it. We've been friends since we were tiny tots. Shooting things, blowing shit up.

BEN

That a common activity here? Blowing things up?

TY

I mean, sure. If it's the weekend, there's not a game on, why not?

BEN

Crawl sounded pretty intense about Abilene.

TY

That was his childhood crush. He grew up thinking he'd marry her.

BEN

Till when?

TY

Till now.

(beat)

That was pretty common, too.

(MORE)

TY (CONT'D)

Half the town was in love with Abilene. Small town. And she sure was something.

BEN

You described Sancholo as a "Mexican drug dealer."

TY

Yessir.

BEN

You also said he called your house every night since seventh grade.

TY

Yessir.

BEN

So if he grew up here, why describe him as Mexican? Isn't he American?

TY

I mean, half the people here are Mexican, ancestrally. Probably more. Rodriguez, Jimenez -- those are all-American names out here. For generations.

BEN

Right, so the question is, why describe some of those people as "Mexican" and some not?

TY

(thinking)

I guess you just kind of have a sense, you know? I don't know what you'd call it.

(then)

I like questions like that. Is that the kind of thing that could make the podcast?

BEN

That's *exactly* the kind of thing that could make the podcast.

More driving, scenery.

ELOISE (PRE-LAP)

The stuff you've uploaded so far is amazing.

INT./EXT. ALAMO RENTAL CAR - DAY

Ben signs paperwork, drives off in a rented Prius.

BEN (PRE-LAP)

Yeah?

INT. TEXAS DINER - DAY

Ben sits at a table with his laptop, iPad, iPhone, Molekines, and multiple chargers and cords. He gets a few stares.

ELOISE (PRE-LAP)

I mean: Crawl! Granny! They're really opening up. You get a sense of color and character. And mindset. And I'm finding some great material on theme.

BEN (PRE-LAP)

Yeah?

INT. PUBLIC RADIO OFFICES - ELOISE'S OFFICE - DAY - INTERCUT

Eloise, in Manhattan, on the phone. She has index cards on the wall and reading material in front of her, highlighted.

ELOISE

Vengeance is a unique phenomenon. Evolutionarily speaking, there's no explanation for it. Every other primal human instinct -- lust, ambition, fear -- directs us to a clear reward in the future.

EXT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - DAY - INTERCUT

Ben paces in the backyard, on the phone with Eloise.

ELOISE

But vengeance is different. It's only about the past.

BEN

It's about regret. Correcting a regret.

ELOISE

Exactly.

BEN

It means you care about something so much, you'll take an action that has no benefit to you.

ELOISE

It's as irrational as love.

BEN

Yeah. Nice.

Eloise puts her materials down, contemplates, excited.

ELOISE

This could really be a definitional story about vengeance. Why we need it. Why we look for it when it's not there.

BEN

What about the past we need to confront.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - DAY

Family hanging out. Ben on his laptop, recorder out.

BEN

Explain the gun thing to me.

SHARON

Oh, we're not a big gun family at all. We have maybe a couple rifles for targets, a couple of handguns for safety, and the AR that came free with Ty's truck.

BEN

That doesn't concern you?

SHARON

Why would that concern us?

BEN

There's this playwright, Anton Chekhov, who said that if you have a gun in Act One of a play, it has to go off in Act Three.

PARIS

What does he know about that?

BEN

Meaning there's an inevitability --

PARIS

There's not a gun I can think of in any of his plays. Cherry Orchard, Uncle Vanya, Seagull -- where are the guns?

BEN

I'm not actually that familiar with his plays, I just --

PARIS

I was filming a version of Three Sisters with the three of us sisters. No guns in that.

BEN

Really. Will you send that to me?

PARIS

Mm hmm.

BEN

So Ty mentioned something about a factory where Abilene was hanging out?

SHARON

Factory?

KANSAS CITY

Q. Sellers Music Factory.

INT. Q. SELLERS MUSIC FACTORY - RECORDING ROOM - DAY

A TEENAGER nods along to a country instrumental track.

TEENAGER

Yeah... Mmm hmm.. yeah...--

Q. SELLERS, a magnetic presence, radiating intelligence and charisma, watches under a large pair of headphones. He gestures to a SOUND ENGINEER to cut the music. Q. slides his chair over. Ben watches, riveted.

Q. SELLERS

What is music to you?

TEENAGER

Like, singing and stuff.

Q. SELLERS

Yeah. That's right. But let's take a step back.

He takes off his headphones.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

There's an idea I want to share with you.

He takes her hands in his.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

There is no argument more profound than how the universe came into existence. Are we here because of God? Or science? It is, by its nature, the most fundamental question. You may have even heard your own family arguing about it around the dinner table.

TEENAGER

Or when the black man came on after Family Guy.

Q. SELLERS

But there's one thing - one thing about it - that everyone agrees on.

She is rapt. So is Ben.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

Whether it was God declaring "Let there be light" or a particle of infinite energy bursting forth in a big bang, the one thing that everyone - everyone - believes is that *the universe started with a sound.*

(beat)

And every sound that has been made since then is part of that single, continuing, unbroken record of the universe.

(gesturing around the studio)

Why do I call myself a record producer when we don't make records anymore?

TEENAGER

(laughing shyly)

I'dunno.

She nervously bites a Pez from a dispenser. Q. leans in and takes her hands again.

Q. SELLERS

What we're making isn't your record. It's *your sound* on the *record* that started with the first moment of time.

The teenager nods, tears in her eyes.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

Every record we record is our record of existence. So when you sing this song, I want you to think about how what you're making is the record of your time on earth. It's the sound you scratch, with your life, on the record of the universe. Okay?

The teenager nods, wipes away tears, and hugs Q. He puts the headphones back on and motions to the Sound Engineer to start the beat again. The teenager resumes her place at the microphone and belts out a beautiful fragment:

TEENAGER

*"I finished my shift at Claire's...  
Walked up those steep mall  
stairs..."*

EXT. Q. SELLERS MUSIC FACTORY - LATER

Q. walks Ben through his indoor-outdoor complex. Ben records.

Q. SELLERS

I named it the Factory after Andy Warhol's Factory. But everyone here thinks it's a reference to the C & C Music Factory. Which, of course, Warhol would have loved.

BEN

(laughing)  
Right.

Q. SELLERS

I'm from out here, then I went to college at -- well, I went to college in New Haven.

BEN

Nice. I went to school in Boston.

Q. SELLERS

At first I assumed I'd open up in New York, but this is the place that needs it more. The desperation you see out here -- it isn't a lack of intelligence, or creativity, or energy. It's an excess.

BEN

Tell me more.

Q. SELLERS

If the landscape were boring and the people were boring, you wouldn't have a problem. The problem is, you have all these bright, creative lights with nowhere to put their energy. That's why you see it channeled into conspiracy theories, drugs, violence.

They round a corner.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

Who are your favorite musicians right now?

BEN

(thinking)

Um... well...

Q. SELLERS

Can I take a guess? I think you have favorite music, but not favorite musicians. You're a song-to-song person. You hear a song, put it on a playlist --

BEN

Yes!

Q. SELLERS

And you don't even know who sings it.

BEN

Yes!

Q. SELLERS

It's not just you. And it's not just music. We're in the playlist era.

(MORE)

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

We don't pay attention to whole people -- we pay attention to the pieces of them that benefit us at a given time. And look at social media: people have favorite sentences now, not favorite books; favorite images, not favorite movies. Do you think half these kids posting Oscar Wilde quotes have ever read one of his plays? Or have ever seen an Audrey Hepburn movie?

BEN

Yeah! What is that about?

Q. SELLERS

It's the same in culture as it is in archaeology: when a civilization collapses, only the smallest fragments survive.

This guy is water in the desert to Ben. He stares at his recorder.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

But there's a way we can build it back up again.

BEN

How?

Q. SELLERS

By making recordings that reveal real people. Complete people.

(re: self)

Not a catchy song.

(re: Ben)

Not a funny stereotype.

(beat)

Real people.

This advice affects Ben.

EXT. Q. SELLERS MUSIC FACTORY - DAY - A LITTLE LATER

Q. hands Ben a flash drive.

Q. SELLERS

Abilene.

BEN

Thank you.

Q. SELLERS

All the stuff we recorded. There's some true beauty in there.

BEN

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I never even heard her sing.

Q. SELLERS

You're in for a treat. Doesn't she have a little sister, too, wants to be a singer?

BEN

(amused)

Wants to be famous.

