

Balance

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Parents with kids in tow make their way into the building. Cars pull into the parking lot, zippers on jackets go up against the early evening chill.

INT. GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Various gymnastic equipment -- balance beam, horizontal bars, springboard -- sit atop blue foam mats.

Stands are half-filled, people mill about as piano music plays softly behind the chatter. Anxious young girls in their leotards stretch, talk and wait.

Light hair pulled back in a ponytail and all business is KATY BRIGGS, 13. She takes off her coat and gives it to MONICA, 37, who makes a case for black wool sweaters and blue jeans.

KATY

I'm gonna go warm up, mom.

MONICA

Wait. You got everything? Water, shoes--

Katy holds up her bag. She can't get away fast enough.

MONICA

Hold on.

Monica plants a kiss on her cheek.

MONICA

Happy birthday, sweetheart.
Good luck.

KATY

Thanks, mom.

Katy runs off.

Monica canvasses the stands. She finds a familiar face in the crowd, ALLY, 36, and heads over.

ALLY
How's it goin', Mon?

Monica slips out of her overcoat, brushes her long dark hair away from her eyes.

MONICA
So far, so good.

ALLY
Does she know yet?

Monica smiles nervously. She turns to see several beaming faces looking back at her. They nod their heads in unison.

MONICA
Best kept secret in town.

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

A handful of people fill the room, desks arranged in a semi-circle. To the right, a dusty chalkboard with some history notes on it. Someone spins a globe.

In the middle is STAN HARDY, 53, overweight and balding, an ever present grin on his face as he speaks with --

DAVID BRIGGS, 39, military fatigues, black boots and beret. His short cropped hair shows a hint of gray in spite of his boyish looks.

STAN
Couldn't have timed this any better if you tried, eh, Corporal?

DAVID
Please, call me David.

STAN
David.

NANCY, 60s, glasses down along the end of her nose, pushes over a large box. It's wrapped like a present, a big pink bow on top.

STAN

Okay, just so we're clear. You'll be in the box, I'll be in the gym. When the meet's over I'll make an announcement that we have this big surprise for your daughter's birthday. We wheel you out, you pop out of the box... Am I missing anything?

DAVID

No, I think we're good.

STAN

Great. This is gonna be awesome. Father daughter reunion. Touching, heartfelt moment. Hey, you guys ready?

Stan flashes a look to a modest TV CREW of three. They nod and give a thumbs up.

STAN

Okay, then. I guess we're all set here. I'll leave you with Nancy. Any other questions?

David waves a finger at the box.

DAVID

How long I gotta be in there again?

INT. GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

A YOUNG GIRL is in the middle of her routine on the --

BALANCE BEAM

She performs a tediously rehearsed ballet of moves: split leaps, forward rolls and turns.

On the follow through of a leap, she loses her footing. Her knee grazes the beam and she crashes hard to the mat.

The crowd *GASPS*.

On the sidelines, Katy stretches her leg behind her back. She looks up.

The young girl, eyes filled with tears, sits up. Her COACH rushes over, touches her on the ankle. She throws her head back and winces.

Coach helps her to her feet, and leads the visibly shaken girl over to the sideline where she limps past... Katy.

Their eyes lock and no words are spoken, but Katy instantly recognizes the anguish in her stare. She can see the hurt that's etched on her face, and the dashed hopes that trickle slowly down her cheeks.

Muffled *APPLAUSE* rises. A voice from somewhere says -- "Katy Briggs."

A clipboard taps her on the shoulder.

KATY'S COACH
You're up, girl.

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

Only Nancy and David remain.

NANCY
You wanna try it on for size?

David raises his eyebrows.

NANCY
The box, silly.

DAVID
Oh, yeah. The box. Right.

Nancy turns to retrieve the cover. She doesn't see as David unzips his coat, revealing a holstered REVOLVER that dangles at his side.

David steps into the box. A bead of sweat slides down the side of his face.

NANCY
Tight fit?

DAVID
Been in tighter.

There's a curious scraping noise. She pushes her glasses up and peers in to see David's hand shaking furiously against the inside of the box.

She puts the cover on.

NANCY
You okay in there?

The shaking stops abruptly.

DAVID (O.S.)
I'm fine.

Her expression says she's not buying it.

NANCY
All right. I'm gonna go check up on Stan. Should be just about ready.

No answer.

NANCY
Corporal?

DAVID (O.S.)
(agitated)
I'm fine.

She pauses, concerned.

NANCY
Okay. Back in a minute.

She leaves.

INT. GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Katy's on the beam, her routine a picture of quiet elegance and impeccable posture. A back leg lift. She holds it, holds it --

Then steps into a cartwheel, finishing with a flip and a twist onto the mat.

