

STARLING
Screenplay
by
Jason Paul

BLACK SCREEN

A crowbar probes French doors, wood creaks, windows rattle, metal scratches metal. A door lock jolts.

Three quick bum-rush efforts toward the doors - each more forceful - and they burst open. A bolt pings and rolls over a wood floor. An echo of encroaching FOOTSTEPS.

FADE IN

INT. HOUSE - UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - DAY

POV - UNDER A BED, looking past an open door and toward the second-story stairway landing of a comfy upper-class home.

OFFSCREEN - FOOTFALLS and RUMMAGE SOUNDS from DOWNSTAIRS. VOICES of INTRUDER #1 and INTRUDER #2 at a mindful volume.

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
Check that closet for a safe. I got
the office.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)
They gonna be gone all day?

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
Just move your ass.

STARLING (11) is under the bed; sprawled on his belly, statue-still, eyes wide, chin rests on the knuckles of his fingers interlocked in front of him. He listens.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)
No safe in here.

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
Bathroom cabinet. The mom look like she
pop vickies.

Starling is rooted to the carpet, concentrates on the scenario underneath him.

OFFSCREEN - drawers and cabinets open and close, their contents sifted.

DOWNSTAIRS - IN THE BATHROOM

Everyday toiletries and innocuous prescription bottles tumble into a vanity sink. Intruder #2's gloved hand riddles through the pile.

DOWNSTAIRS - IN THE KITCHEN

Intruder #1's leather-clad hand snatches a crystal vase from a china cabinet shelf, stuffs it into a knapsack that holds a laptop.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)
(from the bathroom)
Nothin'.

Follow Intruder #1's hand as it reaches for a fancy wine bottle from a rack built into the china cabinet.

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
In here! The good shit'll be where they think nobody's gonna look.

BACK TO THE UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - UNDER THE BED

Starling tenses.

OFFSCREEN - the rifling of items intensifies.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)
C'mon, let's hit the bedrooms upstairs.

Starling draws a controlled breath, chin off his knuckles, rests his hands flatly on the carpet in front of him.

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
Go. Turn that bitch inside-out. I'll be up when you find something.

Starling's eyes dart to the doorway as FOOT THUDS ascend toward the second-story landing.

STARLING'S POV - LOOKING INTO THE SECOND-STORY HALLWAY

Intruder #2's black leather boots stomp across the carpet and halt at the threshold of the bedroom doorway.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)
(to himself)
Ho-ly shiiit...

Starling doesn't blench, eyes locked on the boots.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)(CONT.)
(to himself)
I got me something.

Boots creep past the threshold and toward Starling.

INTRUDER #2 (O.S.)(CONT.)
(to himself)
Got me a nice little surprise.

Starling steadies, his eyes track the footpath.

Intruder #2's boots skirt the edge of the bed frame, clomp toward the headboard, then halt. Intruder #2 crouches to one knee. His pant leg grazes the frame.

Starling fixes on the dangerously close figure.

BEDSIDE - INTRUDER #2

wears a three-hole, full-face beanie, eyes trained on--

A SQUARE-SHAPED, BLACK VELVET BOX

on the bed. It rests atop the pillow lump of a paisley duvet cover. Next to the box, a greeting card with a glossy bouquet pattern and the words "HAPPY ANNIVERSARY" printed across in elegant, classic font.

Intruder #2 grins, reaches for the box.

Starling's cautious gaze drops to a frown. His right hand dips OUT OF FRAME, then ENTERS FRAME again and aims a nine-millimeter with a silencer at Intruder #2's leg. A stifled thunk as he pulls the trigger.

The bullet tears into Intruder #2's ankle. Blood and flesh splay from a gaping, smoking hole. Intruder #2 yells.

DOWNSTAIRS IN THE LIVING ROOM - INTRUDER #1

Donned in a three-hole, full-face beanie. His look whips upward toward Intruder #2's muffled OFFSCREEN YELL.

