

STATIC

FADE IN:

EXT. TELEVISION STATIC - NIGHT

Pure white noise. Graininess cascading across the screen. The sound builds beneath it - not music, not wind - something closer to breath. Someone speaking in a whisper. We can't make out the words. It gets louder.

In the static, a face begins to emerge. Distorted. Flickering. A man's face - older, unresolved, never quite clear. More the frame of the head than details. It moves toward us and retreats, toward us and retreats. The whisper climbs toward something unbearable. Louder and louder. Still unable to make out the words.

DANIEL
(gasping)
- no -

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - 3:14 AM

Daniel Hale (42) jolts awake and sits upright in bed. Chest heaving. Filled with terror. Fighting to relax. The room is dark except for a faint light. The title card - **STATIC**.

Sound first. The static turns to ocean waves. Waves before picture. Then -

EXT. OCEAN - JERSEY SHORE - DAY

Daniel's face. Just his face, water to his chin and the Atlantic Ocean moving around him. He's not swimming. Not struggling. Just out there treading yet still able to stand and holding himself in place against the pull.

His face is blank. It's unclear what could be on his mind. His eyes are on the horizon. The line where the water meets the sky. Something about it holds him. He stares at it the way a man stares at an exit sign.

Behind him, maybe 50 yards, the shore. The sound of the beach - voices, gulls, a radio, children playing and laughing. The whole ordinary noise of a summer beach weekend. None of it reaches him or finds its way in. He is somewhere else.

He continues to tread water.

CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH - JERSEY SHORE - CONTINUOUS

Sarah stands at the water's edge. Hand shading her eyes. Scanning.

The water is full of people. Kids jumping waves. A man on a boogie board. Couples waist-deep kissing and laughing.

She can't find him.

Her smile fades. One second. Two.

She takes a half-step forward. The water touches her feet.

Then - she finds him. Out further than she expected. Just his head above the surface, facing away.

Relief moves through her face. She cups her hand around her mouth.

SARAH

Hey! You okay out there?

Daniel turns. Finds her on the shore. Raises one hand above the water as if to say "Yeah, yeah."

He's fine. He holds her gaze for a moment - she smiles, waves, full and warm and real - and then he turns back.

Faces the horizon again. Treads.

Opening Credits Begin

The credits play over fragments of the vacation - handheld, sun-bleached, the way home movies look when you're trying to hold onto lasting memories. A week at the shore. An ordinary family being ordinary together.

Over these images and short reels, Daniel and Sarah's voices. Not one conversation - multiple - the same conversation, returned to over years, in different rooms, at different times. Stitched together into something that sounds almost like a single breath.

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT./INT. - JERSEY SHORE - VARIOUS - DAY

Eli burying Daniel's feet in the sand. Daniel watching him with something that looks like a mix of love and annoyance.

A card game at a picnic table. Sarah winning. Laughing. Eli demanding a rematch.

Daniel at the grill, spatula in hand, staring at a video on his phone he's watched 100 times, but never really watched deeply. He's out of it until Sarah touches his arm and he comes back. The food starting to burn.

The three of them in line for ice cream. Eli deliberating with the gravity of a Supreme Court justice. Daniel irritated by how long it's taking and the line barely moving. Sarah's hand finding Daniel's. His fingers close around hers as he looks at her with a half-smile. He wants to relax but can't. Sarah smiles more fully, then makes a face.

Eli asleep in the back seat, sunburned, mouth open, one shoe off, toys everywhere.

Daniel driving. Sarah watching the window. The particular quiet of people who have run out of conversation for the day - not badly, just fully. Neither minds the silence.

DANIEL (V.O.)

I don't know how to explain it. It's not that anything's wrong.

SARAH (V.O.)

Then what is it?

He doesn't answer.

Daniel and Eli at the edge of the surf, father crouching to son's level, pointing at something in the water. Eli's face lights up. Daniel's almost does.

Sarah photographing Eli on a jetty. She turns the camera on Daniel without warning. He raises his hand half-blocking his face. She lowers the camera. Studies him in a way the camera can't.

The three of them walking the boardwalk at dusk, Eli between them, holding both their hands, swinging. Sarah looks across at Daniel over Eli's head. She is so full of this. All of it. The whole thing. Daniel looks straight ahead.

DANIEL (V.O.)

You know what I keep thinking about? That there's a version of my life that went differently. And I keep ruminating on it. I wonder and know I can't change it. But it consumes me. And now I feel lost.

SARAH (V.O.)

You're here, Daniel. This is your life.

DANIEL (V.O.)

I know.

SARAH (V.O.)

Eli is here. I'm here. We love you
more than anything.

DANIEL (V.O.)

I know that.

The longest pause.

CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH HOUSE PORCH - EVENING

The vacation's last night. The sky going pink and grey behind them.

Sarah and Daniel on the porch steps. Eli's voice inside - the television, a cartoon, something upbeat. The smell of sunscreen and salt and whatever was on the grill.

Sarah turns to look at Daniel. Really look at him. She reaches up and touches his face with both hands the way you touch something you're afraid of losing. Afraid you may have already lost it.

SARAH

I love you. You know that? I love
our life. I love this.

She means all of it. The porch. The boy inside. The man in front of her. She means it without reservation or performance. It is simply the truest thing she knows.

Daniel looks at her.

He covers her hands with his.

He almost smiles. The saddest almost-smile. The kind that says I know. I know you do. I know I should be happy. But I'm in so much pain.

He doesn't say any of it.

He nods.

She leans her head against his shoulder. Looks out at the last of the light.

He looks to the distance. To nothing.

OPENING CREDITS END

CUT TO:

EXT./INT. CAR - MOVING - DAY

The drive home. The car packed. The shore receding in the rearview mirror.

Eli asleep in the back. Sarah watching the window. Daniel driving.

The highway opening up ahead of them. Flat and long. Realizing it's back to reality.

CUT TO:

INT. HALE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The front door opens.

Daniel carries a bag in from the car. Sets it down. Stands in the entryway of his own home.

The house is exactly as they left it. Nothing has changed.

He stands there.

He feels a physical weight that settles over him. The walls. The familiar smell. The life waiting patiently for him to return to it as if to say you tried to get away, but not so fast.

He doesn't move.

Sarah passes behind him with a bag, touches his back lightly as she goes.

Eli pushes past his legs with something he found in the car, already running toward his room.

ELI
Dad look -

CUT TO:

FLASH - STATIC. ONE FRAME.

CUT TO:

INT. DANIEL'S CHILDHOOD HOME

A different house. A different doorway. A man - ROBERT HALE - dropping bags on the floor with force. His face is wrong. Something has been building in him for the entire drive home. He sees a boy playing with his toys. The boy hasn't been home for two weeks. Robert is overcome with anger and turns around.

ROBERT

*I hate this house. I hate this
goddamn house.*

He moves through the room. The air changes. The boy is Young Daniel - eight years old. He goes still in panic the way children go still when trying to take up no space at all to make themselves invisible.

Robert goes to the garage. The door slams. Then, through the wall - the sound of things being thrown. Something metal. Garbage cans being punched. Something that shatters.

Young Daniel standing and moving toward the garage door. Waiting for it to stop. Unsure what to do.

CUT TO:

INT. HALE HOUSE

Daniel is standing in front of the garage door. He pauses for a moment and returns to the car. He turns to look at the house. He is already somewhere else.

CUT TO:

INT. DANIEL'S HOME OFFICE - DAY

A laptop open on a desk. The room behind Daniel is filled with scattered books and memorabilia, ordinary and accumulated and slightly airless.

On the screen: DR. MARCUS WEBB (58, sharp but unhurried, professorial). He's based in Los Angeles. Behind him - different light. Warmer. Bookshelves. A plant that someone tends. A life deliberately and thoughtfully built.

DANIEL

*Happened again last night. The
dream.*

DR. WEBB

How often now?

