Sorta Like a Rock Star

by
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Based on "Sorta Like a Rock Star"
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FADE IN:

INT. BACKSTAGE CONCERT ARENA - DAY

CLOSE-UP on a pair of worn vintage boots as they stride deliberately towards the stage. The ROAR from the CROWD grows more audible with each step. Awaiting the presence of someone sorta amazing, someone sorta iconic...

AMBER (V.O.)
Not to brag or anything, but I'm sorta like a rock star to these people.

The fantasy snaps to...

INT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME/COMMON ROOM - DAY

PAN-UP from the boots to reveal their wearer: AMBER APPLETON, 17, as she struts into a linoleum-floored room. All long limbs, tousled blonde hair and confident smile.

REVEAL that her Crowd consists of a group of OLD PEOPLE. Her number one fan, OLD MAN LINDER, early 80's, Christmas sweater, approaches Amber, toting his oxygen tank behind him.

OLD MAN LINDER
Alright, kid. Joan of Old has been mumbling nasty things about you all week. She's coming at you hard today.

He massages her shoulders like a trainer in a boxing ring.

OLD MAN LINDER
Don't let her rattle you with any low blows, 'cause the wrinkly bag's been a real snake lately. New acid reflux meds or something.

Amber's gaze becomes fixed on her opponent: JOAN OF OLD, late 80's, blind as a bat and ninety pounds soaking wet. Joan presides in her wheelchair, front and center. Her milky irises vacantly stare in Amber's general direction.

AMBER
Please. You think Morticia can faze me? You're talking to the undefeated champion of word battle.

Old Man Linder cracks a smile and high-fives Amber.

The Old People push their chairs and wheel the wheelchair-bound into position so everyone can see and hear. White hair abounds, along with yellow fingernails, shaky limbs, and wrinkles galore.

OLD MAN LINDER
This is the only thing we have to look forward to. Besides the weekly battle, our lives bore us to death.
(beat)
Literally.

GRANDPA THOMPSON, 70's, oversized bow tie and hunched back, stands and faces the audience.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
Welcome once again to the Wednesday Word Battle between Hope and Despair. To my left we have the undefeated indomitably optimistic one, the teen of merriment, the fan-favorite, the girl you wish were your granddaughter, the only minor who visits the home on a non-holiday, Amber the Princess of Hope Apple-Tooooon!

Amber rolls her head, cracks her knuckles, and jabs the air, putting on a real show.

The Old People CLAP. Men who still have teeth WHISTLE.

GRANDPA THOMPSON (CONT'D)
And now the challenger...

The audience starts to BOO.

GRANDPA THOMPSON (CONT'D)
The widow of Methuselah. The wench who faked a heart attack when she thought we were having too much fun at last year's holiday party. The lady in black who has probably insulted you at least once already today: Joan! Of! Old!

With her bony hands, Joan waves off the "Boos."

GRANDPA THOMPSON (CONT'D)
You know the rules. If Joan of Old smiles, the young lady wins; Amber takes home a pudding cup and we get to keep our holiday party.
(MORE)

GRANDPA THOMPSON (CONT'D)
If Amber Appleton cries and the old broad wins her first battle, no party for us. Challenger calls it.

He flips a coin.

JOAN OF OLD
Tails.

Grandpa Thompson catches the quarter and slaps it down on the back of his spotted hand.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
Heads.

JOAN OF OLD
Damn you to hell!

Grandpa Thompson sticks his tongue out at her.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
Let the battle begin.

Joan of Old clears her throat.

JOAN OF OLD
You think you're optimistic, huh? That's what I'd call delusional. Amber Appleton and her plucky little dream of going to an Ivy League college. The only ivy you'll be seeing will be growing on the side of the strip club you'll be dancing at. You're not going to be cracking the books at some highfalutin' school, you'll be cooking the crystal in a trailer park like the rest of the foolish, homely girls in this town. May as well face it, Amber. The only thing you're going to do is pack on an extra twenty pounds and end up an old, pathetic spinster.

The audience reacts with GASPS and "Oooohs." Amber nods, nonplussed.

AMBER
Alright, alright. Speaking of spinsters, what are you now, like 210?

The audience CHUCKLES and Amber plays to her crowd, rising to her feet like a stand-up comedian.

AMBER
Joan of Old is so ancient, she took her driver's test on a dinosaur. She's so long in the tooth, she can't go to an antique store, 'cause they'd ask to sell her. She's so friggin' old, she remembers when the Dead Sea was just getting sick.

