

A CUT ABOVE THE REST

by

Chris Bodily

FADE IN:

INT. "SANTA MIRA TRIBUNE" - CORRIDOR - DAY

On the door reads the Santa Mira Tribune logo. Below the logo reads the name:

PERRY GREEN
EDITOR

VICTOR (PRE-LAP)
A fast food restaurant?!

INT. PERRY GREEN'S OFFICE - DAY

VICTOR HERMAN, 50, brown suit, very professional, paces around the room.

PERRY GREEN, 45, sitting, tries to calm him down.

VICTOR
You want me to review a fast food restaurant?

GREEN
Food critics review fast food joints. Just like film critics review Michael Bay movies.

VICTOR
Which is why I'm glad I'm not a film critic. Did you know Roger Ebert gave Garfield three stars?

Green stifles a chuckle.

VICTOR
Look. Every one of my colleagues has acted strangely since reviewing Stepford's. It's as if they're a completely different person.

Green sighs from exasperation.

VICTOR
And have you seen the size of that place? Who needs that much real estate? I suspect they've been drugging their patrons.

Green palms his face.

GREEN
That's crazy talk!

VICTOR
A good friend of mine's a P.I.

GREEN

That won't be necessary. Come on,
the food's great for a burger
joint. A cut above the rest. But
I'm not a food critic.

Green slowly reaches to his left for a pink slip, taunting
Victor. Victor grows tense.

VICTOR

Fine. You win.

INT. "SANTA MIRA TRIBUNE" - CORRIDOR - DAY

Victor leaves Mr. Green's office, closing the door behind
him. He grabs his cell phone and dials a number.

The other line RINGS. And RINGS. And RINGS.

VICTOR

Come on, pick up.

The LINE IS DISCONNECTED. Dread reads on Victor's face.

VICTOR

Bobby? Bobby??

EXT. "STEPFORD'S BURGERS" - DAY

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

The logo on the sign consists of yellow cursive.

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

STEPFORD (PRE-LAP)

(trance-like monotone)

Good news, everybody...

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

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

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

The uniforms match the building's color scheme.

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

PHIL (19), also sporting sunglasses, talks into his drive-thru headset. He also speaks in an eerie monotone.

PHIL
Hold on, ma'am.

Static through the headset.

STEPFORD
We have a very special guest coming in today.

He pauses. Anticipation.

STEPFORD
Victor Herman.

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

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

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

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

His voice sounds perfectly normal.

Phil and Dave gasp.

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

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

CHUCK
What did I do?

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

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

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

STEPFORD

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

The three employees nod.

STEPFORD

Oh, and Chuck, before I forget...

He hands Chuck a pair of sunglasses. Attached to the handles are earbuds.

CHUCK

What do I need these for?

Mr. Stepford walks to the back without answering.

Chuck tries on the sunglasses. He inserts the buds in his ears. His body gradually trembles and contorts.

CHUCK

What's going on? Help!

Chuck throws the glasses off. They spin on the counter, playing a continuous A note, tuned to 432 Hertz.

Chuck covers his ears and rushes to the back area.

He uncovers them, reaching his right hand to grab two fries from the back room, inserting one into each ear. He continues to tremble.

On the right handle of the sunglasses is a volume knob. Chuck turns it all the way down. Silence.

The trembling slows to a crawl. He removes the fries, tossing them in the trash.

He buries his head in his hands, breathing heavily. He starts to panic.

Victor Herman, carrying a clipboard with pen and paper, enters the restaurant. Neutral expression on his face.

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

VICTOR

Excuse me, sir.

Chuck lowers his hands, revealing a frightened expression on his face. His voice is similarly shaky. He tries to hide this, unsuccessfully.

CHUCK

You must be Mister Herman?

Victor reads Chuck's name tag.

VICTOR
And you must be Chuck?

Chuck's voice raises to an unnatural pitch. He shakes uncontrollably, but tries to stifle it.

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

Victor feigns a smile.

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

Victor seems somewhat uncomfortable, but not like Chuck. Victor reads the menu.

VICTOR
I hear you have the best hamburgers in town?

CHUCK
Can't argue with that.

Chuck lets out an uneasy, loud, shaky chuckle, causing Victor to wince. Victor clears his throat.

VICTOR
Are you feeling okay?

CHUCK
(stammers)
Yes, sir.

VICTOR
What comes with a Number Four?

CHUCK
Number Four is the kids meal.

VICTOR
Oh, I apologize.

Victor scribbles a note.

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

CHUCK
To stay, right?

Victor nods.

CHUCK
Your total is eight dollars.

VICTOR
Eight dollars?! Why so much?

Chuck takes a step back, clutches his heart for a second.

CHUCK
I guess because you're paying for
quality.

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

Chuck, likewise, tries to calm his.

VICTOR
How long do I have to wait?

Chuck gives him a large cup. Victor takes it.

CHUCK
One minute, on average.

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

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

Victor reads the logos of the different beverage options. Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, Dr. Pepper, Mountain Dew, Tropicana Lemonade, "Stepford's Special Red" and water.

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

Victor shivers.

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

CHUCK
Mister Herman, your order's ready!

