

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

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By Noah Key

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THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

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Abstract

This thesis explores the combination of two distinct film genres: the coming-of-age narrative and the losing-grip-on-reality trope seen in psychological films. Influenced by the global pandemic and other crises, this thesis looks to how young people have to grow up in a time where everything is unknown, and reality is not in its normal state. This thesis comprises of an analytical, introductory essay that explores my creative process, a Hollywood-standard treatment, and an original, feature-length screenplay entitled *The Road to Nowhere*. Works that inspired and influenced this thesis include *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *The Graduate*, *Birdman*, *Donnie Darko*, Jim Henson's *Tale of Sand*, and Talking Heads' *Road to Nowhere*. The screenplay examines both a crisis of identity and a crisis of reality, asking the following questions: who are we and where do we belong in this world; how do we perceive the world around us; how much are we willing to risk finding happiness; and where do we find happiness: in the jobs and opportunities we earn or the people and environment we surround ourselves with?

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	vi
Treatment.....	xvi
<i>The Road to Nowhere</i>	1
Credits.....	95
References.....	96

Introduction

Since their creation, motion pictures possess the power to captivate and connect with audiences of broad demographics around the world. Like any other medium of storytelling, a film serves to give its audiences entertaining stories that leave them with ideas to consider, whether it be an applicable moral, a relatable character, or perhaps a mind-opening revelation on life. The fascinating difference with film is its ability to be immersive and mimic reality on the screen. Movies can be shot on-location, create visual effects, focus on a single character's perspective, and use numerous other tactics to relate more to moviegoers. Because of cinema's unique way of depicting reality to the masses, there is now a new world of stories that have yet to be told.

When I was entering this project, my major concern was coming up with something original. As artists, we all have different inspirations and influences that affect our writing, our work, and our creative process, whether we realize it or not. When conceptualizing what this thesis and its screenplay would cover, I, along with the rest of the world, was stuck in the midst of a global pandemic. I worked as a Resident Advisor on the University of Houston campus over the summer months of 2020 when the emotional and mental effects of the pandemic on people became apparent. During this time, many residents, including myself, were experiencing anxiety due to isolation and fear of the unknown. I specifically remember an instance where one of my residents relayed their fears of trying to find a safe job during this time, all while continuing to be a student at the university and a young person trying to find who they are in the world. This common feeling of heading into the unknown inspired me. I began thinking of how so many young people have to grow up in a time where everything is uncertain, where reality is not in its

normal state. So I thought about what kind of stories relay these kinds of messages and themes. I soon found what I was looking for in two specific genres.

The coming-of-age film is a popular and relatable genre in modern cinema due to its ability to capture a pivotal moment in a character's life and their personal growth through specific circumstances. A central theme of these films is the idea of identity and one's goal of finding their own. Mike Nichols' 1967 dramatic masterpiece *The Graduate* focuses on this theme, following the romantic escapades of the protagonist, Benjamin Braddock, as he experiences an identity crisis. Nichols does not underscore this existential theme but instead makes it the core of his film (Schmidt 33). This theme of searching for one's identity is not limited to just dramas, but spans across many genres; for instance, in John Hughes' 1986 teen comedy *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Cameron Frye experiences his own identity crisis, breaking away from his parents' neurotic tendencies. While the coming-of-age film has been presented in a variety of ways, there is one avenue that the cinematic themes of identity and growth have not fully ventured.

The cinematic trope of a character losing grip on reality is not a novel concept in film; however, it is usually confined in the categories of horror or avant-garde, which is understandable. Characters not understanding what is real and what is hallucination is an eerie motif that leaves moviegoers with new outlooks on life or an overall feeling of uneasiness. With films such as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *Birdman*, and many others demonstrating how older adults can lose their grip on reality, there have been far fewer films that explore younger characters that experience this struggle while they try to discover themselves. Films that fall in this category include Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko*, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, and Robert Egger's *The Witch*. While these films have found success in their

own times, there is still more to discover in these themes of reality, identity, and growth. In our modern world of political turmoil, mandated isolation, and general feelings of helplessness, young people are trying to find their own identities in the midst of the unknown.

How could these topical issues be translated into a psychological, coming-of-age film? In what ways could a screenplay incorporate them to relate more to young audiences today? What would a modern character in the midst of the unknown trying to find his identity look like? These are questions I asked myself when brainstorming my screenplay. I took these questions and tried to find what stories could potentially emerge from them. What came next was a series of concept maps and short film pitches.

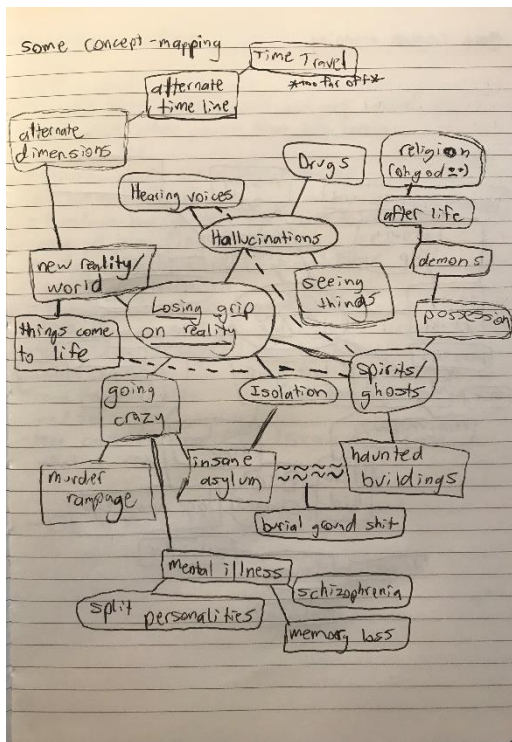


Figure 1: Concept Map by Noah Key, 2020

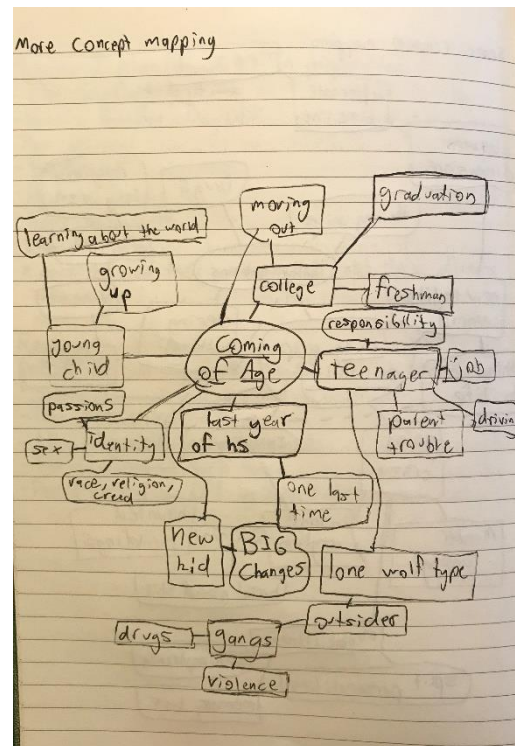


Figure 2: Concept Map by Noah Key, 2020

After going through potential ideas, I settled on a concept that I eloquently wrote as, “Man goes on a road trip and sees crazy, abstract shit.” The idea then expanded to include a

specific destination, a desert landscape, and a companion to accompany our protagonist. The concept was then playfully changed to “Oz in the middle of the desert.” I soon found the name of our destination: Despina, derived from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, which describes his version of Despina as a city between two deserts that appears different depending on whether you come by land or by sea. I went with this name not only for the desert connection, but Despina in my own work is perceived differently by our two protagonists: one sees it as a paradise, the other sees it as a myth. As I continued to work with this idea, I found myself being drawn to two different but significant sources of inspiration: one that I was familiar with and one that was brand new to me.

Looking at the first source of inspiration, I want to note that the work’s artist Jim Henson has been a major influence on my work, both in my writing and my filmmaking, with myself studying and analyzing his career and his artistic works for several years. With this project, I found inspiration from one of his less well-known works. *Tale of Sand*, written by Henson from 1967 to 1974, is an unproduced, experimental feature film that takes place in the North American desert. The screenplay, which has very little dialogue, follows a man as he treks through the desert on foot, encountering bizarre events, such as a lion driving a limousine and a tiny shack that holds an entire fancy restaurant on the inside. While the film was never produced, the lost screenplay was turned into a graphic novel by Ramón K. Pérez in 2014. This screenplay, and its subsequent graphic novel, shaped how I wanted to tell my story in the desert. *Tale of Sand* stresses how the expansive environment of the desert can affect a person’s mental and emotional states, with the graphic novel creating beautiful and bold imagery to accompany the story. This imagery, both from the screenplay and the comic, played a major role in how I wanted the desert to interact with the characters in my project, especially in the final act of the screenplay.

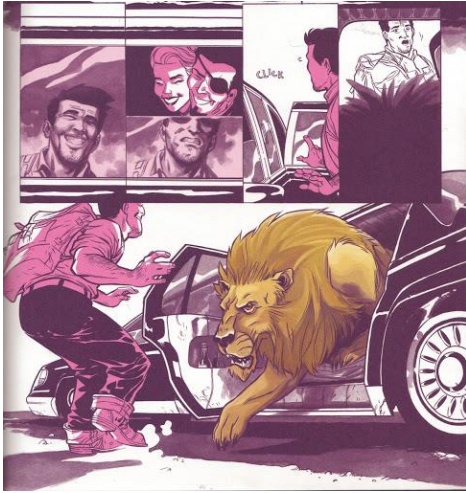


Figure 3: Pérez, *Tale of Sand*, 2014



Figure 4: Pérez, *Tale of Sand*, 2014

The next major source of inspiration can actually be found through the project's title: *The Road to Nowhere*. Normally when writing a story, I like to save the title's conception until the very end, but with one of my inspirations for this thesis, I immediately caught on to the title right away. I had only just started to listen to Talking Heads when I was brainstorming this project, with classics like *Once in a Lifetime* and *This Must Be the Place* being a few favorites. *Road to Nowhere* introduced itself later on and not only was I entranced by its uplifting melody, but I was also really attracted to the lyrics. By this point, I already had the road trip idea in mind, so when I looked through the lyrics, I found some beautiful, narrative points in the song that I wanted to parallel in my screenplay.

“ *I'm feeling okay this morning, and you know,
We're on a road to Paradise, Here we go, here we go...
There's a city in mind, come along and take that ride...
And it's very far away, But it's growing day by day...
Would you like to come along, you can help me sing the song...*

They can tell you what to do, But they'll make a fool of you,

And it's alright, baby, it all right " -*Road to Nowhere*, Talking Heads

This idea of paradise and an eagerness to get closer to it resonated with me and this story I was developing, and as the plot points began to take shape, I liked the idea of going “nowhere”. So with that in mind, I took to name my project after the beautiful song written by the talented David Byrne.

While these two works were my major inspirations for my work, there are still other influences that shaped my story worth noting. For example, the protagonist’s love for jazz and the saxophone comes from my own experience as a saxophone player and listening to jazz performers in person or on records. At one point, our protagonist explains why he chose to play the saxophone, describing how the saxophone is “technically a woodwind, but it's made out of brass like a trumpet. Not many band and orchestral pieces utilize the saxophone. I don't know, the saxophone doesn't really belong anywhere, y'know? And I relate to that feeling.” This quote describes my own personal attraction to the saxophone when I first decided to play it, with my fascination for the instrument and its role in music growing a decade later. With this in mind, I continued to make music a theme throughout the piece and how music affects our characters, both in moments of pleasure and crisis. Finally, I set the hometown of our heroes to be Houston, Texas. Not only did I choose this location because of my personal connection to the city, but also I have found Houston to be its own form of Despinia that our hero does not quite see. He decides to leave one artistic city for another; while he does appreciate some aspects of Houston, his mind still wanders to what could be, leading him to go on to his adventure.

Once the atmosphere and environment of the story were established, I began work on writing. With having specific beats and points I wanted to hit on already in mind, I was left with

the task of connecting these dots to create a cohesive story. A strong focus during this process was understanding that this story should center around our protagonist, Justin Reynolds, and his quest to find a home and an identity for himself. One tool utilized to help with navigating the arch and trajectory of the story was a scene wall, a practice derived from Blake Snyder’s book on screenwriting, Save the Cat!. I initially started with the main beats of Justin’s journey and then filled in the gaps with scenes that would create the best cohesive and entertaining story. This wall, which lists every distinctive scene in the movie, was established in my own apartment, in a way forcing Justin’s story and his journey into my home and everyday life.



Figure 5: Scene Wall by Noah Key, 2021

As the writing process continued, the duality of Justin’s journey began to make itself more apparent. Throughout the screenplay, Justin experiences two different crises: one with reality and one with identity. With his crisis on reality, Justin experiences a variety of hallucinations, all warning him that he is going “nowhere” and that he will not find what he is looking for. These hallucinations represent the unknown, the reality-bending that is heavily prevalent in the psychological thriller genre. The next crisis deals with Justin’s identity, and who he wants to be. In the opening scenes of the screenplay, the audience is introduced to Justin’s predicament and how he feels that he just “doesn’t fit in” with normal society. These scenes

emphasize the theme of the film and act as the catalyst for Justin's search for something new, leading him to Despina. The identity crisis shoots Justin right into his reality crisis, and the two merge together to create Justin's central yet dichotomic conflict.

It is crucial to note the important crisis within our second protagonist, Clare Geller. Throughout the story, Clare is always in conflict between her logical senses and her compassion for Justin. Even at the beginning of the screenplay, Clare is torn between supporting Justin's desire to live the struggling-artist lifestyle and guiding him to find a sensible job and finally make a life of himself. This conflict suddenly grows when Justin decides to journey to Despina, leaving Clare to make the difficult decision: stay with her desired job, her education, and opportunities or leave it all to follow her best friend. While she does take the risk of joining Justin, she never stops questioning whether it was the best decision or not. This conflict within Clare represents what many young people struggle with before entering adulthood. How much are we willing to risk finding happiness? Where do we find happiness: in the jobs and opportunities we earn or the people and environment we surround ourselves with? The heart of the story is where Justin's crisis and Clare's crisis meet, demonstrating the bond these two characters have, how they interact with one another, and how they take on the world together.

By the time I wrote a substantive number of scenes, I took to how my writing was perceived by others. I notice in my previous works, both for theatre and screen, that I am quite expository and act as a director through my writing, with this project being no exception. This note was also pointed out by my colleagues and advisors, so I searched for ways to constrain these tendencies. Taking in the advice of my committee, I decided to have the performance of this screenplay be directed by someone other than myself, allowing me to experience the true role of the writer. In the virtual table read of the first 18 pages of *The Road to Nowhere*, I gave

the role of director to a trusted colleague of mine from Honors College Club Theater, Keegan Freeman. The only notes and information I provided to him were my sources of inspiration and what I believed were the important themes of the story. A screenwriter will certainly imagine how the scenes will play out while they are in the writing process, but there is also a limit to how far the screenwriter should go in detailing the characters. The writer gives a certain amount of space in their work to allow for the actors and director to find different ways to interpret the characters; this allows these artists to create a strong connection to the characters, to make the characters their own. Any writer, including myself, can feel some sort of nervousness or fear of how their work will be perceived or interpreted by others, especially in performative mediums. During the table reading, I witnessed Keegan and the actors portray the characters in their own unique ways while still respecting what was established in the story. I saw as my peers transformed into the characters that I had spent the good part of a year simply imagining on paper. While they were not what I imagined when I started this project months ago, their portrayals were no less the characters than the ones I wrote down. The table reading, while short, was still a crucial part of this thesis and my growth as a screenwriter.