Q. SELLERS

(sincere)

That just means she knows she's somebody, but doesn't know who yet. We'll find her voice.

Beat.

BEN

What about mine?

(shy)

I mean, what advice would you give me, if I came in? About my writing, the podcast I'm working on?

Q. SELLERS

No one ever writes anything. All we can do is translate. So if you ever find yourself stuck on what to say - - listen. Listen to the world as hard as you can. Then repeat back exactly what you heard. And that translation is your voice.

BEN

I think that's like the best advice I've ever heard.

Q. SELLERS

Welcome to Texas.

Q. makes the same finger gesture Crawl did: bends down his fingers to make the shape of Texas, then turns it into a gun and play-fires it at Ben. This time, it's friendly. Ben does the same thing back.

INT./EXT. BEN'S PRIUS/HIGHWAY - DAY [DRIVING]

Ben talks to Eloise via Bluetooth.

BEN

(energized)

There's so much more here than I imagined. Contradictions everywhere. Texas is a character. The characters are characters. And I got a lot of good audio of the girl.

ELOISE (V.O.)

Amazing. Send when you can. So I'm piecing together some threads.

INT. ELOISE'S OFFICE - DAY - INTERCUT

Eloise is organizing her office wall, covered with colored timecoded index cards tracking different story threads and themes so far (i.e. Race, Drugs, Sancho, Oil/Economics, etc.)

ELOISE

There are so many themes and ways this could go. It's fantastic. This guy that Crawl mentions, Sancho --

BEN

They say he'll be at the rodeo.

ELOISE

Great. Great. Whatever happens when you meet him, that could play into any number of directions.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ben watches video of Abilene's performances. He's captivated. Her singing is beautiful, full of personality.

ABILENE (ON VIDEO)

Elvis Presley called this the saddest song he ever heard in his life. Well, I don't know if it's 'cause it's so beautiful, or 'cause there's something wrong with me, but it's a happy song to me.

(singing)

(MORE)

ABILENE (ON VIDEO) (CONT'D)  
*Hear that lonesome whippoorwill /  
 He sounds too blue to fly / The  
 midnight train is whining low / I'm  
 so lonesome I could cry...  
 I've never seen a night so long /*

El Stupido knocks and enters, aiming a gun directly at Ben.  
 Ben freezes in fear.

EL STUPIDO  
 Will you help me unjam my gun?

BEN  
 ...I don't know how to do that.

El Stupido does it himself.

EL STUPIDO  
 (smirking)  
 They oughta call you El Stupido.

BEN  
 Why'd you ask for my help if you  
 could do it yourself?

EL STUPIDO  
 Cuz I wanted something for us to do  
 together. Can I sleep on your  
 floor?

BEN  
 Yeah. Of course.

EL STUPIDO  
 I promise not to cry too much.

EXT. RODEO PARKING LOT - THE NEXT DAY, EARLY EVENING

Twilight outside a rodeo is beautiful. COUPLES and FAMILIES  
 and KIDS mingling, snacks being sold.

Ben walks in with Ty, Paris, and Kansas City. Ben is dressed  
 so he's only subtly out-of-place in jeans and a Rag & Bone  
 plaid shirt, in a world of Wranglers, oversized belt buckles,  
 and cowboy hats. Ty spots a food stand.

TY  
 Oh hell yes. Deep fried Twinkies.  
 Ben, you want to try one of these?  
 (to food stand guy)  
 Five deep fried Twinkies, please.

BEN  
 (to food stand guy)  
 Can we get one of those grilled?

EXT. RODEO - LATER

The family is seated in the outdoor arena.

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
 Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I'm your announcer, West Huggins, welcome to the Holliston rodeo. We say a special hello to our sponsors, Stetson Energy; McGuane Energy; Trailways Energy Company; Rawson Energy; the T & B Energy Company; Panhandle Energy; Andrew & Sons Hardware, an Energy Corporation; Anderton Energy Transport; Donahue Energy; and the Q. Sellers Music Factory, making dreams come true since 2016. Now riding out on their six white horses carrying the six flags of Texas, our beautiful riders...

Six white horses with flags ride out. Ty covers Ben's eyes.

TY  
 The six flags of Texas are the six countries that Texas has belonged to. Can you name all six?

BEN  
 Hmm. Okay. U.S. Mexico. Spain? France. Oh! Republic of Texas! That's five...

Ben draws a blank and Ty removes his hand from Ben's eyes. Ben sees the flag he missed: the Confederate flag.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 Right.

TY  
 Five, though! Not bad, brother!

BEN  
 So, wait, is the park "Six Flags"--

TY  
 Exactly! That's a Texas company!

BEN  
So one of the six flags is--

TY  
K.C.'s got a boyfriend in the  
roping competition.

KANSAS CITY  
He is not my boyfriend.

TY & PARIS  
(teasing)  
"K.C.'s got a boyfriend, K.C.'s got  
a boyfriend."

KANSAS CITY  
(mortified)  
Shhhh! He's not my boyfriend! He's  
just a boy that I fuck!

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
Ladies and gentlemen, if you're a  
real Texan, you know what to do  
when this song plays...

The organist plays an instrumental version of "Deep in the Heart of Texas." At the key part everyone claps four times except for Ben. Ben opens his phone and tries to discretely Shazam the song. A MAN behind them notices.

MAN  
.... Did you just try to Shazam  
"Deep in the Heart of Texas?"

BEN  
No.

People nearby look over. Ben notices guns on nearly everyone.

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
Okay, now, ladies and gentleman:  
who here is a die-hard fan of the  
University of Texas?

Ben stands up and cheers - alone.

BEN  
YEAHHHHHHH!

Ben gets some looks.

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
And who here is a fan of Texas  
Tech?

The whole crowd ROARS. Ben sits down quickly.

RODEO ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)  
 Okay, let's hear from both sides.  
 Can we have the UT fan come down?

Everyone points to Ben. He reluctantly heads down to the arena.

RODEO ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)  
 And let's get a Texas Tech fan!

Many volunteers. An enthusiastic MAN jumps into the arena.

RODEO ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)  
 (to Ben)  
 What's your name, son?

BEN  
 Ben Manalowitz.

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
 What the hoozit?

The crowd laughs. The RODEO CLOWN plays a sound effect.

RODEO ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)  
 And what'd'ya do, son?

BEN  
 I'm primarily a writer.

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
 A rider! You don't look like a rider. What'd'ya ride, son?

BEN  
 Hm?

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
 Lotta *kinds* of riding! D'ya ride horses, steer, tractors?

RODEO CLOWN (OVER P.A.)  
 Women.

A goofy sound effect plays over the P.A. The crowd laughs.

RODEO CLOWN (OVER P.A.) (CONT'D)  
 Men.

A goofy sound effect plays. The crowd laughs harder.

BEN  
No, I'm not a--

RODEO CLOWN (OVER P.A.)  
Little boys.

A goofy sound effect plays. The crowd laughs even harder.

BEN  
No. I'm not a rider. I'm a writer.  
A writer.  
(beat; off his blank  
stare)  
Like, if you come across a book, or  
an article online...  
(off his silence)  
Or like, even if a tractor says  
"John Deere" on it, someone has to  
write--

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
I know what a "writer" is, you  
condescending asshole!

The crowd boos.

RODEO ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)  
And tell me, Shakespeare, what do  
you like so much about the  
(lispng mockingly)  
"University of Texas?"

The crowd boos.

BEN  
Okay. Well, it's a state school, so  
I like that it gives opportunities  
to local people who need financial  
aid. And I hear it has a strong  
film department--

RODEO ANNOUNCER  
Uh huh. Okay.  
(to other guy)  
And what do you like about Texas  
Tech?

TEXAS TECH FAN  
QUARTERBACK MATT HARRIS!!!!!!

Triumphant music plays, crowd roars.

EXT. HONKY TONK - LATER - NIGHT

A big open-air bar circling a line-dancing floor. The music alternates between modern country and hip hop. Two ROWDY STRANGERS approach Ben to taunt him.

ROWDY STRANGER

(re: Ben)

Hey! It's the Longhorns fan!

TY

(protecting him)

Hey, it's the why don't you fuck the fuck off.

A dance anthem (e.g., "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk") starts. Kansas City runs out to the dance floor to join in. Ben stares at the huge MASS OF PEOPLE line dancing in unison.

TY (CONT'D)

You ever see anything like that?

Ben shakes his head.

BEN

It's kind of like a Bar Mitzvah, actually, but so much bigger.

TY

Everything's bigger in Texas.

(then)

There's our man. Sancholo.

