

BOTTLENECK

Sci-Fi / Psychological Thriller

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FADE IN:

1. INT. BASEMENT - NIGHT

The camera slowly approaches the pine tree lying against the wall. Meanwhile, we hear the distant, buzzing voices of four friends chatting over dinner upstairs.

FADE TO BLACK

2. INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - NIGHT

BENJAMIN (13 months old) sits on the floor in front of his crib. AUSTIN (10 months) old stands in front of Benjamin with curious eyes.

AUSTIN
Hey... Friend?

Benjamin looks at Austin with blank eyes. Then he smiles.

He picks up the shape sorter toy next to his crib and puts it in the center.

AUSTIN
Want to play? Okay!

Austin sits on the floor. He takes the triangular prism in his hand and puts it through the hole of the box. When he realizes that Benjamin is looking at him with empty eyes, he hands him the cube on the floor. Benjamin takes the cube in his hand and nibbles on it. Austin points to the box.

AUSTIN
See here... It goes in here.

Benjamin tries to put the cube into the triangular hole.

AUSTIN
(frustrated)
No...

3. INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

ETHAN (40) and his wife MADISON (35), TOM (37) and his wife HAILEY (32) chat at the dinner table.

TOM
Did you really get a real pine tree
for Christmas? Out of the blue,
what made you go for it?

ETHAN

Madison and I thought, why toss plastic trees every year when we could have a real one in the backyard? Plus, with Benjamin's first Christmas, it seemed right.

HAILEY

After dinner, let's see the tree then!

MADISON

Ethan had plans to plant it in the backyard. But that was three months ago.

Ethan sighs.

ETHAN

I couldn't find a chance, you know. I've been all over the place...

TOM

(laughs)

Come on Madison, give him some slack! He is the Country Manager of Attica Electronics after all!

MADISON

I know, of course, what he's dealing with... But if he wasn't so hard on himself...

TOM

Ethan was very hardworking as a child too. No surprise he's the only one from our block in such a high-up job now.

HAILEY

Baby, you've done well for yourself too.

TOM

Yes Hailey, of course, but my title defines my limits. I used to be a Service Specialist. Now, I'm a Senior Service Specialist. But that's the highest position here; we don't have a managerial role or anything beyond it. In essence, I am at the peak of the ladder in my department.

ETHAN

Tom, are you happy to work there?

TOM
 (laughs)
 Absolutely, I'm content...

A beat.

TOM
 Dude, I'm giving you props here.

He turns to Madison and Hailey.

TOM
 Ethan's always been a grinder.
 Heck, he's my only buddy from
 Harvard. Look where hard work's got
 him. Can't blame the man for being
 swamped.

The conversation at the table is interrupted by the shout of Austin, who comes stomping through the darkness of the corridor.

AUSTIN
 Mom... Moom!

When he enters the living room, he is involuntarily embarrassed by the curious eyes looking at him. He holds his mother's hand tightly and looks at the floor.

AUSTIN
 Let's go... Let's go home.

HAILEY
 Oh, Austin? What's wrong, sweetie?

AUSTIN
 I miss Mia...

HAILEY
 (smiles)
 Aww, my little sunshine!

She kisses her son on the cheek. She strokes his hair.

HAILEY
 We will leave soon. Okay,
 sweetheart?

Austin hesitantly nods.

HAILEY
 Come on, now you go play with
 Benjamin.

She pats her son on the butt. Austin walks back to Benjamin's room as he had come.

MADISON

Does Austin know? Mia's condition...

TOM

No, of course not. Austin thought we brought Mia to you because she was sick... Madison, by the way, we can't thank you enough. The new Mia is almost no different from the old one. Even her habits are the same. When we brought her home, she scratched the same end of the couch that the old Mia used to.

MADISON

Actually, she is exactly the same. That's the beauty of it.

HAILEY

What was the process called? Phoenixify?

MADISON

Yeah, Hailey. Phoenixify.

ETHAN

(smiles)

Mia was reborn just like the phoenix is reborn from the ashes.

MADISON

Exactly... In fact, she wasn't born. She was reshaped exactly the same as she was. So, she didn't become a baby copy of Mia.

ETHAN

(annoyed)

Yeah, I know... But that's where the name comes from, right? From the phoenix?