*Figure 6: A virtual table read of *The Road to Nowhere*, April 3rd, 2021. From left to right.*

Top row: Aria Shankar, Lawrence Weeden, Naomi Zidon. Middle Row: Anthony Ontiveros, Ashli Acuna, Noah Key.

Bottom Row: Keegan Freeman

Ultimately, this thesis served as a form of introspection of myself. Not only did I discover what kind of writer I want to be and what kind of stories I want to tell, but I learned more about how I perceive my relationships, my reality, and my connection to the world we live in. While I wrote this coming-of-age story with full confidence of how this genre generically plays out, I am still living this stage of my life, still learning about what it means to be a person in the world. The idea of my identity is something I still grapple with to this day, but I believe that this should not restrict what I write, but rather strengthen it. Art, one way or another, is a reflection of the artist in the moment of its creation, yet at the same time, the art can reflect back onto the artist. Writing this thesis provided me insight into my own journey as an artist and storyteller, and I believe that is an important step for every artist to take. As I continue my path as a cinematic storyteller, I will look back to this thesis as a portrait of myself in this era of my life, reflecting on who I was and who I became going forward.

Treatment

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

LOGLINE: When a college drop-out musician and his best friend take a harrowing, transcendental journey to the mysterious desert city of Despina, he discovers more about himself and what he wants out of life.

TREATMENT:

This film looks to combine the coming-of-age genre of cinema with the losing-grip-on-reality trope known in psychological thrillers. With this in mind, the film focuses on themes such as identity, finding your place in the world, and navigating the unknown. The atmosphere of the film begins light and playful, but as the film progresses, the tone grows darker, weirder, and more macabre. There are moments of playful banter throughout the whole story, but there is an increasing feeling of dread and confusion looming over our protagonists. With hallucinations and visions scattered across the film, the idea of our young heroes navigating the unknown is taken to a new level for the audience.

The Road to Nowhere opens with a road in the middle of the Great Basin Desert. The camera slowly pans up and we see, off in the distance but not out of reach, a mystical city, shining under the burning sun. Just as the camera begins to zoom in, our hero, Justin Reynolds, bursts open his eyes and jolts up in his bed. A dream? A vision? Justin drags himself out of bed. A youthful, 21-year-old man with long, tangled hair and a slightly unshaven face, Justin exemplifies his "alternative" style he strives to achieve. As Justin makes his way downstairs, the film introduces his dysfunctional family. The family comprises of his suburban mother, his cold-hearted businessman father, and Ava, his 13-year old sister who remains to be the glitter of hope

for this family. As Mrs. Reynolds and Ava head off for the day, Justin and his father discuss Justin's dropping out of college, his constant obsession with playing the saxophone, and his unwillingness to get a job. Justin declares to his father that he "just doesn't belong here" in this suburban life, emphasizing the theme of the film. After the heated discussion settles, Mr. Reynolds informs Justin that he has one week to move out or start paying rent. As his father leaves, Justin has a brief, sudden vision of the desert city, a vision of what lies ahead.

Distraught with his situation and nothing to do, Justin continues his day by traveling to the Heights of Houston, visiting his favorite places. He ends the day at the Cottonwood Bar, where he plays another one of his saxophone gigs. In the middle of the gig, Justin's best friend Clare Geller walks into the bar. The two then begin to reminisce about when they used to play jazz together when Justin was still in school and before Clare stopped playing, with Justin playing the scene out with their favorite song. As Justin comes home late that night, he runs into Ava drawing a beautiful picture of a desert mouse for homework. Justin mentions how Ava can really be whatever she wants to be, with Ava responding, "Can't you?"

The next day, Justin and Clare visit the library together, where Justin tells Clare about his rent and job situation. Clare, understanding both sides, tries to find a compromise for Justin to find a job here that he will still enjoy. This begins the conflict within Clare between her emotions and her senses, a conflict that grows throughout the film. Suddenly, Justin comes across a book about the desert city from his dream. The book describes the city, named Despina, as a paradise for artists, musicians, and freethinkers, secluded from the outside world. While Clare questions the validity of the book and the very existence of the city, Justin becomes entranced by the book and dreams of finding Despina for himself. By the next morning, Justin convinces himself that he must journey out and find himself a home in Despina, inviting Clare along with her. He breaks

the news to his family over breakfast, utterly embarrassing Clare. Clare storms out, naming off Justin as crazy. As she contemplates the situation alone, Clare realizes that she cares very deeply for Justin and does not want to be without him. After Justin says his goodbyes to his family, he finds Clare, packed and ready, waiting for him by the car. The two hop into the car and drive out towards Despina, guiding our audience into the second act.

Not long after their journey begins, the two stop at a gas station not too far from city limits. Clare goes into the convenience store of the gas station, where she encounters a creepy cashier who asks if she and Justin are a couple, with Clare giving a bumbling reply, hinting at her romantic feelings for Justin. As she is doing this, Justin begins practicing his saxophone outside near a pasture of cows. As he begins to play, the cows start to creep closer towards Justin. One of the cows manages to break the fence and starts to cross the road towards Justin when suddenly a truck runs over the cow. Justin runs over to the bloodied cow when the cow starts to suddenly speak in a demonic voice, “You are going nowhere!” Horrified, Justin runs back into the car. This is our first instance of Justin’s hallucinations and foreshadows what lies in store for our heroes. Justin does not tell Clare of the experience as the two head back down the road. Not long after, Clare brings up to Justin the fact that she has given up everything to go on this trip with him. Justin, initially too traumatized to answer, reassures her that they will be in this together. This moment emphasizes the crucial bond between Justin and Clare, and with it lies the heart of the film.

That night, Justin is awakened by a desert mouse who bites him on the hand. As he chases after the mouse, he runs into a creepy, elderly woman, who begins to chase him and terrify him. The next morning, Clare, noticing Justin is acting strange, takes him to a diner for breakfast. While at the diner, Justin calls Ava to ask how his family is doing. After Ava tells him

that their parents are doing just fine without him, Justin realizes that he does not want to return home. When his food comes out, Justin sees more terrifying imagery in his pancakes and retreats to the restroom. In there, his reflection in the mirror turns into a dirty, chilling version of himself, warning him that he is indeed going nowhere. Upon leaving the diner, Justin admits to Clare the horrible things he has been experiencing on their trip. Clare suggests that they head back home, but Justin refuses, reaffirming his desire to find a life for himself in Despina. This marks a specific shift in Justin's character, where he starts to spiral out of control into insanity.

At another gas station stop, Clare enters the store, where the same creepy cashier is working. Not really noticing he is the same man, Clare confides in the cashier that she is truly in love with Justin. This acts as a pivotal moment of self-realization for Clare. As they continue down the road, Justin begins to see the elderly woman creepily smiling and waving at him from the side of the road, over and over again. Growing concerned for Justin's wellbeing, Clare pulls over by some rock formations to let Justin relax. While he tries to relax, Justin sees horrifying faces in the rocks, leading him to run out by himself. Lost, Justin runs into the elderly woman again and begins asking what she wants with him. She snaps her fingers and Justin falls onto the ground, passed out. Not long after, Clare wakes Justin up and brings him back to the car. That night, Justin begins to scream in his sleep, "Nowhere!", traumatizing Clare.

The next evening, Justin drives them down the road. He starts to see the elderly woman again. With his insanity growing, Justin decides to take an opportunity to end his suffering once and for all. He steers towards the elderly lady and runs over, intentionally killing her. Clare, who now sees the old lady, is horrified by what Justin has just done, thinking the old lady to just be a hitchhiker. Justin, however, is relieved by the fact that the old lady is dead. As Justin buries the body, Clare calls Justin completely crazy and pleads for them to go home. When Justin refuses,

Clare admits that she never really wanted to go to Despina and only went on the trip to be with Justin, confessing her love for him. Clare ends the conversation by stating he has done something unforgivable. The two then drive to a motel for the night. The next morning, Justin wakes up to find that Clare and the station wagon are gone. We are now thrust into the third act of the film.

In the motel bathroom, Justin encounters his creepy mirror version again, who tells Justin it is too late and that he is in fact nowhere. Justin, still set on finding Despina, decides to take his journey on foot. As he continues down the desert, he begins to encounter more strange occurrences. This marks a shift in tone for the film, leading into the world of the abstract and unusual. Just like our characters, the audience feels uneasy in this environment. In one occurrence, a jazz band drives by and offers Justin a ride to Despina, only to retract the offer and laugh in his face. In another, Justin is chased and attacked by numerous desert mice. When Justin falls asleep on the desert ground, alone, he begins to cry, missing Clare. The same night, Clare is driving back home when she spots the creepy cashier on the side of the road. She suddenly stops the car, realizing that Justin may not be any less crazy than herself.

Trudging under the desert sun alone, Justin spots what he believes to be Despina. He runs up to the sight in joy, only to find out it is the dead cow from before, standing in the middle of the road. Justin goes into a rampage, yelling at the cow to tell him where Despina is. He then passes out again and wakes up to the elderly lady standing over him. As she begins to question Justin about how he dragged Clare along on this journey, the elderly lady takes off her skin to reveal herself to be Clare. Justin runs up to the image of Clare, apologizing for not appreciating what she has done for him, and cries out how he loves her too. This moment depicts Justin at his very lowest. The image of Clare then blows away in the wind. As a desert mouse crawls up to

him, Justin welcomes the mouse and puts it on his shoulder, accepting the fact that he is indeed crazy.

A new day and Justin walks down the road with a new sense of energy. As he continues walking, the world around him begins to blend into a bright sky of color with jazz music playing. After a few moments in this world, the audience sees that in fact, Justin is dirty, exhausted, and insane. He reaches a point at the road and falls to his knees, beholding a sight not seen to the audience. Justin first begins to laugh maniacally in joy, but the laugh turns into a loud sob. He then feels a presence behind him. Justin turns around and sees Clare, the real Clare, standing behind him. They then smile at each other in the middle of nowhere, as the film fades to black.

The Road to Nowhere

By

Noah Key

A Screenplay

©April 2021

FADE IN:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

A long, narrow road, stretching across the empty desert.

Slowly, the road's destination is revealed. On the horizon, way off in the distance but not too far out of reach: a city.

Beautiful, unearthly skyscrapers shoot up behind the grand, surrounding walls. The road is a straight shot towards its gates. This mystical city glimmers under the shining sun.

This is DESPINA.

As we slowly move closer to this magnificent sight...

INT. JUSTIN'S BEDROOM- MORNING

The alarm clock blares loudly as two eyes suddenly open wide.

JUSTIN REYNOLDS, a youthful, 21-year-old man, jolts up in his bed, startled. With long, tangled hair and a slightly unshaven face, Justin exemplifies his "alternative" style he strives to achieve.

He breathes heavily as he turns and shuts off his alarm.

He has a contorted face of confusion, for a brief moment, contemplating. A dream? A vision?

He shakes it off as he gets up out of bed.

INT. REYNOLDS HOUSE- CONTINUOUS

MONTAGE:

Justin gets ready for the day.

Posters of jazz musicians cover the walls of his room. His desk is covered with papers, scribbled with sheet music.

On the floor sits an open saxophone case, accompanied by a clearly old and used saxophone and a few dollar bills spilling out from behind it.

Surrounding the saxophone case on the floor is a messy array of dirty clothes, books, and other assortments of junk. This mess continues across the house as Justin makes his way to the bathroom. Comb, brushes, and men's grooming bottles clutter the sink.

Despite all of these items laying around, Justin, still pondering, simply puts on deodorant, sniffs to check, and leaves.

Back in his room, he picks up a sweatshirt and jeans from the ground and puts them on. He takes one final look in the mirror. He looks himself up and down. He then stares at himself straight in the eyes.

JUSTIN
(under his breath)
Into the valley of death.

Suddenly, from down the hall:

MRS. REYNOLDS (O.S.)
JUSTIN! Breakfast!

Justin turns back, annoyed. He sighs. He turns back to the mirror.

JUSTIN
All the world wondered.

CUT TO:

INT. REYNOLDS KITCHEN- CONTINUOUS

All around the kitchen table is the Reynolds nuclear family, getting ready for the day ahead:

MRS. REYNOLDS, an energetic woman in her late 40's, is dressed in athletic clothing. She quickly sets plates of food down around the table.

Already in her seat sits AVA REYNOLDS, Justin's cheerful 13-year-old sister. She looks up from her cell phone as her mom sets down her plate.

AVA
Thanks, Mom!

MRS. REYNOLDS
Sure thing, sweetheart.

Mrs. Reynolds sets down the last plate in an empty spot.

MRS. REYNOLDS
(yelling)
JUSTIN REYNOLDS, don't make me call you over again!

She sits down and begins to eat her small breakfast quickly. As she chows down, she looks across the table to her husband.

MRS. REYNOLDS
I can not be late today. Last time I was late, the cycling instructor threatened to move me to the second row. *Second row!*

MR. REYNOLDS, a well-built 50-year-old man in a three-piece suit, sits with an electronic tablet and stylus, working on finances and whatnot. He does not seem to notice his wife.

MRS. REYNOLDS
(annoyed)
Harold!

Mr. Reynolds quickly looks up from his tablet.

MR. REYNOLDS
Huh?

MRS. REYNOLDS
I was telling you how I *can't* be late again to my-
(shouting back)
JUSTIN! GET DOWN HERE!
(back to Mr. Reynolds)
-to my cycling class and I'm just so-

MR. REYNOLDS
(shutting it down)
Okay, okay, well, y'know what? You go to your cycling. I'll take Ava to school today.

MRS. REYNOLDS
(sighs in relief)
Really? You'd do that?
(yelling back)
JUSTIN! NOW!

MR. REYNOLDS
Yes yes, it's no trouble at all.

Having already finished her food, Mrs. Reynolds gets up.

MRS. REYNOLDS
Baby, you're a lifesaver!

She walks over and kisses her husband's forehead.

MRS. REYNOLDS (CONT'D)
And you'll tell Justin what we agreed
on?

MR. REYNOLDS
Yes, dear.

At this line, Justin enters the kitchen silently. He keeps his eyes to the ground as he goes straight to his seat at the table. Mr. Reynolds notices him.

MRS. REYNOLDS
(groans)
Justin, every morning now?

MR. REYNOLDS
Ah, and here is his majesty now. Did
we interrupt your busy morning?

JUSTIN
(sarcastically)
Good one, Dad!

MRS. REYNOLDS
Okay, well, I *need* to head out now.
(to her husband)
Let me know how it goes.
(back to everyone)
Love you, Ava!

AVA
Bye, Mom! Love you too.

JUSTIN
(doesn't look up)
Bye, Mom!

Mrs. Reynolds leaves.

Mr. Reynolds looks up from his tablet over to his daughter and smiles.

MR. REYNOLDS
(a little too cheerful)
Ava, sweetie, could you get your stuff
ready and wait by the car? I'll be out
there in a little bit.

AVA
Yeah, sure, Dad!

Ava gets up and passes by Justin.

AVA
 (whispers)
 I'm sorry.

Ava leaves the room. Mr. Reynolds looks back down at his tablet.

