

FADE IN:

INT. SEANCE ROOM - DAY

We are in a seance room. Candle lit. New age music plays. Incense smoke wafts. At a round table sits a smattering of people. Among them is ZACHARY GRACE (30). Across from him sits a MEDIUM. Zachary is in the process of getting a reading.

MEDIUM

Tell me, Mr.--

ZACH

Grace. Zachary. Zach.

MEDIUM

What is the name of the person you wish to contact?

ZACH

Anna.

MEDIUM

Your relationship to the deceased?

ZACH

She was my wife.

The medium closes her eyes in intense concentration. After a moment:

MEDIUM

Anna is in the room here with us right now. She has a message for you. She says she is always with you, and with your son.

ZACH

I don't have a son.

MEDIUM

A daughter, perhaps? Yes. She is watching over your daughter, blessing her.

ZACH

You mean Casey?

MEDIUM

Casey, yes. Your daughter's name is Casey. Anna is sending Casey love right now as we speak.

(MORE)

MEDIUM (CONT'D)

(beat)

Do you have any questions for Anna?

ZACH

Questions, lessee... Like, what is my wife's maiden name?

The medium is caught off guard.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Don't know that one? Okay, how about her hair color? No? Social security number? Home phone? The necklace she was wearing when she died?

MEDIUM

Mr. Grace, these questions you're asking, about material encumbrances, they don't apply to the spiritual plane.

ZACH

I've sat here for over three hours watching you con a bunch of bereaved saps out of their hard-earned cash by offering them a glimmer of false hope in the form of vague, one-size-fits-all platitudes.

MEDIUM

I see what the naked eye cannot.

ZACH

And my bullshit meter is pretty damn sensitive. You're a fraud.

MEDIUM

Why should I justify myself to you?

ZACH

Save it, lady.

He pulls out a sticker from his jacket pocket and slams it down on the table. It reads "Outed."

ZACH (CONT'D)

You've been outed.

One of the ONLOOKERS turns to Zach.

ONLOOKER

What gave her away?

ZACH
My daughter's name isn't Casey.

ONLOOKER
And your wife?

ZACH
What wife.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach chewing on a toothpick across the street from the Seance room, watching as it gets boarded up. He gives a satisfied grin and moves along.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach at his small desk in his cramped apartment writing his story. The words are pouring onto the screen faster than he can type them. He hits the send button. He opens another window on his computer and checks his savings account balance. The two topmost transactions, both credits from "Skeptic Magazine" read PENDING. Zach shakes his head and shuts the laptop.

INT. APARTMENT - NEXT MORNING

Zach awakens on the couch still wearing last night's rumpled dress shirt and slacks.

INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Zach opens the bedroom door to see his daughter, SYDNEY (6), asleep in bed. From the doorway he calls out:

ZACHARY
Wake up, sugar plum.

Sydney shifts and groans beneath the covers, rubs her eyes and crawls out of bed.

LATER

Zach helps his daughter into her plaid dress, fastening the buttons on the shoulder straps.

LATER

Zach and Sydney at the breakfast table. He's reading the paper and eating a sandwich. One eye is on his daughter as she spoons cereal into her mouth.

ZACH
 You're not eating your berries.
 (kids voice)
 Eat yo bewwies!

She giggles and spoons a strawberry into her mouth.

INT. HALLWAY - LATER

Zach and Sydney exit his apartment and walk down the hall. They pass a neighbor's door. It opens to reveal a WOMAN and her SON. The woman wears a hijab or traditional Muslim headdress. The boy is Sydney's age. Sydney and the boy smile at each other.

MOTHER
 You are driving? We can carpool?

ZACH
 Sorry. We're taking the train today.

Zach pulls his daughter along by the arm.

INT. CAR - MORNING

Zach driving his daughter to school. He's lost in his head. She's playing with a doll. He looks at her, tries to engage.

ZACH
 Okay where were we. ABCs.

SYDNEY
 I already know my ABCs.

ZACH
 Count to a hundred.

SYDNEY
 I can do that too.

Zach's attempt to be a hands-on parent fails and he gives up.

A song comes on the radio. Zach gets into it, turns up the volume, starts banging on the dashboard, like he's a drummer.

ZACH

This is from when I was your age.
You like it? Wanna sing along?

He ad libs a a verse but his daughter goes more deeply into her doll.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Zach and Sydney walk hand-in-hand to the school gate, where they are met by Sydney's TEACHER. He nods to the teacher and hands his daughter off. He stoops and she kisses his cheek. As she walks off:

ZACH

(calling out; almost
desperately)
I'll be here when you get out,
baby.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

Zach sits in an almost empty courtroom, lazily watching a trial unfold. A LAWYER announces.

LAWYER

Prosecution calls expert witness
Dr. Ian Steinmann.

The PSYCHIATRIST takes the stand.

LAWYER (CONT'D)

Dr. Steinmann, in your expert
opinion as a psychiatrist who
evaluated the defendant, was Mr.
Morehouse mentally sound at the
time of the killings?

STEINMANN

Yes, I believe he was.

LAWYER

But the defendant maintains he was
speaking in tongues. Surely this is
a sign of a mental aberration of
some sort. I mean, we're not living
in Biblical times any more...

STEINMANN

The defendant's claim that he was
speaking a language unknown to him
at the time is patently untrue.

(MORE)

STEINMANN (CONT'D)

I analyzed the words he claims to have uttered at the time of the killings. They were a line from *Beowulf*, a book he was assigned in English class, junior year of high school.

LAWYER

You know this for a fact?

STEINMANN

(nods)

I checked his school records. Mr. Morehouse is not insane. He just has a really good memory.

LAWYER

Thank you, Doctor.

EXT. COURTHOUSE - DAY

Outside the courthouse Zach catches up with Dr. Steinmann on his way down the steps.

ZACH

I'm Zach Grace. I'm a journalist. I wanted to extend my compliments. I came here to debunk xenoglossy but you did it for me. Saved me a day's work, if also a day's pay. But I'm willing to let that slide if you'll let me buy you a drink.

STEINMANN

I don't drink, Mr. Grace. And I know what you're getting at.

ZACH

You do?

STEINMANN

The answer's yes. I once treated a patient who exhibited a genuine case of speaking a language she had never before heard. I'll tell you about it if you come to my home office. I can serve you tea. I'll even sweeten it if you prefer.

INT. CHURCH AUDITORIUM - DAY

Zach and Sydney at her catechism class. They sit cross-legged on the floor in a circle with other children. Zach is one of the only parents present. At the center of the circle FAITH RAINES (30) leads the class. Zach looks like he doesn't want to be there.

FAITH

What does Christmas stand for,
class?

CHILD #1

Jesus.

FAITH

And who is Jesus?

CHILD #2

Jesus is the Son of God.

CHILD #3

The Savior.

CHILD #4

A prophet.

FAITH

Very good. He was also the Messiah.
Who knows what Messiah means?

Zach can't help himself.

ZACH

It means "chosen one." But Jesus
wasn't chosen. Jesus was a Jew.

All the kids look at Zach.

FAITH

Excuse me?

ZACH

I said, Jesus wasn't God's son, or
a savior or a prophet. And he
certainly wasn't the Messiah. Jesus
was a Jew. Which is probably better
than being any of the above. But
I'm probably partial.

Zach laughs at his own joke. We can't tell if Faith shares his amusement.

FAITH
I'll need to have a word with you
after class.

The kids do the "ew somebody's in trouble" thing.

LATER

Zach approaches Faith after class.

ZACH
Am I in trouble?

FAITH
You're kind of making my life hell.

ZACH
So you believe in hell? Of course
you are, being a Christian.

A beat.

ZACH (CONT'D)
We Jews are skeptical by nature.
Especially of the New Testament.

FAITH
Mr.--

ZACH
Grace.

FAITH
Grace... It doesn't sound like a
Jewish name.

ZACH
Jewish on my mother's side. It's
the side that counts.

FAITH
Mr. Grace, this class is
ecumenical. It's purpose is to
unite people of various faiths.

ZACH
And serve as a form of glorified
babysitting until their parents get
off work.

FAITH
Okay, maybe that too.

They share a smile.

FAITH (CONT'D)
What I'm trying to teach is a
belief in a higher power.

ZACH
Can you teach that? Because I
haven't learned it.

FAITH
So you're a cynic.

ZACH
A skeptic, really. Do you know the
difference?

Faith is intrigued.

FAITH
Enlighten me.

ZACH
Okay, Ms.--?

FAITH
Faith.

ZACH
Faith. You see, you're born to
believe. I on the other hand... A
cynic is selfish and negative, but
motivated by virtue. Whereas a
skeptic relies on reason and
critical thinking, rather than
blind...

FAITH
Faith.

ZACH
How ironic, that Faith is your
name.

FAITH
Is it?

ZACH
Given what we're talking about, I'd
say it is.

FAITH
Am I the opposite of what you'd
expect, as in not your type?

They look at each other. The attraction is palpable.

FAITH (CONT'D)

What is ironic is your name. Grace is given to those with faith, and you seem to lack it altogether. Being a cynic.

ZACH

(correcting)
A skeptic.

FAITH

Like the magazine.

ZACH

Which I write for it.

FAITH

That's fitting.

ZACH

Small world.

(beat)

Truth is, I'm just here to support my daughter. Her mother was a practicing Catholic and wanted her to receive the sacraments. Thus this church we're in.

FAITH

(sternly)

Well, Mr. Grace, do me a favor--

Sydney comes over and tugs on her father's sleeve.

SYDNEY

Daddy I wanna go home.

Zach stoops down and lifts his daughter into his arms. He looks at Faith - who is clearly touched by the gesture - as if to say, "You were saying?"

FAITH

(softer)

Just kindly show your support for your daughter in a less vociferous way.

INT. STEINMANN'S HOME - DAY

Steinmann opens the door to let Zach in.

INT. OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Zach looks around the study as Steinmann roots through a prodigious stack of files in his closet. Zach takes everything in. The books on the shelf, the peculiar altar to a dark-skinned, robed man in a corner of the office. The altar is partially covered with a cloth. Zach scoots it aside to get a closer look at the picture of the robed figure but moves away before Steinmann notices. Steinmann holds up a file.

STEINMANN

The woman's name was Jackie. She was a patient of mine for some time in the late 80s. I treated her for depression and anxiety. She was in and out of the hospital several times. She called me one day and told me she was getting messages in Sanskrit and other languages she had never heard before. So at our next visit I videotaped her, and sure enough she produced entire sentences in obscure languages. It was one of the most remarkable things I have ever witnessed.

He hands Zach a file. He coughs, covers his mouth, and reaches into his pocket for a couple pills which he downs with a half a glass of water.

STEINMANN (CONT'D)

I wish I could offer you more than a stack of papers, like a zip drive or a disc. But it was before the Internet. You'll find a video worth watching however.

ZACH

Did you publish your findings?

STEINMANN

I considered it. But a personal crisis prevented me. I lost my wife.

ZACH

(noticeably affected)

I'm sorry.

(beat)

I'm sure you are aware that there's never been a documented case of speaking in tongues.

(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)

Verified, I mean. Of course there's the Biblical story.

STEINMANN

But it doesn't hold any water for us Jews.

They exchange a look of commiseration.

ZACH

Your account, if verified, would make history.

STEINMANN

And only you stand in my way, you're saying?

ZACH

My job is to dispel pseudoscience. I expose quacks, Dr. Steinmann. You don't strike me as a quack.

STEINMANN

I hope your researches will prove you right in your assessment.

ZACH

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach going over the files. He goes into his closet and finds an old VCR machine. Before he closes the door we see an altar similar to Steinmann's, but it is to Zach's deceased wife, Anna.

Later, Zach watching the VHS tape while making notes. On the TV screen we see a much younger Steinmann in his office sitting with a YOUNG LADY who is reading to him from a piece of paper containing Sanskrit words.

INT. STEINMANN'S HOUSE - DAY

Steinmann opens the door for Zach, who hands him back the file.