The audience CLAPS and CHUCKLES, repeating her silly jokes to each other like they're Comedy Central gold. Joan of Old's face doesn't budge.

JOAN OF OLD
Yes, I'm old. But I can remember when I was a young woman. There weren't actually any dinosaurs around. You know what there were a lot of? Lonely, ordinary girls who had big dreams that would never come true. By the time they figured this out, their looks had faded along with their hope and it was too late to do a thing about it. Today, the same kind of half-witted, bovine-faced girls can usually be found at the old people's home, doing community service.

The crowd reacts with "Boos" and "Ouch!" etc. Old Man Linder gives Amber a nod of reassurance.

AMBER
I get it. You think it's silly for me to have goals. You think a positive attitude is a sign of weakness. You think I'm an idealistic twit.
(beat)
I'll take it! Better foolish than friendless, right folks?

OLD MAN LINDER
That's right!

AMBER (CONT'D)
You know what, Joan? You're not as bad as people say.
(beat)
You're much, much worse.

Amber turns to her audience.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Joan of Old is so freaking pessimistic, the blood crawling through her veins is B-Negative.
(to Joan of Old)
I'd try to see things from your point of view, Joan of Old, but I just can't get my head so far up my ass.

Amber waits for the audience's APPLAUSE to subside.

AMBER (CONT'D)
(to Joan of Old)
You should really do some soul-searching. You just might find one.

The audience CLAPS. Amber smiles with satisfaction.

JOAN OF OLD
Here's a quote for you, Amber. 'The thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets successfully through many a bad night.' That's Friedrich Nietzsche and I offer that tidbit to you as a form of consolation when we're all dead and you're alone in some federally funded hellhole thinking about your barren womb and abandoned pipe dreams.

AMBER
Ah, Nietzsche. Didn't he diss you, back in the 1800's?

Joan of Old trains her blind eyes on Amber and speaks with a clipped, level cadence.

JOAN OF OLD
You haven't even begun to feel pain, young woman, but you will. Trust me, you will. Life is hell and yours has only just begun.

The room goes silent. Chilled by Joan of Old's words, Amber looks like she might be on the verge of tears. Several tense moments go by.

AMBER
It's cool, be as nasty as you want, Joan of Old. I'll still love you anyway.

She hops up and plants an enthusiastic kiss on Joan of Old's cheek. Joan of Old's mouth drops open. The audience HOWLS.

AMBER (CONT'D)
You adorable, little, wrinkly, depressing old hag, I love ya!

Amber kisses her other cheek. Joan of Old blushes and -

GRANDPA THOMPSON
She smiled! Joan of Old smiled for a second. Do I have a witness?

Half of the Old People in the room yell, "Aye!"

OLD MAN LINDER
That's our girl!

He lifts Amber's hand in the air, proclaiming her victorious. The Old People CHEER and Amber happily pockets the pudding cup that Grandpa Thompson presents to her.

JOAN OF OLD
Cheater! Physical contact is against the rules!

She's drowned out by the revelry buzzing through the room.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
Let's hear it for Amber!

The ROAR of the CROWD sharply transitions to the CLINK of a bike lock.

EXT. CHILDRESS HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

CLOSE-UP on a bike lock being sealed on a run-down bike. PULL BACK to reveal Amber securing her bike on the rack.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Amber slides into her seat as the BELL rings. The English teacher, JONATHAN FRANKS, late 30's, red hair, round glasses, writes the word "HAIKU" on the blackboard.

FRANKS
Tell me what you know, people.

The STUDENTS remain silent.

FRANKS (CONT'D)
Anyone? Anything? Does any individual in this classroom know something about the Japanese form of poetry known as haiku or is this another instance of 'it's not cool for teenagers to like, know stuff and say it out loud?'

The Students CHUCKLE. Amber raises her hand, but Franks' attention turns to PRINCIPAL FIORELLI, who stands at the door with TY, 17, a tall, skinny, black kid.

Franks goes over and briefly confers with the Principal.

FRANKS (CONT'D)
Everyone, we have a new student. Please do your best not to frighten Ty with your over-the-top participation skills on his first day with us at Childress High.

Ty takes a vacant seat. Amber smiles politely, her hand still raised in the air.

FRANKS
Amber, why thank you for volunteering to show Ty around.

