

**STEPPING STONES**

INT. LECTURE HALL - DAY.

A modern, tiered, lecture hall of a successful film school bustles with creative STUDENTS in their early twenties.

Film equipment surrounds a group of four on the back row.

RORY, 21, protective, well built, cameraman, flirts with OLIVIA, 24, petite, fragile, producer.

BLAKE, 23, egotistical, ambitious, director, chats with JOSH, 22, funny, outspoken, the sound guy.

JOSH

You hear about the dyslexic devil  
worshipper? She sold her soul to Santa.

GRACE, 25, independent, loner, sits on the front row. She wears a pagan necklace and flicks open a notebook.

MR. APPLEBY, 60s, pioneer, maverick, lecturer, strides into the hall, surveys his audience and leans against a table.

MR. APPLEBY

When I was your age, I knew a girl;  
Marzia. I wasn't ready for her. I was a  
gibbering, inexperienced virgin. Just  
like you, the Jew at the back.

Mr. Appleby points at Josh. Other students snigger.

MR. APPLEBY (CONT.)

May think you mask it well, son, but I  
can smell your fear down here. I  
must've been the same. Caught Marzia's  
attention. She was a foreign student,  
the exotic type. We fucked like  
rabbits, every way and everywhere you  
can imagine. I see you cringing; "This  
old man's way past his sell-by-date.  
Why's he making us wanna vomit?". I'll  
tell you why. Great film is like the  
most amazing sex. Once you've  
experienced it, you'll spend your whole  
life chasing it and probably never find  
it again. So make mind-blowing films  
and screw like chipmunks while you  
still can. It's no fun getting old.

Mr. Appleby waves 'A code of conduct by Arthur Appleby'.

MR. APPLEBY (CONT.)

Make this your ally. Break free from your student shells and flourish into the filmmakers I know you can become. And remember: The best things in life are free. Unless you can pay for them, then they're even better. Now go.

The students rise and grab their equipment.

Mr. Appleby motions at Blake's group to come down to him.

BLAKE

He just told us to go.

JOSH

The guru wants to share sex tips.

OLIVIA

You'll see what I ate for breakfast.

RORY

What right has he got to lecture us on morals with his track record?

BLAKE

What you getting at?

Mr. Appleby chats with Grace. Other students leave the hall.

RORY

His films he screened from the 70s. He left one out. Where he mingles with heroin addicts. One was raising a baby.

The group descend the stairwell.

RORY (CONT.)

When the film was released, everyone found out about her. She couldn't cope with the shame. Killed herself.

They approach Mr. Appleby.

MR. APPLEBY

Blake and co., raring to go?

BLAKE

Chomping at the bit. What's the holdup?

MR. APPLEBY

Take it you've all met Grace.

BLAKE

When she bothers to show up.

GRACE

I am here you know.

BLAKE

Makes a change.

MR. APPLEBY

One day, Grace will be in my shoes giving lectures of her own. If she plays her cards right.

JOSH

She can teach me about sex any day.

BLAKE

What's she got to do with us?

MR. APPLEBY

She's your newest member.

Josh sticks his thumb up at Grace.

BLAKE

What? Our group's full. Been preparing this film for 3 months.

MR. APPLEBY

You need an editor.

BLAKE

I can edit.

MR. APPLEBY

You're directing.

BLAKE

I ain't letting a slacker waltz into my movie and start calling all the shots.

MR. APPLEBY

If I hear of any trouble, you won't  
have a film to control, Blake.

Mr. Appleby heads for the door.

BLAKE

Did you control all your films?

Mr. Appleby halts and glares at Blake.

RORY

He means nothing by that, sir.

Mr. Appleby leaves the room.

RORY (CONT.)

Tryin' to get us kicked out?

Mr. Appleby storms back into the room.

MR. APPLEBY

You know what, Blake? I'm sick of your  
kind. Come here with your money and  
think you know film; you're stuck  
playing in the sandbox, kid. You've got  
one last shot, show me you're not all  
talk, or you won't have a degree to  
walk out with.

Mr. Appleby leaves.

JOSH

Ears like a shithouse rat.

RORY

I warned ya.

Josh extends a hand to Grace. Olivia sits by her side.

JOSH

Happy to have you on board, Grace. No  
turning back now. You're on the crazy  
train and in for the long haul.

Blake kicks a waste bin over. Litter flies everywhere.

OLIVIA

Don't worry about him.

An empty can rolls across the floor.

EXT. HIGHWAY - AFTERNOON.

An empty can rolls onto the highway and crushes beneath the wheel of a speeding van.