INT. OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Steinmann leads Zach into the study.

STEINMANN

So, what do your researches suggest?

ZACH

I'd like to speak to the girl.

STEINMANN

Impossible. She's aphasic. Suffered a series of mini-strokes. Besides we lost touch when she moved upstate. I don't think I have a new address.

ZACH

What about this holy man, Sai Baba. The one she says visited her in dreams and taught her Sanskrit?

STEINMANN

He left his body six years ago.

ZACH

She have any encounters with Sai Baba while alive?

STEINMANN

No.

ZACH

But you did.

Steinmann looks surprised.

STEINMANN

I'll admit I was a devotee for a time.

ZACH

I'd say you're still pretty devout, judging by that set-up you got over there in the corner.

Zach gestures at the altar to Sai Baba.

STEINMANN

I'm ... ambivalent.

ZACH

In light of his sex scandals and allegations of sorcery, I'd be too.

Steinmann looks at Zach as if to say, "How did you know?"

ZACH (CONT'D)

Unlike you I have an Internet connection.

STEINMANN

If you are saying that I offered the case to you to validate my belief in the Hindu Swami.

ZACH

I don't have to say that. You already did. I just wish you had mentioned it before is all. It would have done something for my faith in the human race.

He hands Steinmann the file.

ZACH (CONT'D)

As I see it, this is a case of transference/counter-transference. My guess is that this Jackie wanted to please her therapist by parroting the words of the man he most admired. Patient suggestibility, coupled with the desire to impress her father-figure of a shrink, who was also her lover.

(beat)

You're wondering how I know you were lovers? Call it a hunch. Which would explain why you never sought publication for the case. And why your marriage broke up.

(off Steinmann's look)

You said you lost your wife. I took it to mean she died, but she divorced you. Frankly I think you're in desperate need of validation. Those pills you're taking, oral chemotherapy. You find yourself at the end of life and you're wondering what your legacy will be. You pledged allegiance to this man of miracles who proved to be a charlatan or at least a social deviant, in any event he was purported to be, and you desperately wish to extract some meaning in your life before it is all over.

(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)

Well I can't give that to you,
because I've got a job to do, and
it's to expose frauds like you. I'm
sorry, sir.

STEINMANN

But how could she know Sanskrit?

ZACH

You're that gullible?
(goes over to bookshelf)
She borrowed a language book from
your own shelf.

Zach takes a book out of his bag and replaces it on the
shelf.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Didn't even know it was missing,
did you? Nor did you way back when.
If that's not enough, here's a
library card from the local
library, circa 1988. Jackie took
out several books referenced in her
phonetic dictation. She was
transcribing the words of the
Bhagavad Gita in the original
Sanskrit. You knew it then as now,
though you've failed to let on as
much. Nice try, Doc. I'll let
myself out.

INT. SKEPTIC MAGAZINE OFFICE - DAY

Zach enters a warehouse with a few cubicles. The place looks
like it is going out of business. RAYMOND, the editor, is a
sleazy guy with a comb-over and a paunch. He's at a miniature
basketball net shooting hoops with TWO OTHER GUYS, the
magazine's accountant and another reporter.

ZACH

Hey Ray.

RAY

Zachamundo, my friend.

ZACH

Did you get the seance article I
sent you?

RAY

I did. Loved it, Zachy baby. Real
vintage shit.

ZACH

Great, because I haven't been paid for my last two pieces.

RAY

Hmmm, must be an accounting screw-up. I'll have to check.

Zach looks over at the accountant.

RAY (CONT'D)

Now's not the time. Listen, Zachalufagus...

(leads Zach to entrance)

Times are a changing. Print is waning. Ezines are the deal. I'm doing my best to stay afloat. That means less reporters, and editors doing more reporting. That means me. And so it's time to say goodbye.

ZACH

You're firing me.

RAY

Didn't your mama tell you not to play with matches? Euphemisms, please. I'm letting you go. You'll get paid. I promise, I just don't know when.

ZACH

Fuck.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach walks alone through the neighborhood, bundled up against the bitter cold. The dirty snow makes him cringe, as does the litter. He passes an ally in which two kids smoke a crack pipe. Across the street he sees a drug deal take place. He kicks a can to scare off the street urchins, shakes his head. He's had enough of this crummy neighborhood.

He stops in front of the church.

INT. CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Zach enters the church. It is candle lit and empty. He awkwardly moves forward and takes a seat at a pew in back.

LATER

Zach is slumped at the pew, asleep. We see a woman's hands as they slide over his face and cover his eyes. This startles Zach awake.

WOMAN'S VOICE

Guess who?

Zach peels the fingers off his face, sees Faith standing behind him.

FAITH

I was wrong about you.

She sits down next to him.

FAITH (CONT'D)

You said you didn't have any faith.

ZACH

Looks can be deceiving.

FAITH

Come here often?

ZACH

I just needed some time alone.

FAITH

That's what prayer is all about.
And you're not alone.

ZACH

I wasn't praying. In this city a church is practically the only place you can find silence and not pay rent. Remind me to duck out before they come around with the donations bucket.

FAITH

Seriously, what are you doing here?

ZACH

I know I should be out job hunting, but most businesses are closed at this hour, and I'm not in the racket of saving souls.

FAITH

The magazine?

ZACH

Going under, or so my editor says.

They sit in silence.

ZACH (CONT'D)
Wanna get outta here?

FAITH
Sure.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

Faith sits across from Zach, watching him dump numerous packets of sugar into his coffee.

FAITH
Easy there, partner.

He takes a sip, winces.

FAITH (CONT'D)
Drowning your sorrows?

The waitress comes over with a huge plate of ribs for Faith.

ZACH
Better than soaking them in salt.

FAITH
Touche.

ZACH
What's your deal?

FAITH
You mean, what am I doing
volunteering with inner-city kids?

ZACH
Is that what my daughter is?

FAITH
Sorry, I didn't mean to generalize,
but yeah?
(laughs)
I'm a graduate student in
philosophy. Working with kids is an
antidote.

ZACH
An antidote.

FAITH
To all the reading I have to do. If
you haven't read St. Augustine.

ZACH

I haven't.

FAITH

Then don't.

ZACH

Okay.

FAITH

Let's just say it's enough to make you cross-eyed. Too much head, not enough heart. The kids live in their hearts. Sydney does, especially. She's so special.

ZACH

Now you're just trying to win me over.

FAITH

Nah. Well, maybe. I like you.

ZACH

I'm a married man.

FAITH

Sydney told me what happened to your wife. I, uh, I'm sorry.

ZACH

What exactly did she tell you?

FAITH

That her mom went to heaven.

ZACH

(shakes his head)

That's just like Anna, filling our daughter with those useless notions. Fantasies, superstitions.

(beat)

Religion is the opium of the people.

FAITH

That was said by a communist. With your love of sugar, you don't strike me as one?

ZACH

What, a communist? I'm more of a socialist.

FAITH
Is there a difference?

Zach looks at her as if to say "here we go again."

ZACH
I'm tired.

FAITH
I can finish my dinner in the car.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Zach pulls up in front of Faith's place.

FAITH
It's been real.

Zach touches Faith's coat to detain her.

ZACH
I was hoping to see you tonight.
That's why I came to the church. I
knew you would be there.

FAITH
Did you now?

ZACH
I checked the schedule.

FAITH
What did you want to see me about,
pray tell?

ZACH
(shrugs)
I'm not exactly sure.

FAITH
Did you think I might find you a
job? Because I could.

ZACH
(taken off guard)
Really now.

FAITH
I have a friend, another graduate
student. He's writing a book on
paranormal phenomena, if he ever
gets around to writing it. Should
be right up your alley.

ZACH

I debunk that hocus-pocus stuff,
you know.

FAITH

I'm sure Steven could use the
stimulation of a different opinion.
Or needs a fact-checker.

Zach pulls a joint out of his pocket and lights up.

FAITH (CONT'D)

Mary Jane? My aren't we full of
surprises.

He hands it to Faith, who takes a toke.

LATER

The two are still in the car, thoroughly stoned.

FAITH (CONT'D)

You know that most of the world
believes in reincarnation. They
almost included it in the Catholic
religion, but it was vetoed by a
narrow margin at the Council of
Nicea, or maybe it was Trent. So
many councils back in the 4th
century.

(beat)

Who do you think you were?

ZACH

In another life? Identity requires
memory and continuity. Me, I can't
remember anything before the age of
ten. So if memory serves, then I
was a nobody.

(beat)

Ever hear of xenoglossy?

FAITH

That's... speaking in tongues.

ZACH

I just wrote this article debunking
a case of a girl speaking a
language she'd never heard. She was
channelling the teachings of this
Indian holy man. I came to find it
was total BS.

(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)

But what she said, about how we're all one, and cosmic consciousness, I haven't been able to get it out of my head. Here I'm supposed to be worried about paying the bills, and I'm wondering what it all means. And whether I'll ever see my wife again.

FAITH

When did she die?

ZACH

It's been almost two years, and coping is not getting any easier. She went suddenly. She had a brain tumor but she didn't die of that.

Faith is waiting for Zach to say more but he can't go on so he changes the subject.

ZACH (CONT'D)

(beat)

What about you? Who were you in ... another life? I can't believe I just asked that...

FAITH

Cinderella. And it's practically midnight, so I'll be saying good night.

Faith kisses Zach on the cheek.

FAITH (CONT'D)

Thanks for the weed. Really good shit. A very un-Cinderella thing to say, I recognize.

She lets herself out of the car, closes the door, speaks to Zach through the window.

FAITH (CONT'D)

Oh and come by here tomorrow at around 1. Ask for Steven, he's the guy writing the book. If you're lucky, maybe I'll see you then.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Zach walks down the hall towards his apartment door. Screaming can be heard coming from Zach's apartment.

The next-door neighbor (Muslim lady) is peering out of her door, looking concerned.

NEIGHBOR

She's been crying like that for almost an hour.

ZACH

(brusque)

It's fine. I'll take care of it. You can go back inside your apartment now.

NEIGHBOR

I asked her to come to the door and let me in but I think she is too scared.

ZACH

(a bit too forceful)

You can return to your apartment now. I got this.

NEIGHBOR

What kind of father leaves his child at home alone.

ZACH

(losing it)

I said go back inside!

INT. APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Zach enters his daughter's room and turns on the light, sits down next to her in bed. She hugs him. He strokes her hair.

ZACH

It's okay, sugar plum. Daddy's here. Nightmares again?

SYDNEY

(nods into his shoulder)

A man with big hair and a dark face. He was speaking to me.

ZACH

What was he saying?

SYDNEY

I can't remember. But I was scared.

ZACH

Did you ever see him before?

SYDNEY

(nods)

The book on your desk.

Zach nods.

ZACH

That's called the power of suggestion. We often dream about the last thing we saw before falling asleep. You remember I was reading a book with him on the cover and so that's what you dreamt about. See, it was just a dream.

SYDNEY

Do you dream too, daddy?

ZACH

We all do. I just can't remember my dreams. Never have. Are you ready to say good night?

SYDNEY

Okay, but can we first say a prayer that God will protect me?

Zach thinks.

ZACH

I don't know any prayers. How about I promise to learn one and get back to you?

He kisses his daughter good night.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Zach beneath the covers. He reaches into his night stand drawer and pulls out a picture of his wife, looks at it hard, sets it on the night stand. He then pulls out a book on Sai Baba and begins to read.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Zach awakens with the book still on his chest.

EXT. FAITH'S PLACE - DAY

Zach arrives in front of her walk-up apartment. He's shaved, hair combed, carries a briefcase.

The way he'd look for an interview, which is what this is.
Takes a deep breath and rings the bell.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

A wild-haired guy opens the door. He's wearing pajamas and eating from a bowl of cereal with an oversized spoon, which he holds in his palm like a child. His hair hasn't been combed in over a week.

ZACH
Steven?

STEVEN
That's me bra. Come on in.

