

FER-DE-LANCE

BLACK

FADE IN:

INT. JOE'S DINER, PHILADELPHIA - LATE MORNING

A handful of diners are spread around, indifferently eating their food and drinking their coffee. JUDI MICHAELS, a waitress, is behind the counter. She's in her early 40's, slender, with youthful dimples and carrying a week's worth of fatigue in the bags under her eyes. She eats a salad, keeping an eye on the customers in case anyone needs service.

She hears the door open as ROBERT BIAS enters the diner and noticeably perks up. She flashes a big, toothy grin which supersedes that of standard friendly service. Robert is in his late 40's, clean cut with soft eyes outlined with slight cracks from a few hard years. He wears a striped button-up shirt, gray windbreaker and jeans.

JUDI
Hey, Robert.

Judi wipes her mouth with a napkin.

JUDI (CONT'D)
Just have a seat anywhere. I'll be right with you.

Robert looks over the other diners before taking a seat in a booth near the front corner. Judi appears shortly thereafter with a menu and a cup of coffee. Robert smiles as she approaches and places both items before him neatly.

ROBERT
What's special today?

JUDI
Oh nothing much so far, other than the grilled salmon with mixed vegetables and your choice of potato and either soup or salad.

ROBERT
That sounds special enough.

JUDI
And your potato? Mashed, baked, wedges or fries? Sorry, nothing too special.

She maintains a sly grin.

ROBERT
Mashed is good.

JUDI
Mashed *is* good. Soup or Salad?

ROBERT
So many decisions.

JUDI
These are only the small ones.

ROBERT
I'll take the salad.

JUDI
And what kind of dressing?

Robert looks up at her with a exaggeratedly pathetic stare that makes her chuckle.

ROBERT
Italian.

JUDI
And would that Northern Italian,
Neapolitan or Sicili-

Robert looks irritated.

ROBERT
You can be so mean.

JUDI
(laughing)
I'll be right back with your order.

Robert watches as Judi walks behind the counter. He removes his Blackberry from his pocket. He looks again at the other diners, noting where their attentions are.

Judi leans her head into the kitchen window. RONNY, a heavy-set cook, and TINA, a career waitress, are taking a few minutes to relax before the lunch rush. Tina reads a magazine while Ronny plays a noisy game on his phone.

JUDI (CONT'D)
One special, mashed and salad.

Ronny grunts and puts his phone away.

TINA
(not looking at Judi)
Special, eh?

JUDI
That's his order.

TINA
You'd think the guy would have the menu memorized by now. What's he in here three times, four times a week? Poor guy's gonna get a heart attack from all this grease.

Ronny grunts, gives a dismissive wave and continues cooking.

Judi looks back at Robert before speaking, quietly.

JUDI
It's nice. Between here and the hotel I'm exhausted by the time I get home. And I can never figure out his schedule except for the nights he tutors Andy.

TINA
Yeah, free Spanish tutoring.
(to Ronny)
Free tutoring for her kid, could this guy be any more obvious?

Ronny mutters something incomprehensible.

TINA (CONT'D)
If he had any kinda guts he'da made his move by now.

Judi looks at Robert again, focused on his Blackberry.

JUDI
He went to West Point, you know. I think that's guts enough. Fluent in Spanish too. He's been invaluable for Andy's schoolwork.

TINA
Maybe he has some kinda trauma. A lotta them boys are coming back from Iraq with that PTSD thing like something's wrong with their brains.
(to Ronny)
What's that thing?

Ronny shrugs.

JUDI
PTSD, post-traumatic stress
disorder. It's what they used to
call shell shock.

TINA
Like they wake up thinking they're
still over there or something. Guys
screaming in their sleep and stuff.

JUDI
I'm pretty sure he doesn't have
PTSD, just a demanding job.

TINA
Tell ya what, why don't I take care
of these other tables while he's
around today? Spend enough time
with him and maybe he'll find his
old guts.

JUDI
(nervous)
No, no, it's fine. Take your break.

TINA
Maybe with a little extra time
he'll leave us a little extra tip.

Ronny places the food at the window right next to Judi and
hits the bell on the counter. He resumes the phone game.

JUDI
Shit. I forgot to bring his salad.

TINA
Well there goes that extra tip.
Maybe undoing the top button will
help him forget.

Judi looks at her with irritation.

TINA (CONT'D)
Go on, I got it.

JUDI
All right but let me know if things
get busy.

Judi takes the food and walks away from the window.

Ronny continues playing his game.

RONNY
 (chuckling)
 PSTD.

Robert sees Judi approach with both entree and salad. He calmly puts his Blackberry away.

ROBERT
 You look a bit overburdened.

JUDI
 Just a little bit.

She places the lunch and salad on the table.

JUDI (CONT'D)
 I'm very sorry for not bringing the salad out earlier. You must be starving.

ROBERT
 It's fine, I'll just stuff it all in my mouth at the same time.