She *STUMBLES* on her landing, momentarily thrown off. She grits her teeth -- *dammit!* -- straightens up, and holds her head high to the cheers of the hometown crowd.

She prances off to the sideline.

STANDS

Monica and Ally applaud.

ALLY

She did great, Mon.

MONICA

(harrumphs)

She's not gonna think so.

Monica gets up, gathers her stuff.

MONICA

Well, this is it. Wish me luck.

Wide grin from Ally.

ALLY

Break a leg.

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

The covered box sits in the middle of the room.

INSIDE THE BOX

Darkness. Murky cheers seep in through the cardboard.

David shuffles around, uncomfortable. The scraping noise resumes. His breathing simmers, steadily rising like a kettle on a hot, red coil until...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY

A wicked sun beats down on several decrepit, abandoned buildings. A town once thrived here, now its streets are vacant and swirling with dust.

SUPER: AFGHANISTAN, 3 MONTHS EARLIER

A MILITARY ROADBLOCK, a makeshift set of plastic barrels with intermittent flashing lights, sits fifty yards from --

An ARMY SQUAD of five in standard BDU's, armed with M-16's. They do nothing but wait, keyed-up and watchful. Among them, Corporal David Briggs.

He intently surveys his surroundings when his radio crackles to life. Enter PRIVATE WILLIAM DOBBS, 22.

DOBBS (O.S.)
Got something. Over.

David clicks his two-way.

DAVID
Go ahead. Over.

EXT. ROOFTOP - DAY

Dobbs lays flat atop a building. Through the scope of his rifle a dusty tan CAR crawls up the road.

DOBBS
It's a car, chief. 'Bout a hundred yards away from you. Awaiting instructions. Over.

DAVID (O.S.)
Can you ID? Over.

DOBBS

Negative. Man driving... some movement
in back. Windows are tinted. Over.

Dobbs clears his throat, wipes the sweat from his brow.

DAVID (O.S.)

Send a warning shot across the bow,
Dobbs. Let 'em know we're here. Over.

DOBBS

Roger that. Over.

Dobbs takes aim and squeezes off a shot. It kicks up a burst
of dust in front of the car, but doesn't deter it.

It just keeps coming, approaching the roadblock.

DOBBS

Chief, they're still going. Over.

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY

David holds the radio. The men look on anxiously. One of them,
CASSIDY, 25, flicks a cigarette onto the dirt.

CASSIDY

Corporal?

DOBBS (O.S.)

Chief, you there? I'm not gonna have a
shot if I wait. I gotta do it now if
I-- Shit! Coming your way, coming your
way! Over!

David snaps to attention.

DAVID

Let's go! Let's go!

Three men dart across the street. Two of them duck down an
alleyway, the third gets behind a stone pillar.

David and the last soldier, FERRY, 20, shield themselves
alongside the wall of a burned out building.

Fifty yards in front of them, the car turns the corner. It stops at the blockade.

The men look across at one another. David turns to Ferry.

DAVID

Cover me.

Ferry nods.

David advances carefully, taking cover behind anything he can. He stops behind a support, looks back.

DAVID

On my command!

He edges into the road, throws his hands forward in the direction of the idling car.

DAVID

Go back! Go back!

The car doesn't move. Just sits there, engine *RATTLING*.

Cassidy licks his lips, one eye pressed tight against the scope of his rifle.

DAVID

Go back!

The car's engine clicks, rolls in reverse. It stops, advances around the blockade, and heads straight for them.

CASSIDY

Chief!

David ducks into a storefront doorway. He squeezes the trigger of his M-16.

Cassidy and the rest of the men follow suit. A storm of bullets pummel the approaching car.

Its windshield disintegrates, the tires blow out, hood flies up. Steam hisses from the engine. The car veers right, hits a support and comes to an abrupt stop.

The assault, however, continues.

DAVID

Stop! Stop! Cease fire!

A final few stray shots, then eerie silence. Glass shards *CLINK* from inside the vehicle.

David turns to the men -- they're all there. That's when the back door of the car opens.

A small arm, a CHILD'S arm, flops out. It's streaked with blood and... in its grasp is a BABY DOLL, dressed in a blue outfit.

Small fingers slowly release, and the doll tumbles face-up in the dirt.

A sudden void of silence falls upon the men. There are no words for this.

David lowers his head and stares down at his boots.

DAVID

Fuck...

FERRY

Chief, we had to do it. There was no other option, right?

CASSIDY

(irritated)

Christ, he knows that, Ferry.

David reluctantly looks up. His glazed eyes suggest he knows nothing of the sort.

A rusty *CREAK*.

The passenger door slowly opens. A WOMAN in her thirties struggles out, a shredded burqa clings to her body.