LATER

Zach sits stiffly on the couch, his briefcase on his lap. Steven practices his putting game on a portable green.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
So... Faith.

ZACH
Faith.

STEVEN
She said you're really good with details. We used to date no big deal.

ZACH
Okay.

STEVEN
She's a serious chick, and I can't be tied down. We're both clean freaks, so it works.

Scratches his testicles.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
We live with two other students. Total nerds. But it saves on rent. I have a trust fund though. But Faith pinches pennies.

ZACH
What do you want me to do?

STEVEN

Sorry, TMI. I'll get to the point. I'm a PhD candidate in philosophy and I'm writing a thesis, which I hope to turn into a book for major bucks, after I graduate I mean. If I graduate. Its purpose is to establish paranormal entities, ghosts and things, as facts.

ZACH

I don't believe in ghosts and things. If you ask me, they don't exist.

STEVEN

Great. Here's what I need you to do. Interview this man. He's a professor of religious studies. You've read the Bhagavad Gita? It's the seminal text of Hinduism. No? You can read it on the way to see him.

Steven hands Zach a piece of paper with a name scrawled on it in practically illegible cursive.

ZACH

What do you want me to ask this Abdullah Al-Mahdi?

STEVEN

I hope to get his expert endorsement, specifically of ghosts. The terrifying sort. Just let him lead. But first you got to find him. He's a professor somewhere. Not at Columbia, is all I know.

Zach's phone buzzes. He looks at the message on his phone's screen. "Reminder: Sacred Heart School. Next tuition payment of \$500 due tomorrow."

ZACH

I'm happy to track this fellow down, and to interview him, but I'll need to be paid.

STEVEN

This is a student project. Didn't Faith say so? I could get into major trouble if money exchanges hands.

ZACH

Then I'm not your man. I make it a policy never to work for free, if I can avoid it.

STEVEN

Good negotiation skills. Props for that.

(thinks)

How about I give you whatever is in my wallet and we take it from there?

Steven takes out his wallet, extracts a few crumpled bills and hands them over to Zach.

STEVEN (CONT'D)

Should be nearly a hundred, definitely more than fifty. There's more where that came from. I always wanted to say that.

Zach takes the money, nods and leaves.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Zach walks along the street. He searches his phone for the address of the man he's supposed to interview. Finds a Dr. Al-Mahdi at Stony Brook University.

INT. SUBWAY - DAY

Zach riding the train to Stony Brook. He's reading his phone. On the screen we see it is the *Bhagavad Gita* he reads.

EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

Zach walks through the campus towards a brick building.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Zach knocks at the office door.

ZACH

Professor Al-Mahdi?

The bearded PROFESSOR seated at his desk looks up from his book.

LATER

Zach sits in front of the professor.

PROFESSOR
What would you like to ask me?

ZACH
I don't know, really. I don't know
why I'm here.

PROFESSOR
Join the club.
(laughs)
Seriously, I do not often give
interviews, even to my own
students. And I have a lecture
beginning shortly. You have
questions.

ZACH
What I wanted to know...
(improvising)
in the *Bhagavad Gita*, when Lord
Krishna appears to the charioteer--

PROFESSOR
Arjuna, yes.

ZACH
He is terrifying in his aspect.
This is God on Earth, supposedly,
and he frightens the shit out of
his biggest disciple.

The professor sits back, satisfied with this observation.

ZACH (CONT'D)
I don't understand it. Isn't God
supposed to be good and just,
sweetness and spice and everything
nice?

PROFESSOR
If the Lord is all that is,
wherever you look, there you will
find Him.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach relates his interview to Steven, who is stirring a pot
of pasta at the stove.

STEVEN

Brilliant. You see, that explains why so many people who have visitations, of ghosts you know, report their skin crawling, feelings of dread. They're terrified. Because ghosts are closer to God than humans.

ZACH

(interrupting)

Look I'm glad the interview helps support the case you're trying to make, but I need more money.

STEVEN

I'm flat out. Spent the rest of my allowance on this dinner I'm cooking. Hope it turns out. Why don't you join?

ZACH

Thanks but I already ate.

STEVEN

Come on. Faith'll be here.

ZACH

I can't. I gotta six-year-old daughter. I leave her at home unattended again and the neighbors'll have me arrested.

STEVEN

So bring her over. There's plenty of food. I mean it.

ZACH

Yeah?

STEVEN

Yeah.

INT. CHURCH - EVENING

Zach waits at the door for catechism class to finish. Faith is interacting with the children. Zach sees a PRIEST.

ZACH

Father may I have a word with you?

PRIEST

Yes of course.

The priest gestures Zach into the sacristy.

ZACH

Father I'd like to have my daughter baptized.

PRIEST

How old is she?

ZACH

She's six. I know these things usually happen around birth, but you see I'm Jewish and I opposed it at the time. My wife, you see she was a Catholic. A practicing Catholic. And this was her dying wish.

PRIEST

Is your daughter's wish also to receive the sacrament of Baptism?

ZACH

Yes, she desires it very much. She's currently enrolled in catechism class, for that purpose.

PRIEST

I see. We can arrange it. There is a group service I'm performing this Sunday. Your daughter is welcome to attend.

ZACH

Thanks, Father. I think I'd like to be baptized too.

PRIEST

I see. I must ask you something. You mentioned your late wife, who was the mother of your daughter. Was she your first wife? Your only wife?

(off Zach's look)

I need to ask, you see, because we see an unprecedented number of multiple marriages going on these days.

ZACH

Actually no. I was married once before. It didn't count really. We were only married a couple months. Shotgun wedding.

(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)

Practically on a dare. She got hitched a few months after we split. Is happily married with three kids.

PRIEST

I understand. But the Catholic faith does not countenance divorce. The Church is guided by the words of Jesus on the indissolubility of marriage, found in Matthew 19:6: "Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate." Divorce itself is not necessarily sinful. What is prohibited is a second marriage while a previous bond still exists.

(beat)

I'm afraid we can't allow you entrance into the Catholic faith.

ZACH

That seems rather discriminatory, Father.

PRIEST

You know what they say: I don't make the rules...

At the door Sydney appears.

SYDNEY

Ready to go, daddy?

ZACH

Hey baby.

(to priest)

Thanks for your time, Father. I hope I didn't keep you from, you know, saving any souls.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

The door opens to reveal Zach dressed for dinner, holding his daughter by the hand.

STEVEN

Welcome. Hey Sydney. Come on in.

LATER

Zach and Sydney sit with Faith and Steven and their two ROOMMATES. Faith is explaining/defending her catechism class.

FAITH

The class is universal. I try to teach from all religions, without naming names. There's a common thread uniting all faiths, no pun intended.

STEVEN

The perennial philosophy. Aldous Huxley. I've read about that.

FAITH

Much older than Aldous, actually. Vedanta. It goes back over 5000 years.

ZACH

So why conduct the class in a church?

FAITH

It's in a church because a mosque or temple wasn't available, but it could have been held in either.

STEVEN

Enough, Faith. I've heard it all before. Let's hear from our guest. Zach, what's your story?

ZACH

Not much to tell, really. My daughter and I moved here with my wife a couple years back. She was dying and wanted to be close to her parents. But they ended up moving away. She passed away, and we stayed. But it's not permanent, is it sugar plum?

SYDNEY

I want to go to back the beach.

ZACH

California. That's where we're from. And where we're headed, maybe.

STEVEN

You know what we should do? We should hold a seance. You know, to communicate with your wife.

ZACH
Nah, thanks but. No way.

STEVEN
Come on, it'd be fun.

ZACH
I'm not into that.

SYDNEY
What's a seance, daddy?

Zach doesn't reply.

STEVEN
It's a ceremony whereby the living attempt to contact those who've died. I mean your mother.

ZACH
It's a bogus ritual conducted by charlatans to hoodwink the gullible and part them with their money, honey.

SYDNEY
What's a charlatan?

ZACH
(points at Steven)
You're looking at one. Come on, let's go home.

Zach takes his daughter by the hand and leads her to the door. Faith shoots Steven a look and follows them out.

INT. STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

Faith follows father and daughter down the stairs.

FAITH
Forgive Steven. He can be callous. Unthinking.

Zach turns on her.

ZACH
I noticed you were playing footsie under the table.

FAITH
Don't be ridiculous.

ZACH
Your arms touched throughout
dinner. Am I being ridiculous?

FAITH
You're just being jealous. We were
seated next to each other, for
Christ's sake, Zach.

ZACH
Thank you for dinner. Don't contact
me again.

Zach leads his daughter out the exit door. Faith calls out:

FAITH
Does that mean I won't be seeing
you at your daughter's baptism next
week?

EXT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach approaches the entrance to his apartment with Sydney.
Neighborhood kids play in the background.

SYDNEY
Daddy, can I play with them?

ZACH
Next time, baby. How 'bout I read
you a bedtime story instead?

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Zach tucks Sydney into bed.

ZACH
'Night, baby.

SYDNEY
What about my story?

ZACH
Daddy's tired. Rain check?

SYDNEY
What does 'rain check' mean?

ZACH
It means we do it tomorrow.

SYDNEY

You said you'd pray with me tomorrow.

ZACH

I will, baby. I promise.

SYDNEY

Then tell me a story today.

Zach rubs his eyes, reaches onto the nightstand and grabs a book. It is an illustrated version of THE STORY OF BEOWULF.

ZACH

(reading)

Long, long ago there lived a king...

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach walks down the street. Burning off nervous energy. His phone rings.

VOICE

If God is all that is, Mr. Grace, he is the devil too.

ZACH

Professor? Dr. Al-Mahdi?

PROFESSOR

I have an assignment for you.

ZACH

What sort of assignment?

PROFESSOR

A student of mine is conducting research on immigrants in your neighborhood. You said you lived in Midtown, is that correct?

ZACH

Yes.

PROFESSOR

You are to get to know the tenants in your apartment, write about the various ethnic backgrounds. A sort of getting-to-know you piece.

ZACH

What for?

PROFESSOR

Think of it as a way to counteract Trump's heavy-handed stance on immigration. Devil's advocate, if you will.

ZACH

As much as I'd like to help you out, Professor, student projects don't really pay. I got a hungry mouth to feed, and not just my own. Besides, immigration is not really my thing.

PROFESSOR

This job pays rather handsomely.

ZACH

How handsomely?

PROFESSOR

You name your fee.

ZACH

Name my fee? That's ridiculous. Who's the editor?

PROFESSOR

I'm not at liberty to say. But if you accept you will receive half the requested amount mailed to your address within 24 hours, the other half on completion of the assignment. Do you accept?

ZACH

In that case, yes.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Sydney is about to be baptized with a group of other children. Zach looks on. Across from him is Faith. Before the ceremony begins he makes his way over to her.

ZACH

Hey.

FAITH

(cool)

Hey.

ZACH
 (in a whisper)
 I need your help. Teach me a
 prayer. Make it quick.

FAITH
 Excuse me?

ZACH
 A promised my daughter I'd learn a
 prayer. So teach me one, but make
 it short.

FAITH
 Zach, this is neither the time nor
 the place.

ZACH
 We're in a church, for Christ's
 sake.

Someone shushes him.

FAITH
 Don't take the Lord's name in vain.

ZACH
 Jesus wasn't God.
 (off Faith's look)
 I know, we've already gone over
 that.

FAITH
 Your daughter is about to receive
 her first sacrament.

ZACH
 Which is why I need to learn
 something holy. So start teaching.

Faith sees she has no way out of this but to give in.

FAITH
 Okay. How about a Hail Mary?

ZACH
 Something more masculine.

FAITH
 Our Father?

ZACH
 I've heard that one. It's too long.

The ceremony begins.

PRIEST

Glory be to the Father, and to the
Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it
was in the beginning, is now, and
ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.

Faith and Zach look at one another. That's the prayer.

ZACH

Amen.

ZACH (CONT'D)

About the other night, I'm sorry.

FAITH

Amen.

Zach turns his attention to the altar where he watches his daughter be baptized. It's rather beautiful. He and Faith exchange looks throughout. At first she seems annoyed but by the end of the ceremony he has gotten her to smile. Friends again.