Justin, still eating, continues to look down as he spurts out:

JUSTIN
 So, what did Mom want you to talk to me about?

Silence from Mr. Reynolds. He does not flinch.

JUSTIN
 Hm, well, let's see. Could it be that you guys finally believe in me?

Again, no response.

JUSTIN
 Ooh, wait, it's *that* you wanna talk about. Again?
 (mockingly)
Your mother and I are concerned about you. I mean, for god's sake, ever since you dropped out, you've just wasted your time with your damn saxophone! We just think you need to get back to work or school or something! Something just to fit in!
 (back to serious)
 Well, y'know what Dad, maybe I don't fit in! Have you thought about that! Who dictated that my life had to go a certain way? That I have to have x by this time and be working on y by this time. Since when was my life not mine? Why do I have to have a plan? Why can't I just continue the way I've been living? I play my sax a couple times at the Cottonwood bar downtown, I make a few bucks here and there. I'm satisfied with that, what more do I need right now? Just face it, Dad. I don't belong in this lifestyle. This bland, provincial, suburban, Americana

society rejects me! And I reject it!

A beat. Then:

MR. REYNOLDS
You finished?

A beat.

JUSTIN
Yes.

MR. REYNOLDS
Well, Justin...I, um,
you're...something. Your days of
"rejecting it" for free are over.

Justin is taken aback a little. Mr. Reynolds closes his tablet, gets up, and starts to head out.

MR. REYNOLDS (CONT'D)
You have one more week here. After
that, the rent is \$250 a week.

Mr. Reynolds exits.

Justin sits still at the table. He stares off through the window, breathing heavily. He sees his Dad's car pass by. His breathing intensifies.

A sudden frame of Despina flashes before his mind again. His anger begins to dissipate as his mind wanders.

He gets up from the table.

EXT. HIGHWAY- DAY

Justin, in his car, sits in frozen traffic on I-10. He gazes out onto the skyline of Houston, Texas.

He then gazes over the thousands of cars in front of him.

A frame of the open road of Despina flashes before his eyes again.

EXT. 19TH STREET- DAY

MONTAGE:

A scene of Justin exploring the street and its stores. The scene is set to jazz or soul music, a la The Suffers.

Justin walks down 19th street. He passes by the many notable shops of the street. He browses vinyl records in the local record store. He navigates around an outdoor art market with tents filled with paintings, jewelry, and artistry. He picks up a taco from a food truck. He sits on the curb as he eats his food.

The whole time, Justin appears to enjoy his time, however, something still fogs his mind.

INT. COTTONWOOD BAR- NIGHT

Justin, donning a nice button-up shirt and slacks, walks into the bar, with his saxophone case in hand.

A bartender from behind the bar waves to him.

BARTENDER

Hey, Justin! Glad you're here. Same spot as usual.

Justin waves back slightly, but he avoids eye contact. His mind is still wandering.

He reaches a spot in the back of the bar. A small stool waits for him in the corner.

He sets up his saxophone. As he does this, we get a look of the bar. A few people glance over towards Justin, but no one pays attention.

Justin pulls his saxophone up to his mouth. He plays a low-pitched warm-up note.

Again, the bar comers barely notice.

Justin then takes a deep breath. He starts to play a loud funky, jazz piece, a la The Gap Band or Parliament.

It is here that people start noticing. Justin notices back. His energy is lifted, almost smiling while he plays. Colors fly around Justin as he gets into the groove of the music.

A few moments pass when a woman walks into the bar. Justin glances up. His eyes widen with glee.

The woman is CLARE GELLER, a 22-year-old college student and Justin's best friend. Similar to Justin's efforts, she too exemplifies the alternative style.

She waves at him. Not missing a beat on his saxophone, he

waves back.

Clare approaches Justin just as soon as he finishes his song.

CLARE

I swear you play the same damn song every time, Reynolds.

JUSTIN

What can I say, Geller, it's a hit.

Clare looks down at the measly 12 dollars and change thrown in Justin's open saxophone case.

CLARE

Clearly.

A beat as they lightly chuckle at this.

JUSTIN

Maybe if you hadn't quit playing, Geller, we could've-

CLARE

No, no, no, not again.

JUSTIN

C'mon, don't tell me you don't miss the nightlife, the excitement, the jazz.

A beat as they both reminisce. Clare sighs and smiles at him.

CLARE

It's my senior year, I got an internship, and I found my calling. I'm finally going to be a sound engineer.

Justin smirks back and nods, understanding.

CLARE (CONT'D)

Besides, you're talking to me about quitting?

Justin winces at this line, thinking about earlier.

JUSTIN

Fair enough. I shouldn't have mentioned it.

A beat as Clare notices something's wrong.

CLARE
Your parents giving you shit again?

A beat.

JUSTIN
Let's talk tomorrow. This:

He motions around the bar.

JUSTIN
My safe place.

Clare nods. A beat.

CLARE
Hey. Play the one I like.

JUSTIN
You like all of them.

CLARE
The one we used to play together.

Justin smiles.

JUSTIN
(hamming it up)
Ooooh, you mean this one?

Justin starts to play a slower jazz piece. He sits back down on his stool.

Clare finds a table right in front of him. She sits down and watches him as he plays on.

INT. REYNOLDS HOUSE- NIGHT

It's the middle of the night as Justin creeps through the front door. The lights are completely out.

Justin slowly tries to walk through the house silently to get to his room.

He then notices a light coming from the kitchen.

He peaks in through the entryway.

INT. REYNOLDS KITCHEN- CONTINUOUS

Ava sits at the kitchen table, a textbook open in front of her. She is scribbling down something in a composition book.

Justin walks towards her.

JUSTIN

You still up?

Ava is startled a bit but then goes back to scribbling.

AVA

Yeah.

Justin crosses over and sits down next to her.

JUSTIN

Yeah, I remember my own late nights of procrastinating homework.

AVA

Oh, no, this is an extra credit project for PreAP Science.

JUSTIN

Oh?

Justin peers over to see what she is doing. She is drawing a beautifully drawn diagram of a desert mouse.

AVA

It's a biological diagram of the Desert Pocket Mouse.

Justin is immediately humbled by her response.

JUSTIN

I still don't know where you got all this talent from.

AVA

Speak for yourself. You're the one who gets to go out and play music for people every other night.

Justin takes in this moment.

JUSTIN

Well, I think what you got going on is incredible. You really can do anything

you want, y'know that?

AVA
Can't you?

A beat. A frame of Despina flashes before Justin's eyes.

He brings himself back in.

JUSTIN
I'm gonna go to bed. Don't go too hard
tonight, okay?

AVA
Okay, Justin.

JUSTIN
Goodnight kiddo.

AVA
Goodnight.

Justin kisses the top of his sister's head and walks off.

Ava continues drawing the desert mouse.

EXT. LIBRARY- DAY

Waiting patiently on the steps of the public library sits Clare. Looking up and down from her phone, she finally spots Justin coming around the corner. She instantly puts her phone away and stands up. She shouts across:

CLARE
Took you long enough, Reynolds!

JUSTIN
Really, Geller? Because according to
my time, it's 11 o'clock, exactly like
we planned on.

CLARE
Well as our music professor says,
"Early is on time, and on time is
late"

JUSTIN
Ugh, that creepy fuck!

CLARE
(jokingly)
Well, I still have to deal with him
every Wednesday for class. Thanks
again for ditching me there.

JUSTIN
(jokingly back)
Low blow there, Geller. Low blow.

The two continue up the steps of the library together,
laughing.

INT. LIBRARY- DAY

Justin and Clare are looking through shelves of books. Clare
already has a small selection of books in one arm. Justin,
not looking as attentively, is empty-handed.

CLARE
Do you even have any leads on a job?

Justin scoffs.

JUSTIN
What do you think?

CLARE
What happened to that sax teaching gig
you had?

This line catches the attention of an older gentleman sitting
by himself. He looks at Clare sternly. She notices.

CLARE
Sax! I said sax! As in the instrument,
saxophone!

Justin can't help but chuckle.

CLARE
Oh, grow up!

JUSTIN
Hey now, you're starting to sound like
my parents.

CLARE
Well, maybe they're not so wrong.

JUSTIN
(confused)
Wait, what?

CLARE
I'm just saying, job means money.
Money means independence from your
parents. I mean, do you really enjoy
living with them?

JUSTIN
I suppose not.

CLARE
Exactly. And who says it has to be
some boring-ass office job? Become a
bartender, or a pastry chef, or a pole-
dancer!

JUSTIN
Right, I'm sure my dad will be totally
cool with me securing a pole-dancing
gig.

CLARE
It can be whatever. But I agree with
your parents.

JUSTIN
Oh, so you full-on agree with them
now?

CLARE
I mean...maybe! I'm still on your
side, but you can't just live off of
tips at random gigs anymore. The
struggling artist life can't last
forever.

JUSTIN
Who says it can't?

CLARE
(groans)
All I'm saying is, your parents have a
point, but you don't need to be
exactly like them. Find your own
unique way to fit in.

JUSTIN
I've given up on that. I've come to

the conclusion that I don't belong here.

Clare's face grows with concern at this line.

CLARE

Is that so?

Justin nods, not noticing his friend's expression as he browses the shelves.

JUSTIN

I have nothing going for me here.

Clare, kinda hurt, follows behind him.

CLARE

Really? You have *nothing* here? *Nothing at all*? Nobody you can rely on and trust?

As Clare continues to question Justin, a red book flies off the shelf and hits Justin in the arm. Justin audibly winces in pain and quickly looks over. Through the spot where the book once sat, across the shelf on the other side, a grey eye stares straight at Justin through the shelf. As soon as Justin tries to focus in to see who it belongs to, the mysterious person races away.

CLARE

What the hell was that?

Justin picks up the red book. It appears ancient, with the pages turned yellow and the text handwritten in ink.

Justin opens to the front page. In large letters reads the title:

JUSTIN

(reading aloud)

Despina.

CLARE

Huh?

JUSTIN

That's the title of the book. Despina.

CLARE

Well, what's it about?

Justin ruffles through the pages and then suddenly stops on a page. His eyes widen.

JUSTIN
I've seen this before.

CLARE
You've read this book before?

JUSTIN
No, I've seen this picture before.

He points out the page to Clare.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)
I saw this in my dream last night.

CLARE
Okay, cut the shit, Reynolds.

JUSTIN
I'm serious, I saw this desert and
this city in my dream last night. I
saw Despina.

We finally see the picture on the page. Sure enough, an ink drawing of Despina is in the center.

INT. LIBRARY- DAY-LATER

In a different part of the library, Clare sits and watches Justin as he paces back and forth, immersed in the book.

CLARE
Okay, so let me try to get this again.
You had a dream last night about a
city in the middle of the desert? And
now this city you dreamt up magically
appears in this book and it's called
Despina?

A beat.

JUSTIN
What's not to get?

Clare lets out a heavy breath.

CLARE
So what does it say about this city?

JUSTIN

Well, this book says that Despina is a lost city in the Great Basin Desert. It's a stronghold where artists and musicians and lovers came to escape the rest of the world.

CLARE

Okay, so it's a folk tale?

JUSTIN

No, the book reads too specifically to be fictional. It reads more like a first-hand account of the city. I think this place actually existed.

CLARE

Well, if this Despina *did* exist, which I highly doubt, it's definitely long gone.

Beat.

JUSTIN

...but what if it isn't?

CLARE

(concerned)

Sorry, come again, Reynolds.

JUSTIN

What if Despina's still out there?

CLARE

(concern growing)

...Justin...

JUSTIN

What if I can find it?

At this, Clare bolts up and faces Justin head-on. She takes the book, slams it shut, and throws it on the table, not breaking eye contact.

CLARE

Justin, you're talking crazy now.

JUSTIN

Why is it crazy?

CLARE

Really?

A beat. Justin looks up confused.

JUSTIN

What?

CLARE

Satellite images? Government agencies?
Fucking Google maps? Is there any
proof?

JUSTIN

This is the proof!

CLARE

It's not real, Justin. It's literally
a fairytale in a book.

JUSTIN

Clare, I'm serious. I swear I saw
Despina in my dream last night and now
I find *this*. Maybe it's a sign. *Maybe*
it's out there, calling out to me.

CLARE

Maybe you've been watching too many
science fiction shows.

An alarm goes off in Clare's pocket. She pulls out her phone
and clicks the noise off.

CLARE

(starts to pack things up)
Damnit, I have to get to work. But
listen, take a break from this Despina
shit. I don't want you going crazy on
me.

Clare starts to head off.

CLARE (CONT'D)

And just...start considering your
options. Please. For me.

JUSTIN

Yeah, yeah, get outta here, Geller.

Clare exits off down the library stairs.

Justin darts his eyes back to the book. Despina flashes before his eyes again.

JUSTIN
(quietly to himself)
It has to be a sign.

He quickly sits back down and begins engrossing himself in the book again.

TRANSITION TO:

INT. LIBRARY- NIGHT- LATER

Hours pass.

Justin remains in the same spot, still absorbed in his reading. Nothing else around him matters. He jolts up when he hears:

LIBRARY PA (V.O.)
YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. THE LIBRARY
WILL CLOSE IN 5 MINUTES. PLEASE MAKE
YOUR FINAL TRANSACTIONS AND EXIT THE
BUILDING.

Justin checks the time on his phone. Late. He closes the book and gets up to leave.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY FRONT DESK- NIGHT

The book SLAMS on the check-out desk. Justin looks up eagerly.

JUSTIN
Hi, yes, I'd like to check out this
book.

Justin excitedly smiles as the librarian scans the book and hands it back to him.

INT. REYNOLDS KITCHEN- MORNING

The next morning.

Mr. Reynolds, Mrs. Reynolds, and Ava sit at the kitchen table, enjoying a nice, slow breakfast. They are all in comfortable clothes.

The weekend is finally here, with much-needed rest and relaxation.

Mr. Reynolds notices Justin's empty chair.

MR. REYNOLDS

Sweetie, have you seen Justin this morning?

MRS. REYNOLDS

No, I haven't. I bet you anything he's probably still asleep.

MR. REYNOLDS

After I told him to start looking for a job, he takes it as "sleep in later"!

A KNOCK on the back door connected to the kitchen. Peeking through the window blinds is Clare, waving at the Reynolds.

MRS. REYNOLDS

Oh, it's Clare, how nice. Ava, could you please let her in?

Ava excitedly gets up and opens the door for Clare. Clare comes in and smiles down at Ava.

CLARE

Hey Ava, how's the eighth grade working for ya?

Clare and Ava perform a fun, intricate handshake that they have obviously done before.

AVA

Oh, not too bad. I'm starting to really enjoy my science classes! I just learned that the Desert Pocket Mouse does not need to drink water, but actually gets water from the seeds it eats.

CLARE

Woah, that's so interesting. Well, keep that attitude up, not many other students are as interested as you are in desert mice.

Clare walks more into the kitchen.

MR. REYNOLDS
Mornin' Clare!

CLARE
Morning Mr. Reynolds. Do you know if
Justin's up yet?

MRS. REYNOLDS
We figure he's still sleeping in, the
lazybones. Why don't you wake him up
and bring him down here?

CLARE
Will do, Mrs. Reynolds!

Clare turns down the hall towards Justin's room.

MRS. REYNOLDS
(to Mr. Reynolds)
She's such a sweetheart, that Clare
Geller.