He nods his head towards a man, SANCHOLO, in the corner, with an ASSOCIATE. Ben steps towards him.

TY (CONT'D)

You want my gun?

BEN

You brought a gun?

TY

(concerned)

Uh oh. Didn't I?

(checking pockets; by rote)

"Keys, phone, wallet, gun..." Yep. All yours.

BEN

(re: gun)

No thank you.

He approaches Sancholo. A good journalist, this is one of Ben's areas of confidence.

BEN (CONT'D)

Heard you were a good guy to know.

SANCHOLO

I got enough friends, faggot.

BEN

Just want to talk.

SANCHOLO

Mama taught me not to talk to strangers.

BEN

Just want to ask a couple questions.

SANCHOLO

Are you a cop?

BEN

I'm not a cop.

SANCHOLO

Cop doesn't have to say he's a cop.

BEN

Then why did you ask?

SANCHOLO

You're wasting my time, figured I might as well waste yours.

BEN

Look. I'm not here to get you in trouble, all right? I'm a journalist. Obviously I know how to protect a source. This isn't my first rodeo.

EL STUPIDO

But it is, Ben. It *is* your first rodeo.

Ben turns to see Ty and El Stupido.

BEN

Technically this is the first rodeo I've been to.

SANCHOLO  
What'd'ya you think?

BEN  
I really liked it. I liked the  
community spirit.

SANCHOLO  
It's a good energy, isn't it?  
Wholesome.

TY  
You fucking killer.

Sanchole's associate steps to Ty. Sanchole waves him off.

SANCHOLO  
Go easy on him. He lost his sister,  
poor thing. Most beautiful girl in  
Texas. Lucky me: her last breath  
was on my shoulder.

Ty charges Sanchole. Sanchole's associate decks Ty, knocking  
him to the ground. El Stupido charges the Associate.  
Commotion -- the fight looks to escalate. Ben scoops up El  
Stupido to protect him and defuse it.

BEN  
I knew her. Abilene. In New York.  
My name's Ben Manalowitz, I'm doing  
a podcast about her.

SANCHOLO  
What'd you say your name was?

BEN  
Ben Manalowitz.

Sanchole gestures to the alley outside. Ty gets up and tries  
to follow. Sanchole's Associate stops him.

SANCHOLO  
(to Ben)  
Just you, amigo.

Ben follows into the dark alley.

EXT. ALLEY OUTSIDE THE RODEO - MOMENTS LATER

It's dark now. Sanchole and his associate lead Ben down a  
deserted path to a small shed. The Associate frisks Ben and  
takes his iPhone. A SECOND ASSOCIATE blows an enormous cloud  
of vapor at Ben as he crosses his path.

INT. SHED OUTSIDE THE RODEO - A LITTLE LATER

Ben sits on a chair across from Sancho.

SANCHOLO

You're Ben.

Sancho reaches over to Ben for support and sobs - a messy, deep cry. Ben is surprised but comforts him.

SANCHOLO (CONT'D)

(through sobs)

I miss her so much. The way she talked. The way she sang. I'm just happy to be with someone who understands.

He takes a moment to catch his breath.

SANCHOLO (CONT'D)

In junior high, my Mom wouldn't let me read *Harry Potter* because of church stuff, so I would call her every night, and Abby would read it to me over the phone. All seven books. And when I first knew things were different with me, I talked to her. Only her. Still only her. No one else here would understand. I knew she would.

(tears again)

I don't know what made her care about me. I'd say why me? I'm just an effing dropout drug dealer. She'd say "heart sees heart."

BEN

You said she died in front of your eyes?

SANCHOLO

I wasn't even there. I was in Tulsa to see Adele.

BEN

Adele?

Sancho takes his phone out and shows a picture.

SANCHOLO

This is me that night.

Ben looks at the photo: a selfie of Sancho and another MAN smiling wide at an Adele concert.

SANCHOLO (CONT'D)

She was there just one night. Me and Clayton, we had to go. I had my guys throw a party. I knew everyone would be too fucked up to know I wasn't at my own party.

BEN

You were at a concert. And you'd rather people think you were throwing a party where...

(to self)

This fucking part of the country.

SANCHOLO

Tell anyone about this conversation and I'll kill you. I mean it.

Ben stares at the photo again.

SANCHOLO (CONT'D)

She opened with "Hello," it was fucking nuts.

BEN

I'm sure.

SANCHOLO

I texted Abby pictures from it all night. They went through green, like her phone was off. Do you have her phone?

BEN

It's locked.

SANCHOLO

She never would have gone to one of those parties. All she cared about was music, and her family. An overdose? At a fucking field party? What they say happened, it isn't her. Not Abilene.

Ben takes this in, his whole theory turned on its head.

EXT. ALLEY OUTSIDE THE RODEO - MOMENTS LATER

Sancho's Associate hands Ben his phone back.

SANCHOLO'S ASSOCIATE

You're at 11%, bro. You might want to switch to low power mode.

BEN  
Thank you.

EXT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - BACKYARD - THE NEXT DAY

BEN  
(on phone)  
She was murdered.

ELOISE (V.O.)  
What?

BEN  
Either she died at a party she  
never would have gone to, from a  
drug she never would have taken --  
or, the drug dealer responsible  
wants me to think that. So, either  
way --

INT. ELOISE'S OFFICE - DAY - INTERCUT

ELOISE  
Okay, give me a second here. I  
thought this was about a girl who  
overdosed and a family who couldn't  
accept it.

BEN  
This wasn't just some girl. This  
was a talented young woman who  
never went to parties like this,  
never touched so much as an Advil.  
Then one night, all of a sudden,  
she's found dead of an overdose at  
a party no one saw her at? Does  
that sound normal to you?

ELOISE  
Yes? I'm sorry, it does. It sounds  
like America.

ELOISE (CONT'D)  
What do the police say?

BEN  
(dismissive)  
Mike and Dan? I'll see, but given  
their reputation I wouldn't put too  
much stock in that.

ELOISE

I thought this was about the meaning of vengeance, the essence.

BEN

That was a theory. This is a story. And it has everything. Drugs, race, an actual unsolved murder. And the more people learn about Abilene, the more they're gonna fall in love with her.

ELOISE

(getting into it)

Okay. All right. I'll make some new cards. These stories are never what you expect, are they?

BEN

Everything's bigger in Texas.

INT. POLICE DEPARTMENT - DAY

Ben sits across from two officers, MIKE and DAN. They are just as Ty described: uncooperative, hostile.

MIKE

Well, look, Dan. It's the Longhorns fan.

DAN

Indeed it is, Mike, indeed it is.

BEN

That was-- I'm not even a football fan, really, I was just trying to fit in.

DAN

Funny way to fit in 'round here.

MIKE

You from Austin?

BEN

New York.

Dan lets out a long whistle.

MIKE

Tell you something. My cousin played for Texas Tech. Now he's fightin' for our country.

BEN  
I'm grateful for his service.

MIKE  
He ain't no hero. He's an asshole.

BEN  
Okay. Sorry to hear that.

MIKE  
S'what makes him such a good  
goddamn Marine.

BEN  
(knowing he can't win)  
Right. I'd love to ask you a couple  
questions about Abilene Shaw--

MIKE OD'd. Accident. DAN

BEN  
Yes, I know that was the report.  
Were you able to talk to anyone  
about the night she died?

MIKE  
(laughs)  
You ever been to a party out by the  
pumpjacks? Everybody goes, and  
nobody was there.

DAN  
I wasn't there.

MIKE  
I wasn't there.

They share a laugh.

DAN  
Why you so interested? You her  
boyfriend or something?

BEN  
Yeah.

DAN  
Yeah?

MIKE  
You know 90% of the time, it's the  
boyfriend who did it.

BEN

...I wasn't really her boyfriend.

MIKE

This guy's story is starting to sound a little inconsistent, Dan.

DAN

Swiss cheese.

BEN

I'm not trying to question your work. I'm just trying to help the family.

MIKE

You can start by telling Ty Shaw not to go helmet to helmet during a scrimmage when the boy's father's in the crowd. That kinda shit can fuck up family dynamics for the rest of their lives.

DAN

What's the other brother's name? Li'l Dumbass?

BEN

That's not his name.

DAN

What's his name?

Beat.

BEN

Who else do you think I could talk to?

MIKE

Awww. Feeling lonely out here? Got them Lone Star blues? There's some numbers on the wall of the men's room at Chuy's Tacos, supposedly you can call them for a good time.