DANIEL

Three times this week. It was nearly every night when I was a kid. Then it stopped - I don't know, sometime after my father died. Years of nothing. And now it's back.

A beat. On screen, Dr. Webb makes a small note. Daniel watches his hand move and looks away.

DR. WEBB

What do you think led to it?

DANIEL

(almost laughing)

How do I know? It's the same thing it's always been. The face. The sound. Words you can't make out but you can feel. I can feel it so deeply. Like something's being said about you, not to you, and you don't know what it is but you know it's bad. And it just keeps building. Getting louder. Until I -

He makes a motion with his body, mimicking a jolting awake. On screen, Dr. Webb waits.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. HALE HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

Sarah comes through the front door with grocery bags, keys still in hand. She stops.

From the living room: the sound of a cartoon. Eli's voice asking a question.

And another voice. Older. Answering him.

Sarah sets the bags down. Goes to the living room doorway.

RUTH HALE (67, the particular exhaustion of a woman who has spent decades refusing to acknowledge her pain or anyone else's and doesn't want to talk about anything real) sits on the couch beside Eli. She's reading the back of one of the books on the table.

She looks up at Sarah. Something passes between the two women - not a greeting exactly. More like a confirmation. It's one of those days.

SARAH
(quietly)
Hey.

RUTH
He's upstairs. He's on with the
therapist, I think.

Sarah nods. Tuesdays are when he and Dr. Webb meet. Ruth knows this. Sarah looks at Eli, who hasn't looked up from the television.

SARAH
Hey, bud.

ELI
(not looking up)
Hi mom.

Sarah watches him a beat longer than the moment requires. Then she picks up the grocery bags and carries them to the kitchen. Ruth follows and offers to help.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. DANIEL'S HOME OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

There is something about the screen between them that lets Daniel say more than he could in a room. The frame gives him distance. He uses it.

DANIEL
It's my father. I can't see him
clearly. But I know it's him. I just
know. I can feel him.

DR. WEBB
What do you feel when you see it?

DANIEL
Terror. And then something more than
terror.

He searches the ceiling. His face goes in and out of the frame and he adjusts in his seat.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
When I was a kid, I felt smothered.
Like he was everywhere. Like there
was no oxygen in any room he was in.
But now it's different.

(MORE)

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Now I see that face and I feel
like... I'm becoming it.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. HALE HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Sarah unpacks groceries. Ruth sits at the kitchen table. From the living room, the cartoon continues. Eli doesn't know there's anything to overhear.

RUTH
How has he been this week?

SARAH
(measured)
It's hard to tell. He's managing. I think.

RUTH
(not judging, but repeating)
You think.

Sarah stops unpacking. Sets a can down on the counter. Doesn't fully turn around.

SARAH
He has the session today. He's been better about going and taking it seriously.

RUTH
Hmm. That sounds better.

A long pause. Sarah finally turns.

SARAH
He's somewhere else, Ruth. He's here - he's at the table, he's in the yard with Eli - but he's not here. It's like talking to someone through bulletproof glass. You can see them, they can see you, and nothing penetrates. Nothing gets through.

Ruth is quiet. Her hands fold on the table.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Eli feels it. He doesn't have words for it but he feels it.

(MORE)

SARAH (CONT'D)
He keeps trying - he keeps bringing things to Daniel, showing him things, asking him questions, asking him to play outside. And Daniel goes. He does. But it's not.

She stops. She's said this before. To Ruth. To herself. To the ceiling at 3 AM.

Ruth turns to make sure Eli can't hear them.

RUTH
(quietly)
Is it the same as it was last spring?

SARAH
It's different right now. Last spring he crashed. This is - I don't know what this is. He's not crashing. He's just... gone somewhere I can't find him.

Ruth looks at her hands.

RUTH
I know that place.

A beat.

SARAH
Ruth -

RUTH
His father used to go there too. I called it going flat. He would just - flatten out. Still functioning to some extent for work and things but not much else. Still present enough that you couldn't point to it being anything major. Just not there.

Sarah watches her.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I told myself it was the business. Or stress. Or a phase.

She smooths the tablecloth with one hand. Back and forth. Back and forth.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I let it go on too long. With his father.

(MORE)

RUTH (CONT'D)
I kept thinking - if I just give it time. If I give him space and just don't push too hard. If I just love him enough.

Her hand stops.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I watched that man disappear inside himself for years. And I kept the boys out of his way when he needed space. And I smoothed things over when he was difficult. And I told Daniel his father loved him very much when Daniel was Eli's age and hiding under his bed from the sound of his voice.

She looks up. Directly at Sarah.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I should have done more. I knew something was wrong - not just difficult, deeply wrong - and I let the years go because I didn't know what doing more looked like. I let him torment that boy. I let Daniel grow up inside that.

The kitchen is very quiet.

SARAH
(carefully)
You were doing the best you could.

Ruth gives a small look - not unkind, not quite an eye-roll, but somewhere in that territory. The expression of a woman who has been told this before and knows it's not true.

RUTH
No. I knew better. That's what I have to live with.

SARAH
Have you ever talked to Daniel about this?

RUTH
He would only get angry.

From the living room, the cartoon ends. The television shifts to something else. Eli calls out.

ELI (O.S.)
Mom? Can I have a snack?

SARAH
Sure. Give me one minute, bud.

She looks at Ruth. Something is forming in her face - a question she's been not asking for a long time.

SARAH (CONT'D)
I'm scared of what happens if this gets worse. Last spring he couldn't get out of bed for days. He cried in my arms and I held him and then two days later he was at the office like it never happened. He just let a little out and sealed the rest back up.

RUTH
He's been sealing things up since he was a little boy.

SARAH
I know that. I've always known that. I married him knowing that.

She sits down across from Ruth now. Two women at a kitchen table while the man they're discussing talks to a screen one floor above them.

SARAH (CONT'D)
(barely)
I'm scared he's going to hurt himself, Ruth. Not - I don't think he would. But sometimes I look at him and I wonder if he even wants to be here. In this house. In this life. And I can't ask him that. Because if the answer is no -

She stops.

RUTH
What does Dr. Webb say? Do you still do sessions with him sometimes?

SARAH
He has a lot of things to work through. He's doing the work by being there.
(laughing)

I wonder sometimes if therapists
even want their patients to get
better. Or if they ever do.

RUTH
(straight-faced)
But.

SARAH
But I don't know what work he's
actually doing. He comes out of each
session and he never tells me what
they discussed. I don't even dare
ask anymore.

Ruth doesn't reach across the table. She doesn't offer any
reassurance. She never wants to go too deep.

Instead, she looks at her own hands. Folded. Still.

From the living room, Eli's voice. Persistent. Eight years old
and impatient.

ELI (O.S.)
Mom! Snack?!

Sarah closes her eyes for one second.

Opens them.

Gets up.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. DANIEL'S HOME OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Daniel is back at the desk. His face fills the frame.

DANIEL
I can't tell Sarah any of this. The
real version of it.

DR. WEBB
Why not?

DANIEL
Because it would break her.

On screen, Dr. Webb's expression doesn't change. But something
behind it does.

DR. WEBB
And yet part of you wants it to
break. To burn the whole thing down.
To end your life.

Daniel looks at him sharply.

Dr. Webb realizes the poor choice of words.

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
Metaphorically, I mean, of course.

Dr. Webb tries to get back on track.

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
Which part is actually protecting
her, Daniel?

He has no answer for that.

He looks at his own face in the small thumbnail in the corner
of the screen. The tiny image of himself, watching himself be
unable to answer.

He reaches forward.

DANIEL
Time's up.

Closes the laptop.

CUT TO:

INT. HALE HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Sarah stands at the counter cutting an apple for Eli. Ruth is
still at the table.

The house is quiet. Then - from upstairs - a door. Footsteps.
Daniel moving through the room above them.

Both women hear it.

Sarah looks up at the ceiling. Tracks the sound of him
crossing the room. Stopping. Standing still somewhere above
her.