BACK TO THE UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

Intruder #2 has rolled over onto one shoulder. He clenches the ankle wound. Blood seeps between his gloved fingers. He locks on Starling.

Starling glowers at Intruder #2, then his gaze falls to--

INTRUDER #2'S NECKLINE

A tattoo of a dire wolf with razor-sharp teeth and opaque eyes, and a dagger piercing its head from crown to chin. The letters "DWG" adorn the ornate dagger handle; the image in stark contrast with Intruder #2's grimace.

Starling aims at Intruder #2, pulls the trigger. Blood and brain matter cannon from the blast directly in between Intruder #2's eyes. He drops.

DOWNSTAIRS IN THE LIVING ROOM - INTRUDER #1

registers the gunshots. He snags the knapsack from atop a table. ANGLE IN FRONT OF HIM as he blazes across the open-floor toward the busted French doors.

From behind, a thud from a muffled gunshot. A chunky, red mass spatters from Intruder #1's head. He drops.

Starling - in the BACKGROUND, his smoking gun aimed - stands at the other end of the open-floor plan, at the foot of a stairway leading from upstairs to the kitchen. He lowers the gun, walks toward the fallen body.

Intruder #1 splays over the hardwood like a chalk outline. Blood drains from a messy head wound. One side of his face and neck are visible. His neck is marked with the same dire wolf dagger tattoo and DWG initials as his partner.

Starling stands over the body, ice-cold eyes. He stuffs the gun inside his hoodie pocket, reaches into his pants pocket, raises a stiletto blade with a chrome skull on the handle. He pushes the skull. A shiny blade snaps up.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Starling scales a wood fence that separates the backyard property line from the ballast of a railroad track. He trudges over gravel stones toward an overgrowth of ivy that drapes the backyard fence.

He brushes back a clump of ivy and retrieves a bicycle hidden behind it. He rolls the bike across the railroad tracks, pushes it and himself through dangling slats of a fence that lead to a cul-de-sac on the other side.

EXT. CITY PARK - DAY

Starling pedals along a dirt path that abuts a creek tucked within a neighborhood of less-than-modest homes. On the other side of the water, lush green grass and shady trees blanket a park area with a glossy pond in the distance.

Starling brakes on the trail, gazes across the water toward a colorful corkscrew willow tree on the bank of the pond.

PRE-LAP - laughter and playful voices from YOUNGER STARLING (6), and CURTIS (20s), Starling's dad.

CURTIS

I'm gonna gitcha. I'm right behind ya.
Better watch out.

EXT. CITY PARK - POND - DAY

STARLING'S FLASHBACK. Younger Starling - mere steps in front of Curtis - scurries toward the willow tree. He cackles as he reaches for the hearty trunk.

YOUNGER STARLING

Safe!

CURTIS

Awww. Safe again. Daddy's still it.

Younger Starling smiles at Curtis, chuckles.

Curtis' hand settles on the tree's contorted bark.

He holds a look on the branches and leaves above, grins; lost in a happy thought.

Younger Starling studies Curtis.

YOUNGER STARLING
Daddy? What is it?

Curtis looks to Younger Starling's eyeline, remembers--

EXT. CITY PARK - POND - DAY

CURTIS' REVERIE

JADE (18), petite; prettiness clashing with tenement roughness and street punk chic. She lies on her back, in the soft grass under the shade of the same willow tree. She looks up at Curtis, smiles.

Curtis - only slightly younger looking - snuggles alongside Jade, smiles back at her.

JADE
I knew it was gonna be a boy.

CURTIS
You knew? Whadda you mean, you "knew"?

JADE
I don't know, I could just tell.

CURTIS
Ah, so you got them "Mommy Senses" already?

JADE
Yeah, you better watch out.

CURTIS
Ah, it's gonna be like that, huh?

Jade chuckles at their banter. As she reaches for Curtis' hand, scars and bruises of old heroin track marks are visible on their arms, all around matching heart tattoos - "CURTIS" etched on her arm, "JADE" etched on his.