FERRY

Chief!

The woman is ravaged with bullet holes. Her eyes, filled with blood, appear black... lifeless. A thick flap of her scalp hangs off, a sickly tangle of matted hair and flesh.

She stumbles into the road, falls to her knees and raises her arms skyward. She mutters something in Arabic.

The soldiers raise their rifles.

CASSIDY

What's she sayin', Ferry?

Ferry listens close, straining to hear.

FERRY

She-- she's praying, I think... Our Lord... impose not on us... which we don't have the strength to bear...

She tediously rises to one knee, agony contorts her face.

FERRY

... forgive us our sins, remit us our evil deeds... make us die... the death of the righteous--

CASSIDY

Chief! Shoot her! Shoot her!

The woman finds her legs and lunges at David, who stands just feet away, frozen, rifle at his side.

WOMAN

Pigs!

A *DEAFENING* blast of gunfire. Scorching bullets tear a gaping hole in her stomach. She's spun around. Blood sprays from her mouth. She drops to the ground in a crumpled heap.

David vomits. His eyes roll back in his head, his legs go out from under him. He collapses in the dirt, hands curled at his chest, convulsing.

Ferry and another MAN quickly race over and drag him away.

Cassidy slowly lowers his smoking M-16, takes out a cigarette and lights it. The *CLICK* of his ZIPPO, the *BEEP* of his radio.

CASSIDY

Cassidy. Over.

DOBBS (O.S.)

Everything okay over there? I heard shots. Over.

Cassidy's eyes take us to where Ferry tends to David, then to the woman in the road. They finally settle on the doll next to the car, just out of reach of those little fingers.

DOBBS (O.S.)

Cassidy, you there? Over.

He takes a long drag, exhales... Holds the radio to his mouth.

CASSIDY

Everything's fine over here, Dobbs...
Just peachy... Out.

INT. GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The meet is all done, the scores are in.

Off to the side, Monica stands with a reassuring arm around her daughter.

Stan's at the back of the gym. *TAP TAP TAP* reverberates off the walls as he checks his mic.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Nancy strides down the corridor, heels clicking on the tiled floor. She turns a corner and into a --

CLASSROOM

She scans the room, her eyes widen.

NANCY

Oh, dear.

INT. GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Katy and Monica.

KATY

Are we going, mom? I don't wanna stay.

Monica points to Stan.

MONICA

Wait, honey. Listen.

STAN

Folks, I know you're all anxious to get home. But before we leave... Where's Katy Briggs?

MONICA

Right here.

STAN

Katy, I understand today's your birthday, am I right?

Confusion on Katy's face. She nods yes.

STAN

Well, Katy, we here at Fairview middle school have not forgotten. That's why tonight we want to present to you a very special gift. A gift I know is going to put a smile on that face.

Smart phones of all kinds are held high in the stands.

Nancy comes scuffling into the gym. She goes to Stan and whispers something in his ear.

He lowers the microphone, his ever present smile fades. He waves Monica to come over.

MONICA

I'll be right back, honey.

She jogs over, they confer. Monica scours the gym, raises her arms, drops them. Nancy shrugs.

Monica hurries back to Katy, puts a hand on her shoulder.

KATY

Mom, what's going on?

Monica shakes her head, sighs.

MONICA

I'm not sure.

Tears well in Katy's eyes.

KATY

Is this some kind of joke?

She kneels in front of Katy, at a loss.

MONICA

Honey, I gotta go check on something, okay? I'll be right back.

KATY

(through tears)

Is daddy supposed to be here?

MONICA

Honey, I...

KATY

Where is he then? *Where is he?*

Monica pulls her in close.

MONICA

I don't know, okay? I don't know.
Just... give me a few minutes.

Monica gets up. She searches through the crowd and finds Ally, who rushes over.

EXT. SCHOOL - NIGHT

A door opens. Monica steps into the chilly night, looks around. There's a noise.

Squatting, back against a wall, is David. A cigarette dangles from his shaking hand. He snuffles, takes a drag.

Monica carefully approaches, arms folded.

MONICA

Hi.

No response.

MONICA

You, um... You wanna tell me what went on back there?

David reaches into his jacket and pulls out a bottle of pills. He shakes his head.

DAVID

They said I had to take these. I didn't wanna believe 'em, you know? Never asked anyone for help before.

MONICA

What are those?

He hands her the pills, shivers. A car door *SLAMS* and he shoots an uneasy look into the parking lot.

Monica reads the label on the bottle.

MONICA

Jesus, David, I-- David?

His gaze, like a cat eyeing a mouse, is still fixed on the parking lot.

DAVID

Yeah..?

MONICA

David, what's wrong?