Judi laughs politely.

JUDI
 Guess I'm not much of a waitress.

ROBERT
 That's because you're a social worker.

JUDI
 Not now.

Robert looks as though he'd like to say something but can't with his mouth full.

JUDI (CONT'D)
 So... how are you today?

Robert takes a moment to finish chewing.

ROBERT
 I'm fine. Ran a few errands earlier and have some work to do tonight. Not much else.

JUDI
 That's too bad. I'm actually off tonight and was hoping you'd be free for dinner or something.

(MORE)

JUDI (CONT'D)

To thank you for all you've done
for Andy. He really appreciates it.

ROBERT

He's a great kid.

JUDI

Yeah. Wish I had more time to spend
with him, like I did before working
here. He'll be gone soon.

ROBERT

He understands everything you do
for him. He tells me all the time
about how great of a mom you are.

Judi looks down at Robert in disbelief.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Well, maybe not all the time, but
he makes it known whether he says
it or not.

JUDI

That's sweet. I just-

Robert motions for her to sit. She looks back at Tina talking
with one of the few customers. She sits.

JUDI (CONT'D)

It's a lot harder now, having to
work two jobs to earn a fraction of
what I made before. Economy goes
down and the first thing cut is
always social services, right when
people most need help. It's like
money can't be spared to help
people.

Robert doesn't eat but watches her empathetically.

JUDI (CONT'D)

Sorry, I (beat) anyway, thanks for
being such a great tutor and really
looking out for Andy the past year.
I wish I could pay you back for all
the time you've spent-

Robert waves the thought away.

ROBERT

It's not your fault. With Andy,
it's because of everything you've
done that he is such a great kid.

(MORE)

ROBERT (CONT'D)

That other stuff, economy, cuts, layoffs, all of that, you have no control over those things. The things you do have control over, like Andy, you've done a great job with. You should give yourself credit for that.

JUDI

Thanks. I'll try to remember that. Probably won't but I'll try.

They fall silent. Judi looks out the window while Robert eats a little more of his meal. Judi waits for him to swallow.

JUDI (CONT'D)

Do you know if Andy's heard back from Penn yet?

ROBERT

Not yet. You heard about the others right? Clarion, Penn State and...

JUDI

Pittsburgh. Yeah, he showed me the letters. I just hope he doesn't feel too disappointed if Penn sends a rejection.

ROBERT

He's already got into some schools even if they don't want him.

JUDI

(sarcastically)
That's reassuring.

ROBERT

Wrong choice of words. I mean to say that no matter what happens you know Andy will get a great education. You've set him up nicely for that.

JUDI

Much better choice of words.

Robert nods knowingly.

JUDI (CONT'D)

Will you be around this weekend?

ROBERT

I should be unless something comes up at work.

JUDI

Isn't it irritating to have clients calling you in at all hours?

ROBERT

A little bit, but I get to choose my own assignments.

JUDI

I guess that's the 'independent' in 'independent contractor,' right?

ROBERT

I suppose. Of course, once I take an assignment there's no turning back, no matter how much the job might suck.

JUDI

Better than having two jobs with no choice in either. But it's what we have to do.

ROBERT

It is.

Robert looks around the diner.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Wait, should you be doing something other than sitting here waiting on me like a king?

JUDI

No, it's fine, your highness. Truth is that Tina over there...

Judi looks for and points at Tina. Tina responds by giving Judi the finger.

JUDI (CONT'D)

Said she'd cover the rest of my tables until the lunch crowd comes in so I can concentrate on getting a bigger tip from you.

ROBERT

I'd love to give you a big tip.

JUDI

Good.

ROBERT

But you forgot to bring out the salad first.

Judi looks exaggeratedly annoyed.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

You're not much of a waitress.

Judi continues to look amusingly annoyed.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

I'll make sure Tina is satisfied with the tip.

JUDI

Hey, I'm the one giving you all this extra attention.

ROBERT

But it was Tina's idea.

JUDI

(playful)

Well, it's clear that this conversation is benefitting Tina more than me.

Judi stands. Robert looks apologetic.

JUDI (CONT'D)

I should get ready for the lunch crowd anyway.

Judi starts walking away.

ROBERT

All right, tell Tina I said thanks for the extra attention.

Judi smiles slightly as she turns and walks back to the counter. Robert watches as she goes. He also sees Tina in the distance watching Judi as well.

EXT. POST OFFICE - AFTERNOON

Robert drives his personal car, a blue 1998 Toyota Tercel to the post office. He walks directly to pick up mail from his PO Box, enters the car again and leaves.

EXT. ROBERT'S BUSINESS HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Robert walks up to the front door of a small, one bed/one bath house in the suburbs. The house has an attached garage with the door lowered. Window shades are pulled down and there are no distinguishing features. Robert tucks his mail and a large manila envelope under his arm and uses three keys to enter: two dead bolts, and the door.