A wistful Jade guides Curtis' hand to her tummy.

JADE
It's gonna be different...better.

CURTIS
We're gonna be better.

JADE
We're gonna be parents.

They smile at each other, kiss. Curtis breaks from Jade's lips, touches his forehead to hers.

JADE

Have you thought of a name for him yet?

Curtis considers. OFFSCREEN - a melodic chirping song stands out from the din of urban surroundings. Curtis looks skyward toward its origin.

In a high branch of the willow tree, a common starling chirps and chatters impressively. It's glossy, metallic plumage looks stunning in the sunlight.

Curtis notes the bird, grins furtively, looks down at Jade.

END OF CURTIS' REVERIE

BACK TO:

STARLING'S FLASHBACK

CURTIS (PRE-LAP)

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

INT. CURTIS' APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY

Sparse, contrasting rundown furniture; a sagging bed, chipped and peeling paint on the walls. Bulbous sunlight glares through raggedy curtains.

Younger Starling - indifferent to the squalor - crouches between stacks of boxes inside a closet, stifles a giggle. He peeks through a sliver of opening in the slightly ajar door which allows a view of the bedroom layout.

CURTIS (O.S.)(CONT.)

Ready or not, here I come!

Younger Starling barely staunches his excitement. Curtis' OFFSCREEN FOOTSTEPS reverberate off groaning wood.

CURTIS (O.S.)(CONT.)

Maybe you're... behind the couch?

Younger Starling's shoulders jar up and down as his hand smothers a laugh. He enjoys the game.

CURTIS (O.S.)(CONT.)

Ahhh. Found a new hiding place, did ya?
Not gonna make it easy this time.

OFFSCREEN - a hard knock on the front door. No motion or response from Curtis. Younger Starling's brow furrows.

OFFSCREEN - a forceful bang. The front door is kicked open. Younger Starling is drawn aback.

INTERCUTS - YOUNGER STARLING / POV THROUGH THE DOOR

VOICE #1 (O.S.)

What's a matter, Curtis? Not in the mood for company?

CURTIS (O.S.)

What are you doing here?

VOICE #1 (O.S.)

You didn't think you'd just disappear for awhile and we wouldn't find you, did you?

CURTIS (O.S.)

I don't know what you're talking about.

VOICE #2 (O.S.)

That's the problem with you stupid junkies. You think everyone's just as stupid as you are.

CURTIS (O.S.)

Whatchyou mean "junkie"-

VOICE #1 (O.S.)

Shut your fuckin' mouth!

A tense pause.

VOICE #1 (O.S)(CONT.)

Gonna find you dead in a gutter, needle jammed in your arm like they found that raggedy piece of ass of yours; "Jade", was it? She couldn't stay away either.

CURTIS (O.S)

I told you, I'm not-

VOICE #1 (O.S.)

Not back on the smack? So you're robbing our partners on the streets for what? For fun?

CURTIS (O.S.)

(quavering)

I swear I didn't know, man. I just needed some money to get me outta this shithole I swear to fuckin' God it was a mistake I'm gonna pay it-

VOICE #1(O.S.)

Oh you're gonna pay, Curtis. You're gonna pay.

OFFSCREEN - a scuffle ensues and trails into the bedroom.

Curtis crashes into the door frame, grunts. From behind, a meaty hand grips his collar, slams him to the floor.

Eyes wide, Younger Starling tears up but makes no sound.

Curtis winces, struggles to rise as he pushes off the floor with his forearms. A booted foot digs between his shoulder blades. A nine millimeter barrel presses on the back of his head. Curtis' eyes bug, his body quivers.

VOICE #2(O.S.)
Where's our money, junkie?

Curtis can't tame his breathing. Sweat dribbles down his brow. His eyes dart from side to side, then lock with Younger Starling when he spots him through the door slat. The boy is paralyzed, helpless, horrified.