AMBER
Actually, I --

FRANKS
Very kind of you. Back to haiku. Five, seven, five. Am I picking my lotto numbers or does that mean something to anyone in this room?

INT. FRANKS' OFFICE - AFTERNOON

Ty trails Amber into the converted closet lined with bookshelves of college brochures and information packets.

Franks does paperwork at his desk while RICKY ROBERTS, 16 and Autistic, plays video games with WHEELCHAIR CHAD, 17.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
(without looking up)
Yo A.

AMBER
What up my brotha from another mother?

RICKY
Hello, Amber Appleton. Ricky Roberts says hello to Amber Appleton. Hi, hi!

Ty's eyes widen.

AMBER
(to Ty)
These are my boys. Ricky, Wheelchair Chad, meet Ty.

Ricky and Wheelchair Chad assess the newcomer. Amber goes to water the Chia pet on Franks desk.

RICKY
Ch-ch-ch-chia!

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
Hey, dude. Welcome to the Freak Force.

AMBER
(to Ty)
Franks lets us hang in his office so a while back, we started calling ourselves the Franks Freak Force Federation. We've been in the market for a worthy fourth member for a while.

RICKY
Franks Freak Force Federation. Ricky Roberts is part of the Franks Freak Force Federation!

AMBER
Damn straight mofos. Let's get our freak on.

FRANKS
Amber. Language.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
He doesn't know what mofos means.

AMBER
(to Ty)
Ricky's worse than a parrot.

Amber perches on the couch and addresses Ricky.

AMBER
Don't say "mofos," okay Ricky? Ricky Roberts doesn't say that word.

RICKY
Ricky Roberts doesn't say mofos.
(beat)
Okay, motherfuckers?

EXT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Amber locates the hide-a-key rock and uses the spare key to let herself into Ricky's house, an elegant white colonial with black shutters.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Amber carefully drops her backpack by the front door.

RICKY
Ricky Roberts is home with his best friend, Amber Appleton. Apple-TON!

An adorably mangy three-legged mutt, BOBBY BIG BOY, scampers outs and attacks Amber, peeing on himself.

AMBER
That's my pup. Sprinkle that excitement, Bobby Big Boy!

Amber kisses her dog, then mops up the urine on the kitchen floor. Ricky plops down at the table and opens his math book.

RICKY
Forty eight squared is two thousand three hundred and four.

Amber hands him a sleeve of Fig Newtons and a blue Gatorade.

AMBER
I have to go see the K.D.s. I'll be back in a bit to cook dinner, cool?

No response.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Did you hear me? I'll be back in a couple hours. Your Mom should be home 'round then too. Ricky?

RICKY
Ricky Roberts is doing math. Do not talk to Ricky Roberts when Ricky Roberts is doing math because it is his favorite!

Amber smiles to herself.

AMBER
Word.

She shoves a Fig Newton in her mouth on her way out.

EXT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - AFTERNOON

Amber arrives at a former shoe store turned House of God that's wedged between a donut shop and a liquor store. FATHER CHEE, 50's, a wizened and kindly Korean, opens the front door as if he's been awaiting her arrival.

AMBER
How's it hanging, Father Chee?

Amber hops off her bike and walks it into the church.

FATHER CHEE
Good afternoon, Amber. It is hanging very well, thank you.

Father Chee dead-bolts the lock behind them.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Amber scoops her beloved dog out of the basket. Father Chee holds out a piece of paper.

FATHER CHEE
Before I forget, I signed the form for your school.

Amber makes no move to take it.

AMBER
I don't keep coming here to pad my resume. The Korean Divas are my peeps.

FATHER CHEE
I know, Amber. I'm well aware that you're here because you want to make a difference in people's lives, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't get the credit you deserve too.

He proffers the piece of paper again.

FATHER CHEE (CONT'D)
It doesn't lessen your good works.

Amber finally takes it and tucks it into her pocket.

AMBER
I do need a boatload of community service hours if I'm going to get into Columbia.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH/SANCTUARY - AFTERNOON

The windowless walls are made of lime green cinder blocks. Fluorescent light bulbs hang in a row from the ceiling. This place of worship is as glamorous as a halfway house.

A dozen KOREAN WOMEN of varying ages, a.k.a. the DIVAS, sit in rows of folding chairs that function as makeshift pews. They jump up, smiling and CLAPPING as soon as Amber walks in.

AMBER
Who rocks the house?

KOREAN DIVAS
The Korean Divas!

AMBER
Hell yeah, K.D.s?