MADISON

Of course!

TOM

I guess there aren't many vets who do this procedure. We searched a lot until we found you.

MADISON

Originally, the process was for industrial animal husbandry. But now, it's making its way into the pet industry.

TOM

So, what exactly are you doing to the animal?

MADISON

It's a bit like putting a dying animal to sleep. We used to use a drug called Pentobarbital for that. For the phoenixification process, we use Stembarbital. Stembarbital also terminates the vital activities of the animal, but it doesn't damage the stem cells. In this way, we can create an exact copy of the animal through stem cells.

HAILEY

Is the animal suffering?

MADISON

(laughs)

No, of course not! It's no different from falling asleep for the animal.

TOM

(smiles)

It's quite a breakthrough, right? Better than mourning over the cat...

MADISON

Exactly. I'm trying to follow similar developments closely. VMX will take place in Orlando next week. Let's see what I'll see there...

TOM

A fair? How long will it last?

MADISON

An expo. About a week or so.

HAILEY

So, Sofia will take care of Benjamin during the whole week?

MADISON

That's the plan. Ethan is busy, you know...

A beat.

HAILEY

It's a nice coincidence, isn't it?

TOM

Oh, definitely! Madison, if our paths hadn't coincided with yours, maybe I wouldn't have seen Ethan for a long time. How many years has it been Ethan? Three?

ETHAN

It's something around there.

MADISON

We'd just been engaged then, hadn't we?

ETHAN

I proposed a few weeks after we saw them.

TOM

How convenient! The last time we met, we didn't even have a ring on our fingers. Now we both have children.

ETHAN

Austin is really sharp, by the way. Bright as a button.

TOM

(smiles)

We didn't expect this much either. I'm glad we fixed him.

HAILEY

Indeed... Austin learned to talk and walk in a very short time. He has good judgment too.

ETHAN

(sad)

Ours hasn't spoken yet.

HAILEY

Madison, if you could've seen me on the day Austin said "mom" for the first time... I cried my eyes out. I never expected to be so emotional. At that moment, time stood still.

MADISON

(fake smile)

How nice!

HAILEY

Have you folks done any fixing with Benjamin?

ETHAN

No. We don't support fixing. We didn't intervene with Benjamin in the womb.

TOM

(surprised)

Why?

MADISON

It's not natural.

TOM

Aren't we trying to surpass nature's limits using tech?

MADISON

Yeah, but in doing so, you are ignoring the genetic heritage of your parents, the sanctity of nature.

TOM

What do you mean?

MADISON

In my opinion, the fixing process raises ethical questions. It feels like we are tampering with fate, altering what nature intended for our child. Everything that makes Benjamin who he is, is a result of the laws of nature acting on the genetic heritage from both Ethan and me. Otherwise, it doesn't seem much different from playing God.

TOM

I see... So, you are conservative in this regard.

MADISON

No! It's not about being conservative. It's about valuing and preserving our genetic heritage.

TOM

Preserve, conserve... Sounds a bit like conservatism, doesn't it?

ETHAN

(annoyed)

If we're going to get caught up on words, the term "fixing" really bothers me.

(MORE)

ETHAN (CONT'D)

It implies those born naturally are somehow deficient or broken. We once used that word for healing the sick. Now, it's being thrown around for genetic interventions that challenge the very fabric of nature.

TOM

Come on, Ethan. Nature isn't some flawless blueprint. Fixing might not just be about mending what's broken but elevating what's already good. Why settle for what nature gave us when we can make it even better?

ETHAN

Depending on what you mean by better, the answer to that varies. I don't know, for example, today a blonde, blue-eyed, athletic-bodied person may fit your definition of better, but tomorrow this standard may turn into something completely different. When social values change tomorrow, won't the fact that you have structured your child according to the old values have negative effects on the child? Parents who fix their babies are making a choice. Right or wrong, the burden of this choice is borne by the baby itself. What if the parent's choice is wrong, what then?

TOM

The moment fixing became an option, all of us parents were handed a choice. It's a choice either way, whether to fix or not. But what if choosing not to is the wrong decision? I believe a natural birth might not be best for society.

ETHAN

Why is that?