MR. REYNOLDS
Mhm, I don't know why she hangs around
our son though.

CUT TO:

INT. JUSTIN'S BEDROOM- CONTINUOUS

Outside of Justin's door, Clare knocks.

CLARE
Justin, it's Clare? You up?

A faint groan of approval resonates from behind the door.

CLARE
Okay, it doesn't sound like you're
completely up. I'm coming in.

Clare opens the door and enters.

The room is utterly dark except for one lamp over the bed. Underneath the light, a completely awake Justin, in the same clothes as the previous day. In his hands, the red book is open to one of the later pages.

Justin pops up his head to Clare, his eyes wide open and crazed. Clare lets out a small yelp at this sight.

JUSTIN
(creepily)
I didn't sleep last night, Clare.

CLARE
(still shocked)
Yeah, I can see that bud.

JUSTIN
I just can't stop thinking about it.

CLARE
Oh god.

JUSTIN
I know it's out there, Clare. I can
feel it.

Clare crosses to Justin and takes hold of the book.

CLARE
I think you've had enough reading for
now.

JUSTIN
Clare. You gotta believe me.

Justin tries to hold on to the book, but Clare manages to take it from him. As Clare sets it down on the desk, Justin stares at the book intensely.

CLARE
C'mon, your family's waiting for us.

Justin slowly gets up out of bed. Clare wraps her arm around him as they walk side by side out of his room.

INT. REYNOLDS KITCHEN- CONTINUOUS

Justin and Clare enter the kitchen. The Reynolds all stop and stare at Justin's appearance.

Wrinkled clothes, sunken eyes, hair greasy and tangled, Justin looks like a bigger mess than usual.

MRS. REYNOLDS
Justin, what happened to you?

Clare and Justin pull up chairs at the table.

CLARE
He just was up all night working.

MR. REYNOLDS
(suspicious)
Oh really? What were you up all night working on?

A beat of hesitation. Then, Clare bursts, saving the day:

CLARE
He was working on job applications!
He's been trying to find a job near here, so he started applying last night.
(fake chuckling)
Spent most of the time fixin' up that resume.

Justin has been holding a dead stare the entire conversation, not noticing what has been discussed.

MR. REYNOLDS
Justin? Is this true?

Before Justin can say:

CLARE
Huh-yeah! All true!

MR. REYNOLDS
Well, I'm glad to hear that.

CLARE
Yeah, I've been telling him lately about how he needs a job.

MR. REYNOLDS
And right you are, Clare. I'm glad that you're taking some initiative, Justin. You're taking your first concrete steps into becoming a responsible member of society-

JUSTIN
I'M GOING ON A TRIP!

The table falls silent. Clare stares in horror, waiting for what Justin will say next. The family eases in towards Justin.

MR. REYNOLDS
A trip, huh?

JUSTIN
Yes, I'm going on a road trip.

A beat.

MR. REYNOLDS
Is this for some job opportunity out
of town or-

CLARE
Yes, yes it is! He just got this
interview for a job out near Oregon so
we were planning a weekend to-

JUSTIN
No, just a personal road trip.

MR. REYNOLDS
Ah-huh-

JUSTIN
AND Clare's coming with me.

Clare snaps her head towards Justin, making a face of pure
terror and rage.

MR. REYNOLDS
Is that so?!

AVA
Where are you guys going?

MR. REYNOLDS
Yes, do tell us. Where will you guys
be heading in this personal road trip
of yours?

JUSTIN
We're going to Despina.

At this, Clare slams her head into her hands.

EXT. REYNOLDS HOUSE- LATER IN MORNING

Clare is storming down the Reynolds's driveway.

A few moments pass. Justin comes out and follows Clare.

JUSTIN

Wait, Clare-

Clare instantly turns around.

CLARE

What the hell was that?

JUSTIN

I'm sorry-

CLARE

Oh, you're sorry? You embarrassed the hell out of me, dude! And in front of your family...

JUSTIN

It just came out of me-

CLARE

And now we're going on this road trip to find this place that doesn't even fucking exist? I told you to knock off this Despina shit last night!

JUSTIN

Clare, I-

CLARE

You understand you sound crazy now, right? Some insane, peace-loving commune in the middle of the fucking desert!

JUSTIN

So what if it's crazy? You know better than anyone how I'm miserable here. This feels like a sign, I have to see where this leads me. And I want you to come with me.

CLARE

No way, keep me out of this. I still have my life here. Good luck trying to find yours in the desert.

Clare turns around and continues walking away.

CLARE

(yelling behind her)

Call me when you're not crazy anymore.

She takes a few steps, then stops at:

JUSTIN
(yelling back)
You just don't get it, do you? You'll
probably never get it!

A beat. Clare does not turn around but takes in what Justin says. She then continues on.

Justin just stares out as he watches Clare turn the street corner, out of sight. He sighs and then heads back inside.

INT. CLARE'S BEDROOM- AFTERNOON

Clare rushes into her room and immediately falls onto the bed, smushing her face into her pillow. She audibly groans into the pillow.

Clare then turns around and faces the ceiling.

CLARE
(sighs, then under her breath)
Fucking psycho.

A beat.

She then turns and looks at the corkboard on the wall. Pinned on it are photographs of her friends and family. She slowly looks at all of them.

She then notices how most of them are of her and Justin, even more so than her own family. Clare then has a face of ponderment. She then turns back to face the ceiling and takes a deep breath.

CLARE
Damn it.

INT. JUSTIN'S BEDROOM- NIGHT

Justin frantically packs a large backpack. He messily stuffs his bag with some clothes and random snacks from his desk. He is visibly upset.

JUSTIN
(muttering to himself)
Fuck her.

As he continues rage packing and muttering, Mrs. Reynolds passes by the open door and sees her son. She pauses and then

pokes her head in slowly.

MRS. REYNOLDS
Justin, sweetheart, are you okay?

Justin stops for a moment and looks at his mother. He sighs and returns to packing.

JUSTIN
Yeah, I'm fine. Just packing.

MRS. REYNOLDS
Are you guys leaving soon?

JUSTIN
Yeah, but Clare's not coming, it's just me.

MRS. REYNOLDS
Oh, I see.

As Justin continues packing, Mrs. Reynolds takes a step inside.

MRS. REYNOLDS
You're not planning to come back, are you?

At this, Justin stops again. A sense of worry and stress washes over his face, but he does not show his mother.

JUSTIN
I don't know, Mom.

MR. REYNOLDS
How does Ava feel about all this?

A beat. This pierced his heart.

JUSTIN
I...didn't ask her.

A beat.

MR. REYNOLDS
Maybe you should.

Justin contemplates.

JUSTIN
That'll just hurt her more.

MRS. REYNOLDS
She deserves something.
(pauses)
She's your sister.

A beat. Justin then turns his head and slightly nods in agreement.

JUSTIN
I'll do something.

Mrs. Reynolds sheds a few silent tears. She starts to leave.

MRS. REYNOLDS
I hope you find what you're looking
for.

Justin finally turns to face his mother. He locks eyes.

JUSTIN
Me too.

EXT. REYNOLDS HOUSE- A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Justin exits the front door of his house. Strapped on him is his backpack, filled to the brim with clothes and food and stuff. He clutches onto the red book in one hand and his saxophone case in the other. He walks down the walkway towards the driveway, his eyes turned to the ground in frustration.

As he reaches the driveway and his car, he looks up. Justin looks surprised.

Leaning up against his old station wagon, Clare is waiting with her own filled backpack.

She cuts Justin off before he has a chance to say anything.

CLARE
Just tell me this. Is this really that
important to you?

JUSTIN
Yes.

A beat. Clare heavily sighs.

CLARE
Then it's important to me.

Clare smiles. Justin smiles. He swoops in for a hug. Clare is surprised for a moment but then accepts the hug back.

CLARE

Okay, Reynolds, that's enough
cutesiness for today. Let's get this
show on the road.

The two throw their bags in the trunk. They climb into the front seats, Justin in the driver's seat, Clare in the passenger.

Justin begins to back out of the driveway.

CLARE

Oh my god, we're *really* doing this?

JUSTIN

We're *really* doing this!

Justin looks over at Clare.

JUSTIN

You okay, Geller?

CLARE

Yeah, yeah, I'll be okay.

JUSTIN

Good, 'cause there's no going back
now!

The car races down the neighborhood street into the night.

INT. AVA'S BEDROOM- NIGHT

Ava is asleep in her bed, all the lights off.

The lights from the car outside exiting the driveway and driving down the street suddenly flood her room through the blinds. The lights pass over her eyes, waking her up.

She looks around and then makes the realization. She jumps up and runs to the window. She watches as the car carrying his brother drives out of sight.

Shocked, she falls back down on her bed, words escaping her. She is on the verge of tears.

She then notices something sitting on her bedside table. She turns on a nearby lamp to see.

An envelope with "To Ava" handwritten on the front.

Ava rips open the envelope, revealing a note. As she reads over it, we hear Justin reading it. Intercut in the reading are flashes of Justin driving away silently in the night.

JUSTIN (V.O.)

Ava. I'm not asking for you to understand why I decided to do this. Know that the hardest part of all this is leaving you alone here. The only thing keeping me from asking you to come with me is the thought that you have a future here. Which you absolutely have a bright future here. I do not. You can do anything that you want and I want you to make that decision for yourself when the time comes. But, if you decide you need to escape too, you can find me in Despina. Love you, Justin.

Ava wipes away a tear after reading the letter. She sets the note on her bedside table. She looks out the window.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY- MORNING

MONTAGE:

The car rides down the city highway as large skyscrapers pass by.

Justin and Clare in the car chatting and laughing away. They make silly faces.

They are truly having fun on this road trip.

At one point, Justin stares out onto the road in front of him. His face is blank as his mind races. He takes a deep breath. Clare then throws a small piece of candy at him and he snaps out of it. Their delightful montage continues.

The car speeds down the road as they leave the big city limits. As the montage draws to a close, the car is now driving in the rural area outside of town.

EXT. PRAIRIES- DAY

As Justin drives, Clare has her feet up on the dashboard.

CLARE

Okay, Reynolds, this is long overdue, but why the saxophone?

JUSTIN

Well, one, because it's the best instrument!

CLARE

Oh is it really?

JUSTIN

Uh- definitely. It's a helluva lot better than the oboe!

CLARE

(laughs)

That's cute. You know the oboe is one of the hardest band instruments to play, while the saxophone is the absolute easiest!

JUSTIN

That doesn't mean anything, the saxophone is just inherently the coolest.

CLARE

Whatever, that's debatable.

JUSTIN

Excuse me?!

CLARE

OVERRATED AT BEST.

JUSTIN

OVERRATED HUH?

CLARE

Pink Panther, Careless Whisper, and Tequila. That's it, that's all you need to be a "good" saxophone player. You need to put in literally no intellectual effort as a musician.

Justin jokingly scoffs at this.

JUSTIN

This sounds like it's coming from a place of hurt, Geller.

Justin creeps his head a little closer to Clare's.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)
Jealous, maybe?

CLARE
Anyways you were saying?

JUSTIN
Right. And two, I can kinda relate to it. It's technically a woodwind, but it's made out of brass like a trumpet. Not many band and orchestral pieces utilize the saxophone. I don't know, the saxophone doesn't really belong anywhere, y'know? And I relate to that feeling.

A beat as Clare takes this in. She then nods.

CLARE
I can respect that.

JUSTIN
Why'd you choose the oboe?

CLARE
Oh, can't you tell? The oboe is a total dude magnet!

JUSTIN
Oh, of course, it is!

CLARE
Don't you notice all the guys that just fall to me, the sexy oboe lady?

The two of them laugh.

JUSTIN
Okay, I'm serious, tell me.

CLARE
I told you! Dude magnet!

Justin side-eyes Clare, smirking. Clare gets the hint.

CLARE (CONT'D)
Fine! I chose it because of how unique it is. The rarity of double reed instruments. The sound as a whole. It

just stood out to me.

A beat. Justin beams at this answer.

CLARE (CONT'D)

But that was a long time ago. Now it just sits in my room, waiting for me to pick it up again.

It falls quiet. Justin decides to break it:

JUSTIN

That would explain the lack of dudes.

Clare playfully hits Justin in the arm.

Justin laugh. Clare can't help but smile at his comeback.

CLARE

You're too much, Reynolds.

EXT. GAS STATION- DAY

The car pulls into a gas station out in the rural prairies outside of town.

Surrounding the gas station is nothing but fields of crops. On the opposite side of the road is a fenced-off field where several cows are grazing.

As their car pulls up to the pump, both Justin and Clare jump out of the car.

JUSTIN

So, who wants to buy the first tank of gas of the trip?

CLARE

Your trip, your gas, Reynolds.

JUSTIN

Ah, one might think that, but I did buy that candy that you definitely ate more of, Geller.

They both have a staredown until Clare finally gives in.

CLARE

Ugh, fine, but you better get the next one.

Clare notices a "PAY INSIDE" sign taped onto the pump.

CLARE

Hey, give me a minute, I need to go inside to pay. You want anything else to go with your gas?

Justin, who is digging in the back of the car, perks up his head.

JUSTIN

See if they have any of those mini blueberry muffins!

Clare looks confused at Justin's actions.

CLARE

What are you doing?

Justin pulls out his saxophone case.

JUSTIN

Gonna practice for a little bit while you do all this.

CLARE

Ah gee, thanks. I'm glad I get to fill up the damn gas while you play your instrument to a live audience.

Clare gestures towards the cows.

JUSTIN

Hey, the quicker you get it done, the quicker I stop and we get back on the road.

Clare grumbles at Justin's sarcastic comment. Justin starts tuning his saxophone. Clare turns around and heads inside.

CLARE

(under her breath)
Why do I even bother with him?

INT. GAS STATION- CONTINUOUS

As Justin's saxophone music is heard faintly in the background, Clare enters the gas station convenience store.

Clare looks up and down the aisles.

CREEPY CASHIER (O.S.)
 (suddenly)
 Ye' need help finding it?

Clare is startled by the creepy, gravelly voice. She pokes her head up above the aisles and looks toward the checkout. Behind the counter, the CREEPY CASHIER, an old, lanky man with a long, dirty beard, stares her down, eyes wide open.

 CLARE
 What?

 CREEPY CASHIER
 Ye' need help finding it?

 CLARE
 Finding what?

 CREEPY CASHIER
 What you're looking fer...

Clare looks around frantically. She spots the mini blueberry muffins. She quickly snatches a pack and raises it up in the air.

 CLARE
 Nope! All good! I found it!

The creepy cashier continues to stare Clare down.

Clare approaches the counter. The cashier scans the muffins.

 CREEPY CASHIER
 Anythin' else?

 CLARE
 Uh, yeah, \$20 for pump 4, please.

As he types away on keys to ring up the gas, the cashier notices Justin playing the saxophone out the window.

 CREEPY CASHIER
 Is that yer man?

Clare looks back at Justin.

 CLARE
 Who, him?

She turns back to the cashier.

CLARE (CONT'D)

Yes. Well-no, he's not my man. But I am with him. I mean- I'm not *with* him with him, as in a romantic way or something, but I am with him. Not saying that I don't want to be *with* him with him, but at the moment I'm just with him. Y'know?

The cashier just stares at her, then takes one big blink.

CREEPY CASHIER

Yer all good, ma'am.