He catches himself, looks up to her.

DAVID

I don't know, Monica. I don't know. I just... I'm sorry. You gotta believe me, I tried. I... I just wasn't ready for this.

Monica wilts. She envelops him in her arms and cradles his head tightly to her bosom.

MONICA

It's okay, honey. It's okay if you're not ready yet. I should've known better. It's my fault. My fault.

Further along the building stands --

KATY

Her partially obscured face watches on from a safe distance away, one hand flat against the cold brick structure.

Monica helps David to his feet.

MONICA

Come on home. No lights, no cameras. Just us, I promise.

DAVID

I think I need to... walk a bit. If it's all the same with you.

MONICA

Really?

DAVID

Yeah.

MONICA

Okay. No rush. You take all the time you need.

DAVID
One more thing.

He reaches into his coat, pulls out the revolver and hands it to her.

MONICA
Christ Almighty! The hell you have that thing for?

DAVID
... I don't know. But put it somewhere safe. You know where. Safety's on.

Monica looks around, grabs the gun, puts it in her pocketbook and leers at David.

MONICA
Pawn shop's more like it.

DAVID
Even better.

Further down along the building...

Katy is no longer there.

INT. HOUSE - LATER

Footsteps tread lightly down a darkened hallway. A NITE LITE in the shape of a CANDLE illuminates what it can.

A hesitant hand reaches for a doorknob.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

David watches his daughter sleep.

Her arm dangles off the side of the bed.

She rustles, groans softly. Her eyes flutter open.

KATY
Daddy?

DAVID

Yeah, honey, it's me.

He goes to her and she throws her arms around him. A crowbar couldn't pry them apart.

KATY

Daddy, daddy, daddy...

David gazes at the ceiling. He pulls a deep breath in through his nose, taking it all in.

DAVID

I'm here, baby. I'm here.

She grabs his face.

KATY

I thought something bad happened to you. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Mommy said you were there, but she couldn't find you and...

DAVID

Shh. It's okay, honey. It's okay. I'm here now and I'm not leaving, okay? I promise.

KATY

Okay.

Katy turns on a lamp that sits on her night stand. She hugs him again. A moment passes, a frozen embrace.

DAVID

I heard about you tonight. Your mother said you did really well.

She frowns.

KATY

Not really. I slipped a few times. They deduct for that. I'm so pissed.

DAVID

Hey, watch your mouth.

KATY

Sorry. It's just... frustrating, you know?

DAVID

Yeah, I know. Tell ya what. Next time I'll slip the judge a twenty, okay?

KATY

(laughs)

Okay.

David observes the room. Cut-out pictures of hunky guys on the wall, their faces circled with hearts.

Next to her closet, in a far corner -- a lonely looking rocking chair. Resting on it, in a pink bonnet, is a baby doll clutching a miniature bottle.

David blinks. A bright *FLASH! GUNFIRE! DEAFENING.*

A *SCREAM...*

CASSIDY (O.S.)

Chief! Shoot her! Shoot her!

Little fingers release a baby doll... tumbles to the ground... dirty, blood streaked... more gunfire...

WOMAN

Pigs!

Another *FLASH.*

KATY

Daddy?

No response.

KATY

Daddy?

David snaps out of it. He gulps for air like someone who's finally broken the water's surface

DAVID

Yes. Yes, baby.

KATY

Are you all right?

He regains his composure, waves his hand. A deep breath. A nervous laugh.

DAVID

Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay.

KATY

What happened tonight? Back at the gym.

Searches for the words... He's hesitant. Embarrassed.

DAVID

I was scared.

KATY

Scared? Of what?

DAVID

It's kinda hard to explain.

KATY

Did it have something to do with me?

DAVID

No. No, not at all. It had something to do with me.

Katy gazes at him with puppy eyes. Her silence implies that she doesn't quite understand.

So he tries on a smile, slaps his thighs and gets up.

DAVID

Well, look, you better get some sleep. Tomorrow's Saturday.

(MORE)

DAVID (cont'd)
Lotta catching up to do, me and you.

KATY
Okay.

He turns off the light.

KATY
I love you, daddy.

DAVID
I love you too, baby.

David kisses her cheek and goes to leave.

KATY
Hey, dad?

He turns to face her.

DAVID
What, sweetheart?

KATY
Did you lose your balance, too?

He looks at her for a long while, a soft gaze through watery eyes that he hopes she cannot see. He smiles.

DAVID
Something like that. Go to sleep.

She lowers her head onto the pillow as he exits.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

David slowly pulls the door closed. His hand remains on the knob for a moment.

He lets go, then quietly walks past the candle nite lite, its steady burning bulb illuminating what it can.

FADE OUT.