KOREAN DIVAS
HELL YEAH!

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH/SANCTUARY - NEXT

Amber commands the Korean Divas' undivided attention.

AMBER
Last week we talked adjectives. I asked you to think about what you'd most like to do in the world and describe how it would make you feel using one killer adjective. Who wants to go first?

The Korean Divas look shyly at their feet. Amber points to KIM LEE, 40's, who sits in the front row.

AMBER (CONT'D)
How about you, Tina Kim Lee Turner?

Kim Lee stands.

KIM LEE
I would like buy a house for my son. That be glorious.

Going down the row:

KOREAN DIVA #2
I like purchase my husband a Ferrari. I feel jumping for joy.

KOREAN DIVA #3
I wish my parents go to scenic Hawaii.

AMBER
No, no, no! I'm failing all of you.

The Korean Divas look down at their feet with shame.

AMBER (CONT'D)
The assignment was to say what you wanted for *yourselves*. It's nice to want to do things for your families, of course, but having dreams for yourself is totally American and if you're going to live here and learn English, you need to start thinking like American women. True?

The Korean Divas nod.

AMBER (CONT'D)
True. Try again, Tina Kim Lee Turner.

KIM LEE
I would like see handsome movie star in Hollywood, like delicious men I see in photo American magazine.

AMBER
Now that's what I'm talking about. Good pronunciation and delicious is a truly killer adjective.

Kim Lee beams. The other K.D.s pat her on the back.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH/SANCTUARY - LATER

Amber doles out song books. Father Chee takes his position at a beat-up piano.

AMBER
Listen up, K.D.s, we need to sell the frickin' words. How do we do that?

KOREAN DIVAS
Hips and hands!

AMBER
That's right, ladies. Your graduation's around the corner and I'm dreaming up a big old bringing-down-the-house performance for your families and friends.

Their enthusiasm instantly drains. Father Chee gets up and takes Amber aside.

FATHER CHEE
I know you're trying to do something nice for them, but the K.D.s are terrified of performing in public. They're self-conscious about their English as it is. The idea of singing in English in front of everyone they know is enough to send them running back to Korea.

AMBER
But the K.D.s are all sorts of jive! They have to show off how far they've come.

FATHER CHEE
You had a great idea for them to learn by singing, but they're not going to do it in front of an audience.

AMBER
Hmmm. We'll see about that.

Father Chee shakes his head. They walk back to the group.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Who's ready to belt one out?

The K.D.s open their song books.

AMBER
Hit it, Father Chee!

CLOSE UP on Father Chee's fingers as they descend upon the piano keys.

The K.D.s launch into "You Can't Hurry Love" by the Supremes, SINGING in a staccato but enthusiastic fashion. Amber leads the way, encouraging their hip-bouncing, hand-clapping, shoulder-dipping moves.

KOREAN DIVAS
You can't hurry love, no you'll just have to wait...

EXT. TOWN OF CHILDRESS - DUSK

The SONG continues as Amber rides out of the sketchy part of town, reaching over her bike's handlebars to pet Triple B.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - DUSK

The SONG ENDS, however Amber HUMS the melody to herself while chopping vegetables and preparing dinner. Ricky sits at the table doing math equations.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - NIGHT

A key turns in the lock. DONNA ROBERTS, mid-40's, struts in and sets down her leather briefcase. She drops her keys into a dish next to a framed photograph of Ricky and Amber as children.

Amber sneaks a reverential glance at Donna's sleek suit, three-inch heels, and impeccably applied red lipstick.

AMBER
Hey, Donna. Did you win your case?

DONNA
Better believe it.

Amber grins, concealing her awe by busying herself with what's going on in the wok.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Amber honey, I've told you a million times, you don't have to cook for us.

AMBER
And I've told you a billion times, I like doing it.
(lying, and poorly)
My Mom's been teaching me how to make all kinds of new dishes at home. I like to practice.

DONNA
Sure does smell good.

She checks the contents of the spice rack.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Although you better let me know what ingredients you need around here. Betty Crocker I'm not, so I apologize if my kitchen's lacking.

AMBER
You, not a domestic goddess? Nah.

Amber and Donna share an amused smile. Donna crosses to Ricky and kisses him on the forehead.

DONNA (CONT'D)
How's my boy?

Amber looks on as Ricky tolerates Donna's maternal embrace.

RICKY
Doing math. Do not talk to --

DONNA
What time is it?