INT. ICE CREAM PARLOR - DAY

Zach, Faith and Sydney sit eating ice cream.

FAITH

It's like we're a little family.

Zach glares at her.

FAITH (CONT'D)

Sydney, my mom used to take me for
ice cream when I was an especially
good little girl. I'd get a double
scoop, just like your daddy bought
you.

SYDNEY

(without looking at Faith)
I miss my mommy.

Faith is not sure how to respond.

FAITH

Yes, well I'm sure she's in heaven.

SYDNEY

Is she daddy? Is mommy in heaven?

ZACH

(coldly; to Faith)

Well that would depend. On whether God allows suicides into heaven. Seeing as how he doesn't allow the twice married into his church, I doubt it.

EXT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Zach leads his daughter up the walkway to their apartment. Faith is by his side. They see kids playing.

SYDNEY

Daddy can I go play?

ZACH

Later baby.

They reach the door. A bearded man exits with his son. He is Zach's neighbor. Instantly Zach becomes the friendly reporter.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Hi, do you live here? I mean of course you do. Right next door to me. I've seen you several times. We have kids the same age.

MAN

You never talk to me before. Now why?

ZACH

I'm sorry. I can get trapped in my head. I'm Zach.

MAN

And I am late. Excuse me please.

The man brushes by.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach tucks Sydney into bed. Faith is checking out the digs in the living room.

SYDNEY

Say a prayer, Daddy. You promised.

ZACH

I know I did.

Zach bows his head, composes himself. Ad libs it.

ZACH (CONT'D)

God, if you're listening, protect this darling child of mine. I love her more than life itself. If she isn't the prettiest baby girl in the whole wide world, you have my permission to come down and tickle her until she pees.

Zach tickles his daughter, who erupts in giggles.

INT. APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Zach closes the door to his daughter's bedroom and joins Faith in the living area.

ZACH

This is a momentous occasion.

FAITH

Is it.

ZACH

Your first time at my place.

FAITH

It may be my last unless you behave.

ZACH

What can I offer you?

FAITH

An explanation. What was with your hostile neighbor?

ZACH

I'm the hostile neighbor. He was just reacting to prior episodes of unfriendliness. But now it behoves me to, ah, cultivate my fellow tenants. I got a gig to write a pro-immigration piece on the people living in this apartment. I just don't know how to reach out.

FAITH

He's Muslim.

ZACH

So I gathered.

FAITH

Muslims love to preach about their faith.

ZACH

Note to self: inquire about Islam. Thanks for the tip. What can I offer you?

FAITH

I'm good. Still digesting the sherbet. Tell me, why are there no pictures of your wife?

ZACH

You are direct, aren't you. I guess I'm not the sentimental type.

FAITH

I won't push it.

ZACH

Thank you.

They sit on the couch.

ZACH (CONT'D)

You're special, you know that?

FAITH

You sound like my mom.

ZACH

I meant you're in an exclusive group. No woman, family members excepted, has ever entered these premises.

FAITH

You're quite the charmer.

ZACH

Really I have no idea what I'm doing.

FAITH

I can make it easy for you.

Faith scoots nearer him on the couch. Zach stiffens.

ZACH

My wife suffered a rare medical condition. Something in her brain. It affected her moods.

(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)

We were in LA, I was holding my own as a staff writer on some TV show that has since been cancelled. We were doing okay. But the medical bills bankrupted us. We had to sell our place to cover debts and move into this seedy apartment in shantytown to be close to her parents. Then they moved away. How's that for irony. Things were really good for us, until they weren't. She overdosed on pain meds. I never got a chance to say goodbye. Neither did my kid. Life sucks sometimes.

Faith leans over and kisses Zach. It's conciliatory at first. But the kiss evolves into a passionate embrace that overwhelms them both. Just when they seem on the verge of tearing each other's clothes off, Sydney's bedroom door opens and she appears.

SYDNEY

Daddy, I can't sleep. I'm afraid of the nightmares.

Zach and Faith separate.

SYDNEY (CONT'D)

Will you read me a story?

Zach looks apologetically at Faith.

ZACH

Will I? It's my life's dream.
(to Faith)
Please excuse me.

FAITH

I should get going.

ZACH

No really.

FAITH

I have a lot of work to do. My thesis...

She reaches for her bag, and from it a manuscript falls out. It's title: A CRISIS OF FAITH. Zach picks it up. Thumbs through it.

ZACH

This, this is about me.

FAITH

It's what I wanted to talk to you about before things got hot and heavy.

ZACH

Stay where you are. Better yet, follow me.

Zach leads Faith to the door. As they pass Sydney:

ZACH (CONT'D)

Baby, I'll be right back.

They exit.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Zach and Faith stand outside his apartment.

ZACH

(re: manuscript)
What the fuck is this?

FAITH

My thesis.

ZACH

What am I, your guinea pig?

FAITH

No, but I can see how you'd take it that way.

ZACH

So all this... What are you doing, just trying to get in with me, to know your subject?

FAITH

It's not like that.

ZACH

I don't want to hear it. I'm done being used. I'm not some lab rat that you can dissect for extra credit and, I dunno, witty tales at cocktail parties.

FAITH

I'm writing about a universal religion. And you--

ZACH

(over her)

And you are using me to make the grade. I get it. If you can convert an atheist to the cause, your method is effective. What's next, a five step program and a self-help book?

FAITH

Don't be ridiculous.

ZACH

I opened up to you and you let me down. Join the crowd. Now leave.

A beat and Faith takes her manuscript from Zach's hands and heads for the elevator. Zach's neighbor appears at her apartment door.

WOMAN

You are angry?

Zach starts to wave her off, then seizes the opportunity.

ZACH

Hi Ms., hell I don't even know your name. But I wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood.

WOMAN

We've lived her five years.

ZACH

Five years? That's three years longer than me. Man I'm really f-ing this up. Excuse my French.

WOMAN

That's not French. It's English and mine is not very good so if you excuse me.

She starts to close the door.

ZACH

Wait. I was hoping maybe, would you like to carpool sometime? Like maybe tomorrow. That way our kids could get to know each other. Sydney is always bugging me about wanting to play with your son. What's his name?

WOMAN

Ali.

ZACH

Yes. So, tomorrow?

WOMAN

Okay. Just keep down your lover's spats. My child is sleeping.

ZACH

I wasn't having a lover's spat. We hardly even know each other.

The neighbor closes her door.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach sitting in front of his computer. He is reading about Islam. He reads from the screen:

ZACH

(reading)

"The word 'Muslim' means one who submits to the will of God, regardless of their race, nationality or ethnic background. Becoming a Muslim is a simple and easy process that requires no prerequisites. If anyone has a real desire to be a Muslim all one needs to do is pronounce the 'Shahada' with sincere belief and conviction."

He clicks on the word "Shahada."

ZACH (CONT'D)

(reading)

"I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except the One God, and I bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Servant and final Messenger of God." Congratulations. You are now a Muslim.

(to himself; intrigued)

Hmmmm.

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

Zach stands in front of his neighbor's door, holding Sydney's hand. He knocks. The door opens. His neighbor nods at him and pushes her son forward.

WOMAN
He sits in back seat.

ZACH
Okay.

WOMAN
Your daughter also.

ZACH
Okay.

WOMAN
With seat belts.

ZACH
Okay.

INT. CAR - MORNING

Zach driving the kids to school. Sydney and Ali sit in the back staring at each other. The boy opens his lunch box and pulls out a snack. After a beat he hands a piece to Sydney, who accepts and takes a bite. She likes it. Zach looks on, wants to say something but keeps his mouth shut.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach knocks on his neighbor's door again. The wife opens.

ZACH
Hi.

WOMAN
Is everything all right?

ZACH
Yeah, the kids are fine. I was hoping I could speak to your husband. Maybe he's at work or there's a better time to drop by.

WOMAN
Why you wish to speak to my husband?

ZACH

I, uh, recently converted to Muslim. Islam. And I was hoping to talk to another brother about the, ah, five pillars. You see I'm thinking of making a pilgrimage to Mecca, and, uh, well I'm not sure when exactly, but... have you and your husband been?

WOMAN

Yes. One minute please.

She closes the door. A beat then it reopens and a man appears.

MAN

You wish to discuss Islam?

ZACH

Yes.

MAN

What you wish to discuss?

ZACH

The five pillars.

MAN

You have climbed the first?

ZACH

I have professed my faith, yes. That's why I'm here.

MAN

And the second?

ZACH

The second?

MAN

Ritual prayer.

ZACH

I, uh, could use help with that.

MAN

Come here tomorrow evening. Six p.m. sharp. You may observe us then.

ZACH

Thanks.

MAN

You are welcome. And thank you for driving my son.

Zach nods.

EXT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach checks the mailbox. His check has arrived. He opens it to see the payer is one MULTINATIONAL CAPITAL AND EQUITIES.

INT. NEIGHBOR'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach watches a roomful of Muslim men as they perform the daily prayer facing Mecca. Zach is clearly struck by the beauty of the ritual.

LATER

The brothers sit around chatting as the wife serves them wine.

ZACH

I thought Muslims... isn't wine off-limits?

MAN

Five pillars, my friend. Outside of that, anything is fair game.

They clink glasses.

MAN (CONT'D)

So tell me, what brought you to Islam?

ZACH

I was searching I guess. Born Jewish but couldn't relate to that faith. Too archaic with its angry god and human sacrifices. My wife was Catholic but they rejected me because I had been married before.

MAN

Not a problem in Islam. Multiple wives are a point of pride.

(off his wife's angry look)

For some people, not me of course.

ZACH

What intrigued me about Islam is they accept a person regardless of race or creed, as long as you accept one God with Mohammed as his prophet. And I thought, sign me up!

The brothers laugh.

ZACH (CONT'D)

I'm not Middle Eastern, though, which makes me a minority in this crowd.

MAN

True, but we know many Westerners who have embraced the faith. There is Kareem Abdul Jabar, and Michael Tyson.

The other brothers chime in.

BROTHERS

Muhammad Ali. Ahmad Rashad. Janet Jackson. Busta Rhymes. Dave Chappelle. Shaq.

Laughter.

ZACH

I did not know this.

MAN

For years you were very standoffish. Why the turnaround of late?

ZACH

I'll cut to the chase. Islam is not the only reason. I'm a reporter. A journalist. And I'm doing a story on ethnic diversity. It's a pro-immigration piece. In support of ethnic diversity. And I was wondering if you would tell me your story.

The brothers look at each other.

MAN

Who commissioned this story?

ZACH

Actually I'm not sure. I got a call from someone who wouldn't give his name. And I got a check from capital equities, or something. Full disclosure.

This seems to satisfy the brothers.

MAN

Well what do you want to know?

ZACH

I'm not sure. This is really not my thing. Just, when you came to this country, how, what brought you here, what you're doing now. Kind of an assimilation piece, I guess. If you're not into it, just give me some generalities I can embellish on my own. But I'll be straight with you, I really need the money.

The brothers look at each other.

MAN

If it's money you want, our cousin Habib could use some help at the deli on Broadway.

(off Zach's look)

Only kidding. Look, this full disclosure, it's not how we usually do things. But since you are a brother, I'm certain we can help you out. Ask away.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

As Zach says his goodbyes, he turns to the wife.

ZACH

Would you mind watching my daughter for a bit? I shouldn't be long.

The wife nods.

EXT. FAITH'S PLACE - NIGHT

Zach rings the buzzer.

FAITH'S VOICE

Hello?

ZACH
Hey. It's me. Zach.

INT. FAITH'S PLACE - NIGHT

Faith opens the door.

ZACH
I'm sorry for being so, ah, gruff.

FAITH
I don't think we should see each other any more.

ZACH
Why not?

FAITH
I have finals coming up. And I don't think you're over your wife.

ZACH
How can you say that? That's not fair. Really, it's not.

FAITH
Well, am I right?