Waiting to hear which direction he'll go.

Both women on edge.

EXT. PLAYGROUND - RIVERSIDE PARK - DAY

A Saturday in the park. Kids on the climbing structure.

Eli and another boy - Brody (8) - chase each other up the slide the wrong way, against all posted rules, delighted.

On a bench with two coffees: Sarah and Mark Delaney (44, easy in his body in a way Daniel has never been). Brody's father.

They're mid-conversation. Have been for a while.

SARAH

- and then the teacher says, with a straight face, that Eli is "a contemplative child."

MARK

That's teacher for "stares out the window and needs Ritalin to pay attention."

SARAH

That's exactly what it's teacher-speak for.

She laughs. Easy. Unguarded. We have not heard this laugh in her house.

Mark watches her laugh and doesn't hide that he's watching.

MARK

It's nice, making you laugh.

Sarah loves it too, but makes a face as if to say it's not the time or place for that.

SARAH

I don't laugh much these days.

He doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. A silence that isn't empty. Their hands, side by side on the bench. Not touching. The inch between them very purposeful.

ELI

Mom! Watch!

Sarah's head turns. Eli at the top of the slide, arms raised, triumphant over nothing - pure boy.

And whatever was happening on the bench leaves her face. What replaces it is harder to look at: the catching of herself.

SARAH
(to Eli, brightly)
I'm watching!

Eli goes down the slide. Sarah keeps her eyes on him longer than she needs to.

SARAH (CONT'D)
(to Mark, quieter)
We should get going.

MARK
Sarah.

SARAH
This is just - coffee at a
playground. That's all this is
allowed to be.

She says it gently. To him, and to herself, and only one of them is convinced.

MARK
For what it's worth, I wasn't trying
to -

SARAH
I know. That's the problem. Nobody
had to try.

She gives him a small smile - there's no cruelty anywhere in her.

SARAH (CONT'D)
(calling)
Eli! Five minutes!

ELI (O.S.)
Ten!

SARAH
Seven!

She sits back down. A careful new distance on the bench now. No one says anything. They don't need to. They both sit with the situation.

She wanted the feeling of someone seeing her. That's all this was. It doesn't make it nothing.

BRODY
Dad! Throw!

Brody, off the slide, a glove from a backpack. A tennis ball held up.

Mark gets up. Easy. No watch-check. No "five more minutes." Just goes.

He lobs one to Brody. Brody fires it back. Eli hovers at the edge of it, wanting in, too polite to say so.

MARK

Eli - go deep.

Eli lights up. Runs. Mark arcs one high and lazy and perfect - Eli runs under it and takes it in two hands like it's nothing. Like it's everything.

ELI

Did you see -

MARK

Did I see? What a catch!

Sarah watches her son play catch with someone else's father.

What's on her face now isn't about the bench at all.

Eli winds up and lets it fly, loose and happy - the ball leaves his hand -

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - LATE AFTERNOON

THE BALL - out of the sky, into DANIEL'S glove. THWACK.

Another day. Another light.

Golden hour. The kind of light that makes ordinary things look cinematic.

Eli stands forty feet away, glove up, tongue pressed to his cheek in concentration. He is trying very hard.

Daniel winds up. Throws easy. The ball drops into Eli's glove with a clean THWACK.

DANIEL

There you go. Nice catch. Now point your glove at me when you wind up. Big C, remember. Turn your hips and let the arm follow through.

Eli winds up – all arm and short, no hips – and heaves it wide. Daniel sidesteps, catches it anyway.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
(still easy)
Bud. Point. Big C. Turn. Follow
through.

ELI
I did.

Daniel looks annoyed but lets it go.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN – CONTINUOUS

Through the window above the sink, Sarah stands washing a glass. We see her at an angle – partial. A shoulder, a profile. Her eyes are on the yard.

She watches.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD – CONTINUOUS

Eli throws again. Better. Not good, but better. He looks immediately to his father.

Daniel nods. Not effusively. Just a nod. It's enough. Eli grins.

ELI
Dad?

DANIEL
Yeah.

ELI
Is mom okay?

DANIEL
What do you mean?

ELI
She's been acting funny. Like more
sad.

A beat. Daniel examines the ball in his glove.

DANIEL
She's fine, buddy. Throw.

And he leaves it there. The way he leaves everything.

Eli winds up.

THWACK. THWACK. THWACK.

The rhythm builds. The light shifts almost imperceptibly.

FLASH - STATIC. ONE FRAME.

A throw goes wide. Daniel has to jog for it.

DANIEL
Eli. What the hell was that?

ELI
What? I'm trying.

DANIEL
If you listened to me -

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

A different angle now. Through the sliding glass door, partially reflected. Sarah has stopped washing. The glass is still in her hand. She watches Daniel's back.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Eli's next throw is worse. Nerves have entered his body. His father's patience has a sound to it - a frequency only children can detect.

DANIEL
Where are you throwing?

ELI
To you.

DANIEL
Then throw to me. Right here.

He points to his chest. Eli nods. Winds up. The ball skips off the tip of Daniel's glove and rolls into the grass.

Eli chuckles to himself. He can't help it.

ELI
(under his breath)
Nice catch, asshole.

DANIEL
(angrily)
What'd you say?

ELI
(fearfully)
Nothing.

FLASH - STATIC. TWO FRAMES.

In it - a yard. Different. Smaller. A younger boy. Daniel, eight years old. A man's back. A ball thrown too hard for a child to catch.

Daniel picks the ball up slowly.

DANIEL
(quieter, which is worse)
You're not listening to me. If you did, you'd hit me in the chest every time.

ELI
Dad, I -

DANIEL
I'm sick of telling you. Point. Big C. Hips. Follow through.

ELI
I know.

DANIEL
Then do it.

Eli's jaw tightens. He is not going to cry. He is very focused on not crying.

He throws. Hip turn attempted, exaggerated, wrong. The ball goes high and left.

FLASH - STATIC. LONGER NOW.

The yard again. The man's back turning. A voice we can't make out. It's garbled, but getting louder.

DANIEL
What are you - Eli, that's not - I
just showed you -

He's moving now. Agitated. Ball in hand, demonstrating. His
body has changed. The golden hour light is going.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Stand like this. This. Is this hard?
Why is this so hard?

ELI
(small)
It's not hard.

DANIEL
Then show me it's not hard.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The glass is on the counter now. Sarah stands at the window.
Not reflected - we see her through it, soft and slightly
obscured by the glare. Her arms are crossed. Her face -

We cut away before we can read it.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Eli throws. The ball hits the dirt five feet in front of
Daniel.

Something in Daniel cracks.

DANIEL
Are you friggin' serious?

ELI
I'm sorry -

DANIEL
Don't be sorry. I'm getting so sick
of this.

ELI
(voice breaking, near
tears)
I said I'm sorry.

Sarah makes a move to go outside. She knocks the glass off the counter and it smashes on the kitchen floor into a million pieces.

The sliding glass door opens. Sarah in the doorway.

SARAH
(sternly)
I think that's enough.

Daniel doesn't stop. Maybe he doesn't hear her. Maybe he can't.

FLASH — STATIC. SUSTAINED.

The yard. Young Daniel. The man turning now. Face not clear. Never clear. Voice louder. Words we can't —

THWACK. A ball hitting a glove. Whose glove? THWACK.

Daniel is shouting now. We don't need all the words. We need his face. We need Eli's face — not crying but somewhere past crying. Somewhere still.

And then — at the peak of it —

FLASH — WHITE. STATIC. FULL.

A boy. Eight years old. Standing in a yard. Looking up at a face that is screaming.

The boy is Daniel.

The face — is Daniel.

Silence.

Daniel stops. Chest heaving. Ball in his hand.

Eli stands forty feet away, glove at his side. Looking at his father with an expression no eight-year-old should have to know how to make.

Daniel opens his mouth, but doesn't say anything. Closes it.