Ricky checks the clock on the wall, shuts his math book.

RICKY
It’s time for Ricky Roberts to watch Saved By The Bell.

AMBER
Not tonight. We’re going on a mission tonight, remember?

RICKY
Yes. It’s time for Ricky Roberts to eat his dinner with Mommy Roberts and best friend Amber Appleton.

Amber puts three plates on the table. Donna checks her watch.

DONNA
Better eat up quick.

RICKY
Franks Freak Force Federation is going on a mission. Yes.

DONNA
(to Amber)
And as your attorney for the evening, I must advise you to videotape the proceedings.

AMBER
I think I forgot my --

DONNA
Furthermore, as said attorney for the evening, I’ve taken the liberty of procuring a video camera.

She presents a shopping bag and pulls out a video camera.

DONNA (CONT’D)
I’ll do the documenting. You make sure your boys know their lines. We’re counting on you to lead the Freaks Force to success.

INT. CHILDRESS HIGH SCHOOL/BOARDROOM - NIGHT

Principal Fiorelli, a dozen SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, and several SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS preside around a long table.

REX (O.S.)
Who are you and what do you think you’re doing?

REX PINKSTON, 50's, a Dick Cheney doppelganger in a three-piece suit, jumps to his tasseled loafer-clad feet as Amber, Wheelchair Chad and Ricky march past him, followed by Donna, who holds the camera. Ty trails them and observes.

AMBER
Why don't you sit down and I'll tell you and the rest of the school board?

Principal Fiorilli's eyes go wide.

PRINCIPAL FIORILLI
Ms. Appleton, what on earth is going on?

Still on his feet, Rex fixes his attention on Donna.

REX
We don't allow board meetings to be recorded. Surely you understand.

DONNA
Surely I do.

Donna keeps filming. Amber lines up with Wheelchair Chad and Ricky in front of the school board. Principal Fiorilli attempts to conceal his unease.

REX
Enough with the antics! This meeting is a closed session. You kids can't walk in here like it's a Starbucks and --

AMBER
Order a latte? Don't worry, I'm not here for the coffee. I'm here so my voice is heard and to ensure that none of my civil liberties are violated, I've brought my attorney, Donna Roberts.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Donna Roberts of Roberts, Bradley & Wong. You'll notice that's not alphabetical. The one in charge, Roberts? You're looking at her.

Donna grins in the way that only self-made single mothers with nothing to apologize for are capable of.

REX
You cannot --

AMBER
Actually, we *can*. The Constitution grants us freedom of speech and if you'll stop interrupting me, Mr. Pinkston, we'll get to the point.

Rex takes a seat with a sour expression.

REX
Make it quick.

Amber surveys the long table of School Board Members.

AMBER
Ladies and gentlemen of the school board, administrators, and other people whose jobs I don't entirely understand, but who hold the fate of Mr. Jonathan Franks in your hands. You may think that Mr. Franks, high school English teacher, college counselor, affable redhead despite his ginger minority status, is an expendable part of your operation. Just another cog in the machine, a teacher in an underfunded school district. You propose we share a college counseling department with the next town over. You think these cost-cutting decisions are difficult yet necessary. But a few of us students feel quite differently.

Amber takes a well-rehearsed, dramatic pause.

AMBER (CONT'D)
How does it make sense that the board of education would axe the college counselor, of all things? Does that inspire the student body to aim for higher education? Does time-sharing a counselor from our neighboring town tell us that you believe in us?

Several School Board Members exchange chagrined looks.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Pardon my candor, but Childress High School is a daily hell for me. What keeps me going is the idea that I'm headed somewhere else, I'm working towards something better.
(MORE)

AMBER (CONT'D)
And Mr. Franks is here to help me get there.

Rex Pinkston adjusts his tie uncomfortably. Principal Fiorilli swallows hard. Ty smiles at Amber with adoration.

AMBER (CONT'D)
In the meantime, there is one place I'm always welcome and that's Jonathan Franks' office. Mr. Franks is the only teacher who's believed in me. Franks' encouragement is the one good thing in my school day. As far as I'm concerned, he's the saving grace of your school. So for the benefit of kids like me, I implore you not to take that away.

The room remains silent for several moments.

PRINCIPAL FIORILLI
That was some speech, Amber. Thank you for --

AMBER
I'm not quite done. I'd like you to meet some of the other kids you'd be hurting if you fire Franks. We might be nothing but a bunch of freaks to you, but I think it's high time we put a face to the freak.