DAN

Mike, ain't that how you met your wife?

MIKE

Fuck you.

DAN

Fuck you.

From the back of the room, another officer, JIMENEZ, unseen until now:

JIMENEZ

Sheriff'll talk.

Mike and Dan smirk.

DAN

Ain't that a fact.

JIMENEZ

This ain't even our jurisdiction anyways. Party's outside city limits, so that's county, not city. County is Sheriff.

BEN

This is helpful. I'd love to talk to him if that's possible.

JIMENEZ

Sheriff's a politician. How much time you got on that recorder?

BEN

400 hours.

JIMENEZ

You might want to bring a second one.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

SHERIFF GONZALEZ, warm, helpful, sits across from Ben. A number of deputies are there, too, amused and curious about the stranger in town. The Sheriff leans over and pins a toy sheriff's badge on Ben.

SHERIFF GONZALEZ

So today, you're part of our team!  
You are an honorary Sheriff's deputy.

BEN

This is what you give to kids,  
isn't it?

The deputies all crack up. The ice is broken.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - A LITTLE LATER

The Sheriff shows pictures of recent drug seizures -- boxes containing rectangular "Oxy Bars."

SHERIFF GONZALEZ

These are Oxy Bars. See how the pills are squared off like a little candy bar, that way they can pack 'em in boxes to the corners without wasting any space. That's how big this business is. We don't who's shipping it, all we know is, they're coming along the interstate right along the border.

BEN

And that route cuts right by the oil field, where the party was.

SHERIFF GONZALEZ

Yessir. I'd get you confirmation on that, but apparently no one was at this party.

He shoots a teasing glance to the Deputies, who snicker.

SHERIFF GONZALEZ (CONT'D)

So we're out of luck.

BEN

But this is your jurisdiction.

SHERIFF GONZALEZ

No sir. This was along the highway, that's a matter for highway patrol.

INT. HIGHWAY PATROL OFFICE - DAY

Ben interviews two HIGHWAY PATROLMEN.

HIGHWAY PATROLMAN

Ain't that just like a Sheriff to puff his hot air and blow you straight into my office. If there's a drug overdose at a party in a fucking field off 29 -- well, I'm sorry, we got shit to do. We're not a bunch of army rejects gazing at the Rio Grande.

BEN

I didn't say you were.

SECOND HIGHWAY PATROLMAN  
 He ain't talking about us. He's  
 saying this is a criminal incident  
 that took place within fifty miles  
 of the U.S. border.

INT. BORDER PATROL OFFICE - DAY

Ben is rattled as a BORDER PATROLMAN yells at him.

BORDER PATROLMAN  
 (furious)  
 Oh, is *that* what they told you over  
 at Highway Patrol? Well you can  
 tell Junior Brown and the rest of  
 'em glorified meter maids that if  
 they spent more time with their  
 real guns and less with their radar  
 guns, we might not have to chase  
 goddamn Texas Syndicate up and down  
 the Trans-Pecos! Got it?

BEN  
 ...If I find a natural way to work  
 it into the conversation, I'll  
 bring that up.

Over CROSS-CUTTING of all four departments presenting Ben the  
 same one-page CORONER REPORT labeling the death an accidental  
 overdose (M.O.S.), we hear Ben updating Eloise.

BEN (V.O.)  
 There are four overlapping  
 jurisdictions for where the party  
 took place. P.D., which is city;  
 Sheriff, which is county; Highway  
 Patrol; and Border Patrol.

INT. PUBLIC RADIO OFFICES - ELOISE'S OFFICE - DAY

Eloise is on the phone with Ben.

ELOISE  
 I wonder if that's a piece of the  
 puzzle. Four departments where they  
 bounce things from one office to  
 the other. So it's no one's  
 responsibility to solve.

EXT. SHAW FAMILY BACKYARD - DAY - INTERCUT

BEN

Exactly. And like everything else down here, it's personal. So their cooperation is all dependent on their personal relationships.

ELOISE

You know, if this never gets solved, that actually could be a really good ending. Leaves the listener wondering forever.

BEN

And the family wondering forever. No. I have to solve it.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ben watches videos. At a live venue:

ABILENE (ON VIDEO)

... Thank you. You're all so kind, so supportive. When I told my mama I was coming to New York to try to make it in music, she said, "bless your heart."

(some "aws" from the crowd)

Which is Texas for "fuck you."

Some laughs. Ben laughs, too.

ABILENE (ON VIDEO) (CONT'D)

This one goes out to a man in my life who's not here, and is probably never even going to watch this. But if he does...

(to camera)

You must think I'm crazy for caring so much about you so early. Well, I think you're crazy for not caring so much yet.

Ben reacts, with regret and longing. Abilene sings an original song.

As the song continues, it scores a montage of scenes of Ben connecting more to the family:

- Ben and Ty with Crawl at Ty's vape "cloud chasing" competition.

- Ben and Ty with Crawl at Crawl's underground cage fight.
- Ben line-dancing with the sisters and their friends; asking them questions after.
- Ben helping El Stupido with his homework.
- Ben interviewing lots of people in town.
- Sharon and Ben go through a shoebox of photos of Abilene from childhood. Sharon pauses with tenderness at some of them; Ben sorts the ones that are of interest. He has Abilene's phone next to him, trying passwords based on any potential clues he sees: sports jersey numbers, etc. Ben pauses on a photo of young Abilene smiling in a D.A.R.E. T-shirt.
- Ben in the bathroom, brushing teeth, noticing a bottle of Advil. Curious, opens it. Safety seal is still on.
- Ben at the diner. We see from body language with waitress, etc. that Ben is a regular there now. He's editing sound. This connects to:

INT. ELOISE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Eloise is watching the clip of Abilene singing, enthralled by it.

ELOISE  
 (on phone)  
 Her voice. It's so...

EXT. DINER - DAY - SAME TIME - INTERCUT

Ben is eating a Frito Pie as he walks to his car, talking to Eloise with air pods in his ears.

BEN  
 Specific.

ELOISE  
 Yeah! It's wonderful. Any luck with her phone?

BEN  
 No. No luck.

ELOISE  
 People in town?

BEN  
 (eating)  
 I think the answer is with the family. I just have to get closer. Listen harder.

ELOISE  
 What are you eating?

BEN  
 Frito Pie.

ELOISE  
 What is that?

BEN  
 They take a Frito bag and pour chili and stuff on it.

ELOISE  
 That sounds disgusting.

BEN  
 (laughing)  
 Yeah, in a good way --

Ben's Prius EXPLODES. Not as big as a mafia hit, but enough to seriously injure a person -- at least. And enough for that high-pitched piercing sound to resonate, and for a concussion to take us to black.

On Eloise's side of the call: confusion, concern.

ELOISE  
 Ben? Ben?

INT. WEST TEXAS EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

A far West Texas emergency room. As much Spanish as English. Children running around. Overdose patients. Narcan (sort of an Epi-Pen for opiate overdoses) being administered in triage.

INT. WEST TEXAS HOSPITAL - EXAM ROOM - DAY

Ben is shaken, but okay. His vitals are checked out by a kind, older DOCTOR. He moves slowly, thoroughly.

DOCTOR  
 What happened to you, son?

BEN  
My Prius exploded.

The doctor nods, unfazed.

DOCTOR  
You might need to see a urologist  
for that.

INT. WEST TEXAS HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

Ben emerges. The Shaw family is there waiting.

SHARON  
Are you okay?

BEN  
Yeah.

TY  
(fired up)  
We're going to find who did this,  
brother. This time it's personal.  
Even more personal.

EL STUPIDO  
Who did it, Ben?

TY  
Could mean we're getting close.

BEN  
Yeah.

TY  
Or it could just be random.  
Sometimes people just blow shit up  
out here. In case that makes you  
feel better.

BEN  
(thinks, then)  
It makes me feel the same.  
(re: family)  
I can't believe you're all here.

SHARON  
Of course. Where else would we be?

This surprises and moves Ben. Sharon turns to Ty.

SHARON (CONT'D)

Ty, can you load up the kids in the truck please?

Ty and the kids leave. Sharon is alone with Ben.

BEN

People really just blow stuff up here?

SHARON

What answer are you hoping for?

Ben doesn't know.

SHARON (CONT'D)

Ben. You don't have to do this.

BEN

What do you mean?

SHARON

You've already proven yourself. Whether or not you're getting close, this is no joke. It's dangerous. And no matter what you do, it ain't gonna bring her back.

BEN

I know.