DANIEL
(barely)
Let's go inside.

He walks past Eli without touching him. He walks past Sarah too without looking at her or saying anything. The back door opens and closes.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Daniel sees a large piece of glass and reaches to pick it up. It cuts his finger and he starts to bleed. He throws the glass into the garbage can and punches it.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Eli stands in the failing light. He looks at the space where his father was.

Then he winds up. And throws the ball at nothing.

THWACK - it hits the fence. He goes and picks it up. Does it again.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

The house is quiet. Eli's door is closed down the hall.

Daniel sits on the edge of the bed, still in the clothes he wore to play catch. Elbows on knees. Looking at the floor.

Sarah comes in. She doesn't slam the door. That's almost worse.

She stands for a moment. Then moves to the dresser and starts taking off her earrings. Methodical. Her eyes find him in the mirror.

SARAH

What the hell, Daniel? You can't do that to him.

Daniel doesn't say anything. He doesn't look up.

SARAH (CONT'D)

He was trying, Daniel. He really was. And more than that. He was trying to spend time with you just playing.

Daniel finally looks up. Distraught look on his face.

DANIEL
(quietly)
I know.

A beat. She turns around. Leans against the dresser. Arms crossed but not in anger – in something more exhausted than that.

SARAH
Then what just happened?

Long pause.

DANIEL
Something just ... snapped. I don't even know where it came from. One minute I'm standing there and the next I'm –

He stops. Rubs his face with both hands.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
I told myself my whole life I wouldn't become my father. My whole life. That was the one thing I would never let happen.

Daniel pauses.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
(voice trailing away)
The one thing.

Sarah is quiet. She's heard versions of this. She knows when to let it sit.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
He's eight years old and I'm so angry he doesn't hit me perfectly in the chest every throw? Like it's a crime? And I'm standing there and I can hear myself and I can't –

Daniel shakes his head.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
I work my ass off all day. I come home. I think, alright, let's go outside, let's do something. And it's like – I don't even know if he wanted to be out there.

SARAH

Would you want to be out there if you were him? He wanted to be out there with you. And you made it miserable. For him and for you. Why?

A beat. She tries to keep her voice level.

SARAH (CONT'D)

I can love you through what your father did. I can sit with it and fight for you. But I cannot let Eli inherit it.

That lands. Daniel has no answer for it.

The silence has weight and history. She looks at him the way she has looked at him for years – full of him, exhausted by him, still here.

She pushes off the dresser. Goes to the bathroom. The door doesn't close all the way.

Daniel sits there. Down the hall, a light is still on under Eli's door.

He looks at it.

He stands.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Daniel moves slowly down the hall. Stops outside Eli's door. The light underneath it. Warm. Still on.

He raises his hand.

Knuckles almost touching the wood.

He stands there. Five seconds. Ten.

His hand drops.

He stands another moment – close enough to knock, close enough to hear if Eli is still awake, close enough that it would take almost nothing –

He turns around.

Walks back down the hall and turns on the TV.

The light under Eli's door stays on a little longer. You can see it behind Daniel's head.

Then goes dark.

CUT TO:

INT. HALE HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Morning. Too bright. Too ordinary.

Eli sits at the table with cereal he has mostly pushed around. Backpack on the floor. Daniel stands by the counter, coffee in one hand, a small cut visible on his knuckle from the glass.

Sarah moves between them with the brittle efficiency of someone trying to get through the morning without touching the bruise.

Daniel looks at Eli. Eli looks down.

DANIEL

Hey, bud. About yesterday -

Eli tenses before he can help it.

ELI

It's okay.

It isn't. Everybody in the room knows that.

DANIEL

No, I just - I shouldn't have -

He stops. The apology is right there. Close enough to say. Close enough that Sarah stops moving.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

We'll play again this weekend. I'll show you the throw again.

Eli nods.

ELI

Okay.

The word does too much for an eight-year-old.

Sarah looks at Daniel. Not angry now. Worse. Watching him miss the door while standing in front of it.

Daniel's face changes. He recognizes the damage and still takes the exit.

CUT TO:

INT. DANIEL'S CAR — LATE AFTERNOON

Engine running. Parked outside the office. He hasn't gone in yet.

He's been sitting here long enough that the coffee in the cupholder has gone cold.

He stares through the windshield at nothing. At the ordinary world moving around him. People crossing the lot. A man loading groceries. A woman on a phone call, laughing at something.

His hands are on the wheel. Going nowhere.

DANIEL
(to no one)
What if I just didn't -

Not a question. A thought that found its way out.

He leans his head back. Closes his eyes.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
(barely audible)
What if I just drove.

He sits in that feeling. Lets it spread. Just — west. Just gone.

His phone buzzes on the seat beside him.

He doesn't look at it.

It buzzes again.

He opens his eyes. The name on the screen isn't one he recognizes. A local area code.

He picks up.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Yeah?

His face doesn't change at first. He's still half inside the fantasy. Still unsure if it's a dream or nightmare.

Then his face does change.

We don't hear what's being said. We don't need to.

We just watch Daniel's face lose everything it had left.

His hand finds the steering wheel. Grips it. Like it's the only solid thing.

The phone lowers from his ear slowly. Call still connected.

Outside the windshield, the ordinary world continues.

The man finishes loading groceries. The woman finishes laughing. The parking lot goes about its business completely.

All indifferent to the fact that Daniel Hale's life has just been shattered.

He sits very still.

Then —

STATIC

SMASH CUT TO:

INT./EXT. VARIOUS — DAYS UNKNOWN

Fragments. No score. Just ambient sound, static, and silence.

A hospital corridor. Fluorescent light. Daniel seated in a plastic chair at the end of it. Still in his work clothes. Someone's hand on his shoulder. He doesn't look up.

CUT TO:

The front door of the house opening. A woman with a casserole dish. She's saying something. Daniel nods. Takes it. Closes the door. The dish goes on the counter. Still wrapped in foil.

CUT TO:

People moving through the living room. Soft voices. Someone crying near the window. Daniel moves through them like a current through still water. There but not there.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON: Eli's glove. On the floor by the back door. Right where he left it. Daniel's feet stop beside it. He doesn't pick it up. He walks past.

CUT TO:

The hallway at night. Dark. No light under any door. Daniel stands in it anyway. Looking at the closed door at the end.

CUT TO:

The casserole dish on the counter. Still wrapped. Days later – the foil slightly curled at the edges.

CUT TO:

The living room. Empty. The last car pulling out of the driveway through the window. People finally gone.

CUT TO:

INT. HALE HOUSE

Daniel stands in the center of the room. The house makes its small sounds around him. The refrigerator hum. A pipe somewhere. The particular silence of a place that used to have people in it.

He stands there a long time.

Then he sits on the floor.

Not a chair. The floor.

And for the first time since the parking lot – no one is watching.

He puts his face in his hands.

His shoulders come up around his ears. His whole body is trying to make itself smaller. He is not performing anything for anyone.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. ACCOUNTING FIRM – BOARD ROOM – DAY

Fluorescent light. A clean table. The kind of room that's treated like the war room but nothing important has ever really happened.

GERALD MARSH (58, a decent man, uncomfortable with this) sits across from Daniel. There's a card on the table. Signed by the office. Gerald keeps glancing at it.

GERALD
There's no timeline. I want to be clear about that. Your position is here whenever you're ready.

Daniel nods.

GERALD (CONT'D)
Benefits. Pay. I talked to the other partners and there's no - you don't need to worry about that.

DANIEL
Thank you, Gerald.

GERALD
Take whatever time you need. Genuinely.

Daniel nods slowly. More of a slight body rock.

GERALD (CONT'D)
What do you think you'll do?

Daniel picks up the card. Opens it. Reads the signatures of people whose handwriting he recognizes from twenty years of signing returns and statements of work.

He doesn't answer Gerald's question.

His face goes very still the way faces go still when emotion arrives too large for any expression to contain it.