Robert enters and locks behind him. He places the envelope on a table near the door with three piles: junk mail, bank statements, other, almost as though sorted by a machine. The house is nearly bare and exceptionally tidy. He sorts the mail and separates one letter with a return address for Ares Defense, Inc. Once the mail is sorted and neatly stacked, he picks up the manila envelope and opens the letter.

INSERT - LETTER

Portions of the letter read "it was a pleasure to speak with you," "we are truly impressed by your credentials," "your criminal history," "do not feel you are the right candidate for this position," "thank you for your service."

Robert takes a moment before very calmly placing the letter in the trash. Among the items in the house is an empty aquarium with a clear cover.

He takes the envelope to a small, circular table in the living room near the kitchen. The table has only two chairs, facing each other on opposite sides. He puts the envelope down, removes the Blackberry from one pocket, places it at the edge of the table, and removes an iPhone with a Bluetooth attachment from a different pocket, puts on the headset and opens his iPhone contact list to KIM GABANY. He sits. He opens the envelope while speaking on the phone.

KIM

Hello.

ROBERT

(sighing)

Hi, Kim.

Robert begins sorting the content of the envelope on the table. The contents remain unseen.

KIM

Are you okay?

ROBERT

Just a minor annoyance. Yourself?

KIM
I'm okay. It's nice outside.
Nothing to complain about.

ROBERT
Did you get my check?

KIM
Yes. It's definitely enough to
cover Ben's tuition.

Robert places each envelope page in a careful grid.

ROBERT
How is he?

KIM
The semester's been a bit rough but
he's hanging in there.

ROBERT
Are classes getting harder or is
the partying?

KIM
A bit of both I imagine.

ROBERT
The pleasures of college. West
Point solved the partying problem
by loading up on morning drills.
The two don't mix well.

KIM
Not so fond memories?

Robert studies one paper very closely before placing it on
the table.

ROBERT
It served its purpose.

KIM
No college can be that good if all
you can say is that it served its
purpose.

ROBERT
Everything does.

KIM
(sighing)
So what's going on, Bobby?

ROBERT

Just wanted to talk. Judi spent a little extra time with me at the diner today. Said she was angling for a better tip.

KIM

Really? What did you talk about?

ROBERT

Andy mostly.

KIM

You've been spending a lot of time with him.

ROBERT

He's got finals coming up soon.

Robert finishes removing papers.

KIM

You guys talk about anything else?

ROBERT

Not really. She wanted to have a thank you dinner, but the timing didn't work.

KIM

That's unfortunate.

ROBERT

Yeah.

He starts to meticulously rearrange the papers.

KIM

Well, she thought enough to take time away from work, even about having you over for dinner. That means something. You can't beat yourself up for bad timing.

Robert stops arranging the papers.

ROBERT

I guess not.

KIM

Look Bobby, it's been years since the divorce, move on.

ROBERT
I'm trying to.

KIM
Are you?

Robert stares at the papers.

KIM (CONT'D)
I still know you enough to know
that when you want something, you
make an effort for it. You always
did.

ROBERT
That was a long time ago.

KIM
Well, it's either that or do
nothing. I think we both know how
that ends.

Robert says nothing.

KIM (CONT'D)
Whatever moving on means, if it's
Judi or something else, it's time.
You paid your debt to me, to
society, to yourself.

Robert looks uncomfortable hearing this while looking at the
papers arranged in front of him.

KIM (CONT'D)
There's nothing left to pay for.

ROBERT
Yeah. (beat) I have to get ready to
meet a client. Thanks for talking.

KIM
Okay. You'll be in my prayers.

ROBERT
Thanks for that too. Bye.

KIM
Goodbye.

Kim hangs up. Robert removes the Bluetooth and places it on
the table in front of him. He leaves for the bedroom.

Each page is placed on the table neatly. Notes on one side, a series of photographs of a man in his mid-50's with gray hair and jowls, a black Lincoln town car, a house, a couple of store fronts on the other.

Roberts walks back to the table with a metal footlocker. He places it on the table. He makes a call on the Blackberry.

ROBERT
Is the car ready?

Inside the footlocker is a Glock 9mm, a silencer, a pair of black gloves and a leather wallet.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
I'll be there in ten minutes.

INT. CAFE, PHILADELPHIA - NIGHT

Robert sits in the outdoor seating area of a small restaurant, drinking a coffee. He has his Bluetooth earpiece in and his iPhone out. He glances at a black Buick parked across the street before making a call to Judi.

JUDI
Hello.

ROBERT
Hi.

JUDI
Oh hey, Robert. How are you?

ROBERT
I'm doing okay, just preparing for a long night.

JUDI
That sucks.

ROBERT
The way it is. How're you?

JUDI
I'm great, it's nice being home early enough to make dinner for Andy. I really missed doing that.

ROBERT
What was on the menu?

JUDI
Chicken lasagna. Old family recipe.

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