VOICE #2(O.S.) (CONT.)
Where's the fuckin' money!

Curtis' lips stammer, regretful eyes locked on his son.

CURTIS
(softly)
Starling...

Younger Starling's face shudders.

A deafening blast from the gun, a chunky burst of red from Curtis' head as his body drops to the floor.

Younger Starling blenches. Tears roll down his face.

Voice #2 steps past the threshold, looks down at Curtis' dead body.

Younger Starling locks on the man's face, on his neck tattoo - the same dire wolf, dagger, and DWG seen earlier - this man is Intruder #2.

INTRUDER #2
The fuck he talking about - "starling"?

Voice #1 steps to the door frame. Younger Starling's look shifts to him, to his neck tattoo - the exact same design; dire wolf, dagger, DWG. This is Intruder #1.

INTRUDER #1
Just take whatever shit he's got on him
and see what he mighta hid in here.

Intruder #2 nods, digs through Curtis' pockets. Intruder #1 steps back into the hallway toward the apartment space. Younger Starling stymies his heartbreak, labors to control his breathing in order to survive.

Intruder #2 pulls a wadded dollar bill from Curtis' pants pocket. Nothing more.

INTRUDER #2
Dumbass, broke-dick bastard.

Intruder #2's look falls toward the slat of opening in the closet door. He holds on the space, thinks he sees something, cranes for a more concentrated look. Maybe - just maybe - it's an eye, a few bangs of hair.

INTRUDER #2
(to Intruder #1 offscreen)
Yo...

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
What, man? Whadda ya got?

Intruder #2 steps cautiously toward the door, eyes lasered on the door slat. Younger Starling holds his breath, eyes frozen. Intruder #2 steps closer...into the glow from the bedroom window...closer...

OFFSCREEN - a whiz of sound kicks up from beyond the window, like fluttering and chirping multiplied by thousands. Intruder #2's look whips toward the sound.

LOOKING THROUGH THE BEDROOM WINDOW

and directly across the street toward the city park and glossy pond from earlier. A massive flock of common starlings - a murmuration - swoops, whirls, darts, and dives in perfect unison, as eerie as it is beautiful.

Intruder #2 watches awestruck.

INTRUDER #1 (O.S.)
The hell's goin' on in there?

Intruder #2 steps hypnotically toward the window. A loud thwack against the glass makes him jump. Then another. Common starlings crash against the window.

Suddenly one waywardly diving bird breaks through the glass directly into Intruder #2's face. The force of the blow sprays shards into his eyes and knocks him to the floor.

Intruder #1 flashes into the doorway, surveys the chaos.

INTRUDER #1 (CONT.)
Fuck it, man. We're outta here.

He darts out of the doorway toward the front door. Intruder #2 wipes blood and glass from his face, shifts his look once more toward the closet door slat - sees nothing. He scrambles to his feet, bolts out of the room.

INSIDE THE CLOSET

Younger Starling is curled behind stacks of boxes. He stares straight ahead, a slow burn of anger over his face.

EXT. FOSTER CARE GROUP HOME - DAY

Half-a-dozen KIDS ages 6 to 12 play in front of a tract house with a nicely groomed yard and white picket fence. They ride scooters, toss a ball, play hopscotch.

Younger Starling - now 8 - stands at a distance, wrapped in a gray hoodie, thoughts elsewhere. His focus shifts to--

ACROSS THE STREET

Two GOONS stand at a corner, talk. GOON #1 snaps a lighter under a cigarette dangling from GOON #2's mouth.

Younger Starling notes the familiar dire wolf dagger tattoo on both mens' hands. His look is murderous.

A black sedan pulls up to the Goons. They duck inside.

IN THE YARD OF THE GROUP HOME

The kids continue to play, but now Younger Starling is suspiciously absent.

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

A rail-thin JUNKIE crashes forcefully into a garbage bin abutting the concrete wall of a dingy, abandoned strip mall. Goon #1 smashes his boot into the Junkie's face. The Junkie splats over the concrete, out cold.