Gerald stands. Extends his hand. Daniel shakes it. Gerald holds it a beat longer than a handshake requires - the only thing he knows how to do with the distance between what he wants to say and what he can. He knows Daniel better than the other partners. He knows Daniel won't be coming back.

Daniel walks out through the open office. People look up. Some nod. Some look away. Someone says his name softly as he passes.

He doesn't stop.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. HOUSE - DAY

The house half-emptied. Not packed up - he's not selling it, not yet, maybe not ever. Just the things he needs. A bag on the bed. Another by the door.

He moves through the rooms slowly. Not saying goodbye - he's not capable of that yet. Just looking. The kitchen. The living room. The hallway.

He stops at Eli's door.

He opens it this time.

Eli's room exactly as it was. Posters. Books. A half-built Lego set on the desk, frozen mid-construction.

Daniel stands in the doorway. Doesn't go in.

On the floor by the back door - Eli's glove. Still there. Still exactly where he left it after the catch.

Daniel picks it up.

He turns it over in his hands. The leather worn at the pocket. Eli's name in marker on the wrist strap, written in Sarah's handwriting so he wouldn't lose it at school.

He puts it in the bag.

He carries the bags to the car. Puts them in the trunk. Gets in.

He sits there a moment - the same way he sat in the parking lot the day of the call. Same seat. Same hands on the same wheel.

Then he backs out of the driveway.

The house in the rearview mirror. Getting smaller.

Then gone.

CUT TO:

EXT./INT. INTERSTATE - VARIOUS STATES - DAY/NIGHT

The road. Hours of it. The country changing outside the window - the dense green of the east thinning, flattening, opening into something wider and less certain.

Daniel drives. Stops for gas. Eats at a counter without tasting it. Drives more.

At night the headlights make a tunnel. He stays inside it.

Ohio. Indiana. The flat middle beginning.

He doesn't call anyone. He doesn't turn the radio on.

He drives west.

Somewhere in Missouri the night comes down hard. The road straight and indifferent.

FLASH — STATIC.

The kitchen. Robert pacing. Young Daniel standing at the edge of the room — close enough to hear, far enough to run. Robert's voice filling the house: I gave you everything. I worked every day of my life so you'd have something to come home to. And you look at me like I'm nothing. You all look at me like I'm nothing.

Young Daniel's face. Not scared. Past scared. Just waiting for the room to come back.

Daniel drives. The headlights cut through the dark.

CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL BAR — WICHITA, KANSAS — NIGHT

The kind of place that exists between other places. Low light. A television above the bar with the sound off — weather maps, then sports scores, then weather maps again.

Four people in the room. The bartender. A couple in a booth who stopped talking an hour ago. And at the far end of the bar, RAY (68, the kind of weathered that comes from decades of choosing himself, not happily).

Ray nurses a bourbon. Not his first. Not making a night of it. Just a man at a bar the way some men are always at bars — naturally, without drama.

Daniel comes in from the highway. Still has road on him. He sits two stools down from Ray without looking at him. Nods at the bartender.

DANIEL

Bourbon.

He stares at the television. Weather moving across Kansas in colors that mean nothing to him.

Ray glances over. Doesn't stare. Goes back to his drink.

A few minutes pass. The couple in the booth puts on their coats.

Ray watches the weather map. Daniel watches it too.

RAY
Long drive.

Not a question. Just an observation. Daniel has road on him — Ray can see it.

DANIEL
You could say that.

A minute passes. The bartender wipes the counter down the other end.

RAY
Heading somewhere or just heading?

Daniel looks at him for the first time.

DANIEL
California.

RAY
Ah, yes. Go west, young man.

He says it quietly — not a joke, not quite. More like a man who has watched the west mean something to people and knows what it costs.

RAY (CONT'D)
(low and contemplative)
California.

He says it the way people say it when they know what California means to certain people at certain moments in their lives.

DANIEL
You from around here?

RAY
Not too far. Little town a couple of hours east. Came in for the day for some meetings. Decided I didn't feel like the drive back in the dark.

Daniel doesn't really want to keep the conversation going, but the road has been lonely. Something compels him to continue.

DANIEL
What line of work?

RAY
Agricultural equipment. Forty years.
You?

DANIEL
Accountant.

Ray nods. Takes a sip.

RAY
Never did understand numbers much
myself. Always figured if I had, I'd
have made different choices.

DANIEL
(quietly)
I figured that too.

Something in that lands between them. Ray looks at him but
doesn't ask.

They sit with the weather for a while. The television changes
back to maps.

RAY
You leaving something behind?

The question sits on the bar between them.

Daniel picks up his glass. Sets it down without drinking.

DANIEL
I did.

Ray goes still in the way of a man who has learned when to
stop asking. He signals the bartender. Points at Daniel's
glass without looking at him. The bartender refills it.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
My wife and son were killed. Car
accident. Few months ago.

He's never said it that simply before. Not to Dr. Webb, where
it came out in fragments over three sessions. Not to his
brother, where it barely came out at all. Just - said.

RAY
I'm sorry.

Not I'm so sorry. Not God, that's terrible. Just - sorry. The
old short version. The one that means something.

DANIEL

I kept thinking about California.
Before it happened. Kept thinking
about just - getting in the car.
Starting over. Turns out the
universe has a sick sense of humor.

Ray looks at his glass.

RAY

You blame yourself.

It's not a question.

DANIEL

For the accident? No. I wasn't
there.

RAY

That's not what I mean.

Daniel looks at him.

DANIEL

No. I know it's not.

A long silence. Outside, a truck pulls into the lot. Its
lights sweep the window and pass.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

When it happened - when I got the
call - I was sitting in a parking
lot thinking about how to escape it
all. That specific thought. That
specific moment. And then the phone
rang.

Ray doesn't move.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

And I have been trying to figure out
which feeling was worse. The grief.
Or the -

He stops.

RAY

The guilt.

DANIEL

(barely)

Yeah.

Ray nods slowly. He doesn't rush. He doesn't fill the silence with reassurance or horror or pity. He just lets the thing exist in the air between them, which is the only honest thing to do with it.

RAY
I never had kids.

DANIEL
A wife?

RAY
No wife either. Couple of times I got close. Decided against it. Or let it decide against me - I was never sure which.

He turns his glass in a slow circle on the bar.

RAY (CONT'D)
I used to think that made me free. Independent. My own man.

He stops turning the glass.

RAY (CONT'D)
Now I'm sixty-eight years old and I'm sitting in this bar because I didn't feel like making the drive back to an empty house. And I think about those couple of times when -.

He doesn't finish that sentence. He doesn't need to.

DANIEL
Do you regret it?

RAY
Every damn day.

He picks up his glass.

RAY (CONT'D)
Doesn't change anything though, does it.

DANIEL
No. It doesn't.

They drink.

The television is showing weather again. A front moving in from the west. Colors spreading across the map like something inevitable.

RAY

My father used to say - you make the choices and then the choices make you. I didn't understand it, but thought it was wisdom when I was young. Spent about thirty years being angry at them. The choices I made and what it made me.

Daniel stares at the map. The colors moving east.

DANIEL

My father killed himself. When I was in college.

Ray absorbs this without reacting. Just present.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

I've spent my life since trying to understand how a man gets to that place. How you go from being a person who gives his kid advice about hard work and toughness - to just - ending it. Such a hypocrite.

He looks at his hands.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

He used to tell me how hard he worked for us. A man shows up. A man doesn't run.

A beat.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

(quiet, not to Ray)

Well. Who's the hypocrite now?

Ray says nothing. That's the right thing.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

I think I understand it now.

The words land in the room. Ray looks at him directly for the first time.

RAY

You planning on getting to California?

Daniel meets his eyes.

A long beat.

DANIEL

Yeah.

He means it. Just not the way Ray means it.

Ray holds his gaze another moment. Then nods slowly. Looks back at the bar.