Amber rolls Wheelchair Chad's wheelchair forward.

AMBER
This is Wheelchair Chad.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
Wonder how they came up with that one, right?

He points to his wheelchair. CLOSE-UP on Ty, who LAUGHS.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD (CONT'D)
Since my sweet ride's hard to miss, you'd think the school district might do something to make life on wheels a little easier. But nope, nada. My whip doesn't fit through the library aisles, so I can't check out books.
(MORE)

WHEELCHAIR CHAD (CONT'D)
Most of the exits don't have handicapped ramps, so I gotta roll around half the school to get to my classes. Few people care about those with special needs around here. But you know who does? Mr. Franks. Sure, he lets us play video games in his office. In video games I can walk. I can jump. I can run. Try not being able to use your legs for seventeen years, then tell me that a teacher who reminds me of what it's like to live isn't worth a fraction of your budget.

Wheelchair Chad rolls himself back. Amber hands Ricky an index card.

AMBER
And this is Ricky Roberts.

Ricky reads his prepared speech from the card.

RICKY
My name is Ricky Roberts. I am the only Childress Public High School student diagnosed with Autism. But I love Mr. Franks because he always makes me and my friends feel like we have a place where we belong. I do not like eating in the lunchroom where I am teased all the time by the other students. I like eating in Mr. Franks' office. Please do not fire him.

Ricky finishes reading from the index card and checks in with Amber, who smiles at him. He gives her a thumb's up, then returns his attention to the school board, off-card.

RICKY (CONT'D)
A lot of people do not think I am smart. Mr. Franks thinks I am. Mr. Franks tells me I am smart. He is my friend. And he is right!

CLOSE-UP on Donna's proud smile as she videotapes.

AMBER
There you have it, folks.

Amber begins to walk away, then doubles back, feigning as though she's just had an epiphany.

AMBER (CONT'D)
One more thing. The last time I checked, not observing basic handicapped regulations is a pretty major violation. I'd hate to have to bring our code violation to the state's attention. So what I suggest is this: you keep Mr. Franks and avoid a discrimination lawsuit.

Principal Fiorelli and Rex Pinkston look at Wheelchair Chad, who shrugs.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
Everyone wins.

Amber curtsies in front of the School Board.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Have a good meeting.

EXT. FRIENDLY'S DINER PARKING LOT - EVENING

As they exit the diner, Ricky pushes Wheelchair Chad's wheelchair towards the car. Ty walks with the guys, while Donna and Amber trail behind.

DONNA
Amber, you commandeered that room like a pro tonight.

AMBER
Thanks Dons. I just pretended I was a kick-butt lawyer going in front of a jury, like you do every day.

DONNA
You're going to make a great lawyer one day.

AMBER
I know. It's my destiny.

They pause and watch Ricky CLAP his hands as Wheelchair Chad pops a wheelie and twirls around the parking lot.

DONNA
There aren't a lot of people like us in the world, let alone this town. You know that, right?

AMBER
People who don't take no for an answer?

DONNA
People who come from nothing and turn their lives into *something.*

Amber tenses up.

AMBER
I don't know what you mean. I come from something.

Donna gives her a compassionate smile that says, "Your secret's safe with me."

DONNA
When are you supposed to hear from Columbia?

Amber smiles, grateful Donna changed the subject for her.

AMBER
Any day now.

An icy breeze blows. Donna notices Amber shiver.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Man, did the temperature drop! This suit may make my ass look great, but my other money-makers are about to freeze off.

Amber opens the passenger door to Donna's Mercedes and collects Bobby Big Boy, who licks her face in greeting. Donna eyes Amber's thin coat.

DONNA (CONT'D)
How 'bout I give you and Bobby Big Boy a ride home?

AMBER
It's okay, I could really use a walk after all those sundaes. Trying to watch my girlish figure and all.

DONNA
It wouldn't be a bother. It's freezing out here, Amber.

AMBER
I told you, we're copacetic.

RICKY
(to no one in particular)
Co-pa-seh-tic: adjective. Very good; excellent; completely satisfactory.

Donna and Amber exchange a smile. Donna pulls a scarf out of her purse and wraps it around Bobby Big Boy.

DONNA
Not a word. We both know Triple B's had his eye on my scarf all night!

EXT. SCHOOL BUS PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Amber scurries past dozens of yellow school buses parked in perfectly symmetrical rows. The lot is book-ended by train tracks on one side and dark woods on the other.