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

VICTOR
Could you hold my clipboard for me,
Chuck?

Chuck does so.

VICTOR
Thank you.

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

CHUCK

Enjoy your meal, Mister Herman.

Victor sits down at the table behind the other patron.

Victor reviews his notes.

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

THE FINAL NOTE

at the top of the page, reads:

Acceptably quick wait time, nice selection of Pepsi products, atmosphere unnerving and suspicious.

The note is handwritten in print, moderately sloppy.

Black ink.

BACK TO SCENE

Victor sets his notepad down.

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

VICTOR

I thought I told you no pickles?

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

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

He turns his head toward Chuck.

VICTOR

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

Dan Stepford enters calmly. Chuck scrambles to put his sunglasses on.

STEPFORD

Mister Herman?

Victor points to the burger.

VICTOR

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

STEPFORD

Oh, it's... meat.

VICTOR

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

Victor chortles, clearly joking.

Mr. Stepford's smile diminishes somewhat.

STEPFORD

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

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

VICTOR

And these fries don't taste like
fries. They don't even taste like
potatoooooh my God!

The "fries" are human fingers -- bones removed, nails
intact. The ketchup is thick blood.

Victor drops the "fry" and trembles.

He takes out his cell phone. Stepford confiscates it.

STEPFORD

Would you mind stepping in the
back?

Victor reaches for his phone, to no avail.

STEPFORD

Please?

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

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

VICTOR

Spit it out, Mister Stepford.

Dave holds out a bloody hatchet, still dripping.

Victor is the only one not smiling or wearing sunglasses.

STEPFORD

You know too much.

A man SCREAMS.

Victor turns to his left to see who it is.

Another SCREAM.

VICTOR

Bobby!

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

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

VICTOR

You, you... cannibals!

STEPFORD

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

Standing next to Bobby is a perfect BOBBY CLONE, wearing only briefs. Motionless like a mannequin, eyes open, unnaturally wide grin. There are THREE ADDITIONAL EMPLOYEES, plus Dave, standing next to the two Bobbys.

The real Bobby ekes out his last breath.

BOBBY

(weakly)

Victor...

Bobby passes out, dead.

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

VICTOR

Bobby! You, you...

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

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

BOBBY CLONE

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

The Bobby Clone opens his arms for a hug.

VICTOR

You're not Bobby! What have you maniacs done?

BOBBY CLONE

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

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

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

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

He washes it down with a gulp of Pepsi.

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

Dave creeps toward Victor with his hatchet.

Victor grabs it, accidentally hitting Chuck in the face and knocking his sunglasses onto the floor.

Chuck trembles, dropping his fake smile.

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

STEPFORD

No!

CHUCK

What... what happened?

VICTOR

These cannibals brainwashed you.

CHUCK

But I don't even smoke weed, dude.

VICTOR

I said "cannibals."

Victor points at Mr. Stepford, Phil and Dave.

STEPFORD

Enough!

Dave marches forward, zombie-like, trance-like monotone.

DAVE

Give me that back!

Victor swings the hatchet at him. Dave, dodging the weapon, grabs Chuck's sunglasses off the floor and forces them on Victor. Victor resists and grunts.

He tries to push Dave away, to no avail.

Dave pins him to the floor. Victor uses the hatchet like a shield. Dave shoves the shades onto him, grabbing the knob and gradually increasing the volume.

Victor screams, then kicks Dave in the groin. Dave grabs Victor's foot and twists it. CRUNCH!

Victor kicks him again in the crotch, knocking him over. The hatchet spins around on the floor.

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

Phil and Mr. Stepford march toward Victor like robots or bloodthirsty zombies. The three other employees -- ASHLEY, JOEY, and RACHEL -- follow suit.

Victor takes five steps back.

VICTOR
Are you even human?

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

The patron shoves a handful of fries in his mouth.

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

The brainwashed cannibals march closer.

VICTOR
Stop! Stop it!

Closer.

Dave picks himself up, grabs the hatchet and joins the others. He licks the blood off his lips and swings his hatchet violently.

VICTOR
Please.

Even closer. Victor takes another step back.

Chuck guards Victor like a human shield.

CHUCK
Mister Stepford!

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

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

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

The patron takes a swallow of his Pepsi before taking another huge bite of his burger.

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

Chuck sputters, coughs, dies.

VICTOR

Chuck!

Ashley starts eating Chuck's fingers on his left hand.

Victor glares at his enemies.

VICTOR

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

Joey and Rachel join Ashley in feasting upon Chuck's digits.

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

STEPFORD

It had better be good...

OVER BLACK

Victor SCREAMS in horror.

SLASHING, HACKING, STABBING.

More SCREAMING, followed by GRUNTING.

FADE IN:

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Stepford stands behind the counter.

STEPFORD

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

WOMAN

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

Mr. Stepford nods.

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

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

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

Finally, the top bun to cap it off. A perfect burger.

INSERT - NEWSPAPER

Victor's rave review of Stepford's Burgers.

The headline reads:

Welcome to Good Burger

Followed by the lead-in:

Stepford's best hamburger I've ever tasted

FADE OUT.

THE END