Goon #2 snags a money roll and ziploc bag from the Junkie's pocket. The Goons walk toward the mouth of the alley.

From behind, a small hand snatches the Junkie's stashed tek-9 gun from underneath the garbage bin. In the blink of an eye, Goon #1 and #2's foreheads are dotted with bullets and they drop dead.

PARKED AT A CURB NEAR THE STRIP MALL

GOON #3 rockets from the driver's seat of the sedan, raises a stiletto blade in response to the shots. The dire wolf dagger tattoo is visible on his forearm. Goon #3 rushes to the alley, stops when he sees the two dead bodies.

He scans the surroundings, sees nobody.

Goon #3 spins back toward his car, tightens his grip on the blade. Younger Starling pops out from behind the open driver's side car door, gun drawn. He blasts Goon #3 between the eyes. The man drops.

The stiletto blade slides across the concrete sidewalk. A shiny chrome skull can be seen on the handle.

MOMENTS LATER

Younger Starling RISES INTO FRAME brandishing the bloodstained blade. He glares downward, then steps toward the alley.

CLOSE ON GOON #3'S FOREARM

A clump of skin has been sliced away, and a messy patch of blood has formed where his dire wolf tattoo used to be.

IN THE ALLEY

Younger Starling kneels over Goon #2's body, slides his blade back and forth, tosses something onto the concrete.

Views of Goon #1 and Goon #2's hands show their tattoos have been similarly removed.

Younger Starling walks to the mouth of the alley, abruptly pauses. He looks back at the bodies, gears turning. He has been struck with an idea.

IN THE ALLEY

CLOSE ON GOON #1 AND #2'S HANDS

A stick-figure sketch of a common starling is carved into each man's hand opposite that of their former tattoos.

NEAR THE CURB ON THE STREET

CLOSE ON GOON #3'S FOREARM

The common starling is carved opposite his former tattoo.

QUICK SERIES OF SHOTS - STARLING'S PATH OF VENGEANCE

INT / EXT GANG CLUBHOUSE - NIGHT

The bodies of two HOODS slump across a felt poker table - one with a red splotch carved into his right biceps and a starling into his left, the other a splotch carved into his shirtless back and a starling into his nape.

Younger Starling - shrouded in a gray hoodie - wisps over over a backyard fence and disappears into the darkness.

INT. CONCRETE BASEMENT - NIGHT

Two more DEAD HOODS are splayed over a craps game lit by a dangling bulb - one Hood has a red splotch on his right face cheek and starling on his left, the other a splotch above his left breast and starling above his right.

Younger Starling slinks into the shadows of the stairway leading out of the basement.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

TWO MORE HOOD VICTIMS

One laid out near a money counting machine - a red splotch on his exposed calf and starling on the other - the second toppled across cardboard boxes full of money with a red splotch on one wrist and starling on the other.

A view through an open window and past curtains blowing in a light breeze shows Younger Starling riding away in the distance on his bike.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

BACK TO:

11-YEAR-OLD STARLING'S FLASHBACK

INT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE COMPLEX - DAY

Starling - in the corner of the room of a scabrous multi-story structure - sits on fruit crates fashioned into furniture. His stiletto blade whittles a slat of wood from a forklift panel.

THE WHITTLED SKETCH

A striking likeness of the faces of Intruders #1 and #2.

Starling puts the finishing touches on the carvings, a stewing look on his face.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

The same comfy, upper-class residence we know from the opening home robbery. Intruder #1 and Intruder #2 sit in a parked car across the street, #1 behind the wheel. The men eye the home up and down, look at each other, drive off.

A hoodie-shrouded Starling rolls into the empty space on his bike. He glares at the car rolling down the street.

EXT. CITY PARK - DAY

Intruder #1 and Intruder #2 stand in the middle of a bridge that spans a walkway that cuts through the sprawl of grass and trees toward the glossy pond. They eat burgers from fast food bags, drink from plastic throwaway cups.