EXT. GAS STATION- CONTINUOUS

Clare exits the gas station store and walks over to the pump.

Justin is standing closer to the road, still playing his saxophone. He is playing improvised jazz music. He wails away, visibly enjoying the groove with his eyes closed.

When he opens his eyes, he sees out in front of him. Across the road, behind the fence, all of the cows have turned directly towards Justin. Some are noticeably closer than before. They are all completely still, staring straight at Justin.

Justin looks confused. He blows his saxophone and plays a little more. As he plays, the cows walk closer towards the fence and Justin. Justin stops again. He turns back towards Clare.

JUSTIN

(yelling)

Hey Clare, you see what these cows are doing?

Clare looks up and sees.

CLARE

(yells back)

I don't know, Reynolds. I guess these cows appreciate freeform jazz!

Clare turns away and continues to pump the gas.

Justin starts to play his saxophone again. The cows start moving eerily closer towards Justin. By now, most of them are along the fence.

Justin continues to play louder and louder. The cows continue slowly walking and pushing up against the fence. Suddenly, one part of the fence snaps. One of the nearby cows then walks through the opening, straight towards Justin.

Justin notices the cow and points his saxophone directly towards it as it walks closer to him, now starting across the road.

The cow is halfway across the road when suddenly, out of nowhere, a truck speeds by and runs over the cow.

Justin immediately stops playing. The other cows stop moving. Justin stares in horror at the sight he has just witnessed. The truck does not stop and speeds down the road, out of sight.

Justin runs towards the cow on the road. He starts to freak out. Covered in blood, the cow appears dead.

Suddenly, the eyes of the cow burst open, scaring Justin. The grey eyes stare directly at Justin. The cow then speaks in a deep, demonic voice.

COW
YOU WILL NEVER FIND WHAT YOU SEEK. YOU
ARE GOING NOWHERE!

The cow then shuts its eyes and falls dead again.

Justin is mortified and runs back towards the car.

Clare turns back around right when Justin throws the saxophone in the back and jumps in the passenger seat.

CLARE
(groans)
You're making me drive now too? You
owe me another one for this.

Clare gets into the driver's seat. She looks over at Justin. He is clearly shaking.

CLARE
You good, Reynolds?

Justin takes a moment then shakes it off.

JUSTIN
Yeah, I'm good. Did you get my
muffins?

Clare throws the pack of muffins at him.

CLARE

Got 'em right here. Hope they're worth it. That cashier in there was creepy as hell.

As the car pulls out of the gas station and onto the road, there is no longer the cow in the road, nor is there an opening in the fence anymore. All of the cows are where they originally were, grazing in the field.

EXT. FIELDS- LATE DAY

As she drives the station wagon down the road, Clare peers over to Justin. Justin stares out of the passenger window, deep in thought.

Clare grows a face of concern. She then puts on a smile.

CLARE

Hey, you know what I just realized?

Justin does not stop staring out the window.

JUSTIN

Hm?

CLARE

I literally gave up everything to go on this trip with you.

JUSTIN

(taking some notice)

Huh?

CLARE

I'm serious. I'm going to miss classes for this. I'll probably get fired from my job when they see I'm not coming anymore. I don't think my family even knows I left.

(starts to ponder)

Why did I do this? I had everything going for me? And now, I'm on this crazy quest for this Despina or whatever. Why am I doing this?

As Clare continues driving, noticeably distraught, Justin snaps out of his trance. He turns to Clare and starts trying to comfort her.

JUSTIN

Shh, shh, hey, Clare. I promise, this will all be worth it. I know it's a lot but you and I are a team, and we can take on this world together, just you and I! I wouldn't be able to do this without you.

Clare starts to calm down and forces a smile.

CLARE

You really mean that?

JUSTIN

Of course I do. It's going to be a long road ahead, but you and I can do it together.

Justin returns to his seat. He looks out the window ahead.

Clare takes a deep breath. She then glances back over at Justin. She looks at his face, at his smile. That smile.

Clare turns her eyes back to the road. She has a face of confusion but then cracks a small smile herself. She knows why she left.

EXT. FIELDS- NIGHT

The station wagon is parked by the side of the road, out of the way of any potential traffic.

Scattered on the ground nearby are some empty bags of food, backpacks, and a battery-powered lamp. Laying on top of their sleeping bags, Clare and Justin look up at the stars.

JUSTIN

Okay, crazy question time.

CLARE

Shoot.

JUSTIN

You think there are aliens out there?

A beat.

CLARE

Define aliens.

JUSTIN
Life not from Earth.

Clare ponders for a moment.

CLARE
Yes.

JUSTIN
Really?

CLARE
What?

JUSTIN
I don't know, I didn't expect that answer from you.

CLARE
You peg me for a skeptic, Reynolds?

JUSTIN
I mean, you just always seem so rational.

CLARE
Oh, so I'm not being rational now?

JUSTIN
See, I didn't mean it like that and you know it!

The two of them chuckle a bit, then return to staring up.

A beat.

CLARE
I don't believe there are any humanoid aliens out there.

JUSTIN
Oh?

CLARE
Yeah, the odds that another biped, intelligent species exists and hasn't already tried to make contact seems far-fetched to me.

JUSTIN
So what aliens do you think are out

there?

CLARE

Probably some sorta minuscule bacteria thing.

A beat.

JUSTIN

What if we're the bacteria?

CLARE

You talk too much to be a bacteria, Justin.

Clare yawns.

CLARE (CONT'D)

Bacteria aren't able to talk their bacteria friends into crazy ideas like going on a road trip to God-knows-where.

JUSTIN

(chuckles)

Glad to hear I'm smarter than bacteria.

CLARE

I didn't say smarter. Just you talk too much to be one.

A beat.

JUSTIN

I'll take it.

The two chuckle again.

EXT. FIELDS- NIGHT-LATER

Later in the night. The moon shines brightly over the fields.

Both Clare and Justin are wrapped up in their sleeping bags, fast asleep.

Suddenly, a loud rustle is heard.

Justin awakens and perks up at the sound. He looks around. Just the fields blowing the night. He returns back to sleep.

The rustle is heard again, only louder.

Justin wakes up again, more alarmed now. He gently shoves Clare.

JUSTIN

Clare, did you hear that?

Clare grumbles, still half-asleep.

CLARE

Hear what?

JUSTIN

That rustling sound.

CLARE

Damn it, Justin, I don't know! It was probably some animal or something. Be the strong, tough guy you are and check it out.

Clare turns back over and falls back asleep.

The rustle is heard again. Justin turns his head towards the noise, a bit frightened now.

He gets up, slips on his shoes, and turns on his flashlight. He begins to wade through the field.

Justin walks farther away from Clare and their campsite. He nervously looks around, trying to find the source.

The rustling is heard behind him. Justin quickly turns around. Nothing there. He hears it behind him again. He turns again. Over and over, the rustling grows louder and closer to Justin. Justin is now completely on edge, preparing to face something frightening.

Just as the sound comes right up to him, Justin looks down through the grass. From the blades pops out the source of the noise: a small desert mouse.

JUSTIN

What the hell?

The desert mouse hops closer towards Justin. Justin lightly chuckles, admiring the cuteness of the animal.

Justin crouches down and sticks out his right hand. The desert mouse sniffs and inches onto his hand. Justin stands

back up, holding the mouse in his hand. He looks at the mouse in fascination.

Suddenly, the mouse bites Justin on the hand.

Justin pulls back his hand in shock and pain, dropping the mouse. He holds his hand in pain.

As the mouse reaches the ground, it quickly scampers through the grass. Justin follows it with his eyes.

The mouse hops up towards a dark figure standing in the grass. The mouse hops up into the air into the wrinkled hands of the figure.

Justin's eyes draw up from the ground as he pieces the figure.

Standing no more than a couple yards away from Justin, an old, withered lady stands alone, staring at Justin. She is wickedly smiling at him.

Justin then notices her grey eyes. The same grey eyes that stared at him in the library.

JUSTIN

Hey, your stupid little pet just bit me!

The old lady does not respond. She continues staring and smiling.

JUSTIN

What the hell, lady? Did you even hear me?

The old lady starting manically laughing. It starts as a small chuckle but then grows louder into a wild cackle. Justin, becoming very frightened starts to take a few steps back.

The old lady then stops laughing. She stares at him with a cold face. A tense moment as Justin looks at her, wondering what will happen next.

Suddenly, she runs towards him, almost flying. Justin, completely terrified, drops the flashlight, turns around, and runs the opposite way.

After an intense chase, Justin sees the campsite in the distance. He quickly runs to it, never taking a second to

check behind him.

Justin reaches the campsite, out of breath. He turns around. The old lady is gone. Nothing but empty fields in sight.

Justin breathes heavily for a moment. He looks down at his right hand. Small bite marks drip blood from his hand. He takes some napkins, wraps his hand up, and lies back down in his sleeping bag.

Justin takes one more look around. He then lowers his head and falls back asleep.

As he lays asleep, the small desert mouse pops through the grass and hops over towards Justin. The creature's dark eyes focus in on the sleeping Justin.

FADE TO:

EXT. FIELDS- MORNING

The station wagon drives down the road, passing a sign that says indicates West.

Justin drives the car as Clare sits in the passenger seat.

CLARE

I still can't believe you lost the flashlight last night.

Justin, tense, just stares out towards the road.

CLARE (CONT'D)

Did you even find out what was making those sounds last night?

Justin does not take his eyes off the road when he responds.

JUSTIN

It was just some desert rat-thing.

CLARE

Really? All the way out here? We haven't even passed the prairies yet.

JUSTIN

Guess he was lost or something

CLARE

Speaking of lost, we should find somewhere to eat and maybe ask for

directions.

Clare pulls up the red book and opens it.

CLARE (CONT'D)

I mean, this thing doesn't really give great directions.

Justin suddenly turns his head.

JUSTIN

DON'T READ THAT!

Clare drops the book, shocked by Justin's sudden burst of aggression.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

I know where I'm going, okay? I promise.

Clare, still kinda tense and confused, eases down.

CLARE

I'm sure you do. Could we still stop somewhere to get something to eat? I saw a sign for a diner up ahead.

As Clare says this line, Justin looks out the window. His eyes widen in fright.

Standing on the side of the road is the old lady, smiling at him.

Justin turns away, avoiding eye contact with the old lady.

JUSTIN

Uh, yeah, let's try to find that diner!

He steps on the gas, speeding the gas station down the road, leaving the old lady in the dust. She waves as she watches the station wagon drive out of sight.

EXT. DINER-DAY

The station wagon exits off of the road and pulls up to a small, traditional diner, straight out of the 1950s. Only a few cars are already parked in the dirt parking lot.

After the car comes to a halt, Justin and Clare jump out of the car and into the bright sunshine.

Justin looks behind him towards the road. Not a car, or a person, in sight on the road. He sighs in relief.

The two walk together into the diner.

INT. DINER- CONTINUOUS

As the pair enters the diner, they look around. The diner is worn down, but not completely destitute. There are only a couple of tables taken. Everyone moves, talks, and eats slow and quietly, almost as if the life was sucked out of the establishment.

Clare walks up to the host counter. A tall, pale teenager in a 50's diner uniform stands behind it with an expressionless face.

CLARE
(cheerfully)
Hi, yes, can we get a table for two please?

The teenager exhales deeply and loudly as he picks up two, old-looking menus. He walks zombie-like as he guides Clare and Justin to their seats.

CLARE
(quietly as teenager walks away)
I see quality customer service is not a priority out here.

As the two of them sit down in their booth, Clare is quick to open her menu.

CLARE
I am *starving!* I wonder if they have any Belgian waffles. Pssh, what am I saying, it's a diner!

Justin, appearing uneasy, slowly opens up the menu as it lays on the table.

CLARE (CONT'D)
What are you thinking about getting?

JUSTIN
I'm not sure.

CLARE
I think I'm going with those Belgian waffles.

JUSTIN
Sounds good, Clare.

Clare notices Justin's strange behavior.

CLARE
Everything okay, Reynolds?

JUSTIN
Yeah, I don't know. Guess I didn't
sleep too well last night.

CLARE
I bet, you protecting us from the
primal dangers of the Desert Pocket
Mouse!

JUSTIN
The what?

CLARE
I think that desert rat you saw last
night was the Desert Pocket Mouse.

JUSTIN
Oh, well, *glad* I can put a name to the
animal.

CLARE
You know, the Desert Pocket Mouse does
not need to drink water, but actually
gets water from the seeds it eats.

JUSTIN
How do you just know that?

CLARE
Ava.

JUSTIN
Of course.

A thought pops into Justin's head. He pulls out his cell
phone.

JUSTIN
Damn, no service.

CLARE
What are you trying to do?

He stops the waitress passing by.

JUSTIN

Excuse me, would you guys happen to
have a payphone?

The waitress points towards the dining room on the other side
of the diner. In the corner is a small payphone.

JUSTIN

Thank you.

CLARE

Who are you calling?

Justin ignores her. He gets up and heads towards the
payphone. Once he reaches it, he pulls out a couple of
quarters and starts dialing. The phone rings as he waits
patiently.

INT. REYNOLDS HOUSE- DAY

Ava sits on the couch in the living room, reading her
textbook. Her cellphone, sitting beside her rings. She
casually peers over but then gets notably suspicious when she
sees the caller ID. She quickly grabs her phone and answers.

AVA

Hello?

INTERCUT PHONE CONVERSATION.

JUSTIN

Hey, it's Justin.

AVA

Justin?! Where are you calling from?

JUSTIN

Just this diner we found. Doesn't
matter. How're you doing?

AVA

Okay, I suppose. But tell me how're
you doing.

A beat as Justin contemplates what to say to his sister.

He takes a deep breath.

JUSTIN

I'm doing great. Exactly what I hoped it would be.

AVA

Well, that's great! I'm glad to hear that!

A beat. Justin is at a loss for words.

AVA

Any particular reason you called?

JUSTIN

I just-

A beat of contemplation.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

I wanted to check on you, see how you were doing. How Mom and Dad are doing.

AVA

Well, things are kind of boring.

JUSTIN

Boring?

AVA

Yeah I mean- everything's kind of normal.

A beat.

JUSTIN

Normal, huh?

AVA

Yeah, Mom and Dad are still just as busy with work and cycling and whatnot.

A beat. Justin is taken aback by this.

JUSTIN

I see...and you? Is everything normal for you?

Ava sighs audibly.

AVA

No.

(pause)

I really miss you.

Justin cracks a heartfelt smile at this.

JUSTIN

I miss you too.

AVA

Is there any way you can call me when you get there? Or message or something?

A beat.

JUSTIN

I don't know.

AVA

Try if you can.

A beat.

Justin then tries to respond but the line cuts out before she can say anything.

Ava waits for a reply then hears the dead tone. She puts the phone down. Tears start to flood her eyes.

END INTERCUT.

Justin hangs up the phone. He then slowly walks back to the booth.

Clare notices Justin and then peers back down in her menu.

CLARE

Who'd you call?

A beat. Justin does not make eye contact with Clare. Clare keeps her head in her menu.

JUSTIN

Ava.

CLARE

Really? How are they all holding up?

A beat.

JUSTIN
They're doing alright.

CLARE
That's good. What else did you guys
talk-

Before Clare can finish, their waitress arrives. Justin shakes back into reality. In the same uniform and mood as the teenager, the waitress appears before them suddenly but talks slowly and eerily.