Ben puts his arm around Sharon and heads out to the truck.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY 29 - EVENING [DRIVING]

The whole family rides together in Ty's truck. Mood is upbeat. Ben reads Eloise's text: "ARE YOU OKAY? WHAT HAPPENED?" He responds: "I'm fine. With the family. Getting close." Eloise: "To what?"

EL STUPIDO

You're going to love Whataburger, Ben.

TY

It's the best!

BEN

What makes it the best?

TY

Wherever you are? There's a Whataburger.

KANSAS CITY  
It's always *right there*.

BEN  
Okay. And then once you get there,  
what do you like about it? What do  
you get?

TY  
Whatever you want!

EL STUPIDO  
You can order anything, Ben!

PARIS  
Anything on the menu.

KANSAS CITY  
It's always *right there*.

BEN  
Right. I'm just trying to  
understand. There are a lot of  
places like that. So let's say  
there's a McDonald's, a Burger  
King, a Sonic, and a Whataburger,  
all lined up. What would you go to?

EVERYONE  
Whataburger!!!

BEN  
Why?

TY/KANSAS CITY/EL STUPIDO  
Because it's *right there*!

BEN  
But they're *all* right there. In  
this scenario. They're all right  
there. Why do you love it -- what  
are you getting from it?

TY  
Ben, asking why you love  
Whataburger... It's like asking why  
you love Christmas, or a summer  
night, or why you love your dog.  
You could point to reasons but the  
reasons aren't the point. You just  
love it. That's how love works.

INT. WHATABURGER - LATER

The family is at a table with burgers and honey butter  
biscuits.

BEN  
I love this.

KANSAS CITY  
And it's always --

BEN  
Right there.

Kansas City pockets the plastic Whataburger "tent" number on their table.

KANSAS CITY  
It's a Texas thing. You're not supposed to do it, but you're supposed to do it.

Ty and Sharon both nod their permission.

KANSAS CITY (CONT'D)  
You're supposed to take your lucky numbers but I figure every number is lucky to someone so I take 'em all.

BEN  
I won't tell Mike and Dan.

PARIS  
Like they'd do anything.

SHARON  
They'd say it was an accident.

Ben laughs.

PARIS  
What's it like to live in New York?

KANSAS CITY  
My friend Selena went there on a school trip. She said Times Square is like if your phone came to life.

BEN  
What kind of phone does she have?

KANSAS CITY  
Samsung Galaxy.

BEN  
That sounds right.

KANSAS CITY  
What's it like to be verified?

BEN

It's not any different, K.C.

KANSAS CITY

Don't lie. Tell me.

BEN

It's like there's this mountain. And only some people get to see the other side of the mountain. And everyone who gets to the other side says, "Trust me, it's exactly the same on this side." And you think maybe it is, but you have to see it. And when you finally get to see it, yes, it's totally, exactly the same. But now you know it's the same. You saw it with your own eyes. And that makes you different.

KANSAS CITY

I'm gonna see it.

BEN

I know you are.

SHARON

We're so lucky you found Abilene.

BEN

I never did.

PARIS

What do you mean?

BEN

I look at those pictures in her bedroom and in every picture, she's looking at me, I'm looking away.

KANSAS CITY

Maybe that was her good angle.

BEN

No. I really have no idea what she saw in me.

Ty gestures: heart-eyes-heart.

TY

Heart sees heart.

GRANNY

You got family in Texas?

BEN

No.

GRANNY

You do now.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ben lies in bed. Hears mayhem and explosions out the window. He looks out and sees a couple of young teenagers down the street making harmless mischief with firecrackers, etc. A version of "just blowing stuff up." Reassuring, weirdly. Ben turns back to his video.

ABILENE (ON VIDEO)

This is a song I wrote about the  
finest man I've ever known. This  
one is for Mason.

Ben is intrigued, confused. Then he looks at the floor to where El Stupido is sleeping.

BEN

Mason?

EL STUPIDO

(waking up)

Yessir.

BEN

Good night.

EL STUPIDO

You woke me up to say good night?

BEN

Yessir.

On camera: Abilene blows a kiss to the camera. Ben plays back the last part of the clip again, then closes the laptop.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben is up first. Makes Chemex coffee for everyone in the family.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Ben, spread out on the floor, maps every single clue and discovery on colored index cards. Over the course of the day, Paris and K.C. join the project.

By the end of the sequence, hours have passed, and the wall is covered with cards and connections, like it's *The Wire*.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The family has gathered. Ben presents.

BEN

Okay! The different colors of cards represent different story strands -- following a single person, theory,-- and the string connects strands that might be connected.

The family is interested. Ben points to one row of cards.

BEN (CONT'D)

One thing that's interesting to me is the idea that this was a party where, quote, "everybody goes and nobody went." Where people have reputations to protect that stop them from helping. So that's my first question: who is someone with a pristine reputation, who might secretly have been connected to drug use at the party with Abilene?

GRANNY

Abilene.

BEN

Right, with Abilene.

GRANNY

Abilene. That's one person, for starters. Great reputation, big pill popper.

(beat)

Put that on a card.

BEN

What? How do you know that?

GRANNY

Girls told me.

Ben looks at the daughters, who are silent.

BEN

Paris? K.C.?

PARIS

Ty told us not to say anything.

Ben stares at Ty.

TY

(defensive)

I mean... that was one side of her. She was so much more. I didn't think it defined her, or anything.

BEN

(calm covering rage)

Can we talk outside for a second?

Ty gets up to join Ben. They walk to the front yard.

GRANNY

(eyes glued to the cards)

We'll keep working on the story.

EXT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

Ben blows up at Ty.

BEN

Are you fucking kidding me? This undoes everything we've been working on. Everything!

TY

I thought you wouldn't do this with me if you knew she was using.

BEN

Why did you want to do this in the first place if you knew she was using?

TY

(defensive)

I thought there might be more to it. I don't know, maybe it was part of the grieving process or something. Denial? Isn't that one of the twelve steps of grief?

BEN

It's five stages of grief, twelve steps to recovery, but I understand everyone here is more familiar with the latter!

TY

What's that supposed to mean?

BEN

You want me to say it slower?

TY

Look, it's not a crime to assume a Mexican drug dealer killed your sister and to want to kill him.

BEN

Yes, it is a crime! It's called a hate crime.

TY

I know something happened. I don't know how I know. I can't explain it, I just know. It's complicated.

BEN

It's not complicated: it's prejudice, and it's denial. See? Solved it. Not so complicated after all. Everything here is actually really simple. That's why it took me so long to understand it.

The rest of the family has gathered outside.

TY

Great, well, now you got what you came here for. Now you can go back to New York, make us look like a bunch of rednecks on your podcast, get a lot of laughs. You can be the great enlightened hero who exposed us for what we are. Meanwhile we'll just be right here, short one family member. And maybe I'll never know what happened to Abilene. But at least I'll know I was following my heart.

BEN

Oh, yeah? You were following your heart?

TY

That's what we do down here.

BEN

Well, maybe it's time to ask yourselves how that's working out.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

Maybe you should try your brain for a change. Maybe then, you wouldn't fall for every racist, click bait conspiracy theory that wrecks your lives and drags the rest of the country along with it. If you follow your heart? The Earth is flat, coal is the future, manufacturing's coming back, vapor isn't smoke, global warming is a hoax, Jesus is gonna take the wheel, and Mexican drug dealers killed your sister! You know what people say about you where I'm from?

TY

Let me guess, bad things.

BEN

No. Worse. *We say good things.*  
 "We took them literally, when we should have taken them seriously."  
 "No: we took them seriously, when we should have taken them literally." You're neither! You're definitely not serious and you're sure as hell not literate. And maybe you should start taking us seriously and literally, because where I'm from is fun and interesting and the people are diverse and rich and hot, and meanwhile, your town?  
 (gesturing widely)  
 Looks like *this!!!*

Ben's shout sets off a couple of stray dogs howling.

SHARON

Bless your heart.

BEN

Oh, and I know what that means, by the way. And you know what? Bless your heart. All your hearts can go bless themselves.

KANSAS CITY

Why are you so shocked? Don't people do drugs all the time in New York?

BEN

You know what? When we do? At least it's for a purpose. We do drugs because there's *so much to do* and we want to enhance it. Unlike this part of the country where life is so fucking boring that you have to invent a new way to ruin your lives every two weeks. You do drugs because there's *nothing* to do -- and then you're all hopped up with nothing to do, and you wonder why your lives are such shitshows! Like opiates. Or meth: what is even the end game with meth? I mean, what is the *goal*? Complete the sentence: "Let's smoke weed *and watch TV.*" "Let's do coke and *dance all night.*" "Let's do meth and..." What? Burn down a shed? I don't understand you people.

