A CUT ABOVE THE REST

by

Chris Bodily
FADE IN:

EXT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - DAY

A brightly-colored light-blue building, somewhat large for a fast food joint.

The logo on the sign consists of yellow cursive.

Patronage seems light: Only seven cars in the parking lot, and another at the drive-thru.

    STEPFORD (PRE-LAP)
    Good news, everybody...

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

Manager DAN STEPFORD (36), white shirt, tan pants, tie, dark sunglasses, addresses three employees.

The employees are dressed in light blue uniforms with yellow vertical stripes and white paper hats with the Stepford's Burgers logo on either side.

The uniforms match the building's color scheme.

Stepford and two employees have wide smiles, which seem eerie and somewhat unnatural.

PHIL (19), also sporting sunglasses, talks into his drive-thru headset.

    PHIL
    Hold on, ma'am.

Static through the headset.

    STEPFORD
    We have a very special guest coming in today.

He pauses. Anticipation.

    STEPFORD
    Victor Herman.

Phil and DAVE (21), chubby, dark sunglasses, freeze for a beat. Then, they gasp, cheer, and applaud.

Nodding, Stepford signals that he has more to say. Phil and Dave quiet down, their smiles never diminishing.

    CHUCK (31), blond hair, neutral expression, is the only one not smiling eerily or wearing shades. Standing next to the cash register, he shifts his eyes, as if confused.

    CHUCK
    Excuse me, Mister Stepford, but who's Victor Herman?

Phil and Dave gasp.
A PATRON, male, huge unnatural smile, drops his burger onto the tray and freezes, motionless.

STEPFORD
It's alright, everybody! Chuck's new here.

CHUCK
What did I do?

The patron goes back to eating his burger and minding his own business.

STEPFORD
Chuck. Mister Herman is only the most powerful food critic in this state. A review from him is like a review from God.

PHIL
What do you need us to do? Stepford's has been in business for how long--

STEPFORD
My father opened this restaurant forty years ago, and we've never gotten one bad review. Give Mister Herman the best damn service you can.

The three employees nod.

STEPFORD
Oh, and Chuck, before I forget...

He hands Chuck a pair of sunglasses.

CHUCK
What do I need these for?

Mr. Stepford walks to the back without answering.

Chuck tries on the sunglasses. His body gradually trembles and contorts.

CHUCK
What's going on? Help!

The trembling slows to a crawl. He buries his head in his hands, breathing heavily.

VICTOR HERMAN, 50, brown suit, carrying a clipboard with pen and paper, enters the restaurant. Neutral expression on his face. Very professional.

He walks up to the cash register and clears his throat.
Victor

Excuse me, sir.

Chuck lowers his hands, revealing the same unnatural smile as everyone else.

Chuck

You must be Mister Herman?

Victor reads Chuck's name tag.

Victor

And you must be Chuck?

Chuck

Welcome to Stepford's. May I take your order?

Victor feigns a smile similar to Chuck's.

He stares at Chuck, and then, clearly feeling awkward, resumes his previous expression.

Victor seems somewhat uncomfortable. He reads the menu.

Victor

I hear you have the best hamburgers in town?

Chuck

Can't argue with that.

Chuck lets out a light chuckle, causing Victor to wince. Victor clears his throat.

Victor

What comes with a Number Four?

Chuck

Number Four is the kids meal.

Victor

Oh, I apologize. I don't have my glasses.

Victor scribbles a note.

Victor

I'll just have your classic Stepford Burger with nothing on it, large fries, and a large Pepsi, please.

Chuck

To stay, right?

Victor nods.
CHUCK
Your total is eight dollars.

VICTOR
Eight dollars?! Why so much?

CHUCK
I guess because you're paying for quality.

Victor scribbles a note. He looks back up to Chuck, trying to calm his demeanor.

VICTOR
How long do I have to wait?

Chuck gives him a large cup. Victor takes it.

CHUCK
One minute, on average.

Victor goes to the soda machine. He grabs his pen and scribbles more notes.