Blake's shabby van hurtles along a dusty stretch of highway, through small-town America. Travel bags cling to the roof.

INT. VAN - AFTERNOON.

Rory drives with Olivia by his side. Blake, Josh and Grace chill in the back.

BLAKE

Didn't know you were Jewish, Josh.

GRACE

Hint's in the name, perhaps?

JOSH

Know why Jewish men get circumcised?  
'Cos Jewish women won't touch anything  
without 20 percent off.

A radio broadcast announces the disappearance of a local girl and provides a brief description--

Grace leans forward to turn the radio off mid-message.

JOSH (CONT.)

Talk about cutting things short.

GRACE

That kinda thing creeps me out.

RORY

Was keeping me awake.

BLAKE

Entertain us then, Grace.

JOSH

You been screwin' Appleby?

Grace buries herself into a psychic magazine.

BLAKE

Why don't you read my mind?

GRACE

You make it obvious enough.

BLAKE

Take a wild stab in the dark.

GRACE

You're wondering how I haven't succumbed to your charm and why your hairstyle hasn't worked magic on me.

JOSH

Ooh! The kitten has claws.

Olivia turns around and high fives Grace.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DUSK.

The van creeps along a never-ending highway as the sun fades and drains light from the landscape.

They pass a road sign for an upcoming gas station and diner.

INT. VAN - DUSK.

Rory wipes his tired face as the relentless journey descends into darkness. The tarmac seems to disappear before him.

Grace claps her magazine shut. Josh wakes from a nap.

GRACE

Could really use a restroom.

BLAKE

Must reach the motel before dark.

OLIVIA

Quick break won't hurt.

BLAKE

Can break when we get there.

JOSH

Come on, dude, I'm starving.

A sign indicates the rest stop is next exit.

BLAKE

Rory, keep driving, get us there.

Rory swings the van off the highway last minute.

BLAKE (CONT.)

What the--

The van bounces along a dirt track.

Rory confronts Blake.

RORY

Sick of you whining like a bitch, I'm pulling ove--

The van ploughs into something. Rory hits the brakes.

BLAKE

See what I mean?

Rory warns Blake with a glare and gets out of the vehicle.

EXT. DIRT TRACK - DUSK.

A dying coyote writhes in agony in front of the van.

Rory kneels to inspect the animal in distress.

The coyote eyes Rory in pain and is unable to move away.

Blake clambers to the front seat and shouts from inside.

BLAKE

Got no time for a fuckin' funeral.

RORY

Will be your funeral in a minute.

INT. VAN - DUSK.

Grace tries to see the animal from inside the van.

GRACE

That's not a coyote is it?

JOSH

Yeah, why?

GRACE

What direction did it come from?

BLAKE

The front. That's why it's under the damn truck.

GRACE

I read the Navajo believe it's bad luck when a coyote crosses your path from the East. Warns of terrible events heading your way, that you should turn back. They believe the coyote's an evil spirit; a trickster.

BLAKE

Well, let me get my compass out. Jesus.

OLIVIA

What happens if you kill it?

GRACE

Didn't read that far.

EXT. SIDE ROAD - DUSK.

Rory, upset, stands over the coyote and breaks its neck. Rory rests the animal's head down and strokes its fur.

RORY

Sorry, buddy.

Rory drags the carcass off the road.

INT. VAN - DUSK.

Blake, impatient, climbs into the back and snaps at Grace.

BLAKE

See what happens when you fuck with my plan? Now there's blood on your hands.

Rory hops in. Grace hurries out and slams the door.

RORY

Open your mouth again, Blake, I'll  
knock your teeth out.

Olivia rests a hand on Rory's lap and calms him.

Rory shifts the van into gear and slowly follows Grace.

Grace runs along the dust track towards the rest stop as the headlights illuminate her.

EXT. REST STOP - DUSK.

A FILTHY TRUCKER, 50s, stares at Grace like she's a piece of meat as she approaches.

Grace disappears into the gas station.

Rory pulls the van into the diner car park next door.

Olivia views the trucker from the van's wing mirror.

INT. GAS STATION RESTROOM - DUSK.

Grace bursts into the grubby restroom and stares into the mirror to compose herself.

She enters a cubicle, closes the door, lowers the toilet lid, sits, sobs into tissues and blows her nose.

Olivia enters and views her dingy surroundings with disdain.

OLIVIA

Grace, hunny, you there?

Olivia waits outside the occupied cubicle. No answer.

OLIVIA (CONT.)

Come on, sweetheart, don't cry.