INTRUDER #1

They leave tomorrow. That's when we hit.
Every bit of shit from every room.

Intruder #2 nods. Intruder #1 slurps the last of his drink, tosses his garbage on the bridge slats, motions for Intruder #2 to follow him off the bridge.

UNDERNEATH THE BRIDGE SPAN

Starling sits on his bike, tucked in the shadows of the arc. He listens, nods. He knows their plan.

EXT. COMFY UPPER-CLASS NEIGHBORHOOD - HOUSE - DAY

An automatic garage door rolls open. A luxury suv is parked inside the immaculately organized space. Three trash cans are stacked neatly against a side wall.

INSIDE THE GARAGE

A VOICE yells from the suv - A TEEN BOY.

TEEN BOY (O.S.)
Mom! We're gonna be late!

A WOMAN (30s), in high-end brand clothing, scuttles through a door leading from the house into the garage, tote bags and luggage looped around either arm.

WOMAN
I'm coming, I'm coming. I'm ready, I'm-
uh-oh, my phone, my phone.

She pivots back toward the door and inside the house.

TEEN BOY (O.S.)
Mom!

WOMAN (O.S.)
I know. I'll just be another second.

Moments later she returns - sweeps past the closing door, forgets to lock it. She jumps into the car, backs past the trash cans. The garage door rolls closed. Starling pops up from behind the trash cans, creeps toward the house.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Looking through the colorful flower bed toward the custom ornamental wrought iron front door of the same house. Two pairs of black leather boots step calculatngly INTO FRAME. Intruder #1 and Intruder #2 survey their target.

PRE-LAP - the break-in sounds; crowbar, creaking wood, scratching metal, jolting lock--

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Starling places the square-shaped velvet box and greeting card neatly on the bed cover. He whips toward the OFFSCREEN break-in noises.

UNDER THE BED

Starling dips beneath the edge of the frame and bedspread, his dour glare replaced by wide eyes, chin on the knuckles of his fingers interlocked in front of him. He listens.

PRE-LAP - two stifled thunks from gunshots. Then a third.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Starling stands over Intruder #1's body, his blood-drenched stiletto blade in one hand and red patch of human skin in the other. His look shifts toward the ceiling, upstairs toward where Intruder #2 would be.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. CITY PARK - POND - DAY

Starling stands at the bank of the water, looks across the rippling sheen. After a pensive moment, he pulls the stiletto blade from his hoodie pocket, launches it into the eddies. A splash surges from the middle of the pond.

Starling kneels, gently cleanses his hands in the water.

EXT. CITY PARK - DAY

Starling stands for a moment of reflection at the corkscrew willow tree. Thoughts of his mother, father, his life and how it has panned out; not what he wanted, but undoubtedly what he felt he had to do.

A look of vindication on his face, a gleam of pride in his eyes, a feeling of relief knowing he is done. He looks up at the span of leaves and branches, as twisted and varied as his life path from this point forward.

OFFSCREEN - soft conversation catches Starling's attention.

Two hard-looking HOODLUMS - shaved heads and leather jackets, serious glares - walk side-by-side across a verdant knoll as they share a blunt and talk business.

Starling surveys the Hoodlums as they pause under the golden afternoon glow. Hoodlum #1 offers the blunt to #2.

HOODLUM #1 turns his body in such a way that Starling can now see the opposite side of his head.

The dire wolf dagger tattoo covers the entire area of this side of Hoodlum #1's bald dome.

The man begins walking away again. As Hoodlum #2 follows, Starling gets a view of the back of this man's hairless head, and the dire wolf tattoo that adorns it.

The hoodlums - unaware of Starling's presence - continue to walk away and talk while they trade puffs from the blunt.

Starling's glare drifts back toward the willow tree. He stares forward - distant, brooding.

FADE TO BLACK