WAITRESS
(monotone)
Welcome to Byrne's Diner. How can I
help you today? Would you like to try
some of our new, refreshing beverages?
We now offer Squirt, New Coke-

CLARE
Hi, yeah, we're actually ready to
order.

JUSTIN
(quietly to Clare)
We are?

WAITRESS
(sighs heavily)
What will it be?

CLARE
I'm gonna have the Belgian waffles.
And he's going to have the smiley face
pancake stack. And two coffees as
well, please.

WAITRESS
Uh-huh.

With that, the waitress takes their menus and slowly shuffles off.

Justin raises his eyebrow at Clare.

JUSTIN
The smiley face pancake stack, huh?

CLARE
You need some cheering up this
morning.

Clare winks and smirks at Justin. Justin smirks back.

CLARE

So, real talk, what's waiting for us
in Despina, anyway?

JUSTIN

What do you mean?

CLARE

Well, you dragged me into this
insanity, I'd like to know now what
lies ahead.

JUSTIN

It just...has everything you need.

CLARE

...everything I need, huh?

JUSTIN

Essentially, yeah. There are just
musicians always playing on the
street. Every wall on every building
is a beautiful mural. And there are no
limitations on art or just how people
live in general. Anyone and everyone
can belong here.

CLARE

Hmm...so Rashneesh meets El Dorado
with a dash of Pleasure Island? Is
that what you're getting at?

JUSTIN

It's more intricate than that, Clare.

CLARE

Oh, I'm sure it is. Quick question,
how do they survive? It's the middle
of the desert, so how would they get
food and water? Y'know, *everything you
need!*

JUSTIN

According to the book, Despina is self-
sustainable. They grow their own
crops, they have their own water
supply.

CLARE
I see. Well, I suppose I *will* see if
we make it there.

JUSTIN
When.

CLARE
Sorry, *when* we make it there.

A beat.

CLARE (CONT'D)
What did your parents say? When you
explained to them all this?

JUSTIN
I didn't.

CLARE
So... they really have no idea what we
got ourselves into, huh?

JUSTIN
...Pretty much.

CLARE
So they don't even know when we're
coming back?

The two stare at one another, Justin too scared to say what
he wants to say.

Suddenly, the Waitress appears before their table, plates in
hand.

WAITRESS
The Belgian waffles and the smiley
face pancake stack?

CLARE
Oh, good, the food's here.

The Waitress sets the plates of food down in front of them.

WAITRESS
Enjoy.

Clare takes the first bite of her food. She smiles.

CLARE

MM, just as I suspected. Nothing beats waffles from a diner!

She starts to dig in more to her food.

Justin stares at her for a moment, then looks down at his own food. The stack is soaked in syrup. The whip cream face on top of the pancakes stares back at Justin. He looks back up at Clare.

JUSTIN

I'm not sure if I'm hungry anymore.

CLARE

Oh c'mon, just give it a bite, I'm sure you'll get hungry once you actually start eating.

Justin takes up his fork and knife and slowly starts to cut into the pancake stack. As he does this, he notices the pancake face change.

The whip cream smile starts to morph into a frown. Drips of whip cream start dribbling down from the eyes as if the face was crying. Justin just stares on in, both confused and frightened by his breakfast food. The frown opens up, like it was screaming. Syrup that starts to fall out of the pancake's mouth and eyes. The pancake smile is now a face of terror. By now, Justin is breathing heavily but remains silent.

He closes his eyes for a moment. He then opens them again. Staring back is a disgustingly melted face of syrup and whip cream.

Justin, looking a little green, quickly stands up.

JUSTIN

I need to use the restroom!

Clare, who had been eating her waffles the whole time, glances up suspiciously.

CLARE

Okay, Reynolds. Thanks for letting me know.

Justin hurries down the walkway of the diner towards a sign saying RESTROOM. He turns the corner and charges through the Men's Room door.

INT. DINER BATHROOM- CONTINUOUS

An empty bathroom, with a row of sinks with a long vanity mirror mounted above them.

Justin runs up to one of the sinks. He faces down into the sink, breathing heavily, trying not to get sick. After a few moments, his breathing calms down. Justin then turns on the sink and begins to wash with face with the water. With his eyes closed, he reaches over to a nearby paper towel dispenser and dries off his face.

As he pulls down the paper towel, he looks into the mirror and lets out a yelp at what he sees. Staring back at him with a maddening grin, his reflection is covered in sand and dirt with minor cuts and bruises on his face and limbs. The reflection's eyes are dilated, filled with insanity. He starts to menacingly chuckle.

REFLECTION JUSTIN

You are going nowhere!

JUSTIN

What?

REFLECTION JUSTIN

You are going nowhere!

(singing, child-like)

Nowhere, nowhere, you are going
nowhere!

Reflection Justin starts dancing around the vanity mirror, laughing crazily, as Justin stands still and watches. Reflection Justin then notices Justin and freezes.

Suddenly, the lights go out except one over Justin. Reflection Justin, now a real person outside of the mirror, pops up in front of Justin and grabs his head.

REFLECTION JUSTIN

Listen to me! You are so close to
finding it all! But you are going
nowhere!

Reflection Justin starts to sob uncontrollably, almost screaming in pain. He falls to the floor at Justin's feet.

REFLECTION JUSTIN

Nowhere! Nowhere! Nowhere!

Justin then makes a break for the bathroom door, leaving

Reflection Justin alone under the sole light. Reflection Justin reaches out to Justin, screaming and repeating "Nowhere!"

INT. DINER- CONTINUOUS

Justin emerges into the light of the diner.

Down the walkway, Clare stands by the table, setting money down on the table. She looks up and sees Justin.

CLARE

Hey, there you are. You were in there a while, I thought I'd bail you out again and pay-

As Clare says, Justin ignores her as he rushes past her, straight towards the exit. Clare glances back in confusion.

As Justin walks through the door, Clare sighs.

The Waitress walks in just in time to see Justin rush out. She turns her head towards Clare and glares. Clare raises up her money to show her.

CLARE

Thank you again!

EXT. DINER-DAY

Justin sits on the ground, leaning up against one of the tires of the station wagon. He just stares at the sandy ground in front of him.

After a few moments, Clare exits the diner and sees Justin. She approaches him slowly. Once she reaches Justin, Clare looks down at him for a second, then proceeds to sit down next to him.

CLARE

You want to tell me what's been going on?

No answer from Justin.

CLARE (CONT'D)

We came out all this way, I deserve some explanation.

JUSTIN

I've been seeing things.

Clare looks over at him confused.

CLARE
What kind of things?

JUSTIN
Weird...scary things.

CLARE
You mean like the mouse last night?

JUSTIN
But that was real!

He lifts up his palm. The bite marks are still visible.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)
So I think they're all real.

CLARE
There was more than just the mouse?

JUSTIN
Yes! There was a cow that I killed with my saxophone! Well-I mean it got run over but then it spoke to me! And just now, in the bathroom, I saw this scary reflection of myself in the mirror-and-and-they said the same thing, that I was going nowhere! And in the fields last night, there was this old lady and now...now I think she's following me.

Silence falls between the two of them. Clare takes in what she just heard.

CLARE
I think we should head home.

JUSTIN
No! We've gone too far.

CLARE
Justin, you're obviously not doing okay right now!

JUSTIN
I don't care, I'll be better when we get to Despina!

CLARE

I don't think this is what's best for you, though-

JUSTIN

I thought you said you were in this with me!

CLARE

I am! But I'm worried about you-

JUSTIN

Well, stop worrying about me! We're not giving up now! It's too late for that! We have to keep going.

Clare looks at Justin, who looks back at her. Clare notices the tears swelling up in Justin's eyes.

CLARE

Okay, Justin. I'll keep my word. Let's keep going. But don't think I've forgotten about this. You *have* to tell me if you see anything else. Okay?

A beat. Justin glances back at the ground.

CLARE

Okay?!

JUSTIN

Okay!

Clare lays a hand on Justin's back, comforting him.

CLARE

C'mon, let's hit the road. You need to eat today and I think this diner's a bust. There's probably something further down the road.

Justin wipes his eyes.

JUSTIN

Yeah, okay.

Our two heroes stand back up and get in the car, with Clare climbing into the driver's seat.

CLARE

I don't think that waitress liked us

too much.

The station wagon pulls out away from the diner and heads back down the road.

EXT. GAS STATION- DAY

The station wagon pulls up to a gas station. There is nothing else on either side for miles and miles.

Nothing but the gas station.

Clare looks over to Justin. He is practically balled up in the passenger seat.

CLARE

Hey, what do you want from here?

Justin does not respond.

CLARE

Justin?

JUSTIN

(pointed)

I don't fucking know!

(first words in his head)

Chips!

Clare is taken aback by this but does not attempt to fix it.

CLARE

Fine.

Clare gets out of the car and slams the door shut. Justin winces at the door slam. Clare walks up to the convenience store of the gas station.

INT. GAS STATION- CONTINUOUS

Clare enters the gas station. She looks around the aisles. She then notices who is standing at the counter.

It is the same creepy cashier as before.

Clare is thrown off by the sight of him but continues anyway, choosing to forget it. She is on a mission. Aggravated, nonetheless.

She quickly finds the chips, grabs the first bag she can, and walks directly up to the counter. She slams the chips on the

counter.

The cashier looks up from the counter and up at Clare.

 CREEPY CASHIER
Anythin' else?

 CLARE
Nope. Just the chips.

The cashier scans the bag of chips and begins clicking away at the cash register. He glances outside towards the car. He spots Justin in the passenger seat.

 CREEPY CASHIER
Is that yer man?

Clare glances over to the car as well. She then looks away.

 CLARE
I thought so. At one point.

A beat. The creepy cashier does not reply, but rather just stares Clare down. Clare takes the opportunity to vent.

 CLARE (CONT'D)
It's just frustrating, y'know? I mean, I pack up everything and leave my life behind for him? I had an internship lined up, I was about to graduate, become a sound engineer. I had it all figured out. Did he even consider that? And I did this because why? Because he's my best friend? Is that a good enough reason to do that? And to top it all off, he tells me he's starting to see things. And I don't know what to do. Why did I even come?

A beat. The cashier is still silent, a blank stare.

 CLARE (CONT'D)
Because I love him? Is that it? Is that really enough for me to throw my entire life away?

A beat.

 CREEPY CASHIER
Is it?

Clare looks up at the cashier. She hesitates.

CLARE

I don't know.

A beat.

CREEPY CASHIER

The desert can get to some people when
they're out in the middle of nowhere.
Especially alone.

A beat. Clare looks out to Justin.

CREEPY CASHIER

That'll be 2.50, ma'am.

Clare hands over the cash, her frustration lifted. She grabs the chips and heads out through the door.

EXT. GAS STATION- CONTINUOUS

Clare walks over to the car and gets into the driver's seat. She looks over to Justin. Justin still appears a little shaken.

Clare gently hands Justin the bag of chips. He takes them. He looks over to Clare.

JUSTIN

Thank you.

He smiles. She smiles.

CLARE

You're welcome.

A Justin starts to slowly eat his chips, Clare starts up the car and heads back down the road.

EXT. DESERT- AFTERNOON

The station wagon barrels down the highway. Clare is driving while Justin is slumped against the passenger window.

He occasionally looks up at the desert landscape, but nothing stands out.

Then, a dark shadow quickly passes by the window. This grabs Justin's attention. He tries to look back at what it was, but it is now too small and too far away to make it out. Justin

returns back to his previous position, but now stares out the window.

The shadow now passes again. This time Justin sees what it was; the old lady once again standing on the side of the road.

Justin jolts up quickly and stares back out. As the station wagon passes by, the old lady's head turns to watch them off. She is grinning menacingly.

Clare takes notice.

CLARE
Something happening?

Justin continues to peer out the window.

JUSTIN
Thought I saw something.

Clare, still looking ahead on the road, makes a face of worry.

CLARE
Okay, well, let me know if you see anything else.

JUSTIN
(quietly)
Okay.

Justin sits straight up in his seat, focusing his vision on his side of the road.

Far up ahead, he sees her again. Just like before, the old lady stands on the side of the road, still smiling. Her gaze locked onto Justin.

Justin taps on Clare's shoulder just as they reach her.

JUSTIN
Clare-Clare look, she's right there!

CLARE
What? Who?!

JUSTIN
The old lady I told you about. She's on the side of the road! She's been following us.

CLARE

Justin...

JUSTIN

I'm serious, look, she's right there.

Justin points frantically out the window, but as soon as Clare turns her head to look, it is too late. They have already passed her.

CLARE

Justin, I don't see her.

JUSTIN

She was right there, I swear. Look, she'll probably pop up again, just watch.

CLARE

How is that possible? There's no way she would be able to get in front of us-

JUSTIN

JUST WATCH, CLARE!

The two of them fall silent. Clare, frustrated, keeps her eyes on the road. Justin is on the edge of his seat, trying to spot the old lady again.

JUSTIN

It'll be any second now.

CLARE

Okay, Justin.

JUSTIN

Just watch.

CLARE

I'm watching!

A few moments pass, no sign of the old lady again. Justin leans back in his chair, defeated.

JUSTIN

She was there, I'm sure of it!

CLARE

It's okay, just stop thinking about it.

JUSTIN

Yeah, you're right, I'll play some music.

Justin presses a few buttons on the dashboard and orchestral music starts to play.

In the corner of his eye, movement is seen in the rearview mirror. Justin looks up and he turns the rearview mirror. In the reflection, sitting in the back seat is the old lady, grinning again.

Justin screams at the sight. Clare screams back in response to Justin, the car swerving a bit.

CLARE

What the fuck, Justin?

JUSTIN

She's in the car!

CLARE

She's what?!

Clare turns her head to look at the back seat.

CLARE (CONT'D)

(quickly turns to the front)
Justin, no one's back there!

JUSTIN

No, I saw, in the mirror-

Justin turns back to see for himself, but Clare was right. The back seat is empty save for their backpacks. Justin turns back, still shaking.

CLARE

Justin, you really need to take it easy. You nearly killed us!

JUSTIN

I'm sorry, I just- keep seeing her.

CLARE

Okay, listen to me. This old lady...she's not real. You're just making it up in your head. You got that?

JUSTIN

But...I don't think I am!

Clare contemplates for a second.

CLARE

I think we need to pull over and take a little walk. We've been staring at the road for too long.

JUSTIN

Okay, yeah, I'd like that.

EXT. DESERT ROCK FORMATIONS- CONTINUOUS.

A few moments later, Clare drifts the car over to the right and pulls to a stop. They are pulled up next to a series of large rock formations.

Clare gets out of the car first and takes a deep breath in. She then walks over and opens the door for Justin, who meekly exits the car.

CLARE

C'mon, let's take a look at some cool rocks.

Clare reaches out her hand for Justin to hold. Justin does not notice it and stuffs his hands into his pockets. Clare notices and proceeds to do the same as Justin.

CLARE

Just take some deep breaths, okay?

Justin takes a few deep breaths with his eyes closed. Clare then plants herself in front of Justin, putting both of her hands on his shoulders. She starts to breathe in and out with him. The more they breathe in sync, the slower and calmer the breaths.

CLARE (CONT'D)

Feeling better?