Olivia enters a cubicle and tries not to touch anything.

GRACE

Think I wanted any of this? Forced into  
a group that hates me.

Olivia uses tissue to close the lid and sits on its edge.

OLIVIA

It's not you, Grace. Blake's a dick.  
Cares about himself and his film,  
that's all.

Olivia views some of the graffiti in the cubicle.

GRACE

Wasn't my fault.

OLIVIA

It wasn't Rory's. Was an accident. Come  
on out, hun.

Grace wipes her eyes and hears Olivia squeal.

Olivia leaps off the toilet seat in horror.

Olivia backs out of the cubicle and Grace joins her.

GRACE

You ok?

OLIVIA

Oh my God.

Olivia points to the floor next to the toilet she sat on.

A few bloody teeth scatter the dirty floor.

OLIVIA (CONT.)

Gross, goddamn rednecks.

Olivia washes her hands.

OLIVIA (CONT.)

Let's go before we catch something.

INT. DINER - DUSK.

Rory, Blake and Josh sit at a table in the diner.

JOSH

Know how to circumcise a hillbilly?  
Kick his sister in the jaw.

BLAKE

What's the obsession with circumcision?

JOSH

When someone goes near your tackle with a pair of shears, you'll understand.

BLAKE

Way to kill an appetite.

A WAITRESS delivers five plates of pie and a can of root beer to the group.

Blake cracks open the can and glugs it down.

Rory spots a poster on a nearby wall with a photo of a young woman. "Have you seen our missing waitress Millie Simmons?".

RORY

Thanks. Did you know her?

WAITRESS

Sorry, I'm new here.

The waitress leaves.

JOSH

She probably took her job.

Rory searches her name on Facebook on his phone. She poses in a profile picture with her baby. Rory looks concerned.

Blake motions to the pie at Grace's vacant seat.

BLAKE

Think it'll work?

JOSH

Oldest trick in the book.

Olivia and Grace rejoin the group at the table.

Blake stands and pulls a chair out for Grace.

BLAKE

Grace, I've been an asshole.

JOSH

It's not the first time. Or the last.

Grace sits. Olivia winks at her.

Blake hits Josh playfully.

BLAKE (CONT.)

I get carried away. Bought you pie.

JOSH

Just to warn you, he ain't paid yet.

GRACE

It'll take more than humble pie.

BLAKE

Well, it's a start.

JOSH

Sorry you had to find out about Rory's driving.

Rory sternly shakes his head at Josh. Josh gets the message.

BLAKE

Careful, Josh, he'll break your neck.

RORY

Too soon, lads.

The group tuck into their pie and unwind over dessert.

Blake finishes the last of his drink and crushes the can. He inspects the crumpled metal.

EXT. REST STOP - EVENING.

Blake examines the dent on his parked van and sighs at Rory.

BLAKE

You owe me.

RORY

You just apologised to Grace for being a dick.

BLAKE

Doesn't mean I'll stop being one to you

EXT. HIGHWAY - EVENING.

The van rejoins the highway.

INT. VAN - EVENING.

Rory prepares himself for the final stretch of the journey.

Olivia pulls out Mr. Appleby's 'Code of Conduct' booklet.

JOSH

Reckon the Karma Sutra's in there?

BLAKE

Y'know, people who always talk about sex never get any.

JOSH

Think I'm a virgin 'cos I didn't forward those chain emails in 2008.

Josh snatches the manual and mimics their maverick lecturer.

JOSH (CONT.)

Blake, listen up. Respect yourselves, respect your subjects and above all respect a woman's weak bladder!

Grace snatches the booklet and hits Josh playfully with it.

JOSH (CONT.)

In times of need, just feed her pie.

BLAKE

That doesn't work.

OLIVIA

You watch that Appleby film then?

RORY

Yeah, online.

BLAKE

What's it like?

RORY

Pretty good.

OLIVIA

Does the mother die in it?

RORY

Nah, that was after.

JOSH

Would freak me the hell out.

OLIVIA

Not sure I could live with myself.

GRACE

What about Werner Herzog's documentary?

BLAKE

'Grizzly Man'?

GRACE

A man gets eaten by bears in that one.

OLIVIA

Really?

BLAKE

You don't see it.

GRACE

You hear it.

BLAKE

Nah, you don't. Herzog does.

GRACE

Still the same. His face said enough.

JOSH

He's used to that sort of thing though.

RORY

Herzog once got shot in the stomach by some madman. Just played it cool while the interviewer shat himself.

Copyright 2015 Tadhg Culley -- All Rights Reserved