PARIS

"You people" is a microaggression.

BEN

Oh, my apologies: "y'all."

PARIS

"Y'all" is cultural appropriation.

BEN

You accusing someone of cultural appropriation *is cultural appropriation!*

TY

Why didn't you look out for her?  
Why didn't you check in with her?

BEN

Because I wasn't her boyfriend! I barely saw her, I was hooking up with a lot of people, I thought she was too, because that's what everybody does in New York. She wasn't my girlfriend, she was just a girl in my phone.

Ty punches Ben in the face, hard.

TY

Now you've been in a fight.

SHARON

Kids, in.

The rest of the family goes inside as Ben picks himself up.

SHARON (CONT'D)

I don't know the whole story. Maybe I never will. Life is complicated, even in Texas, if you can believe that. But we don't go home after this, okay? We live here. Those of us who are still alive, anyway. Since you brought up the drug thing -- one thing I do know is people don't turn to 'em for no reason. They turn to them because they're in pain. Pain like, I don't know -- falling in love with someone who barely knows your name. So maybe I missed something in my years of knowing Abilene, or maybe you did. But if you're still looking for someone to blame for what happened, you may not have needed to come all this way. Bless your heart.

Ben is slain.

SHARON (CONT'D)

Better get some sleep, 'cuz it's a long drive to the airport tomorrow.

EXT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - BACKYARD - NIGHT

Alone under the stars, stripped of all ego, Ben turns on his recorder to record the final piece of his podcast.

BEN

(looking up)

You really feel insignificant looking up at the stars. I wonder if the stars ever look down on us, just to feel, like, really fucking significant. I hope they get to at least enjoy that.

(grasping for something)

They say it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Yeah. It's a whole other level of pain to realize you've lost without ever having loved.

(giving up)

You were right, Ira.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

I was the story. A self-absorbed, know-it-all asshole goes to Texas, thinks he's gonna find out the meaning of America, and all he learns is what a loser he is. Someone who uses people instead of caring about them or forming any connection at all. And who let the love of the one incredible person who he never deserved in a thousand years slip through his fingers. And now she's dead. And I'm as much to blame as opiates, or capitalism, or whatever else I thought I was going to heroically expose down here. And I have no story. Well, I am the story, and the story sucks, because I suck. So joke's on me. And NPR. Story's over. Coming home. Signing off.

Ben clicks off the recorder.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ben packs.

Ben opens the police bag that Abilene's phone was in, and opens the Pez dispenser for the first time: loaded with Oxy Bars.

Ben lies down, stares up at the ceiling.

El Stupido knocks and enters.

EL STUPIDO

I can't sleep.

BEN

Me neither.

EL STUPIDO

I keep getting scared.

BEN

What are you scared of?

EL STUPIDO

Ghosts.

BEN

Ghosts aren't real.

EL STUPIDO

If they're not real how come  
everybody knows what they are?

BEN

They're real as an idea. But  
they're not real-real. I think  
that's what's scary about ghosts.  
Not that they might be real, but  
that they might not be real. If we  
knew for sure that ghosts were  
real, they wouldn't be scary at  
all. We'd just wave and say, "Hi,  
ghost."

El Stupido laughs.

EL STUPIDO

"Hi, ghost."

BEN

What's scary is that they aren't  
real. That's why we try to make  
them feel as real as we can. We  
watch scary movies and tell stories  
about ghosts to make it feel like  
they might somehow be real. Because  
wouldn't that be cool? If when  
someone wasn't there, there was  
still something left of them,  
floating around, that could  
surprise you once in a while?

EL STUPIDO

Yeah.

BEN

But there isn't. There's nothing.  
And that's what's scary. That the  
little, little, little bit of a  
person that feels like it might  
still be there, isn't really there  
at all.

(beat)

Do you feel better?

EL STUPIDO

No.

BEN

Me neither.

EL STUPIDO

Can I sleep on the floor?

BEN

I was hoping you would.

El Stupido settles in.

EL STUPIDO

Are you coming to the pumpjack party for Halloween?

BEN

You're going to that?

EL STUPIDO

Whole town goes.

BEN

I don't think so, Mason.

EL STUPIDO

Please. What if there are ghosts, Ben? What if there are ghosts?

BEN

Good night, Mason. Let's get some sleep.

EL STUPIDO

Good night, Ben. 1435.

BEN

Hm?

EL STUPIDO

That's what Abby would say. She used to say "I Love You Mucho" but then she shortened it so it was like our secret code. Cuz that's the number of letters in I Love You Mucho. 1435.

Ben notices the Whataburger tent numbers on her dresser: 14 next to 35. He jolts up and grabs Abilene's iPhone. Types in 1435.

The most recent texts are to Ben, unsent, from the cold open: "Help. Help. Help." And the video of her final moments, also unsent to him: the vast field, the pair of cowboy boots that seem, at the last second, to kick the phone into the dirt.

Ben reacts, nauseated with guilt that she would reach out to him for help like this.

Then he scrolls through the other texts with him...

ON THE IPHONE SCREEN:

*Ben: love u.*

*Abilene: Love you more.*

*Ben: love u to moon + back my babe.*

... and realizes this doesn't sound like him at all. He keeps scrolling.

*Abilene: Love you to that distant moon of saturn that the discovery channel said maybe had water on it*

*Ben: ur so fucking hot*

*Abilene: nobody can know, ok?*

*Ben: Obv why*

*Abilene: KC would be jealous. Ty thinks you're a total sleazeball, heard stuff*

*Ben: lol dont believe the rumors*

*Abilene: He's so protective. I just have you in my phone as "Ben" this random fuckboi I used to hook up with in NY.*

Ben reacts, in shock, hurt, bewilderment, anger.

*Ben: haha whos that*

*Abilene: This guy I hooked up with him a couple times and built all up to the family. They're like obsessed with him now LOL. Keeps them from asking questions.*

Ben keeps going through the phone, heart pounding. Finds a far different Abilene. Texts asking Sancholo for Oxy bars. Texts with Crawl. Abilene recording music videos with Q. Nothing is what he thought.

From his own phone, Ben calls the number of "Ben." We don't hear what Ben hears, but we see his face harden.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - LATE NIGHT

Ben paces; enraged, conflicted -- a lot of things. He pours a whiskey, sits alone on the couch.

Not alone, actually: Granny sits opposite him, also nursing a drink. After a beat, she starts to sing, maybe drunk, hauntingly, staring at Ben:

GRANNY

*The eyes of Texas are upon you /  
All the livelong day / The Eyes of  
Texas are upon you / You cannot get  
away / Do not think you can escape  
them / At night or early in the  
morn / The eyes of Texas are upon  
you / Til Gabriel blows his horn.*

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - MORNING

Ben is last into the kitchen. He is greeted by coldness.

SHARON

Where's your suitcase?

BEN

I think we all might have said some things we didn't mean last night.

SHARON

I meant every word I said.

TY

Down here, we say what we mean.

Ben takes a seat next to Ty and El Stupido.

BEN

I know. I'm sorry. I got a lot to learn about that.

SHARON

What do you want, Ben?

BEN

(to Ty)

Take me to the Halloween party tonight.

TY

Excuse me?

BEN

I was way out of line last night. You were right. Something happened to Abilene. My gut says that I need to stay and go to this party. Because everyone's going to be there. And so it's our last, best shot to find out what happened. And if we don't find it out, at least I'll know I was following my heart.

TY  
I don't know.

BEN  
Also, I promised Mason I'd go.

TY  
Mason?  
(beat)  
Oh. Mason.

Ty puts his hand on Mason's head affectionately. Something about this moment -- Ben caring enough to know and use Mason's real name -- disarms them.

TY (CONT'D)  
We're gonna have to get you a costume then.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Ben gets dressed in borrowed cowboy clothes. Ty knocks and enters, in a cowboy outfit as well.

TY  
Well, look at that. A real Texan cowboy.

He takes Ben in for a long beat.

TY (CONT'D)  
You know how you said we'd follow the story wherever it took us?

BEN  
Yeah.

TY  
If this is where it took us, that's good enough for me.

Ben smiles.

El Stupido, also in a cowboy outfit, enters and sees Ben and Ty. He's overjoyed.

EL STUPIDO  
Three cowboys!

BEN  
(twirling his gun)  
How do I look?