VICTOR
McDonald's is cheaper. And I'm a food critic!

He observes the lone patron eating his burger and fries, particularly the thick, reddish-brown sauce dripping from the juicy patty.

Victor shivers.

Chuck holds up a tray with Mr. Herman's food.

CHUCK
Mister Herman, your order's ready!

Victor turns around toward the cash register, grabbing his wallet and taking the tray.

VICTOR
Could you hold my clipboard for me, Chuck?

Chuck does so.

VICTOR
Thank you.

Victor pays with a ten dollar bill. Chuck gives him two dollars in change.
CHUCK

Enjoy your meal, Mister Herman.

Victor sits down at the table behind the other patron.

Victor reviews his

NOTES

Each one is handwritten in print, moderately sloppy.

Black ink.

The first note reads: "Every one of my colleagues has acted strangely since reviewing Stepford's Burgers. It's as if they're a completely different person. A P.I. friend of mine has been investigating for the last six months."

The second reads: "The building is unusually large for a fast-food restaurant. Who needs that much storage space?"

The third reads: "Interior quite clean."

The fourth note reads: "Cashier familiar with menu when I tested him. Assumed he was rookie, but quite bright."

Number five reads: "$8 price tag of #2 pricey."

Victor flips over to the next page, written on another piece of paper.

The final note, at the top of the page, reads: "Acceptably quick wait time, nice selection of Pepsi products, friendly atmosphere unnerving and suspicious."

BACK TO SCENE

Victor sets his notepad down.

He unwraps his Stepford Burger, inspects it. Lifts up the bun: Two pickles.

VICTOR

I thought I told you no pickles?

Another scribble in his notepad. He puts the pen down and resumes his business.

He takes his first bite of the burger. Something odd, yet satisfying, about the taste.

He turns his head toward Chuck.

VICTOR

Excuse me, young man, Chuck. May I speak to your manager please? Don't worry, you didn't do anything.

Dan Stepford enters calmly.
Victor points to the burger.

**VICTOR**
Some good stuff, but this doesn't taste like any beef I've ever had. What kind of meat is this?

**STEPFORD**
Oh, it's... meat.

**VICTOR**
But what kind? Beef, ham, pork, chicken, turkey? Human?

Victor chortles, clearly joking.

Mr. Stepford's smile diminishes somewhat.

**STEPFORD**
We use only the finest beef. No beef in the world tastes like ours. Not McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Red Robin, Carl's Jr.

Victor picks up a fry and takes a bite. Tasty, but something's off.

**VICTOR**
And these fries don't taste like fries. They don't even taste like potatoes.

Victor takes out his cell phone.

**STEPFORD**
Would you mind stepping in the back?

Victor reaches for his phone, to no avail.

**STEPFORD**
Please?

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

Moderate light from an overhead bulb. Everybody is scattered around the area.

**VICTOR**
Spit it out, Mister Stepford.
Dave holds out a bloody hatchet, still dripping.

Victor is the only one not smiling or wearing sunglasses.

STEPFORD
You know too much.

A man SCREAMS.

Victor turns to his left to see who it is.

Another SCREAM.

VICTOR
Bobby!

The man is BOBBY, Victor's private eye friend, with his stomach ripped open, bleeding, and guts dangling. His eyes are wide with fear.

So are Victor's. He turns his head back toward Mr. Stepford and his minions.

VICTOR
You, you... cannibals!

STEPFORD
We're not cannibals. Cannibals eat people. We merely serve them.

Standing next to Bobby is a perfect BOBBY CLONE, wearing only briefs. Motionless like a mannequin, eyes open, unnaturally wide grin.

The real Bobby ekes out his last breath.

BOBBY
(weakly)
Victor...

Bobby passes out, dead.

The unassuming smiles juxtaposed with the blood and butchering visibly disturbs Victor. He trembles.

VICTOR
Bobby! You, you...

Bobby's clone immediately comes to life and dresses himself in the real Bobby's clothes. Very little blood on them.

The clone marches toward Victor. Victor takes a step back.