RAY

Good.

They sit until the bartender calls last call. Daniel pays for both of them. Ray doesn't argue.

At the door they pause.

RAY (CONT'D)

You need anything - you call
someone. You hear me?

It's not dramatic. It's not a speech. It's just one man talking to another man in a doorway.

Daniel nods.

He won't. They both know it.

RAY (CONT'D)

Safe drive. It's been real nice
talking to you.

They go to their rooms.

EXT. HOTEL PARKING LOT - MORNING

Daniel stands in the parking lot. The highway is visible from here - lights moving east and west, indifferent, continuous.

He gets in his car.

He drives west.

CUT TO:

EXT. INTERSTATE 10 - LOS ANGELES - DAY

The freeway opens up like something that was always waiting. The city sprawling in every direction under a sky that is genuinely, almost aggressively blue.

Daniel's car in the flow of it. He's been driving for days and his face carries that - the particular blankness of too many hours behind glass. But something is happening to his eyes.

The light is different here. Not better exactly. Just different. Like the same world rendered in a higher resolution.

He passes an overpass and there it is - a slice of it between two off-ramps. The Pacific. Just a glimpse. Grey-blue. Enormous.

Mixed emotions overwhelm Daniel. He can't comprehend why he waited so long, or why everything still feels so similar.

He keeps driving.

But his eyes went to it. Even for a second. Even after everything.

Something in him that isn't dead yet.

CUT TO:

EXT. SILVER LAKE - LATE AFTERNOON

Daniel's car parked on a street of modest apartments and big trees. He sits there a moment after he cuts the engine. Looks at the building.

He gets his bag from the trunk. Eli's glove is on top of everything. He adjusts it so it isn't visible. Then adjusts it back. It doesn't matter.

He buzzes the intercom.

A pause. Then -

NOAH (V.O.)
(through intercom)
Danny?

Only one person in the world still calls him that.

DANIEL
Yeah. It's me.

The door buzzes open.

CUT TO:

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Small. Thoughtfully arranged - the kind of small that has been made intentional rather than apologized for. Books. Art chosen rather than inherited. Plants that are actually alive.

And sound everywhere. Not playing - just present. A keyboard against one wall, headphones coiled on top of it. Sheet music on the kitchen table with pencil marks in the margins. A recording interface with its cables neatly bundled. Acoustic panels painted to look like art. This isn't a room where music happens sometimes. This is where music lives.

Daniel stands in the doorway taking it in. Something moves across his face that isn't grief and isn't quite envy and doesn't have a clean name.

NOAH HALE (38, lighter than Daniel in every sense - not unburdened, just differently weighted) opens the door fully.

He looks at his brother.

They haven't seen each other since the funeral. Since Daniel moved through the living room like a current through still water.

Noah steps forward and puts his arms around Daniel. Holds on.

Daniel receives it. His arms come up. He holds on too.

Briefly. Then the moment passes and they do the thing brothers do - move into the apartment, talk about the drive, put the bag somewhere.

NOAH
You eat anything today?

DANIEL
Somewhere in Arizona.

NOAH
That's not an answer.

He's already moving to the kitchen. Daniel's eyes follow the apartment. A guitar in the corner. Handwritten notes on index cards pinned above the keyboard. One reads: MUSIC IS THE SPACE BETWEEN THE NOTES.

DANIEL
What are you working on?

Noah glances back. Mildly surprised by the question.

NOAH
Score for a short film. Indie thing,
no budget, but the director's good.

DANIEL
What kind of score?

NOAH
Original music. You watch the cut,
figure out what the scene needs
emotionally, and build the sound
that lives underneath it. What it's
feeling even when no one's saying
it.

He says it matter-of-factly. It's just his work. He doesn't
notice Daniel going very still.

DANIEL
(quietly)
When did you start?

NOAH
Seriously? About ten years ago. But
I started messing around after Dad
died. I needed somewhere to put
things.

He sets a pan on the stove. Doesn't look up.

NOAH (CONT'D)
How long are you staying?

DANIEL
I don't know yet.

A beat. Noah nods. That's not nothing - that I don't know yet.

He files it away.

NOAH
Couch folds out. It's not bad.

DANIEL
I'm not going to put you out -

NOAH

Danny. Please sit down. You're
pacing.

Daniel realizes he hasn't stopped moving since he arrived.

Almost stalking the apartment. Or preparing his escape.

He sits at the kitchen table, next to the sheet music. Pencil notations. Tempo markings. The same four notes returning again and again with slight variations, trying to get it right.

For a while it's almost fine - the low-level functional warmth of two people who share blood and history and not much else, relearning the room temperature of each other.

Almost fine.

CUT TO:

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Later. The dishes done. Two beers on the coffee table. The city outside the window.

They've been talking around it for two hours. Daniel can feel it sitting in the room like a third person.

NOAH (CONT'D)

You want to talk about it, or do you
want to keep telling me about the
drive?

Daniel looks at his beer.

DANIEL

The drive was long. There's lots to
talk about.

NOAH

Danny.

A long pause.

DANIEL

I don't know what I'm doing here,
Noah. I genuinely don't. I got in
the car and I drove and I ended up
here because - it's where I always
said I'd go. To start a life, I
guess. A version of one.

NOAH
That's okay. That's enough of a
reason.

DANIEL
Is it?

Noah looks at him carefully.

NOAH
How are you sleeping?

DANIEL
I'm not.

Noah nods. Doesn't ask why. Some things don't need unpacking
in the first hour.

A silence. Outside, a car passes. Music from somewhere up the
street.

NOAH
I don't have nightmares about him.

DANIEL
I know.

NOAH
You think that means it was easier
for me.

DANIEL
(carefully)
Wasn't it?

Noah is quiet for a moment. He picks up his beer. Holds it
without drinking.

NOAH
He never looked at me, Danny. Not
the way he looked at you. You know
what that's like? Standing in a room
with your father and being
furniture.

Daniel doesn't answer.

NOAH (CONT'D)
You think that was freedom. Maybe it
was. But I spent years trying to
figure out what was wrong with me
that my own father couldn't find one
thing to say.

A beat.

NOAH (CONT'D)

I still have this memory. He took me to a Mets game when I was seven. Just the two of us. I think you were supposed to go with him but you were sick. And he was - he was just present. He bought me a hot dog and pointed out the plays and seemed genuinely glad to be there. With me.

He looks at his glass.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Two hours. That's all I've got. Two hours and a baseball game and I built a whole mythology around who he might have been if things were different.

The room gets quiet in a specific way.

DANIEL

I don't have that.

NOAH

(quietly)

I know.

DANIEL

I don't have any of that. What I have is a man who filled every room he walked into with dread. A man I feared and wanted to impress so badly and it was never enough.

The bitterness in his voice has no heat left in it. It's cold now. Old.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

You got to grieve an idealized version. You understand? You lost the father you wanted. I'm still trying to get free of the one I had.

Noah absorbs this. He doesn't argue it.

NOAH

You're right. I know that. But I still miss him.

(MORE)

NOAH (CONT'D)
I miss the idea of him too. And I
know you think that makes me a fool.

DANIEL
(flat)
I don't think it makes you a fool. I
think it makes you lucky.

That lands wrong. Not cruel exactly. Blunt enough to cut.

NOAH
Jesus, Danny. Do you hear yourself?

Daniel looks at him.

Noah pulls himself back.

NOAH (CONT'D)
I'm not saying it to hurt you. I'm
saying it because you always thought
you got the worst of him. And I
always thought you got the best of
him. And we were both right. And
neither of us got out clean.

Daniel looks at his brother. Really looks at him. Sees
something he hasn't let himself see.

The same door. Different sides of it.

DANIEL
(quietly, not really to
Noah)
You got to do what you wanted
though. All of it. The music. The
life you built. You just - did it.
You got out.

NOAH
Eventually. After a lot of work.

DANIEL
I wanted to write. Did you know
that?