TY

Oh, be careful with that. It's loaded.

BEN

What? It's not a fake gun?

TY

Where am I supposed to find a fake gun?

BEN

Why is it loaded?

TY

You wanna be a pretend cowboy?

BEN

Yes, it's Halloween--

Kansas City enters, pouting.

KANSAS CITY

Mom is making me wear a coat over my costume.

BEN

Aww. I remember when my mom made me--

Kansas City drops her coat to reveal the most barely-dressed costume that could conceivably be called clothing.

BEN (CONT'D)

... What costume is that?

KANSAS CITY

(shrugs)

"Girl on Halloween."

TY

Just take the coat off when you get there, K.C.

KANSAS CITY

Fuckin duh.

Paris enters, proudly shows off her costume.

TY

Well, if it isn't Slutty Lana Del Rey!

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - EVENING

CLOSE ON: Ben pulls his phone out of a charger, at 100%, and clicks it in the other holster on his cowboy outfit.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY I-20 - NIGHT [DRIVING]

Ty drives. Ben takes a phone call from Eloise.

BEN  
(into phone)  
Yeah, hey.

ELOISE (V.O.)  
Ira loves it.

BEN  
Hm?

INT. ELOISE'S OFFICE - NIGHT - INTERCUT

ELOISE  
The piece you sent last night. You, lost. It's beautiful. It's perfect. It's so raw, so real.

BEN  
No, no --

ELOISE  
Ira wants to tease it on the show this Sunday and then debut the podcast. How soon can you get back here?

BEN  
Delete it.

ELOISE  
What?

BEN  
Delete it. Pull it. I'm staying down here. I'm close. I know it in my gut. I gotta do this. For Abilene.

ELOISE  
Ben...

Eloise, in her office, puts her head against the window in caring frustration.

ELOISE (CONT'D)

Why do you think I'm doing this?  
Because I think it'll win a Webby?  
It's because I believe in you --  
and this is you! No one cares about  
this one girl -- I mean, the  
listeners don't, they don't know  
her. Last night we finally did get  
to know someone: you. That's the  
story. If we scrap this now... I  
don't think there's any coming back  
from it.

A beat.

ELOISE (CONT'D)

Ben?

BEN

You don't think this will win a  
Webby?

She laughs and sighs.

ELOISE

Good luck.

EXT. OIL FIELD - NIGHT

A grandly wild scene. Two raucous IDIOTS are setting off  
fireworks.

FIREWORKS GUY #1

Fuck yeah! Halloween fireworks,  
bitch! Orange and black!

FIREWORKS GUY #2

I told you the black fireworks  
wouldn't show you jackass!

FIREWORKS GUY #1

I can see 'em!

EXT. OIL FIELD - LATER

Celebration and depravity all around. Drugs and drinks. Ty  
eyes SOMEONE in a Santa costume.

TY

See that? Santa, already? That's  
messed up. It's not even  
Thanksgiving.

PARIS

Maybe it's late stage capitalism  
dressing up as itself.

BEN

Technically it's a costume. Like  
any other costume.

They all stare.

TY

It just feels wrong.

BEN

It does feel wrong.

KANSAS CITY

Imma do a lap.

EL STUPIDO

Same.

TY

(to El Stupido)

You stay with me.

Ben looks out at the seemingly endless party. He notices familiar faces half-hidden behind costumes. The field has an epic vastness to it, a dangerous energy. Guns everywhere, even on costumes that would never have them (e.g. doctor, bunny rabbit).

Ben is startled by a thunderous grinding sound as the oil pumpjacks, on automatic timers, start to pump. One PARTYGOER IN A SOMBRERO is waiting for this moment atop the "Bush Machine," the largest of the pumpjacks, and rides it like a bronco, unleashing a classic "grito" yelp. Ben takes it all in.

TY (CONT'D)

You all right?

BEN

I've been to some parties before  
but... When you get weird in Texas,  
you really get weird.

TY

Everything's bigger in Texas. The  
boring is bigger, the crazy is  
bigger.

Sancholo aggressively pushes past Ben -- cold, in character. Ben starts to call after him but Sancholo ignores.

The two rowdy STRANGERS, who harassed Ben after the rodeo, bump into him with wide, mischievous grins.

ROWDY STRANGER

Hey, it's the Longhorns fan! How's your car?

BEN

Are you fucking serious? That was about football?

Ben pushes past them. They push back. He pushes back harder, and past them. He bumps into Sheriff Gonzalez and the Sheriff's Deputies. They're drunk and aggressive, too.

SHERIFF GONZALEZ

Well, look who it is! Our honorary Sheriff! Don't turn us in, Sheriff!

SHERIFF'S DEPUTY

(re: Ben)

Think we should shoot the sheriff?

SHERIFF GONZALEZ

(he's over this joke)

Never gets old.

Ben pushes past. He spots Kansas City flirting with a cowboy in a black hat, his hands on her waist. Ben approaches and after a second, we realize it's Q., and Q. realizes it's Ben.

Q. SELLERS

(re: Ben's cowboy outfit)

Look at you!

BEN

Look at you.

Q. SELLERS

You know what? The look works. A little silly, but, you almost pull it off.

BEN

Thanks, partner.

Q. SELLERS

I knew Texas would get under your skin. It has a pull, a gravity.

BEN

Yessir. Nice to see a friendly face. Have a minute to catch up?

Q. smiles and gestures for Ben to follow.

EXT. OIL FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Q. leads Ben through a wide, wild scene across the field.

EXT. OIL FIELD - FURTHER OUT - MOMENTS LATER

Q. leads Ben out away from the party, towards a tent set up deep in the field.

Q. SELLERS

First drug law in the U.S. passed in 1875. Chinese railroad workers had brought over the opium den. This country was so anti-immigrant that we banned the opium den -- not the opium. Have you ever heard anything more American? Now we have an opium culture all across the heartland with all the glamour, all the ceremony, all the majesty removed.

The further they walk, the more the landscape starts to mirror what we saw in the opening scene: sparsely populated, scattered with debris.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

And that's what people hunger for. After all, we have an entire generation now who can't enjoy a beer without a ping pong ball. The problem out here isn't the drugs. It's that there's nothing to go with them.

INT. TENT - OIL FIELD - NIGHT

Q. leads Ben further into his tented area, decorated in 19th Century Orientalist influences, low light, cushions, music: a modern take on an opium den, a seductive and sinister feel. The SOUND ENGINEER from the Factory nods for them to enter.

Q. SELLERS

Everyone who's drawn to music isn't simply looking for music.

Ben notices boxes of oxy bars in the corner, guarded by the sound engineer.

Ben knows he's on to something, and keeps up the we're-all-friends-here facade. He nods towards the oxy bars.

BEN

So, is that how the Factory makes its money? Is that what it's about?

Q. SELLERS

What was Warhol's Factory about?

BEN

Art. Music. Ego. Drugs.

Q. SELLERS

Isn't it all the same thing? Escape. The promise of something greater. If you're drawn to one, you're drawn to them all.

Q. takes a bite of a Pez candy.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

I want to help you with your podcast.

BEN

I'd love that.

Q. SELLERS

Do you think Gary Webb would have won a Pulitzer today? You know who he is?

BEN

Gary Webb, sure. He broke the story that the CIA was profiting off the sale of crack cocaine to the inner cities. Allegedly.

Q. SELLERS

Allegedly. I think about that story a lot. Do you?

BEN

It came out at the wrong time. Before the internet, and after the crisis was out of the news.

Q. SELLERS

What's the new inner city? What's the part of the country that the people in charge have an interest in destroying?

(MORE)

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)  
Making it weak, desperate,  
dependent, pushed to the margins,  
easy to control?

Ben reacts, awed by the implications.

BEN  
... What are you saying?

Q. SELLERS  
I told you, partner. I want to help  
you with your podcast.

As Ben takes this in, Q. points the sound engineer towards a  
YOUNG WOMAN passed out.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)  
Can you give her a ride to the  
afterparty?

SOUND ENGINEER  
Where's the afterparty, Q?

Q. SELLERS  
Find out. Give her some medicine  
and we'll take her there later.

SOUND ENGINEER  
Copy that, Q.

Ben watches the sound engineer take the woman out. He notices  
the boots -- same as from the video of Abilene's last  
moments. Ben and Q are alone now.

BEN  
Where's he taking her?

Q. SELLERS  
Somewhere more appropriate.

BEN  
Hospital?

Q. SELLERS  
People overdose a dozen times a  
day. They just can't do it here.

BEN  
Is that what happened to Abilene?