Justin slowly opens up his eyes to the sight of Clare in front of him, hands still on his shoulders. Feeling a moment of peace, Justin cracks a smile.

He then sees a shadow of something disappear behind a rock formation behind Clare. Justin's eyes constrict at this sight.

Justin then suddenly grabs Clare and moves her out of the way, nearly knocking her to the ground.

CLARE

Justin!

He doesn't hear her. His eyes set on his target, he runs straight towards the rock the mysterious shadow fled to.

Clare slowly picks herself up, but does not chase after him. She watches as he runs off, a face of worry washing over her face.

Justin continues running. He reaches the rock and makes a sharp turn. Nothing.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees the shadow rush past by another nearby rock. He quickly runs after. He reaches that rock. Nothing again.

A face of fear and rage grows over Justin.

JUSTIN

Show yourself!

This exclamation echoes throughout the desert.

Justin, now completely on edge and tense, quickly looks around trying to find what he's been chasing. He turns his head suddenly towards one direction and sprints that way to a different rock.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

What kind of sick game are you playing with me?!

No answer to his cries.

His eyes soon creep up to the rock he is standing next to. The rock is twisted and clustered. As Justin turns his head towards it, the sediment and rocks align to reveal a horrified face made out of rock. The mouth open, as if screaming. The eyes of the face are hollow, dark, and empty.

The longer Justin stares at the face, the more he can almost hear it moan. Is it the wind? Is it in his head? Either way, Justin can hear it cry and moan. He covers his ears as he turns away and runs in the other direction.

He reaches another rock formation where he looks up again. Another twisted face of horror is found in the rock. As he

discovers this face, the screams of the rock become louder in Justin's ears.

JUSTIN

Stop it!

Justin runs farther away towards another rock. Once again, he encounters another face, with the screams louder than before.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

Please, make it stop!

Justin begins running across the desert. With every rock he passes, he spots another face staring back right at him. The moans and screams grow more louder, more terrifying in his ears.

The desert around Justin begins to blur as he runs around and around. His breathing grows faster and faster.

Growing weak and tired, he collapses at the foot of a rock formation. He puts his hand to his chest as he tries to control his breath.

He then catches something in the corner of his eye.

A small desert mouse scurries up along to Justin.

Justin remains silent as he stares the mouse down. The mouse stares back at Justin. Then, Justin breaks the silence.

JUSTIN

(under his breath)

What do you want with me?

The mouse then scurries back towards the other side of the rock, but not before stopping to look back at Justin for a moment before continuing.

Justin slowly picks himself up and follows the mouse around the corner of the rock. As he turns the corner, the figure of the old woman is revealed, waiting for him.

Just as before, the mouse reaches the old woman and jumps into the palm of her hand. She stares straight at Justin, smiling wickedly.

Too tired to be scared, Justin creeps slowly towards the old woman.

JUSTIN

Why have you been following me?

The old woman does not move a muscle.

Justin can't take silence as an answer.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

You've been following me this whole time, what the hell do you want with me, huh?

Again, the old woman does not stir.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

What the fuck is this all about? Is this some kind of punishment? Some kind of test? A trial to prove my worth? If that's the case, then I've certainly proved myself.

The old woman slowly and quietly begins to chuckle to herself.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

This is a trial, isn't it? Well, you best believe that I'm not giving up. Not you or any of your tricks can stop me! I'm going to reach Despina! I'm going to paradise!

By now, the old woman is audibly laughing.

Justin begins to crazily smile himself. A twisted sense of confidence has fallen over him.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

I'm not scared of you anymore!

At this, the old woman's face turns stone cold. Her grey eyes stare straight into Justin's. Justin's crazed smile begins to break. The old woman's eyes begin to roll into the back of her head.

She suddenly raises her withered hand into the air.

She snaps her fingers.

As soon as she snaps, the world around Justin and the old woman immediately is blurred and out of focus. Justin is taken aback by this sight. His eyes begin to roll into the

back of his head as well.

Justin begins to sway back and forth. He suddenly collapses on the ground in one go. As he stares at the bare feet of the old woman in front of him, they start to become out of focus as well. Justin then closes his eyes, the world around him going black.

Beat.

CLARE (V.O.)

Justin?

FADE TO:

EXT. DESERT ROCK FORMATIONS- SUNSET

Justin slowly opens his eyes.

Still laying on the ground, Justin awakes to see Clare above him, holding his face.

CLARE (CONT'D)

Justin, are you okay?

Justin shakes his head as he tries to process all that has happened.

JUSTIN

Did you see anyone?

CLARE

Anyone?

JUSTIN

Or *anything*?

CLARE

No, Justin, I didn't. After you didn't come back for a while, I followed after you and I found you lying here passed out. I was so worried, nearly gave me a heart attack.

Justin looks up at Clare.

JUSTIN

You were?

CLARE

Of course, stupid.

Justin sighs.

JUSTIN

Clare, I'm so sorry.

Clare is slightly surprised by his apology. She smiles. She reaches her hand down to help him up.

CLARE

Come on, let's get back on the road.

Justin takes her hand. She pulls him up and puts her arm around his waist as they walk back towards the car.

Justin takes a deep breath.

JUSTIN

Thanks, Clare.

Clare smiles. They continue walking.

EXT. DESERT- NIGHT

The car is parked by the side of the road. A few yards away, Justin and Clare lay silently in their sleeping bags.

Justin is fast asleep. Clare stares up into the night sky full of stars. The stars stare back at her. She silently ponders to herself.

CLARE

(under her breath)

Bacteria.

A rustle is then heard next to her. Clare peers over.

Justin begins tossing and turning, quietly moaning to himself, as if in pain.

Clare's face grows with concern.

CLARE

Justin?

Justin starts shaking and rotating back and forth in his sleeping bag, his noises growing louder.

Clare slowly moves out from her sleeping bag and starts to crawl herself closer to Justin.

CLARE
 (quietly)
 Justin?

At this, Justin suddenly freezes in place and screams loudly up into the air, his eyes still shut. His wretched screaming scares Clare back into her sleeping back.

JUSTIN
 Nowhere! Nowhere! Nowhere!

Clare watches silently in horror. After a few more screams, Justin lets in a loud, deep breath and falls limp, back to sleep.

A beat as Clare is frozen by the sight she just witnessed. She watches Justin snore back into calming sleep, checking to see if the worst is done.

Clare then wiggles back into her bag, her eyes widened as she stares back off into the stars, only now all of her wonder is gone and replaced with fright.

CLARE
 (under her breath)
 Only bacteria.

TIME CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

The next morning. Clare wears the same expression of fright from the previous night on her face. She stares off into the vast desert laying before her.

Behind her, Justin is packing away all of their stuff, however, he too appears shaken from last night. Justin looks over to Clare.

JUSTIN
 You-you alright this morning?

Clare shakes out of it. She looks back over to Justin.

CLARE
 Just a bit worried about you, Justin.

At Reynolds, the two both somewhat smirk at each other, but the tension is still there.

Clare gets up.

CLARE
So, how much longer do you think it's
gonna be?

JUSTIN
(mumbling)
Not that much longer.

CLARE
Okay, sure but how much longer?

JUSTIN
Just...not that much. Soon.

CLARE
Soon?

JUSTIN
(pointed)
Yes. Soon.

Clare opens her mouth to question again, but falls short of saying them. She sighs.

CLARE
Alright then. Soon.

EXT. DESERT- NIGHT

Justin drives the car through the darkness. He appears to be on edge. His eyes are wide and staring off into the dark road ahead.

Clare sits next to him, casually relaxed in the passenger seat.

Looking at the road ahead, Justin stares straight out on the road. All of the sudden, he spies a shadow on the side of the road, just out of view of the car's headlights.

Justin ticks his head suddenly in that direction, paranoid.

JUSTIN
Clare...

Clare looks over to Justin.

CLARE
What now?

JUSTIN
I saw something.

Clare begins to look concerned.

CLARE
What was it?

JUSTIN
I don't...

Words fail him. A beat.

CLARE
Okay, if you need to pull over so I
can drive-

JUSTIN
No! No, I'm fine.

A beat.

The car passes a road sign stating a motel is up ahead.

CLARE
Look, there's a motel in 5 miles. We
can stop there for the night.

JUSTIN
(quietly)
Okay.

He is still staring out onto the road, glancing at each side
of the road, waiting.

His eyes are screaming.

He suddenly spots another shadow flash by the side of the
road.

JUSTIN
Clare! There! Did you see?

Clare's face grows with fear.

CLARE
Okay, that's it, pull over.

Justin's eyes go mad.

JUSTIN
I know it's her.

CLARE
What?

JUSTIN
It's her, I know it, Clare! She's been following me this whole time!

CLARE
Justin, pull over. Now.

JUSTIN
No! I'm ending this now!

CLARE
Justin, pull over, you're scaring me.

Up in the distance, just now in view of the headlights, a figure is seen.

The old lady.

Justin's eyes widen at the sight.

JUSTIN
It's her! Look!

Clare looks forward. Her eyes widen too.

CLARE
Justin, it's a hitchhiker. Pull over!

Justin does not say anything. His eyes are fixated on the old lady.

The car speeds up. Clare notices.

CLARE
Justin, what're you doing?

JUSTIN
(under his breath)
I'm ending this.

CLARE
What?!

Clare tries to reach over to the steering wheel to stop Justin. Justin shoves her back into the passenger seat.

CLARE
(in a panic)
Justin, STOP!

The old lady stands on the side of the road. She waves her hand. Her eyes are locked onto Justin.

Justin locks his eyes on her.

He steers directly towards the old lady.

Clare screams:

CLARE
NO!

The car hits the old lady and runs her over.

A moment after, the car halts to a stop.

A beat. The two sit in silence.

Then Clare starts screaming and crying in horror. Justin remains unphased.

JUSTIN
It's over. It's finally over.

CLARE
What have you done?!

Justin slowly turns to face Clare.

JUSTIN
I ended it, Clare. Everything's okay now.

CLARE
You killed someone!

JUSTIN
She was evil, Clare!

CLARE
What?!

JUSTIN
That was the old lady who's been following me! Terrorizing me!

CLARE

She was just a hitchhiker, Justin!
Even if you thought it was her, you
still killed her!

Clare then shakes in realization.

CLARE

Oh my god.

She exits the car and runs towards the body, laid out on the ground.

A beat in the car. Justin sits in the car, heavily breathing, in and out. Clare's screams from outside are heard from inside the car.

Justin closes his eyes and rests his head on the steering wheel.

TIME CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT- NIGHT

About an hour later.

Justin and Clare stand before a shallow hole they have dug up.

The dead body of the old lady is wrapped with one of their blankets.

Clare's face shows she has been crying heavily. She breathes deeply, in and out.

Justin stares blankly at the dead body.

He then picks up the dead body and tosses it into the hole. The body hits the bottom of the hole with a THUD.

At this THUD, Clare breaks into tears again.

Justin slowly turns his head to face her. They lock eyes with one another.

Clare's eyes are filled with sadness and fright.

Justin's eyes are stale, almost dead.

Justin starts to fill in the hole as Clare cries behind him.

CLARE

What now?

Justin pauses. A beat.

JUSTIN

What do you mean?

CLARE

We have to go back.

Justin returns to filling in the hole. A beat of silence.

CLARE

Justin?

Justin quickly turns around and begins to shout frantically:

JUSTIN

Nothing's changed! If anything, it's all better! I made it all better! There's nothing standing in my way anymore. I mean, c'mon Clare! I am so fucking close to finally reaching this and you want us to turn back?!

CLARE

Justin, you're going crazy!

JUSTIN

Oh, really Clare? Hm? You think I haven't fucking figured that out?! Ever since we started this trip I've been haunted by all of this crazy shit! But now it's all gone! I fixed it, Clare!

CLARE

Justin, enough!

JUSTIN

Why do you want to go back? You want to go to Despina as much as I do!

CLARE

No, I don't!

JUSTIN

Oh yes, you do, shut up!

CLARE
WILL YOU JUST LISTEN?!

A beat. Justin is taken aback by this.

CLARE (CONT'D)
You've barely listened to me this entire trip! I didn't go on this trip to find Despina. The only reason I decided to go on this maddening thing was because of you, Justin. Do you think I would do this for any other person?! Justin, I love you. But now... you've done something so terrible. So completely unforgivable.

She cries for a beat.

CLARE (CONT'D)
I just can't. I can't anymore, Justin.

Clare runs to the car and gets in on the driver's side.

Justin returns to filling up the hole.

Once he is done, he walks up to the driver's side window, which is down.

JUSTIN
Let's find that motel. You want me to drive-

CLARE
NO!

Justin steps back.

CLARE (CONT'D)
I can drive.

A beat.

JUSTIN
Okay.

Justin walks around to the passenger seat.

Justin waits a moment. He then looks back at the filled-in hole. He stares intently for a moment, then gets into the car.

INT. MOTEL ROOM- NIGHT

Justin and Clare lay face up in two separate beds in an old motel room.

Clare is breathing in and out deeply, trying to hold back tears.

Justin is silent.

He stares up at the ceiling above him.

The ceiling slowly starts to twist and distort before Justin's eyes. He remains motionless and entranced by the sight.

A frame of Despina begins to flash before his eyes intermittently.

Justin's eyes begin to roll into the back of his head. His eyes close as the world around him turns to darkness.

Clare's sobs can be heard as we:

FADE TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM- DAY

The next morning.

Justin's eyes burst open.

The ceiling is back to normal.

Justin turns over towards Clare's bed. It is empty.

Justin gets up and looks around the motel room. Any trace of Clare is gone.

Justin quickly runs out of the motel room.

EXT. MOTEL- DAY

Justin runs out of the motel's front door into the parking lot. He spins around and around looking frantically.

The station wagon is gone.

Justin runs to the road. He looks up and down the road on each side.

No cars in sight.

Justin falls on his knees and begins to frantically breathe in and out.

He then screams in pain.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM- DAY

Justin returns to the motel room.

He walks into the bathroom of the suite. He washes his face in the sink.

He then looks up and before him in the small mirror is Reflection Justin.

Justin does not scream or even appear frightened. He is calm. He is numb.

Reflection Justin smiles eerily at Justin.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
She left you.

JUSTIN
She left me.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
Who needs her?

JUSTIN
Did I need her?

REFLECTION JUSTIN
Not you?

JUSTIN
Not me.

Reflection Justin begins to maniacally chuckle.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
You couldn't find it, could you?

JUSTIN
Despina's not that far away now. I'll find it.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
It's too late now. You didn't find it.

JUSTIN
But I will!

REFLECTION JUSTIN
You've lost it!

JUSTIN
I didn't!

REFLECTION JUSTIN
Didn't you?!

Reflection Justin continues to laugh.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
You are nowhere, Justin. Nowhere.

JUSTIN
I'm almost there though!

REFLECTION JUSTIN
Nowhere. Nowhere. Nowhere.

JUSTIN
(getting angry)
Despina is not that far away. I can
make it on foot.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
But you're nowhere!

JUSTIN
I am not!

REFLECTION JUSTIN
You had everything. Now you have
nothing.

JUSTIN
What?

REFLECTION JUSTIN
(childishly)
Nothing going nowhere! Nothing going
nowhere!

JUSTIN
I have Despina! That's what I have.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
Nowhere! Nowhere! Nowhere!

JUSTIN
Stop it!

Reflection Justin keeps crazily singing and chanting "nowhere". The lights begin to flicker on and off.