Zach doesn't reply.

FAITH (CONT'D)
Maybe I'll see you around. I mean, take care.
(beat)
Oh and while I have you here. You're a dutiful father, but you're often distracted and tired. Sydney needs more from you than just dropping her off and picking her up on time. You need to be there for her, in here.
(points to her heart)
I'm sorry if that sounds harsh.

ZACH
It's okay. I probably deserved it.

FAITH
Okay then, bye.

ZACH
Bye.

Faith lingers by the door. She's not ready to leave Zach yet. Suddenly she lurches forward, grabs Zach and plants a huge smooch on his lips. It goes on for a really long time.

FAITH

Okay bye.

She goes inside and closes the door, leaving Zach looking pretty nonplussed. He is about to ring the doorbell again but thinks better of it and leaves.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach walks home. He passes an alley. It's clear a drug deal is underway. He makes hissing noises and the negotiations abruptly cease. Drug dealer and druggie promptly flee in opposite directions.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach cleans out his closet. He is putting his wife's pictures into a box. He comes across a file labeled "Anna's Medical Records." As he puts it into the box a piece of paper slips out. It is labeled "Toxicology Report." He looks at the report - medications in his wife's system at the time of death. We see the word "fentanyl."

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Zach sits with his wife's cancer DOCTOR.

ZACH

I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice, Dr. Schwab.

DOCTOR

Anything I can do to help.

He hands the doctor his wife's toxicology.

ZACH

What can you tell me about this.

DOCTOR

These are the drugs that were in your wife's system at the time of her death.

(closer look)

It says here fentanyl. I didn't prescribe her that.

ZACH

I know you didn't. I'm trying to find out who did.

DOCTOR

You know how it is. Your wife's condition required a multi-pronged approach. She had many doctors overseeing her treatment.

ZACH

And I got to know each one. I was present at all of her appointments. And she was never prescribed fentanyl, I can tell you that.

The doctor types something in the computer.

DOCTOR

There's no record in her chart, you're right. Did she have a friend whose prescription she might have used? This can sometimes happen.

ZACH

(shakes head)

In the final six months of her life Anna hardly left our apartment.

DOCTOR

(thinks)

Fentanyl is a powerful pain reliever used to treat intractable pain in terminal illness. But it's also a street drug. I don't want to put my foot in my mouth, but is there anyone she may have obtained this medication from, legally or otherwise?

Hold on Zach's look.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach passes the alley on the way towards his apartment. He sees a drug deal going on. He approaches the transaction. Drug dealer and druggie start to run off. Zach runs after the druggie.

A long chase scene through the streets of Manhattan. Through alleys. Over cars. It terminates in a dead end. The druggie hops atop a garbage bin and tries to scale a fence. Zach pulls him down and wrestles him to the ground.

DRUGGY
Whattya want, man?

Zach reaches in the guy's jacket pocket and pulls out a vial. He holds it up to the dim light of the overhead street lamp. It reads: "Fentanyl citrate: 2 ml."

ZACH
Where'd you get this?

DRUGGY
You a narc?

ZACH
No I'm not a narc. I'm...just a concerned citizen. Neighborhood watch.

DRUGGY
Then you'll have to beat it out of me.

Zach throws the vial against a brick wall and watches it shatter.

DRUGGY (CONT'D)
Hey that's sixty bucks you just wasted.

ZACH
Better it than you. Now get lost, punk!

Zach lifts the druggy off the ground and pushes him down the alley, even going so far as literally kicking him in the backside.

INT. NEIGHBOR'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach performs prayers with the brothers.

INT. NEIGHBOR'S APARTMENT - LATER

Zach sits with the brothers listening to an ELDER speak. The mood is solemn.

ELDER
(in broken English, for Zach's benefit)
Not only the Jews are waiting for their Messiah.
(MORE)

ELDER (CONT'D)

This desire for a saviour unites all Abrahamic religions. Islam too. Even the Catholics await their second coming. But the Messiah is inside you. And the struggle between good and evil goes on in each and every heart.

LATER

The elder is gone now. The brothers fraternize over wine. Arabic music plays. The mood is cheerful.

BROTHER

(to Zach; over the din)
You are working on a book?

ZACH

No. A story for a magazine.

BROTHER

But you write books?

ZACH

(somewhat tipsy)
No. Well, yes. You saw that on the Internet. I wrote books a long time ago. Before a career in television, which was also a long time ago.

BROTHER

About drug trafficking, this book?

ZACH

Yes, but it was a novel. Fiction.

BROTHER

Not real?

ZACH

No. But based on a real problem.

BROTHER

Muslim drug trafficking is real problem here. You know that?

ZACH

I'm starting to learn. I mean I have eyes.

BROTHER

Two groups. Rivals. Both here in this city.

(MORE)

BROTHER (CONT'D)

(beat)

When do we get to read your story?

ZACH

You mean the article?

BROTHER

It's finished, yes?

ZACH

Almost. I'm just waiting to hear back from my employer.

ANOTHER BROTHER

(holds up glass)

To many successes.

BROTHERS

Cheers.

The front door opens and in walks a MAN who looks vaguely like the guy transacting the drug deal from the previous night. He and Zach lock eyes. A brother stands and hands him something and he leaves.

ZACH

Who was that?

NEIGHBOR

My brother. My real brother. But not my Muslim brother. He has not accepted Allah or Mohammed.

The brothers sigh and shake their heads in unison.

NEIGHBOR (CONT'D)

But I have faith he will come around.

ZACH

In and out pretty quick, wasn't he?

NEIGHBOR

Omar is not what you would call social. He does not drink. Imagine that .And we are the Muslims, if you will.

Laughter. Zach seizes the moment of levity, stands.

NEIGHBOR (CONT'D)

Where are you going? The party is just getting started.

ZACH

I gotta split. Daughter.

The man's wife pops her head in the room.

WOMAN

Her class does not let out for another hour. Relax. Take a load off.

NEIGHBOR

Take a load off!

(laughs)

I love it when my wife uses slang.
To America, brothers!

The brothers raise their glasses and toast. Zach finishes his drink and heads for the door.

ZACH

I promise I'll be back.

MAN

God willing.

ZACH

God willing.

MAN

In Arabic.

ZACH

(tentative)

Ah, Insha'Allah.

BROTHERS

(in unison)

Insha'Allah! Yes brother!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach exits the apartment. Looks both ways. Sees the brother heading down the sidewalk. Follows him. The guy ducks into an alley. Zach crosses the street, hides behind a car, looks on. A guy approaches the brother/dealer, holds out cash. A transaction is completed. Zach pulls out his phone and snaps photos of the drugs/money exchanging hands.

Then, Zach gets a call on his phone. He thinks, swears to himself, answers.

ZACH

Ray. This is not a good time. Don't hang up though. I haven't been paid. I said you haven't paid me. Yeah I'll stop by tomorrow.

Zach hangs up and looks up and the dealer is gone.

INT. MAGAZINE OFFICE - DAY

Zach enters. It is business as usual. He says his hellos. Ray the editor rises from his desk to greet him.

ZACH

Ray, you haven't let anyone go.

RAY

What can I say, we're on the up. Frauds and all.

ZACH

So you have my money.

RAY

Almost my man, almost. I need a minute, or maybe a month, but not more. I mean it.

ZACH

Forget about it. Just tell me what you know about fentanyl.

RAY

What?

ZACH

The prescription drug, fent--

RAY

You been talkin' to my sister? 'Cause she's freakin' hooked on the stuff. Got a script to manage chronic pain. In the form of a patch, I think. And now she's on it around the clock. Suckin' on it, dippin' it in her tea. She never used to drink tea! She's always nauseous and disoriented, but fucking high as a kite, so she don't mind. I'm worried she'll freakin' OD. Any day now, gone like a freakin'--

ZACH

You think she'll OD?

RAY

That's what people do on the shit, man. It's strong, and it's cut with heroin. Cut, because heroin is a walk in the park by comparison. Fentanyl is like 50 times stronger, maybe a hundred for all I know. I sure wish Mary Beth would kick her habit.

ZACH

Where they grow the stuff?

RAY

Grow it? Zach my man. Where you been. Fentanyl is synthetic. That's the thing. They don't have to trudge around in poppy fields waitin' for water and sunlight, like they do with heroin. They make the stuff in a lab. Anywhere, but mainly in Mexico, and in the Middle East. These days, it's all over the streets.

(shakes head; rueful)

I really wish Mary Beth would get clean. I'd give anything. Zach, if you talk to her, go to bat for me. She won't talk to me but you, she always liked you. She'll listen. I'll pay you what I owe you and then some by, like, yesterday. Swear to God, man.

ZACH

Thanks Ray. I gotta go, but thanks.

RAY

(as Zach heads off; more to himself)

People ODing on this stuff left and right. They mix it with other shit and they're out like a light. Mary Beth'll be next, I just know it.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Zach walking down the street. His phone rings.

ZACH

Yeah.

VOICE

Have you finished the story?

ZACH

As a matter of fact I have.

VOICE

Well, send it to me. And I will pay you the remainder of what you are owed.

ZACH

I've finished most of it. There's still one guy I haven't been able to reach as of yet.

VOICE

Forget about him. Just send me what you've written thus far. I'm sure it will be sufficient.

ZACH

You're probably right. The odd man out is a local dealer. Very potent and equally cheap synthetic derivative of opium.

VOICE

You don't say.

ZACH

(probing)

Wouldn't exactly fit with this promo piece. I hope you don't mind I do a little extra credit stuff, for my own, ah, edification. My wife died from the same shit, er, stuff. Could be that I'm biased.

(beat)

Could also be that this guy sold her the drug that took her from me before her time. I'm saying too much. I'll send you the article. And thanks in advance for the payment. You're very generous. Goodbye.

EXT. STREET - MORNING

Zach exits his apartment and goes to the mailbox. Opens it, sees an envelope addressed to him. Opens the envelope, sees the check, kisses it. His attention is drawn to the street where he sees a patrol car. One of his neighbors, whom we recognize as a Muslim brother, is being frisked with his hands against the car as his wife and son look on.

ZACH

(to onlooker)

What the hell is going on?

ONLOOKER

They're being deported. Big crackdown on illegals in the area. Half the taxis will be off the street by tomorrow, liquor stores too. Thank Trump. Our tax dollars.

The onlooker shakes his head and walks off. The man being cuffed points at Zach as his head is pushed into the patrol car. Zach enters his apartment.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach punches in a number. A man's voice on the other line.

ZACH

It's me.

VOICE

Mr. Grace. Our work is done, no?

ZACH

It looks like it's just beginning. You used the information I gathered to remove a lot of people from their homes.

VOICE

It is their own fault.

ZACH

They were good people.

VOICE

They were in the country illegally.
(beat)
You are a journalist. You know not to get too close to your sources.

ZACH

You played me. I was desperate. I shoulda seen it coming.

VOICE

I'm sorry you feel that way. It was just business.

ZACH

What do you care if there are a few more decent folk just doing their jobs? Who cares if they don't have papers. What's it to you?

VOICE

You haven't put it together, have you, Mr. Grace? You're the journalist, get to work.

ZACH

Don't patronize me.

VOICE

To make you feel better I will give you a tip. The man you've been tracking. He poisoned your wife.

(beat)

Find him and avenge her death. If that's what you want to do. If not, do nothing. That is what the Buddhists would tell you. Goodbye, Mr. Grace.

The phone disconnects. Zach calls back.

RECORDING

This number has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error--

Zach hangs up.

ZACH

(to himself)

Do nothing, huh?

Zach goes to his laptop computer, opens a browser window, types the name "Professor al-Mahdi."

ZACH (CONT'D)

(to himself)

I shoulda done this a long time ago.

He scrolls down different entries.

ZACH (CONT'D)

(reads)

"...wrote a series of violent manifestos against the Bush administration" ... "ties to al-Qaeda and ISIS..."

Zach clicks on another link. On the screen, the Professor sits at his desk being interviewed.