Q. SELLERS  
Abilene?

BEN

You recorded with her the night she died, right?

Q. SELLERS

It was our last session at the factory.

BEN

So what exactly happened?

Q. SELLERS

Why do you want to talk about this?

BEN

Why don't you want to talk about it?

Q. SELLERS

Because I have a much bigger story for you.

BEN

You never know where a story's gonna lead you. So. She was at the factory, then what happened?

Q. SELLERS

What happened? She was a drug addict, she overdosed, she was messed up out of her mind, she tried to call 911.

BEN

And?

Q. SELLERS

In Texas, we don't dial 911.

BEN

I've heard that.

Q. SELLERS

All those calls get recorded. You have to be very careful about what gets recorded.

BEN

Yeah. You do.

We see Ben's hand on his iPhone in one of his two holsters. He's been recording the whole time.

Q. SELLERS  
Because that's all that lasts of  
us. The recording.

BEN  
So, Abilene passed out. You didn't  
want her to call 911. Then what?

Loud fireworks again, the cheering of the fireworks guys.

BEN (CONT'D)  
Don't get distracted.

Q. SELLERS  
You have to admit it's quite a  
distraction. It's pretty much the  
definition of a distraction.

BEN  
Abilene.

Q. SELLERS  
(singing)  
"Abilene..."

BEN  
Abilene.

Q. SELLERS  
(singing)  
"Abilene..."

BEN  
Tell me what happened.

Q. SELLERS  
Look, I get it. It's upsetting the  
first time you hear about it. But  
the more it happens, the more you  
get used to it.

BEN  
The more what happens?

Q. SELLERS  
Back to the bigger story --

BEN  
What happened to Abilene?

Q. SELLERS  
Why do you care so much? She was  
your girlfriend?

BEN  
No she wasn't. She was your  
girlfriend.

Q. SELLERS  
(dismissive)  
No she wasn't.

A beat.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)  
She took too many. Too much? Too  
many? You're the writer, which is  
it?

BEN  
When I don't know how to phrase  
something, I just skip past it. So  
what happened after that?

Q. SELLERS  
Started convulsing.

BEN  
Then what?

Q. SELLERS  
Gave her something to calm her  
down.

BEN  
What did you give her?

Q. SELLERS  
More of the same.

A beat.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)  
Look, we have a much bigger story  
on our hands, partner.

BEN  
Finish this one first.

Q. SELLERS  
She passed out safely, then we  
dropped her off at a party.

BEN  
A party like this one.  
(beat)  
(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

A place with no cell reception, where no one would admit to having been, where there was no clear jurisdiction over who was supposed to investigate it. And where her death would be a statistic instead of a problem.

Q. SELLERS

You're a quick study. That's exactly what I did and why I did it. And so concludes the story of Abilene. Got it?

BEN

Got it.

Ben takes out his iPhone and shows the recording. Q. sees it and laughs.

Q. SELLERS

Brilliant! What a great podcast. I would have gone with the other one - but you trusted your gut. Good for you. Can't wait till it comes out.

BEN

You're not concerned about how you come across?

Fireworks continue.

Q. SELLERS

That's how you hook the listener in. At first, it'll seem you got your bad guy. But no one's going to let a story be that simple. Everyone will have a different take, because that's how it works: if you don't have a new take, you don't have a voice, you don't exist. So, some people will blame me. Others will say: hold on, leaving someone to die isn't the same as killing them. Then some will focus on you, and whether you did your job right. Did you breach journalistic ethics? Did you get too close to the subject? Or not close enough? People will blame her family. The pharmaceutical industry. The lack of a Good Samaritan law in Texas. This President. The last President.

(MORE)

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

The culture of fame, the commoditization of validation, everyone wanting to be a star. And then there'll be conspiracy theories. And then people will refute the conspiracy theories. And sides will form, teams. One side will make one version their cause, and so the other side will take the other side, just to be on the other side. And on and on. Until your story proves the defining ethos of our times.

BEN

Which is what?

Q. SELLERS

Everything means everything, and so nothing means anything.

BEN

Some things mean something.

Q. SELLERS

Like what?

(off Ben's silence)

Come on. You didn't care about her. You never even heard her sing. You came here for yourself, to make a recording. And in the course of that, you found her music, her pictures, the record of her. And that's what you fell in love with. A recording, not a person.

Ben's reaction -- this is hitting very close to home. It's everything he fears he is.

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

If Abilene had called 911, from my property, the whole thing would have been shut down. And for what? One person?

(beat)

None of us matter. None of us. The only thing that matters is what we record, and that's why we can't get too sentimental about anyone who gets in the way of that. The recordings -- that's our mark on the universe, that's what will last forever. But Abilene? Come on.

(MORE)

Q. SELLERS (CONT'D)

You and I both know it. She was just some girl.

Ben stops recording and puts the phone back in the holster.

Then with his other hand, takes out the gun and shoots Q.

Fireworks continue outside, masking the sound of the gunshot.

Ben stares for a while at what he has done. He can't fucking believe it. He looks around. Nobody saw. Finally he turns and walks away.

EXT. OIL FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Filmed from a distance, M.O.S.: Ben goes to Ty, who is waiting in line to play beer pong. Ben taps Ty on the shoulder, whispers something in his ear. Ty is completely shocked; Ben nods; Ty puts his forehead against Ben's, intimately; gestures "heart sees heart."

EXT. OIL FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Ty scoops up El Stupido over his shoulder.

Paris and Kansas City follow the three cowboys out of the party as fireworks and mayhem continue behind them.

INT./EXT. TY'S TRUCK/HIGHWAY I-20 - NIGHT [DRIVING]

Ben drives. Suddenly swerves towards another car on the road - - Crawl, on his way to the party -- and then back. The family is briefly terrified. Ben smiles.

TY

Jesus Christ.

BEN

What, would you rather I do the "hi-sign"?

INT. WHATABURGER - LATER

Mike and Dan in line at the checkout.

VOICE ON WALKIE (V.O.)

We got a report coming out of the Halloween party. Q. Sellers shot in the head.

DAN

Shot in the head? Q. Sellers? I never thought of that guy as accident-prone.

MIKE

Someone's got some nerve, calling 911 on a Saturday night.

The officers take off, revealing Ben and the family behind them, sharing a meal. Ben watches them go.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - ABILENE'S BEDROOM - LATER

Ben is asleep as clips of Abilene play on his laptop. It's the *Three Sisters* film that Paris recorded.

ABILENE (ON SCREEN)

"Do you see that tree? It is dead but it still sways in the wind with the others. I think it would be like that with me. That if I died I would still be part of life in one way or another."

(laughing)

Wait, wait, let me do it again.

INT. SHAW FAMILY HOME - MORNING

Ben comes downstairs with a packed suitcase.

SHARON

How was the party?

BEN

Good.

SHARON

Things get crazy?

BEN

A little.

SHARON

I guess I don't want to know what happened.

BEN

Might be better that way.

SHARON  
(re: suitcase)  
You need a ride somewhere?

INT./EXT. TRUCK/TEXAS STATE HIGHWAY I-20 - LATER [DRIVING]

Sharon drives Ben.

SHARON  
What are your plans when you get  
back?

BEN  
I need to find a new story, I  
guess.

SHARON  
What about the whole thing with  
Abby?

BEN  
I don't think I'm going to be able  
to do that one.

SHARON  
Oh, no! After all that?

BEN  
I think that story is just for us.

SHARON  
Oh. That's nice, too.

BEN  
Yeah. No regrets.

She drives.

SHARON  
I've never understood that. "No  
regrets." How do you-- who has no  
regrets? In my life everything  
always starts with a regret.  
Everything ends with regret. In  
between, regrets. My kids, each one  
of them is here because of a  
relationship that's just straight  
regret. And parenting, all regret.  
Every little thing you say and do.  
You're as tired as you've ever  
been, and they're paying as close  
attention as they ever will.

(MORE)

SHARON (CONT'D)

One time Paris was six years old and she was singing along to a song on the radio and I said -- you know, with a laugh -- "You really can't carry a tune, can you?" And she never sang again, not even "Happy Birthday."

(then)

It's all regrets. You run as fast as you can from the regret that causes you the most pain. And you think the whole time you're running that the next thing will make it okay. Of course you're just running right to the next one. That's life. All regrets. That's what they should say. There's no other way to be alive. It's all regrets. Make 'em count.

Ben stares out as they approach the airport.

CUT TO BLACK.