AMBER (V.O.)
Makeshift confessional: I'm not watching my figure. You're probably wondering why I didn't let Donna drop me off, considering it's about a billion degrees below zero...

The scarf now covers Amber's neck and half her face like a traditional hijab worn by Muslim women.

AMBER (V.O.)
The truth is that if anyone found out where I actually live, my Mom would lose custody of me faster than you could say Bobby Big Boy.

Amber makes a sharp right and beelines for one bus, seemingly identical to the rest. She pries the CREAKY bus door open.

INT. HELLO YELLOW - CONTINUOUS

However, this bus is not identical to rest, for it doubles as home for Amber.

AMBER
Mom? You here? Mother Goose?

It's empty. Amber puts down her backpack, lifts a seat cushion, and takes out a blanket and pillow stashed inside.

She collects her toothbrush and toothpaste from a Caboodles kit and using a small plastic water bottle, brushes her teeth, opening the window to spit.

INT. HELLO YELLOW - LATER

Amber wakes to the noise of the bus door SQUEAKING OPEN.

TINA APPLETON, early 40's, weathered and painfully thin, steps on the bus. She sucks the life out of a Newport as she stumbles into a bus seat.

TINA
(under her breath)
Crap.

Amber pokes her head up over the seat.

AMBER
Hi, Mom.

TINA
Oh gosh. Did I wake ya?

AMBER
Nah. Some crazy lumberjack train conductor was gonna abduct me and make me his slave, but you scared him off. Phew!

TINA
That's not even remotely funny.

AMBER
How was fishin' fo' men, any bites?

Tina shakes her head, exposing the dark roots of her dyed yellow hair in the moonlight.

AMBER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
My Mom's taste in the opposite sex is akin to a crackhead's taste in cocaine. It's unfortunate for all her loved ones -- that being me, myself, and I -- when my Mom is on a man-mission, because she sorta loses her mind, to put it bluntly.

Tina removes another cigarette from her pack.

TINA
A good man is hard to find but I'll do it.

Amber forces a smile in deference to her Mom's falsely hopeful tone of voice.

TINA (CONT'D)
(quietly)
This is only temporary, Pokes.

Tina shivers mentholated smoke out through her nose.

AMBER
I know, Mom. I know.

AMBER (V.O.)
The only problem is, she's been saying that for the last two years.

EXT. SCHOOL BUS PARKING LOT - DAWN

Sunlight pushes through a wall of gray sky. Amber steps out of Hello Yellow. Frost on the ground crunches under her feet.

TINA (O.S.)
Morning, sweetheart.

A cloud of smoke signals her Mom's presence. Amber pulls out a storage bin that's stashed in a compartment between the bus wheels.

AMBER
Hey, Mother Goose.

Amber rifles through a trash bag of clothes, sniffing until she finds a clean sweater and pair of jeans.

TINA
I'm going to head to the kitchen. Pancakes or eggs? Screw it, let's have both.

Amber LAUGHS. Homeless humor.

AMBER
Don't worry, I'll grab something at the Roberts'.

Tina lights another cigarette with her previously lit one.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Mom? Promise me you'll eat something today.

TINA
Oh, sure, sure. Course I will.

Amber takes the pudding cup - her spoils from her Word Battle victory - out of her backpack and hands it to Tina.

AMBER
Take this. Please.

Tina avoids eye contact with her daughter but accepts the pudding cup. Amber pretends not to notice the faint quivering of her Mom's lower lip.

Amber kisses her Mom on the cheek, puts Triple B on his leash, and makes her way out of the school bus compound.

AMBER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I can identify exactly when my Mom stopped eating normally because it started as one of my top-five all-time-favorite-Amber-and-her-Mom moments. They're like these little videos I play in my mind when I need to remember the Mom I knew before she lost the first of many jobs. Before she stopped taking night classes to get her degree. Before she sorta gave up on life.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Tina unloads grocery bags. In vast contrast to the woman she resembles today, Tina has an extra ten pounds on her frame, a spring in her step, and a smile on her face.

AMBER (V.O.)
We were living with her man-of-the-minute, whom I had affectionately dubbed Oliver the A-hole.

TINA
Amber, get your butt out of bed! I got all the fixings. We're going to do this up right.

AMBER (V.O.)
My Mom had decided she was going to make a killer Thanksgiving dinner with an actual turkey and stuffing and gravy and everything, which might not sound like a big deal, but I had never had a real, traditional Thanksgiving before so it was a big deal to me.