BOBBY CLONE
Victor! Long time, no see. Put 'er there.

The Bobby Clone opens his arms for a hug.
VICTOR
You're not Bobby! What have you maniacs done?

BOBBY CLONE
Victor, it's me! Bobby. We've been friends for twenty years. Remember?

Victor looks on over to the real Bobby's body, gutted and still losing blood -- something out of Friday the 13th.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

The lone patron BITES into his hamburger, his teeth RIPPING off a large, meaty, juicy piece.

He washes it down with a gulp of Pepsi.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

Dave creeps toward Victor with his hatchet.

Victor grabs it, accidentally hitting Chuck in the face and knocking his sunglasses onto the floor. The sunglasses play a continuous A note, tuned to 432 Hertz.

Chuck trembles, dropping his frightening smile.

Engraved on the arms of the sunglasses is the Bose logo.

STEPFORD
No!

CHUCK
What... what happened?

VICTOR
These cannibals brainwashed you.

CHUCK
But I don't even smoke weed, dude.

VICTOR
I said "cannibals."

Victor points at Mr. Stepford, Phil and Dave.

STEPFORD
Enough!

Dave marches forward, zombie-like.

DAVE
Give me that back!

Victor swings the hatchet at him. Dave, dodging the weapon, grabs Chuck's sunglasses off the floor and forces them on Victor. Victor resists and grunts.
He tries to push Dave away, to no avail.

Dave pins him to the floor. Victor uses the hatchet like a shield. Dave shoves the shades onto him.

Victor screams, then kicks Dave in the groin, knocking him over. The hatchet spins around on the floor.

Victor throws the glasses off before they can brainwash him. SMASH! He stomps on the sunglasses, disintegrating them.

Phil and Mr. Stepford march toward Victor like robots or bloodthirsty zombies. Victor takes five steps back.

VICTOR
Are you even human?

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY
The patron shoves a handful of fries in his mouth.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY
Phil and Mr. Stepford march closer.

VICTOR
Stop! Stop it!

Closer.

Dave picks himself up, grabs the hatchet and follows suit.

VICTOR
Please.

Even closer. Victor takes another step back.

Chuck guards Victor like a human shield.

CHUCK
Mister Stepford!

WHACK! SPLISH! Dave hacks Chuck in the stomach, drawing blood. Chuck clutches his stomach and falls to his knees, sputtering, gasping, and coughing.

But it's no use -- his intestines fall out.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY
The patron takes a swallow of his Pepsi before taking another huge bite of his burger.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY
Chuck sputters, coughs, dies.

VICTOR
Chuck!
Victor glares at his enemies.

VICTOR
You want a review, I'll give you a review.

Mr. Stepford pulls out a fork and sharp knife from his pant pockets. He and his minions continue marching forward.

STEPFORD
It had better be good...

OVER BLACK

Victor SCREAMS in horror.

SLASHING, HACKING, STABBING.

More SCREAMING, followed by GRUNTING.

FADE IN:

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - CAFETERIA - DAY

Victor fills up his cup with Pepsi. He then grabs a lid and straw, putting them on.

He turns around, revealing an unnatural smile. He returns to his table.

A "Help Wanted" sign now hangs outside the window.

A WOMAN (25), T-shirt and jeans, pretty, enters the restaurant, holding her stomach and smiling.

Mr. Stepford stands behind the counter.

STEPFORD
Welcome to Stepford's. May I take your order?

WOMAN
I'll have a Number Two with Pepsi, please. Make that two Stepford Burgers.

Mr. Stepford nods.

STEPFORD
You're in luck, these babies are fresh.

INT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - BACK ROOM - DAY

A hamburger patty slops onto the bottom bun, followed by onions, pickles, and the sauce.

Finally, the top bun to cap it off. A perfect burger.
Victor's rave review of Stepford's Burgers.

The headline reads: "Welcome to Good Burger"

Followed by the lead-in:
"Stepford's best hamburger I've ever tasted"

FADE OUT.

THE END