Noah is still.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Not accounting. Not baseball. I
wanted to write. Fiction. Stories.
Movies. I had notebooks full of them
in high school.

NOAH
What happened to them?

DANIEL
No idea. I stopped and they're
probably long gone.

He looks at the keyboard. At Noah's pencil notations. At the
index card above it: MUSIC IS THE SPACE BETWEEN THE NOTES.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Dad said accounting would always
provide. So I did accounting. And it
always provided, but I was miserable
every day.

The bitterness in that last sentence is old. It has been
sitting in him for twenty years, getting very quiet.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
I did that to Eli.

It comes out before he can stop it. The thing he hasn't said.
Not to Webb. Not to Ray. Not to anyone.

NOAH
Danny -

DANIEL
Don't.

NOAH
I'm not going to tell you it's okay.
I'm going to tell you he knew you
loved him. Kids know.

DANIEL
You just said you spent years
wondering what was wrong with you.
Is that a man you think loved you?

The silence that follows is the most honest thing either of
them has said in years.

Noah opens his mouth. Closes it.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
I can't be here right now.

NOAH
Daniel, don't -

DANIEL

I just need - I need a night to
myself. I'll get a hotel. I'll call
you.

He's already standing. Already picking up his bag. Eli's glove
visible at the top of it.

NOAH

Stay.

It's one word. No performance. Just the weight of it.

Daniel stops. Hand not yet on the door.

NOAH (CONT'D)

I'm not trying to fix you. I know
you're going to walk out of here and
I know what that means. I watched
Dad do it for years. I watched you
do it to me every time I called and
you said you were fine. I know what
your fine sounds like.

A beat.

NOAH (CONT'D)

I'm just saying stay. We don't have
to talk about any of it. We can
watch something. I can make eggs.
You don't have to run.

Daniel looks at him. He can see what it would cost Noah to say
that, and what it would cost Noah for Daniel to leave.

He leaves anyway.

The door closes. Noah stands in the apartment. The two beers
on the coffee table. The city outside. His keyboard with the
index card above it: MUSIC IS THE SPACE BETWEEN THE NOTES.

He picks up his phone. Puts it down. The specific exhaustion
of a man who has been here before and knows what comes next.

CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL ROOM - SILVER LAKE - NIGHT

Nondescript. Clean. Anonymous. The particular nowhere of a
hotel room at midnight.

Daniel sits on the edge of the bed. Same posture as the bedroom after the catch. Same posture as the parking lot. There is a posture this man returns to – elbows on knees, hands loose, looking at something that isn't there.

Eli's glove in his hands. He's been at it for a while – tossing the ball up, letting it fall into the pocket, tossing it again. A catch with no one on the other end.

THWACK. The ball drops into the glove. He tosses it up again.

THWACK. Again.

There is nothing athletic about it. It's not practice. It's the thing you do when your hands need to be doing something and the rest of you doesn't know what to do at all.

He lies back on the bed. Keeps throwing. The ball up, the glove up, the catch, the throw. The city hum outside. Sirens somewhere. A helicopter.

He closes his eyes. Keeps throwing.

He tosses the ball up one more time –

FLASH – STATIC.

The face in the static. His father. Distorted. Flickering. The whisper building –

And then something shifts. The face wavers. For just a moment it is not his father's face.

It is almost his own.

Almost. Not yet.

Daniel opens his eyes. The ceiling. The city.

The ball is on the mattress beside him. The glove still on his hand. He doesn't remember stopping.

He picks up his phone. Scrolls to Dr. Webb. LA area code.

Stares at it.

It's two in the morning.

He puts the phone down.

But he doesn't close his eyes again.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT./INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT BUILDING — EARLY MORNING

7:40 AM. Bright. The kind of morning people dream of when they think LA.

Daniel stands outside the building door. He hasn't called. He didn't sleep.

He buzzes.

A long pause.

NOAH (V.O.)
(groggy, through
intercom)
Yeah.

DANIEL
It's me.

Another long pause.

The door buzzes open.

Noah is in the kitchen when Daniel comes in, making coffee without looking at him. T-shirt. Bare feet. He's been up for a while.

Daniel sits at the kitchen table. Sets his bag down.

Noah puts a mug in front of him without asking. Gets his own.

Sits.

They drink coffee.

Outside, the neighborhood waking up. A car. Someone's dog.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
(finally)
I messaged Webb. Asked for an in-
person session. Thursday.

Noah nods. Looks at his mug.

NOAH
Good.

That's all they say about it.

They drink their coffee. The morning comes in through the windows.

It's not the conversation either of them needed. But it's the one they can have.

And Noah knows his brother well enough to know that showing up at 7:40 AM without calling is how Daniel Hale says I'm sorry.

He accepts it as such.

CUT TO:

INT. DR. WEBB'S OFFICE - LOS ANGELES - DAY

The first thing Daniel notices is that it has a smell. The office. Specific, warm, particular - the way a room smells when someone has spent years thinking carefully in it.

The second thing he notices is that Dr. Webb is shorter than he expected. Considerably shorter.

DR. WEBB stands when Daniel comes in. Extends his hand.

DR. WEBB
It's good to finally meet you in person.

Daniel shakes his hand. Takes in the actual height of the man.

DANIEL
No offense, but - I thought you'd be taller.

Webb smirks. Just barely. He doesn't address it.

DR. WEBB
Zoom can be deceiving. Come in.

Daniel steps inside. Looks around the office. Bookshelves. The plant he recognized from the Zoom background, larger in person. A window with actual light coming through it. Two chairs at an angle, unhurried.

He sits.

Webb sits across from him. Notepad on the arm of the chair. He looks at Daniel the way he never quite could on a screen - fully, directly, taking in the whole picture.

He doesn't like what he sees. He doesn't show that. But Daniel will feel it anyway.

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
How long have you been here now?

DANIEL
A few days. Feels longer.

DR. WEBB
And how has it been?

Daniel looks at the window.

DANIEL
Fine. Good. I've got a place in Los
Feliz. Furnished rental, month to
month. The light is - it's different
out here.

DR. WEBB
How have you been spending your
days?

DANIEL
Mostly walking. Trying to understand
why the place feels familiar and
wrong at the same time. The light -
it's different out here.

DR. WEBB
Different how?

DANIEL
Just more of it. Brighter. Exposes
you in a sense.

A pause.

DR. WEBB
You said in your message the dream
changed.

Daniel's jaw shifts.

DANIEL
Yeah.

DR. WEBB
Tell me.

He looks at his hands.

DANIEL
It's still the static. Still a face.
But it's not his face anymore. It's
mine.

He says it flat. No drama. Like a man reading a diagnosis aloud.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
I came out here and the dream didn't stop. It changed. I was hoping it would go away but instead it became more real.

He almost laughs.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
And then I wake up at three in the morning and I'm looking at myself. In the static. The same whisper. And I think - that's it, isn't it. That's the thing I've been running from this whole time and it's just me. It's always been me.

Webb watches him. Lets the statement exist in the room.

DR. WEBB
What did you expect to find out here, Daniel?

DANIEL
It's where I always dreamed of living.

DR. WEBB
That's not what I asked.

A long beat. The office is very quiet. Outside, somewhere, the city continues.

DANIEL
I thought I'd find what I had always been searching for. The person I was supposed to be before - before the career and the house and my -

He stops.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Before I became him.

DR. WEBB
Your father.

DANIEL

I became Robert, Marcus. I did the exact thing to my son that was done to me and I knew I was doing it and I could not stop.

The first time he's used Webb's first name. The first time he's said his father's name at all. Both in the same sentence.

DR. WEBB

And California was going to fix that.

DANIEL

(quiet, stripped)

I needed it to.

Webb looks at him. Something in his face adjusts – not softer, more precise.

DR. WEBB

You also said in your message that Eli was in the dream.

Daniel is still.