PROFESSOR (ON TV)

If you wonder why America is in the grips of a heroin epidemic that kills hundreds each week, take a hard look at the US government. The legalization of marijuana destroyed the profits of the foreign cartels. How did the Middle East respond to a major loss in revenue? Like any company, they flooded the market with a new and irresistible product.

INTERVIEWER (O.S.)

You mean synthetic heroin?

PROFESSOR

Right.

Zach clicks on another link. An interview between the Professor and a female journalist with her back to the viewer.

INTERVIEWER (ON TV)

You admit to terrorizing this country, bombing buildings, and committing other crimes during the 70s. And you got away - scot-free. Because this is America, you wound up as a college professor who helped the current president launch his political career.

PROFESSOR (ON TV)

Is there a question coming?

We see the interviewer: It is Faith Raines.

FAITH

I want to know why.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Zach knocks on his neighbor's door.

ZACH

Ms. I don't even know your last name. I'm so sorry.

WOMAN

My husband is gone because of you. I will be taken next. And my son.

She closes the door.

INT. UNIVERSITY OFFICE - DAY

Zach drops in on the Professor.

ZACH

Hello again.

PROFESSOR

Mr. Grace. What brings you--

ZACH

Cut the act. I know it's you.

PROFESSOR

Excuse me?

ZACH

You can disguise your voice all you want but I know who you really are. And the classic tenured radical working on his retirement account doesn't fool me. You're into something much bigger.

(beat)

You hired me to do that immigration piece. It has something to do with drug trafficking. And you're in the middle of it.

PROFESSOR

Interesting fantasy.

ZACH

Did you want to clean up this city, or just make it easier to monopolize?

PROFESSOR

The furies of youth, Mr. Grace. Let me remind you that I am a 69-year-old grandfather. You could bench press me if you wanted to.

ZACH

Thanks, but that's probably untrue. And anyway how do you know I lift?

PROFESSOR

I know much more about you than even you know.

ZACH

I'll tell you what I know. The drug in my wife's system at the time of her death came from a laboratory in Afghanistan. The people who made it are members of the Middle East's most powerful drug-trafficking organization, and my wife's death was a direct result of a business decision made by several of these men. One of them is sitting across from me.

PROFESSOR

What are you saying, Mr. Grace?

ZACH

I'm saying that the largest drug trafficker in the world wears tweed.

PROFESSOR

(laughs)

Maybe hauling an old lefty out of mothballs, shaking him awake, and interrogating him makes you feel like a journalist, but you're barking up the wrong tree. This is not tweed. I only wear cotton.

(beat)

But I know who killed your wife.

ZACH

I suppose you aren't going to tell me?

PROFESSOR

That's for me to know.

ZACH

And for me to find out. A
playground taunt. Rather puerile
for a professor, I'd say.

PROFESSOR

I'd say find the one you are
looking for. Good day, Mr. Grace. I
have papers to grade. It's what
professors do.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Zach arrives at the door as class lets out. His daughter
comes running to him. He approaches Faith.

ZACH

Hello. I'd like to see you again.
It's...not personal.

FAITH

I'm sorry, Mr. Grace. I'm rather
busy these days editing you out of
my paper.

ZACH

Thank goodness. I thought you were
editing me out of your life.

FAITH

Isn't it the same thing? To you it
is.

ZACH

(to Sydney)

Daddy needs to do some adult talk.
Would you mind waiting at the door?
I'll just be a second.

Sydney nods and joins the other children waiting for their
parents.

ZACH (CONT'D)

I need some information.

FAITH

Use the Internet.

ZACH

(changing gears)

I need your help. I learned...on
the Internet, that you used to be a
journalist.

FAITH
I worked for the school newspaper
in college.

ZACH
You interviewed a professor of
religious studies. Al-Mahdi.

Faith freezes at the name.

FAITH
Meet me at my apartment tonight at
eight. Strictly business.

ZACH
Okay.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Zach knocks on his neighbor's door. She answers.

WOMAN
What do you want?

ZACH
I think I can get your husband
back. But first I need you to do me
a favor. I need to step out for a
bit. Will you keep an ear out for
my daughter? She's asleep, but if
she gets upset, here's the key.

The woman nods. Zach hands her his apartment key.

INT. FAITH'S PLACE - NIGHT

Faith opens the door for Zach. He enters.

LATER

FAITH
When Al-Mahdi got out of prison, he
sought to control the entire Middle-
East drug business under the name
of the Akbar Cartel. Over the next
ten years, he went to war against
the other traffickers. That war
took more than a hundred thousand
lives in the Middle East, with more
than twenty-two thousand people
still "missing."

(beat)
(MORE)

FAITH (CONT'D)

The heroin epidemic was caused by the legalization of pot. Weed was a major profit center for the Middle East, but suddenly they couldn't compete against a superior American product that also had drastically lower transportation and security costs. In a single year, the cartel suffered a 40 percent drop in marijuana sales, representing billions of dollars. Arabian marijuana became an almost worthless product. They've basically stopped growing the shit. Looking at the American drug market as it existed, al-Mahdi and his partners saw an opportunity. With cancer on the rise, and chronic pain, an increasing number of Americans were addicted to prescription opioids such as Oxycontin. And their addiction was expensive. A capsule of Oxy sells on the street for thirty dollars, and an addict might need ten hits a day. Well, shit, they thought. We have some of the best poppy fields in the world. Opium, morphine, Oxy, heroin - they're basically the same drug, so...

ZACH

(getting it)

The Akbar Cartel decided to undercut the pharmaceutical companies.

FAITH

(nods)

They increased the production of heroin by almost 70 percent, and also raised the purity level, while dropping the price.

ZACH

Slow down, or else I won't be able to write all this down. Man you're good.

FAITH

You should have seen my thesis, the draft you were in I mean.

(beat)

(MORE)

FAITH (CONT'D)

Anyway, American law-enforcement officials were concerned about the surge in overdose deaths from pharmaceutical opioids, so they cracked down on distribution, opening the door for the new heroin.

ZACH

Fentanyl. Finally I know something.

FAITH

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid.

ZACH

Thirty to fifty times as strong as heroin.

FAITH

It was developed in 1960 by Janssen Pharmaceuticals as a treatment for the severe pain caused by terminal cancer.

ZACH

Thing is, they never offered it to my wife.

FAITH

Because its highly addictive, with a huge potential for resale on the streets. For that reason doctors often restrict Fentanyl to inpatient use in the hospital. It's so powerful that the DEA warns police that they can be injured just by touching it. But for the narcos, the advantages of Fentanyl over heroin are enormous.

ZACH

I know. It's made in a lab, so you don't need fields of poppies that can be raided, fumigated, or seized.

FAITH

It's basically the new crack cocaine.

ZACH

And because Fentanyl is now often mixed with heroin to increase the latter's potency, unaware heroin users are dying from the same doses that used to just get them well. Those who survive become more addicted.

FAITH

More people died from drug overdoses last year than in any other year in American history. The actor Philip Seymour Hoffman died right at the height of the epidemic, on Valentine's Day.

ZACH

So did my wife.

FAITH

I'm sorry.

ZACH

We work well together.

FAITH

Thanks.

(beat)

125 people a day is more than five lives every hour, a fatality level that matched the AIDS epidemic's peak in 1995. And nobody knows it. Know why?

ZACH

The government?

FAITH

Al-Mahdi. I asked him why ISIS strikes everywhere but in America. You know what he told me? He was keeping the peace. We need him. We need the drug crisis. It's all part of one huge scheme I can't even understand. Know why I got out of journalism?

ZACH

Why?

FAITH

Philosophy has more answers than international politics.

(MORE)

FAITH (CONT'D)

At least we know God exists.

(beat)

Unless we includes you. I got work to do. Did I give you what you came for?

ZACH

Yeah. All but one thing.

Zach smiles suggestively.

FAITH

Don't be a bastard.

ZACH

Look I'm sorry about how I treated you.

FAITH

No apologies.

ZACH

Okay then. Love means never having to say your sorry anyway.

He grabs Faith and kisses her hard on the mouth.

ZACH (CONT'D)

No sorries, just a thanks.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Zach approaches his door, no sound. He opens it.

INT. APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Zach goes inside and checks on his daughter, but her bedroom is empty.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Zach knocks on his neighbor's door. No answer. He pounds on it. Still no answer. He starts to panic. He then rams into the door. It opens. He sees his neighbor standing by the kitchen sink. She holds a knife, but doesn't look threatening.

WOMAN

I tried to stop him, but he took her.

ZACH
Who? Who took her?

WOMAN
(points knife at door)
He just left.

Zach bolts down the hall.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach emerges onto the street to see the brother carrying Sydney into a car. He runs after him but the brother speeds away before he can catch him. Zach's daughter looks impassively at him from the back seat.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach enters his apartment lobby, goes to mailbox, opens the mailbox of his next-door neighbor, looks at the mail. Flips through it. Sees a name (Omar) on an envelope that catches his attention, opens it, reads. Zach takes out his phone, dials 9-1-1.

ZACH
(into phone)
I want to report a child abduction.
The perpetrator can be found at
this address.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach pulls to a stop outside Omar's address.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Zach knocks on the apartment door. Omar opens.

ZACH
You're not much good at this, are
you.

OMAR
(stoic)
Your actions called for revenge.
Come in.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach and Omar sit at a table. Sydney sits on Zach's lap.

OMAR

I grew up poor, harvesting opium in the fields when I was your daughter's age. But I didn't kill your wife. He did.

ZACH

Who?

OMAR

The man who hired you to deport my brother.

ZACH

I didn't deport anyone. I merely wrote a story I was told would portray immigration favorably, only to watch it get twisted around and used against your family.

OMAR

I am not the one you want. He is. I am nothing compared to him. He is a menace. But in my country he is a hero. In this country too. A hero to politicians and addicts.

ZACH

What is that supposed to mean.

OMAR

If there was no consumption, there would be no sales. Blame your countrymen.

A knock at the door.

ZACH

Tell it to the cops.

Zach opens the door and the cops barge in.

ZACH (CONT'D)

(to cops)

This man kidnapped my daughter.

(beat)

But it was a misunderstanding. I do not wish to press charges at this time.

The cops look at each other, nonplussed.

COP

Is this some kind of prank?

ZACH

No, if you want to come in and have some coffee I'll explain.

(to Omar)

Can you make these guys some coffee or maybe tea? I don't know. I'm new at this too.

Zach gestures for the cops to sit down. Omar draws a gun and trains it at the cops. Zach tries to shield his daughter. In the crossfire Zach takes a bullet. A cop is wounded. Omar is dead. Sydney is crying. Zach holds her close, loses consciousness.

INT. HOSPITAL DAY

Zach opens his eyes in bed. The doctor comes in.

DOCTOR

Mr. Grace?

ZACH

(groggily)

That's me. Let me guess. I'm lucky to be alive.

DOCTOR

That depends on your world view. The wound was never of the fatal variety. But you came away with a gnarly scar and a piece of shrapnel you'll never get out. You'll be a hit around metal detectors the world over.

ZACH

Lucky for me I don't travel much.

Zach's phone rings.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Can you hand me that? I'll only be a minute. Hello? Hey Jimmy. The script sold? Hey that's great. Can I fly out to LA? Um, sorry but I just told the doctor no more flying for me. I'll have to see. Can I call you back on that?

Zach hangs up. The doctor is gone. Faith appears in his place.

FAITH

Hey.

ZACH

It seems we always meet at life crises.

FAITH

Yeah, well. I brought you some flowers.

Zach smells them.

ZACH

There must be shrapnel in my nose, 'cause I can't make out the scent.

FAITH

They're fake. They'll last longer.

ZACH

Thanks.

FAITH

How you doing?

ZACH

Still trying to determine whether I'm lucky to be alive. If you'd give me a kiss, that'd cinch it.

Faith bends over and kisses Zach's forehead.

FAITH

How's that?

ZACH

It's a start.

FAITH

I'm sorry how everything went down.

ZACH

You didn't make the grade?