Justin crawls into a ball on the floor.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
Nowhere! Nowhere! NOWHERE!

Justin closes his eyes and the chanting continues. Then it suddenly stops.

The head of Reflection Justin, now a real person again, slowly inches next to Justin's ear.

REFLECTION JUSTIN
(creepily whispers)
Nowhere!

Justin opens his eyes in shock, but Reflection Justin is gone, his creepy chuckle fading away until the room drifts into silence. The lights flicker back on.

Justin sits still on the floor. He breathes deeply in and out.

He contemplates silently to himself. He picks himself up and walks into the bedroom part of the suite.

Justin quickly packs up and consolidates all of his belongings into his backpack and saxophone case. He loads up everything onto his back and heads towards the door.

EXT. MOTEL- DAY

Justin walks out of the motel front doors into the burning bright sun.

He walks up to the long narrow road. He looks up at the sun, noticing its position. He then looks one way ahead on the road. He takes a deep breath in and out.

He takes the first step forward.

Justin then begins to trek down the side of the road on foot.

EXT. DESERT- DAY

Justin marches across the desert, alongside the road. There is not a car in sight. Not even a sign of life.

Just Justin and the road.

Justin walks with a face of determination. He stares intently at the path ahead as if he didn't even need to blink.

He treks on and on for what seems like miles, or could it possibly be yards? Justin can not notice either way.

Justin does not even notice the desert mouse he passes by. The mouse sits in place, looking up at Justin, watching him march out of sight.

TRANSITION TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

Hours passed.

The sun's rays hurtle beams of light and heat down upon the desert, the road, and Justin.

Justin now feels the weight of his backpack pulls him down. His posture is no longer one of confidence and determination. His face is a bright red with sweat trickling down his brow and temples. He pants like an animal.

Pushing himself a bit too far, Justin's pant turns into a coughing fit.

Justin slows down to a stop, pauses for a brief moment as he reaches for his water bottle in his backpack, but then realizes this mistake and pushes himself to continue forward. Water can wait, Despina is not too far from here now.

Justin tries to walk faster like the pace he marched before, but he can not reach the same energy he once had.

TRANSITION TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

A desert mouse scurries alongside the road, following behind Justin.

Justin, still pushing himself, looks as if he can tip over at any moment.

Solo saxophone music is heard as Justin now trudges along. The music grows louder and louder as Justin begins swaying back and forth as he walks.

Colors begin to fly around Justin's head as suddenly the music turns into a big band jazz piece.

Justin peers over as a truck suddenly drives up close to him, out of nowhere. In the bed of the truck is a whole jazz band, complete with saxophones, trumpets, trombones, a drummer, and a CONDUCTOR in the middle.

The band plays away as the truck screeches to a halt. After a few measures, the conductor closes off the piece with a large gesture of his baton.

The conductor turns around and faces Justin. He speaks in a 1930s-40s jazz musician voice, akin to Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie.

CONDUCTOR

Hello Justin. Tryin' to make your way
down to Despina?

Justin tries to speak, but can not out of exhaustion. He quickly nods.

CONDUCTOR

Mhm, well, me and the boys are heading
down there now. We've been dreaming of
it for years. The Golden Star of the
Desert, The City of 1000 Dreams, The
Big D! Why, I've dreamed of this day
since I was a boy and we are so close
to gettin there!

The conductor cracks himself up, laughing with glee.

He then side-eyes Justin.

CONDUCTOR (CONT'D)

Care to join us, Justin?

The conductor reaches out his hand for Justin to take it.

Justin walks over to the truck and reaches out his hand. His face is full of joy and relief.

Just as Justin is about to take the conductor's hand, the conductor takes back his hand. He maniacally laughs. The band members laugh too.

CONDUCTOR
You were too slow, boy! You ain't
going nowhere! Nowhere!

He laughs again straight at Justin. He turns his head and shouts:

CONDUCTOR
Charlie, play us out!

A saxophone player starts to play a fast-tempo piece. A few beats later, the rest of the band joins in. The conductor turns around and starts to conduct again.

He turns back around once more to Justin and screams out one more:

CONDUCTOR
NOWHERE!

He cackles as the truck speeds off down the road, out of sight.

A beat. Justin is frozen in place, unable to comprehend the confusion and hurt.

He then lets out a large wail in anger in the direction of the truck.

He lets out a large sigh and rolls his shoulder. He quickly takes a full swig of his water bottle and begins back onto his trek.

TRANSITION TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

Justin continues down the road, his water bottle hanging by a loop wrapped around his fingers weakly. His fatigue is obviously growing.

He then hears a small brush of movement underneath him. He looks down.

Right next to his foot, a desert mouse scurries past him, stops, and looks straight up at Justin.

Justin takes a moment to analyze the mouse. Is this the same mouse as before?

Justin bends down and reaches out his hand slowly. The mouse

scurries up to his hand, sniffs it, and crawls on to it.

Justin cracks a small smile.

The mouse then suddenly bites Justin, in the same spot as last time.

The pain rushes through Justin and he collapses, howling in pain.

Still in pain, the shock of the bite is gone and Justin directs his attention at the mouse.

The mouse stares at Justin intently.

Filled with rage, Justin pops up onto his feet and starts to chase the mouse down the road.

The mouse scampers quickly, with Justin not too far behind him. The mouse suddenly takes a quick right turn and runs into the sandy desert. Justin follows after him.

The mouse then reaches a small hole and dives into it. Justin reaches the same hole and pauses, planning his next move.

Justin then gets on his knees. He slowly lowers his face to the hole, placing his eye down the hole to get a look.

The hole is dark at first, nothing is clear. Then Justin sees small bits of movement. The movement then grows. Two bright beady eyes open up.

JUSTIN

HA!

At the exclamation, two more beady eyes appear. Then another pair. Then another.

Justin's face then turns grim. He quickly backs away from the hole, but it is too late.

A swarm of desert mice rush out of the hole and run towards Justin. They reach his feet and begin climbing up his legs.

Justin falls onto his back, struggling to get free. The mice cover his entire body.

Justin squirms but is unable to get up. He breathes frantically. He shuts his eyes, still fighting to get free. He still hears the mice squeaking and scampering across his body.

He then lets out a loud scream, deep from within him. The mice are gone, disappeared as if they were never there. Justin lays flat on the desert ground, screaming with his eyes closed.

He stops. He slowly opens his eyes. He checks under his arms and legs. No mouse to be seen.

Justin gets up. He lets out a huge breath of relief. He turns over his shoulder and sees the road a few yards away from him.

JUSTIN

Shit.

Justin turns fully towards the road and begins back on his journey, shaken.

EXT. DESERT- NIGHT

The contents of Justin's bag are spread across the ground, a few yards away from the road. Laying on top of a small blanket, Justin looks up at the stars.

JUSTIN

I'm smarter than bacteria.

A beat.

He looks over to his side. There is space next to him. Enough space for another person.

Tears start to swell in Justin's eyes. He then shakes his head no.

JUSTIN

I just talk too much to be one.

He then turns over to his other side. He then begins to silently cry.

JUSTIN

Why?

He continues to silently cry as we:

TRANSITION TO:

EXT. DESERT- NIGHT

Clare is driving down the road towards home at night in the

station wagon. Her eyes are bloodshot from crying and exhaustion. She simply stares at the road ahead.

She peaks out the window at the stars. She becomes entranced by them.

Suddenly, right in front of her headlights, a figure appears. Clare catches the sight last minute, screams, and swerves out of the way before hitting the figure.

Clare continues without stopping, but turns her head and looks back. She can no longer see the figure.

She turns back around, paying attention to the road.

CLARE

You're just tired.

As she says this, she spots another shadowy figure on the side of the road. She turns her head to see. She stares intently, trying to see clearly.

She then sees it. The creepy cashier from the gas station. He is standing on the side of the road, waving and smiling wickedly at Clare.

Clare quickly turns her head forward. She starts to breathe frantically. Her eyes begin to dart all over the place.

She then suddenly slams on the brakes. She takes her hands off the steering wheel. She looks down at them. Her hands are shaking fiercely. Her breathing increases.

She then quickly looks up.

CLARE

Justin.

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

Justin trudges through the desert, more tired than ever. He is practically on his knees, crawling through the sand. His eyes are dreary with exhaustion and stress.

He looks up. He sees something in the distance. The road leads upright to it. Despina?

Hope fills Justin's face. A sudden burst of energy is upon him. He picks himself up and starts running.

The further he runs, the clearer the blur becomes. The mysterious blur stands tall.

As Justin gains in, he starts to slow his pace. A feeling of confusion begins to slowly wash over him.

The image is a bit clearer now. It is definitely not the city, but rather a singular object standing in the middle of the road. Regardless, continues his fast pace in order to reach it.

Then a face of fear springs on Justin's face. It appears to be an animal of some kind. He still treks forward.

The blur is no longer a blur, but rather a cow. Justin now is at a walking pace. He approaches the beast.

Justin makes the realization once he gets in close enough.

This is the same cow that was run over just days ago. The blood, now dried, is still splattered all over the animal's head and body. Hundreds of flies buzz around its head. Its grey eyes stare directly onto Justin.

Justin begins to cry. He screams out to the cow.

JUSTIN

Where is it?!

The cow stays silent.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

I came all this way! Where the fuck is it?!

The cow remains still.

Justin collapses to his knees in front of the cow.

JUSTIN

Please! I came all this way by myself!
Don't I fucking deserve this? Don't I
deserve SOMETHING?!

Justin breathes frantically in and out.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

SAY SOMETHING!

The cow suddenly collapses onto its side. It suddenly lets out a bellowing, demonic screech.

As the screech gets louder, the world starts to spin around Justin. He then falls down on his back. The world goes dark.

EXT. DESERT- NIGHT

Justin's eyes start to blink open. The starry night covers the sky. The stars seem to shine brighter than ever before.

A dark figure stands above Justin. As Justin awakes, the dark figure grows clear.

It is the old lady. She appears the same as before. Not a scratch or bruise on her. She smiles wickedly over Justin.

Justin instantly screams at this sight. He tries to scoot himself away, but the old lady floats towards him. Justin stops, gets up, and stands his ground.

JUSTIN

How are you here? I killed you! You shouldn't be here!

(brief pause)

I should be at Despina!

The old lady chuckles. She then speaks in a raspy, but somewhat alluring voice.

OLD LADY

Is Despina truly what you seek?

JUSTIN

Of course it is! I came all this way! All by myself!

OLD LADY

(pointed)

Did you really?

A beat.

JUSTIN

If you're talking about Clare, that doesn't matter. She left me!

CLARE

Or did you lose her?

JUSTIN

I...

A beat.

OLD LADY
Who brought her here?

JUSTIN
She came all by herself. She chose
this!

OLD LADY
Would she have done this by herself?

A beat.

JUSTIN
(frustrated)
That doesn't matter.

A beat.

OLD LADY
Then you won't find what you seek.

The old lady then begins to disrobe. Justin is scared by what is about to happen.

As her clothes are pulled away, however, the old lady itself disappears. Standing in her place, as if removing a costume, stands Clare Geller.

JUSTIN
Clare?!

Justin runs over, tears in his eyes, and hugs Clare. She stands completely still.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)
Clare, I missed you. I was wrong, I was so wrong, it does matter. I shouldn't have brought us here. I took you for granted and I lost everything. I didn't know how much you meant to me. Oh, Clare, I love you too. You were everything to me. And...

Justin makes the realization.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)
...and I lost it all. Oh god, why did I bring us here?!

Clare then slowly removes Justin from herself.

CLARE

Where is here?

Justin wipes away a tear. He pauses to reflect. Fear is still in his voice.

JUSTIN

Nowhere?

CLARE

Nowhere.

A wind begins to breeze through. Like a mirage, Clare floats away like dust.

Justin looks off to the distance, watching his friend blow away.

Coming from the distance, down the middle of the road, a desert mouse scurries up to Justin's feet. Justin looks down at the creature.

The mouse jumps into Justin's hand, just like for the old lady. The mouse scurries around his hand. It looks at the bite marks left from before. The mouse licks the mark a bit then looks up at Justin.

Justin looks back at the mouse.

JUSTIN

I've lost it, haven't I?

The mouse looks intently at Justin.

JUSTIN

I don't know what to do.

The mouse then looks out onto the road ahead.

Justin looks out ahead for a moment. He then looks back down at the mouse.

JUSTIN

That's all I have left.

Justin then puts the mouse onto his shoulder.

JUSTIN

To nowhere.

Justin closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

He then starts down the road again.

TRANSITION TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

A bright new day.

Justin walks down the middle of the road with a new, steady walking pace. He is clean, with not a bit of sand or sweat on him. He is not slumped over or pulled down anymore. It's as if he is weightless.

His face is filled with calm and serenity. The mouse still sits on his shoulder. They both look out ahead.

The song Justin played at Cottonwood is now heard. As the music fades in, the desert fades away into:

EXT. COLOR MIRAGE

Justin now walks in a world full of color, very hallucinogenic in style. The colors flow, morph, dance to the jazz music.

Justin is unphased by the change. He just stares ahead and walks peacefully onward.

The colors fly all around Justin and the mouse. A light shines from behind them.

He is the center of their universe.

The colors now fill Justin's eyes and the mouse's eyes. A large, cheshire grin grows on Justin's face.

Justin is at peace.

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT- DAY

Back to the hot, sweltering desert.

Justin, back to being covered in sand and sweat again, walks down the middle of the road. He looks exactly like Reflection Justin.

His wide eyes and large smile are still there, but it now appears to come from a place of madness.

After a few steps, he falls down to his knees in the middle of the road, his head slumped forward.

He freezes in this position for a beat. He then slowly lifts his head up. He lifts it higher and higher as if he sees something before him.

His gaze reaches the top of what he is looking at. His mouth grows ajar. He takes deep breaths in and out.

He then starts to chuckle at the sight before him.

The chuckle grows into a laugh.

The laugh grows into a maniacal cackle.

The cackle grows into a cry.

The cry grows into a sob.

The sob turns into a screaming fit.

Justin is in pain.

The mouse jumps off from his shoulder. The mouse turns back to the way they came.

The mouse runs back, down the middle of the road.

He runs up to the feet of someone, facing the direction towards Justin.

Justin looks back towards the road, tears in his eyes, trying to find the mouse. His head tilts up slowly to see what is in the distance.

Dirty and tired, outside the station wagon, stands Clare Geller. The real Clare Geller. She is frozen in place, but no longer in fear. Her relief to see Justin is apparent on her face.

Justin quickly stands up. He wipes away the tears in his eyes.

She cracks a smile at him.

He gleefully grins back.

The road stretches out between them. They are nowhere. Together.

FADE OUT

THE END

Credits

The Road to Nowhere

The first 18 pages of the screenplay were performed in a virtual table reading on April 3rd, 2021.

The entire company was composed of members of Honors College Club Theater, a theater troupe housed in the Honors College at the University of Houston.

Cast

Justin Reynolds.....Lawrence Weeden

Clare Geller..... Ashlí Acuna

Ava Reynolds.....Aria Shankar

Mr. Reynolds.....Anthony Ontiveros

Mrs. Reynolds.....Naomi Zidon

Bartender.....Noah Key

Library P.A.Keegan Freeman

Crew

Director.....Keegan Freeman

Screenwriter.....Noah Key

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