DANIEL

Not – not in the dream. Just after. When I wake up. When I'm lying there in the dark. I see his face.

DR. WEBB

What's his expression?

A long beat.

DANIEL

He's just looking at me. The way he used to look at me when I went inside. He'd watch me through the back window. He never – he never looked angry. He just watched.

Silence. The kind that has nowhere to go.

DR. WEBB

You came to California to find what you'd buried.

DANIEL

(quiet)

I thought it would feel different.

(MORE)

DANIEL (CONT'D)
I thought if I could just get away
from the house, the job, the - I
thought there was a version of me
that existed before all of it.

DR. WEBB
And instead you found the same man
in different weather. And more
exposed.

Daniel looks at him sharply. Something about the phrasing.

DANIEL
Did Noah tell you that? About
California?

DR. WEBB
(slight pause)
He mentioned you'd been talking
about it.

DANIEL
When?

Webb is quiet a moment. He had not planned to land here.

DR. WEBB
We remained in contact after he
referred you to me. Not in a
clinical capacity. He was concerned
about you.

DANIEL
You're still talking to him about
me?

DR. WEBB
Not regularly, but we talk
sometimes, yes. He was concerned
about you.

Something shifts in Daniel's face. Not quite anger. Something cooler.

DANIEL
So you've been getting updates?

DR. WEBB
I've been getting a brother worrying
about a brother.

DANIEL
And building a case.

DR. WEBB
I'm trying to understand you.

DANIEL
You've been trying to understand me
through Noah's version of me.

Webb considers this. He does not deny it immediately. That is not nothing.

DR. WEBB
Is Noah's version wrong?

DANIEL
(hard)
Noah's version is Noah's version. He
spent twenty years invisible to our
father. He doesn't understand there
are kinds of damage you can't see.

Webb watches him.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
(quieter)
What was Noah afraid to tell you
about me? What did he actually say?

DR. WEBB
You know I can't -

DANIEL
You just told me that this wasn't
therapy. So, what did he say?

A beat. Webb sets the notepad down. Shifts his weight.

DR. WEBB
He said he thought you were going to
hurt yourself. He said he thought
you were going to finish
disappearing and there'd be nothing
left to reach.

Daniel absorbs this.

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
That's why he sent you to me. Not to
fix you. He didn't think he could
fix you.

(MORE)

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
He was trying to put you somewhere
he couldn't see it happen.

The room. The plant in its pot. The particular quality of
California light.

DANIEL
And now you're trying to fix me
instead.

DR. WEBB
(carefully)
I'm trying to figure out if there's
something you actually want. Not
something you think you should want.

He leans forward.

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
The writing. You said you wanted to
write.

DANIEL
I said I used to want to.

DR. WEBB
You have been in California for days
now. Walking around the city.
Looking, and hearing, and smelling,
and thinking. Have you written
anything about it?

DANIEL
(a beat too long)
No.

Webb notes this - not what Daniel said, but the beat before
it.

DR. WEBB
What would happen if you did?

DANIEL
I don't know what that means.

DR. WEBB
I think you do.

Silence. Daniel looks at the window. The city. The other life
visible through the glass.

DANIEL
(very quiet)
I'm afraid of what it would sound
like.

Webb waits.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
If I write the real thing - if I
actually try - and it's nothing. If
it's just - nothing.

He stops.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Then there's no version of my life
that went differently. That's it.
That's all I was. A fucking loser.

Webb looks at him. This is a different thing than he expected.
He writes something on the pad.

DR. WEBB
What you just described - the fear
that trying and failing would close
the last door - that's not a writing
problem.

DANIEL
No.

DR. WEBB
I want you to do something before
our next session. I want you to buy
a notebook. That's all. You don't
have to write anything in it.

Daniel looks at him.

DR. WEBB (CONT'D)
Having it is different from doing
it. Just - have it.

The session ends the way sessions end. Daniel picks up his
jacket. Moves toward the door. Webb watches him with the
particular attention he gives to patients as they leave - when
the performance relaxes, when the real thing is briefly
visible.

He sees what he sees. He writes one more thing on the pad.

He doesn't know yet if it's right.

He'll call tomorrow.

He already knows Daniel won't pick up.

FADE TO BLACK.

CUT TO:

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Half-unpacked. The notebook on the table. Eli's glove beside it.

The notebook is open. Blank page. Pen beside it.

Daniel sits at the table. He writes one word.

ELI -

Then nothing. The pen hovers. His hand shakes just enough to make the ink wobble at the edge of the dash.

He closes the notebook before the word has to become a sentence.

Daniel moves to his room and sits on the edge of the bed, phone to his ear. It rings. Rings.

RUTH (V.O.)

Hello?

DANIEL

Hey, ma. It's me.

RUTH (V.O.)

Daniel. I was wondering when you'd call. Did you get the package?

DANIEL

(unsure if he did or not)

I - yeah. Thank you.

RUTH (V.O.)

Because the tracking said delivered Tuesday and I didn't hear anything, so I didn't know.

DANIEL

I got it. It's here.

He looks at the window. The city.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Ma, I wanted to - I've been having a
hard time out here. I think I came
out here thinking it would -

RUTH (V.O.)
You're not eating. I can hear it in
your voice.

DANIEL
What?

RUTH (V.O.)
You get thin when you don't eat. You
always did. Are you taking care of
yourself?

Daniel closes his eyes.

DANIEL
I'm eating, Ma. That's not - I'm
trying to tell you something.

RUTH (V.O.)
So tell me.

He opens his mouth. Here it is. The thing.

DANIEL
I don't think I've ever been okay.
Not once that I can remember. And I
thought if I changed everything it
would -

RUTH (V.O.)
You worry too much.

Silence on Daniel's end. A tear starts to fall.

RUTH (CONT'D)
Daniel.

RUTH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Daniel?

DANIEL
(quiet)
Yeah.

A long beat. Something in him closes. Gently. Finally.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Forget it.

RUTH (V.O.)
Forget what?

DANIEL
Nothing. It's nothing. I should go.

RUTH (V.O.)
Well. Call me if you want to talk?

He hangs up. Sets the phone down, screen dark.

He doesn't cry. It's past that. He sits in the silence of a man who reached out one of the last times he had it in him, and felt his hand close on nothing.

CUT TO:

INT. RUTH'S KITCHEN — NEW JERSEY — CONTINUOUS

Ruth stands with the phone still in her hand. Dial tone, then nothing.

She doesn't move.

She heard it. Some part of her heard exactly what he was trying to say — and could not, would not, open that door. The same door that was closed on her once, by someone else. The cost gets handed down. She is holding it in her hand right now and she cannot put it down.

She looks at her hands.

The kitchen is very quiet.

CUT TO:

EXT. PACIFIC OCEAN — DAY

The water goes out forever. No land in the frame. No horizon line we can trust — sky and sea the same flat silver.

Daniel, in the water. Past the break. Alone.

He treads. Arms moving just enough. The same motion from the Jersey beach, a lifetime ago. Holding. Not swimming.

We do not know how far out he is. The camera will not tell us. There is no shore behind him to measure against and no current we can read. He could be forty feet from the sand. He could be a mile.

He stops moving his arms.

He floats. Face to the sky.

FLASH — STATIC.

Eli's face. Not distorted this time. Not buried in the noise. Closer than it has ever been — surfacing through the static like something rising toward the surface from underneath. Reaching up. Reaching for him.

The whisper.

Louder than it has been in the entire film. Climbing. The specific frequency that has run under everything — under every room, every doorway, every static cut — and it is almost, almost —

It is right at the edge of a word.

The closest it has ever come to meaning.

Daniel's eyes, on the silver sky. Something in his face — impossible to name. Not peace. Not surrender. Not resolve. Just a man in the water, listening, at the exact moment the signal he spent his whole life straining to hear finally rises to the threshold of saying itself —

SMASH TO:

BLACK.

Silence. Total.

We never learn the word.

We never learn which way he was facing.

THE END