FAITH

I got an A. But the thesis paper could have been much better with you as the star. I really wish you'da let me turn it in as is. As was I mean.

ZACH

Coulda been my five minutes of fame. Get 'em next time. Maybe it'll be ten. Minutes I mean.

FAITH

I heard you on the phone. You planning on heading back to Los Angeles?

ZACH

Don't know. There are pros. The urban sprawl beats the shit out of living like a canned sardine. But in LA, one thing's missing.

FAITH

I got a job at a local city college. Assistant professor come the fall. It's a start.

ZACH

That's great. So you're not going anywhere either. I won't be missing my one thing. You.

FAITH

I think you've had too much medication. You're loopy.

ZACH

Probably true. But I mean it. Hey when I get outta here, will you come with me to this place? It's a place I been meaning to visit.

FAITH

Sure. Okay.

ZACH

Great. It's of a religious nature. Spiritual and what not. Right up your alley.

FAITH

Okay.

ZACH

See you then.

FAITH

Hey. How's your daughter? How's Sydney?

ZACH

She's great. Anna's parents have finally come around. They agreed to take her for a while. So we've got time to play.

Faith smiles.

FAITH

You get some rest. And go easy on those meds.

ZACH

All right. See you soon I hope.

FAITH

Okay. Soon.

EXT. STEINMANN'S HOUSE - DAY

Zach knocks at the front door. It opens to reveal a NURSE.

ZACH

I'm looking for Dr. Steinmann. Is he here?

INT. STEINMANN'S HOUSE - DAY

Zach is led into a room where Steinmann lies in bed beneath the covers. He doesn't look well. He's markedly thinner and coughs incessantly. He wears a nasal cannula to provide supplemental oxygen.

ZACH

Dr. Steinmann, what happened?

STEINMANN

Life is what happened. I'm dying. Come sit down. What do you wish to see me about? Out with it. I haven't much time.

ZACH

I just wanted to apologize for being such a damned cynic. I think I was put off by the miracles. I saw it as a shameless attempt to increase discipleship, I guess.

STEINMANN

Christ performed miracles, and many holy men besides.

(MORE)

STEINMANN (CONT'D)

Sai Baba called his miracles his calling card. He was no magician. For no magician gives away his things.

ZACH

I've been dreaming about the guy. My daughter too.

STEINMANN

Sai Baba often comes to believers in dreams. He's visited me, and my patient Jackie. You're in good company.

ZACH

Yeah, well...

STEINMANN

A holy man can adopt many forms. Sai Baba used to say that life is like a dream. What does that mean? The ancient sages held that there are three states, waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep. Modern medicine holds that consciousness is a product of the brain. The mind is product of brain. The ancient sages held the opposite. They said that from consciousness, or spirit, derives the world of matter. This is encapsulated in the phrase that appears at nearly all of Jackie's messages.

ZACH

Whatever form the divine being wills, that is the form he assumes.

STEINMANN

Yes. It is mind before matter, and consciousness, spirit, energy, before even mind. So you see, everything is technically a dream. We are all appearances in consciousness.

ZACH

If everything is a dream, why take life so seriously?

STEINMANN

I don't pretend to have the answer. Chalk it up to Faith.

Zach starts at the name of the woman he loves.

ZACH

Pardon?

STEINMANN

Faith. It's what gets reason over the hump. See, a leap of faith is really a leap into faith. Some things the mind can't understand. Like Sai Baba once said, trying to understand the universe while in it is like trying to lift a boulder while standing atop it. It just ain't possible.

Steinmann coughs wretchedly. Zach waits for him to recover.

ZACH

Your patient, Jackie. Is there any way I could contact her?

STEINMANN

I can give you an old address. She may have moved. She may be dead. But you can try.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Zach stands with Faith facing a house.

ZACH

I just feel you should be here for this. I'm kinda nervous though.

The walk towards the front door.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Zach and Faith are led into Jackie's room where a NURSE attends her patient in bed.

ZACH

Jeez these days it feels like I'm spending all my time in sick rooms.

Faith shushes him. They arrive at the bed.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Jackie? Uh, I'm Zach. Ah, you don't know me, but I know you, through your doctor. Steinmann.

Jackie looks at him.

ZACH (CONT'D)

I read what you wrote, about that holy man. Is it true he spoke to you in dreams?

The nurse intercedes.

NURSE

I'm sorry. Ms. Wycliff can't speak. She hasn't for years.

ZACH

I was just looking for a miracle.

JACKIE

(whispering)

You and I, we're one.

Zach and Faith exchange incredulous looks. The nurse can't believe it either. Jackie smiles and closes her eyes.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Faith and Zach walk toward their car.

ZACH

What do you think she meant, about us being one.

FAITH

It's the central dogma of all the world religions. In the beginning there was God, who is omnipresent. Out of God's essence sprang the phenomenal world. All is one. It's simple truth really. Amazing though it seems.

ZACH

That's too much metaphysics for me. I like to keep my feet firmly planted on earth.

FAITH

So what now?

ZACH

I have to get my neighbors... what's the reverse of deported?
(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)

Reported doesn't seem to fit, since reporting is what got me in trouble to begin with.

FAITH

Go back to the source.

ZACH

My sources are in jail.

FAITH

The one that put them there.

ZACH

You mean the Professor? Only if you'll come with.

FAITH

Okay.

Zach thinks.

ZACH

Better yet, I think we need to beat him at his own game. I just don't know how.

(beat)

Man it's hot. Let's get out of the sun. I don't care what they say about it being the best disinfectant.

FAITH

What did you say?

ZACH

They use sunlight to purify water. UV radiation kills germs.

FAITH

(beat)

That's it. That's what we need to do. Treat the Professor like a germ. Expose him to the light of day.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - DAY

Faith stands on campus outside Al-Mahdi's office building. She has a microphone in hand and looks like a reporter. Steven holds a digital camera.

FAITH

This is Faith Raines reporting outside the office of Dr. Al-Mahdi, a Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies here in New York. Local authorities have determined that Al-Mahdi, who is originally from Afghanistan, operates the largest heroin cartel in the city, and maybe in the nation. We at the university newspaper were first to get the scoop. Before authorities apprehend the professor, maybe we can get a word. Professor?

The camera alights on Al-Mahdi, who is just now walking to his building. Al-Mahdi gets a sense of what is going on and holds his face up to the camera while walking away. By this time a small group of students has gathered around the camera to see what's going on.

FAITH (CONT'D)

(chasing)

Professor Al-Mahdi.

Al-Mahdi enters the building.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Al-Mahdi lets himself into his office. Zach appears behind him and pushes him inside, closes the door.

PROFESSOR

The hell are you doing!

ZACH

Sit down. I know you killed my wife.

PROFESSOR

Hold on!

ZACH

She didn't kill herself. She was in pain and she couldn't get enough meds from her doctor so she turned to the streets, to you. But your stuff was way too potent and she accidentally OD'd. Admit it.

PROFESSOR

You think it is more convincing to believe that I provided illicit drugs to your wife than to believe a drug dealer living in your complex sold them to her? That is preposterous. I am a university professor!

ZACH

You're a high-end dealer. The mastermind. And the government is letting you do it because it is big bucks, provide you let them in on a share of the profits. An entire economy is based on drug prohibition and punishment, something to the tune of \$50 billion a year. You're swimming in money. That threadbare suit of whatever the fuck fabric doesn't fool me. I just can't prove any of what I'm saying.

The Professor starts to laugh.

PROFESSOR

Don't be ridiculous. I haven't got time for this. Good day.

ZACH

How 'bout we make a deal. You get those tenants I had deported back into the states, and we call it even.

The Professor laughs some more. He gets up, goes to the door, opens it and turns to Zach.

PROFESSOR

Now if you'll excuse me I have more important things to attend to.

ZACH

(defeated)
More grading papers.

PROFESSOR

Goodbye Mr. Grace.

Feeling ridiculous after having given it his best shot and failed, Zach walks out.

EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

Zach catches up with Faith.

FAITH
How did it go?

ZACH
Ridiculous. I made a fool of myself. It's hopeless. I'll never get those folks reported.

FAITH
What do you want to do now?

ZACH
Don't you have some teaching to do?

FAITH
I start in the Fall, remember? Till then, I'm happy to spend all my time with you. You can have as much of me as you can take.

ZACH
Come with me to LA.

FAITH
What? I didn't know you were leaving.

ZACH
I'm not leaving, unless it's with you.

FAITH
Where's this coming from?

ZACH
My old writing partner called, and he got an offer on a screenplay we co-wrote.

FAITH
What is it about?

ZACH
Ever heard "Beowulf"? It's an old English epic poem.

FAITH
Heard of it? I had to memorize half if it in high school.

ZACH

Yeah well, we adapted it into a film.

FAITH

(to herself)

Strange thing is I can't even remember what it's about

ZACH

A mighty warrior arises from the sea after a long journey to fight a giant and a dragon, then vanishes into the sea where he meets his death.

FAITH

Does he get the girl?

ZACH

There is no girl, other than the giant's mother, who gets him. I mean kills him.

(beat)

If I go to LA to help with rewrites I get a share of the purchase price. Low six figures. More than I've made in my entire life up to now. My career can take off from where it left off when my wife got sick. It's been over two years. I've been in limbo long enough.

FAITH

What about your daughter?

ZACH

Anna's parents will take care of her till we get settled, then she can come visit, and if she likes it, maybe move in with us.

FAITH

What about my teaching job?

ZACH

There are schools in LA too, lots more than in New York. You'll find a job in no time flat.

FAITH

I don't know, it seems like we'd be running from something.

ZACH

We are running. I am. I hate this city. The filth, the smog, the cold, the heat.

FAITH

Zach...

ZACH

I came here to find you. I know this now. And now that I've found you, it's time for me to leave. For us to leave.

FAITH

What about those former tenants of yours?

ZACH

There's nothing I can do. They broke the law, let the law decide what is right. I'm done fighting battles I have no business fighting. It's all so medieval. I'm no mighty warrior.

(beat)

The good thing about all this is at least I know my wife didn't die by her own hand, at least not intentionally. Now I can put her memory to rest once and for all.

(beat)

Will you come visit her grave with me?

FAITH

What can I say, you got the girl. I'm with you all of the way.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Zach stands with Faith over Anna's grave.

ZACH

You know I haven't been here since she was buried? I was so angry and confused. I felt so alone. And now it's been a couple years, and I'm trying to hold on to her memory, but it's fading so fast. There's so much you forget in life. It makes me wonder who's really dead. I mean I used to wonder.

(MORE)

ZACH (CONT'D)
 (looking into Faith's
 eyes)
 Not any more.

They kiss.

FAITH
 Okay.

ZACH
 Okay?

FAITH
 I'll follow you wherever.

ZACH
 I love you, Faith.

FAITH
 I love you, Mr. Grace!

INT. APARTMENT - DAY - SUPER: MONTHS LATER

Zach sits on the couch reading a book. Outside the window we can see the HOLLYWOOD sign in the distance. On the coffee table in front of him are strewn a dozen books. We see their covers. Religious texts from all over the world. Hinduism. Islam. Buddhism. Zoroastrianism. A Bible. Kabbalah. Etc. In the bg his laptop computer screen glows a blank page.

Faith enters looking long suffering. Zach doesn't look up from the page.

FAITH
 Hey. The life of a substitute sucks
 big time.

She sets her things down and looks at him expectantly.

FAITH (CONT'D)
 (louder)
 I said the life of a substitute
 teacher sucks. Which I should be
 thankful for, now that the strike
 is over and my position has ended.
 In other words, I'm out of work.
 (pause)
 I said I'm out of work.

ZACH
 (still reading)
 I heard you the first time, honey.

FAITH

You did? Because I couldn't tell. I
can't get used to this new you.
Stolid. Impassive.
(beat)
Stoic.

ZACH

Hey, a movement was built around
it.

She cuddles up to him. Zach doesn't respond. Her good humor
fades.

FAITH

Whatcha reading?