TOM

Because I think that the natural-born will hinder the progress of the intelligent who are born fixed.
(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

Because it will make comprehensive social progress difficult, natural-born children will be their generation's-- How do you say--

He snaps his fingers, searching for the right word.

HAILEY

Bottleneck.

TOM

AHA! They will be their generation's bottleneck. Those who're fixed will suffer for their natural-born descendants.

Just as Ethan is about to interrupt, Austin's little footsteps are heard again in the hallway. Austin comes to his mother. He climbs on her lap and hugs her.

AUSTIN

Mom... Let's go now.

HAILEY

Okay, baby. We'll go now.

4. INT. ENTRY HALL - LATER

As ETHAN and MADISON lead TOM, HAILEY and AUSTIN through the door, Ethan can't help but ask.

ETHAN

What was the name of the doctor who fixed Austin?

TOM

Dr. Siemionow. The best in his field.

Meanwhile, Hailey is putting Austin's shoes on in front of the door.

HAILEY

Did you know his great-grandmother performed the first face transplant in the US? He's very dedicated. Always keeping a close eye on Austin's progress. He's aware of every detail about him.

FADE OUT:

5. EXT. CITY SKYLINE - DAY TO NIGHT

A breathtaking time-lapse of the city skyline as day gradually transitions into night.

6. INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

While MADISON is in the bedroom packing her luggage, ETHAN sits cross-legged on the floor in the hallway, trying to teach BENJAMIN the shapes on his shape sorter.

ETHAN
(smiling)
Benji, check this out!

Ethan waves the cube in his hand.

ETHAN
What am I holding? Huh?

Benjamin laughs. Bubbles come out of his nose.

Ethan passes the cube through the box.

ETHAN
See how it goes right through here?
You see that?

Benjamin looks at his father with blank eyes. Laughs again.

ETHAN
MADISON! Make sure to grab a
notebook. It might come in handy.

MADISON
Already on it! Thanks, darling.

Ethan looks into Benjamin's eyes for a while. He sighs.

ETHAN
MADISON! Do you think we should
consult Austin's doctor about
Benjamin? What's your take?

MADISON
And why's that?

ETHAN
Just a thought... Maybe he'll give
some advice or something.

MADISON
No need.

Meanwhile, she places her shirts in the luggage.

ETHAN
(hesitates)
I just wonder... If there's a way
to fix him --

MADISON
NO! Benjamin is perfect as he is.
There is nothing to fix.

ETHAN
Madison, come on! Haven't you seen
Austin? How will Benjamin fare
against kids like that in school?

Madison puts the folded shirt in the luggage. She stops. She takes a deep breath and walks slowly into the hallway to Ethan.

MADISON
Ethan, it's been a week since we
saw Austin. I know what you've been
hinting at all this week. "we made
a quick decision back then
Madison", "look how far technology
has come Madison"... Insinuations
throughout the week... We talked
about this when I was pregnant. We
made our choice back then. You
can't just go against nature.

ETHAN
Madison, for God's sake! Okay, I
was skeptical too, but now
everything is clear. It's been over
a year, Madison! Austin's already
speaking. And our son?

MADISON
He'll speak in his own time, Ethan.
No rush... And trust me, there'll
come a day when you'll wish for
some quiet.

ETHAN
What if he blames us later? Asks us
why we didn't fix him to keep up
with his friends?

MADISON
ETHAN, ENOUGH! This was our mutual
decision. Drop it. If you become a
proper father, he won't fall
behind, don't worry.

Ethan gets to his feet angrily. Benjamin watches his parents argue with eyes full of fear.

ETHAN
 HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?! AM I NOT
 DOING MY PART?!

MADISON
 (calmly)
 I'm not saying that Ethan... I'm
 just saying that remember he's your
 child, Ethan, not some project. He
 is your son, with his beauties and
 flaws. Our son.

ETHAN
 Why should we settle for flaws when
 there's a chance to change them?

MADISON
 Because you are his father, Ethan!
 Because he deserves your love,
 without conditions.

ETHAN
 (laughs)
 Madison, you're making it sound so
 simple. You're smarter than that.
 Come on...

Madison frowns. Without saying a word, she goes into the
 bedroom.

ETHAN
 (whispers)
 Damn...

He goes to the bedroom.

7. INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

ETHAN
 Madison, I didn't mean that. I'm
 sorry.

Madison continues to pack her luggage, ignoring Ethan. When
 she goes to the closet to get her laundry, Ethan stands in
 front of her.

ETHAN
 Madison, let's just... let's talk
 about it.

MADISON
 Will you get out of my way?

Ethan steps aside.

ETHAN
Come on, let's make up.

He grabs her arm.

ETHAN
I truly am sorry.

MADISON
Let go of my arm.

ETHAN
Please.

MADISON
ETHAN, GO AWAY!

She pulls her arm free.

ETHAN
(frowns)
Fine.

He moves towards the bed and picks up his pillow.

ETHAN
I'll crash on the couch tonight.

He stops just as he is leaving the bedroom. He turns to Madison.

ETHAN
And let Sofia know she can have the week off.

MADISON
(surprised)
Why?

ETHAN
I'll take the week off to be with Benjamin while you are at the expo. To be a PROPER father.

A beat.

MADISON
Fine... Suit yourself.

8. INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Ethan brushes his teeth.

As he puts the toothbrush back in the bathroom cabinet, he notices a medicine bottle he has never seen before.

He picks up the transparent bottle the size of his thumb and holds it up to the light. The bottle is filled to the brim with a transparent liquid.

9. INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Ethan calls out from the hallway.

ETHAN
Madison!

Ethan goes into the bedroom and waves the bottle at Madison.

ETHAN
What is this?

Madison looks at the bottle.

MADISON
Stembarbital. Can you put it back,
please?

ETHAN
(angrily)
WHAT IS THIS POISON DOING IN OUR
HOUSE? What would we do if Benjamin
got his hands on it?

MADISON
(calmly)
He can't reach there, Ethan. You're
angry right now, looking for a
place to tease.

ETHAN
Just -- I don't want such things
here.

MADISON
Fine. I'll deal with it when I
return. Just put it back for now.

10. INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - DAY

MADISON opens the curtains. She goes to the crib and pats BENJAMIN's head as he lies in the crib.

11. INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Madison, luggage in hand, looks through the living room door at Ethan asleep on the couch. She smiles.

Madison heads towards the front door of the house. She opens the door and goes out.

As soon as the door closes, we see Ethan's eyes open.

12. INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - LATER

Ethan rushes in, all dressed up. He takes Benjamin from his crib.

13. INT. DOCTOR'S ROOM - LATER

DR. SIEMIONOW (60s) sits at his desk. ETHAN sits opposite him with BENJAMIN in his arms.

DR. SIEMIONOW

It seems Tom might not have gone into specifics. Fixing can only be done in the prenatal period. At the zygote stage, when stem cells are dense, we can modify many different characteristics of the baby, and at the embryo stage, we can partially intervene with the stem cells. After birth, however, our hands are tied.

ETHAN

Doctor, my wife and I were reading up on genetic advancements before Benjamin was born. There were suggestions that infants might benefit from genetic interventions in the near future.

DR. SIEMIONOW

Of course, Mr. Fulton, that could be a possibility down the road. But as for now, unfortunately --

ETHAN

Can't you look into it? If you look at articles or something... There must be studies or progress abroad?

DR. SIEMIONOW

(annoyed)

I've been keeping up with the advancements in the field, Mr. Fulton. That's my job.

ETHAN

But could you perhaps take a deeper dive into it? Just to be sure?

DR. SIEMIONOW
(fake smile)
Alright, Mr. Fulton. Share your
contact with me. If I come across
any method to fix Benjamin, I'll
let you know, you'll be the first
to know.

14. INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Total silence. Only clock is ticking.

Disappointed in his meeting with the doctor, Ethan lies down on the couch in the living room. His eyes are closed. He is deep in thought.

A long beat.

Ethan's thoughts are interrupted by a clattering sound.

Ethan looks towards the sound coming from the center of the living room.

Benjamin has brought his shape sorter to his dad and is sitting on the floor.

Benjamin picks up the triangular prism.

Ethan sits up and pays attention to Benjamin.

Benjamin looks at the toy with a frown and then tries to put the triangular prism through the circle. When he can't, he cries.

ETHAN
GOD DAMN IT!

He stands up and picks up the toy.

15. INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Ethan takes the toy to the kitchen and throws it in the trash.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

16. EXT. AIRPORT TERMINAL ENTRANCE - DAY

Madison waits for a taxi with her luggage. She waves to the taxi. The taxi pulls up in front of her. She gets in the taxi.

17. INT. TAXI - LATER

As Madison sits in the back seat of the taxi, looking out the window, she thinks about how much money she spent at the expo and pulls out her cell phone.

When she logs into her banking app, she is shocked to find that the money in her joint bank account with Ethan has been zeroed out.

MADISON

What?.. How?..

She immediately calls Ethan. The phone rings for a while but Ethan doesn't pick up.

She calls Ethan again. The phone keeps ringing.

MADISON

Come on... Pick it up...

The phone keeps ringing.

MADISON

(to taxi driver)

CAN YOU DRIVE FASTER?!

18. EXT. ETHAN & MADISON'S HOUSE - LATER

The speeding taxi suddenly stops in front of the house. Madison gets out of the taxi, grabs her luggage and runs to the door.

19. INT. ENTRY HALL - CONTINUOUS

Madison storms in.

MADISON

ETHAN!

She panickedly looks for Ethan.

A beat.

MADISON

ETHAN, WHERE ARE YOU?!

She enters the living room.

20. INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Madison continues to look for Ethan.

Ethan enters through the glass door on the east side of the living room where it connects to the backyard. He is covered in dust and dirt. He is drenched in sweat.

A beat.

MADISON

You took all the money out of the account...

A beat.

MADISON

What have you done?

Ethan looks at Madison impassively. He takes a breath.

ETHAN

I finally planted the pine tree in the backyard.

He heads for the bathroom with heavy steps. Madison follows him.

21. INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ethan turns on the sink faucet and squeezes soap into his hand.

Madison stands in front of the door.

MADISON

CAN'T YOU HEAR ME?! WHY DID YOU WITHDRAW ALL THAT MONEY?!

Ethan doesn't answer. He turns off the faucet and wipes his face and hands with a towel.

MADISON

Did you take Benjamin to the doctor? SPEAK UP, DAMN YOU!

ETHAN

(calmly)
Come with me.

Ethan moves slowly down the hallway. Madison follows him.

22. INT. BENJAMIN'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ethan and Madison stop in front of the door.

Benjamin is sitting on the floor, playing with his puzzle toy.

He picks up a cylinder and successfully pushes it through the round hole.

Then he picks up a cube and puts it through the square hole. Then he realizes that his mommy and daddy are watching him.

He smiles.

Madison runs to her child and hugs him tightly.

She smells him.

She waits for a while.

Then she sits up and looks at Ethan with hateful eyes.

MADISON

What have you done? Did you *fix* my baby? Tell me.

Ethan smiles.

Then Madison hears an unexpected voice.

BENJAMIN

Mom...

Madison turns to her son. Her eyes fill with tears.

She holds him tightly against her chest and sobs.

She kisses him. She smells him. She collapses from the shock of the complex emotions she is experiencing.

Her hands tremble, her feet go numb. For Madison, time stands still at that moment.

She forgets everything.

23. INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Madison runs to the bathroom crying. She splashes water on her face.

When she feels like losing her balance, she grabs the edge of the sink.

She doesn't know what to think, what to feel. She takes deep breaths in and out.

After a while, she calms down. She looks in the mirror.

Suddenly, she is startled. Her eye makeup has run down her cheeks, and her eyes are red from crying. She opens the bathroom cabinet and takes out a bottle of micellar cleansing water and a cotton pad.

She pours the water on the pad and cleans her face.

As she puts back the micellar cleansing water in the bathroom cabinet, she catches a glimpse of the bottle of Stembarbital.

She takes the bottle, goes out into the hallway.

24. INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Madison points the bottle of Stembarbital at the window overlooking the backyard. Madison notices that the liquid inside is slightly reduced with the light filtering through the window.

At first, she can't make sense of it.

Then she looks at the window and the pine tree in the backyard.

She freezes.

The camera slowly approaches the pine tree.

The roots of the pine tree have immediately embraced the newly planted soil.

It is as if the fertility lying deep in the soil has suddenly endowed the pine tree with life.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END