He shows her the cover.

FAITH (CONT'D)

(blase)
More of the same.... How's the
writing coming?

ZACH

Stuck in rewrite hell.

FAITH

Any plans to get out of it, by
like, writing? I think that
computer of your has dust mites. I
can tell because I'm always
sneezing.

She waits for a smile from Zach. It's no use. Zach is
someplace else. Faith hands up a letter.

FAITH (CONT'D)

This came in the mail. It's from
your daughter.

Zach snaps out of his trance. Opens the letter. Reads it.

ZACH

She has no interest in coming for
another visit. One and done.

FAITH

I don't blame her for being happy
over there with Gramma.

ZACH

What's that supposed to mean?

FAITH

They pay attention to her, and make killer pies. Whereas you're never home, even when you're home. It's these books, always these books. Your so interested in the Messiah, but all you do is read and think, think and read.

Zach goes back to reading. Faith takes the book and tosses it aside.

FAITH (CONT'D)

Jesus Christ!

ZACH

(playing)

That's taking the Lord's name--

FAITH

(over him)

Jesus Christ didn't just sit around. He went and made a difference. Started a movement. Rebelled! He overturned the tables in the temple. He did everything except write a book. He had the evangelists for that.

(pause)

But you, you're letting life pass you by. And you have everything to live for!

(softer)

You think maybe you're depressed? I mean you haven't worked in weeks.

ZACH

I'm over this writing thing. I can't get into it anymore.

FAITH

You're blocked.

ZACH

It's not that.

FAITH

So you decide to give up just when the advance money has run out? Your timing is impeccable, really.

(MORE)

FAITH (CONT'D)

I follow you across the country,
leave my career, wander around like
some gypsy babysitting the kids of
the rich and famous, and with a
Phd. All this for you and you won't
acknowledge my existence. Or anyone
else's. God is not in the pages of
some book. God is everywhere. God
is--

(grabs him by the face;
yelling)
Look at me!

They stare at one another for a long beat.

ZACH

(mock serious)
Can I go now?

Faith lets him go. Zach turns back to the page. Irritated,
Faith turns on the TV. On it a news station covers the recent
wave of deportations with the headline: IMMIGRATION WAR
CONTINUES; ALIENS ARE LOSING.

FAITH

(irritated)
I can't watch this. I don't know
how you can sit here knowing this
is going on and we played a part in
it! All those poor people without
homes, without families.
(no reaction from Zach)

Faith gets up and to nobody in particular:

FAITH (CONT'D)

I'm taking a shower.
(calling out)
What are we gonna do about rent?

ZACH

I thought we'd rely on your
teaching salary.

FAITH

(comes back in the room)
You really haven't heard a thing
I've said, have you? I'm out of
work. You are sole provider. Now,
provide. Write.

ZACH

I can't. I've lost interest in the
script.

FAITH

Any particular reason why?

ZACH

They're taking it in a direction I won't follow. It bears no resemblance to the original idea I came up with. It's in development hell.

FAITH

I thought you didn't believe in hell.

ZACH

I don't believe in the soul either, and yet mine aches with regret that you expect me to be sole provider.

FAITH

(no laughing)

Well what are we gonna do?

ZACH

Live simply. I was thinking of opening a spiritual bookstore.

FAITH

Bookstores don't exist anymore, Zach. Where have you been the last, I dunno, dozen years? Those that do have taken their act online. Haven't you noticed that Bodhi tree place down the street. You pointed it out to me yourself, said you used to shop there in school. It's a Ross Dress for Less now!
 (grabs Zach's book; throws it across the room)
 Be here with me, now!

Zach glances at a book on the table. It's title is "Be Here Now." Faith notices this too.

ZACH

That's synchronicity.

FAITH

Don't play mind games.

ZACH

We're in the right place at the right time. The moment is perfect.

FAITH

It is, unless you touch that book.

They lock eyes for a long moment. Zach then turns to the book and picks it up. Faith puffs in disgust and exits the apartment wearing only a bra over her jeans. She slams the door. Zach continues to read. She comes back in and grabs a T-shirt before leaving again. His eyes don't leave the page as he picks up the remote control and turns back on the TV.

ZACH (V.O.)

It was then that I realized it. Others don't let us be who we are. To be free is to be on our own. Be free to simply be.

INT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

A mom and pop hole-in-the-wall used book establishment, probably the only one of its kind in the city. We move to the back room where Zach is reading his book to a small crowd.

ZACH (V.O.)

There is no I. The I is an illusion. The I is the ego, it is a thought, it is the soul. There is no death, because there is no individual to live. There is no anger, without someone to be angry. There is no fear either. Beingness just happens. God is.

A smattering of applause. Zach closes the book. On the cover the title reads: BE FREE TO BE.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach enters the apartment. It's the same one as the previous scene, only it has less than half the furniture and looks cleaner. Faith has moved out. At Zach's feet a CAT purrs. His new roommate. He picks up the cat and gives it a squeeze before putting it back down.

He moves to the window. He passes a coffee table with two framed pictures, one of his daughter and the other of Faith.

As he arrives at the window he stands and looks out at the HOLLYWOOD sign promising dreams in the distance. A smile of contentment overspreads his lips. His hand goes up to the lamp beside him and he turns off the light.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach asleep in bed. Suddenly he bolts upright and grabs his jaw in pain.

INT. DENTIST'S OFFICE - DAY

Zach sits in the dentist's chair, his mouth agape. The DENTIST is over him. She holds a dental instrument inside his mouth, examining his teeth. Zach winces in pain.

DENTIST
Your tooth is dead.

ZACH
Then why does it hurt so much?

DENTIST
It's dying.

The sprays some water against the tooth. Zach doesn't flinch.

DENTIST (CONT'D)
Now it is dead. You need a root canal.

ZACH
How much is this gonna cost me?

DENTIST
You'll have to talk to Mary at the front desk. She handles the fee schedule. It depends on your insurance.

ZACH
I don't have insurance.

DENTIST
Then it'll cost a lot.

Zach frowns.

INT. PHARMACY - DAY

Zach sits in the pharmacy. His mouth is full of cotton. He holds his jaw tenderly. At the counter the PHARMACIST calls his name.

PHARMACIST
Zachary Grace?

Zach stands and goes to the counter. The pharmacist hands Zach his prescription.

PHARMACIST (CONT'D)
Vicodin 10 mg. Twenty count.

Wasting no time, Zach opens the bottle and shoots half the bottle into his mouth.

PHARMACIST (CONT'D)
The dosage is one tablet every four to six--

Zach chomps on the pills, not bothering to wash them down with water. He smiles glumly through the pill residue coating his teeth.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach in bed watching TV. Chinese take-out is strewn around him. He is unshaven, tousled, doesn't look happy. He takes a long pull of beer. Reaches for the pill bottles, looks inside. Empty. He reads the label. No refills. He grabs his cell phone, dials.

ZACH
(into phone)
Hello. This is Zach Grace. I had a root canal yesterday. I need a refill on my meds.

LADY'S VOICE
Our records indicate you filled the prescription today. You were given enough to last you five days.

ZACH
(into phone)
I lost 'em.

LADY'S VOICE
We can give you one refill. But you'll need to come in and see the doctor.

ZACH
I'm in too much pain!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Zach walking. Stops at the mouth of an alley. Sees a drug deal under way. He waits for the CUSTOMER to leave. Approaches the DEALER.

ZACH
What you got?

DEALER
What you need?

ZACH
Fentanyl.

The dealer looks at Zach warily. Zach holds out a wad of crumpled bills.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach in bed. On the night stand is an open bag of pills. He stares glassy-eyed at the TV. Feeling no pain. He lies back against the pillow, closes his eyes. Smiles. The first time we've seen him look at peace.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

Zach approaches the dealer.

DEALER
Back already?

ZACH
Not as a customer. I wanna know if you're hiring. I mean who you work for.

The dealer looks around.

DEALER
Meet me back here at midnight.

EXT. ALLEY - LATER

Zach waits by a dumpster. The dealer approaches. Holds out a bag.

DEALER
Here's a gram. Let's see you sell it.

Before Zach can take the bag, the dealer holds out his hand.

DEALER (CONT'D)

You gotta pay up. First you buy it.
You don't sell it, it's yours to
use. Sell it for however much you
can and you keep the excess. It'll
be a grand. A grand for a gram.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zach opens a cigar box filled with cash. Counts out his bills. Five hundred dollars. Not enough. He reaches for his cell phone. Dials.

ZACH

(into phone)

Yeah Susan. It's Zach. Zach Grace,
your client? I need an advance
against future royalties of my
book.

SUSAN'S VOICE

I'm sorry, Mr. Grace. Your book is
not selling as much as hoped. We
can't advance you another cent.

Zach hangs up.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

The dealer completes a sale. Zach grabs him from behind, holds a knife to his neck.

ZACH

Take me to your leader.

DEALER

Huh?

ZACH

I know that sounds ridiculous. But
I need your source.

Zach holds out his spare cash.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Here's five hundred for your
trouble.

The dealer relaxes. Then makes a run for it. Zach chases him down, trips him.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Don't make this harder on the both
of us.

DEALER

Okay.

ZACH

Here's what I need you to do.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A Lincoln towncar pulls to a stop on a quiet street. The door opens. The dealer appears and enters the car. Before the door closes Zach jumps out from behind a dumpster and also enters the car.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Inside is the Professor. Zach has his hand in his pocket and holds it up like a gun at the professor.

PROFESSOR

We meet again.

ZACH

Fancy meeting you here.

PROFESSOR

Fine have the last word.

ZACH

Driver? Drive.

The DRIVER pulls into traffic.

PROFESSOR

What can I do for you, Mr. Grace.

ZACH

You can call me Zach. I don't know.
I don't know why I'm here. I'm in
pain.

PROFESSOR

Pain is part of life. It's what
keeps me in business.

ZACH

I've been selected to put you out
of business. I just don't know how.

The dealer tackles Zach. Zach removes a stone from his pocket. The dealer takes it and hits Zach on the head, knocking him unconscious.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

Zach being dragged into the water. His feet are in chains and stones are tied around his legs. The Professor stands on shore.

PROFESSOR

You have a death wish, Mr. Grace.
But with nothing to live for, why
not wish to die?
(to driver)
Leave him on the shore. The tide
will do the rest.

The towncar pulls away and we watch Zach as he sinks deeper and deeper into the water.

LATER

Zach dragging himself to the shore. He collapses out of the water.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Zach stands on the street corner. He speaks into the cell phone.

ZACH

I have an anonymous tip.

LATER

Zach watches as the towncar pulls up and the dealer gets in. The towncar drives away, behind it is an unmarked police vehicle that pursues.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Zach in bed watching TV. He's eating pizza and drinking beer. On TV is the news.

NEWS

Today a drug lord was captured in Hollywood. He is believed to be at the helm of the largest ring in America.

Zach speaks into his cell phone.

ZACH
(into phone)
Yeah, Delta? I want a ticket to New
York. Leaving ASAP. One way.

INT. FAITH'S PLACE - DAY

Faith takes a break from reading her books to watch the news. A look of surprise and wonder on her face. Then the doorbell rings. She moves to the door, opens it. Zach stands there holding a bouquet of flowers.

ZACH
Hello again. Free for dinner?

Faith's face relaxes into a smile.

FAITH
I'll get a coat.

Zach grabs her and kisses her.

ZACH
It's a beautiful night. I'll keep
you warm.

FAITH
Deal.

ZACH
Just one thing. We need to make one
stop along the way.

FAITH
Okay.

CUT TO

A moving car, seen from the outside. Zach drives. Faith in passenger seat. Zach is talking but we don't hear what he says. He's speaking into the rearview mirror as Faith looks on. In the back seat we see Sydney. She is holding the flowers and smiling at her father.

They pull up at a restaurant. And Zach parks and exits the car quickly, comes around the car and opens the door first for his daughter, then for Faith. We watch as they enter the restaurant and disappear. A happy ending at last.

THE END