Fifteen-year-old Amber enters and wipes the sleep from her eyes to make sure they aren't deceiving her.

TINA
There you are! C'mon, I'll cue up Old Blue Eyes and we'll show this turkey who's boss.

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT/KITCHEN - DAY

With Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me To The Moon" PLAYING, Amber and her Mom hoist the turkey into the oven and dance around.

TINA
(singing)
In other words, please be true. In other words, I love you.

Tina dips Amber, who GIGGLES.

OLIVER (O.S.)
CAN'T HEAR A GODDAMN THING OVER THE RACKET YOU TWO ARE MAKING.

Enter OLIVER, late 40's, sloppy in a wife-beater tank. He barrels to the refrigerator and grabs a six-pack of Bud.

OLIVER (CONT'D)
I'm gonna watch the game at Joe's.

TINA
Okay, babe! Make sure you're back by four, though. Amber's setting the table real nice and everything.

After the door SLAMS shut, Tina turns up the VOLUME and playfully pelts Amber with a cranberry. Amber grins and hurls it back, reveling in the storybook moment.

AMBER (V.O.)
For a moment, it was perfect. Like a scene from the Cosby Show, except with only one kid. And you know, not black.

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT/DINING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Amber and her Mom sit at the table, which has been set with origami-swan place cards and a tablecloth.

The candles drip down, indicating they have been there a while. The array of food remains untouched.

AMBER
Maybe the game went into overtime.

Tina nods numbly. Oliver, along with her former enthusiasm, is nowhere to be seen.

TINA
The food's probably cold already.

AMBER
We can wait a little more.

TINA
It's been over an hour.

Tina scoops a heap of stuffing onto Amber's plate.

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT/DINING ROOM - LATER

Amber eats with overcompensating gusto, making "Mmm" and "Yum" sounds. Her Mom pushes the food around her plate.

AMBER (CONT'D)
These sweet potatoes are amazing, Mom. Seriously, Rachael Ray would give a chubby chipmunk cheek for the recipe.

Tina musters a limp smile.

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT/KITCHEN - EVENING

Amber and her Mom wash the dishes and put the leftovers in plastic containers.

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT/LIVING ROOM - NEXT

Amber snuggles up on the couch next to her Mom. They flip through the few channels they get on the TV's basic cable and settle on *Jurassic Park*.

Amber holds her mother while she cries.

TINA
You're the best thing about my life, Amber, you know that?

Amber pulls back so she can look at her Mom. The front door bursts open and Oliver staggers inside. Tina hurriedly wipes her face.

INT. OLIVER'S APARTMENT/LIVING ROOM - NEXT

Amber looks into the adjacent dining room, where Tina serves Oliver leftovers and fusses over him.

AMBER (V.O.)
I couldn't do much, but as I watched my Mom dote on him and pretend not to care while A-hole Oliver stuffed his drunken face, I knew I'd never let a guy treat me like that.

Tina looks up and catches her daughter's eye.

TINA
(false cheer)
Guess it tastes just as good cold!

Amber turns back to *Jurassic Park* and watches a dinosaur demolish a patch of forest.

AMBER (V.O.)
That's sorta when my whole mission to get into Columbia and become a big shot lawyer officially began. Because if anyone was going to get me and my Mom out of this mess, it was going to have to be me.

BACK TO:

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - MORNING/PRESENT DAY

Amber fills a bowl with dog food. Amber unloads the dishwater. Amber halves oranges and puts them through the juicer. She looks over at Triple B.

AMBER (CONT'D)
(to her dog)
Vitamin C so we can fight frickin' colds and whatnot. True?

Bobby Big Boy lies on his back in the middle of the kitchen floor with his tiny legs in the air. He BARKS his agreement.

AMBER (CONT'D)
True.

With a routine precision that's almost surgical, Amber pours the juice, prepares omelets, sets the table, and puts on a pot of coffee.

RICKY (O.S.)
(authoritatively)
The best part of waking up is Folgers in your cup.

AMBER
You know it!

Ricky cheerfully shuffles in. Outfitted in a perfectly tailored navy blue power suit, Donna sits down at the table and inhales the kitchen's aroma.

DONNA
I'm really starting to feel like Thomas Jefferson.

AMBER
You *are* looking awfully presidential this morning.

DONNA
I meant how every time I come downstairs, I see you slaving away in my kitchen. I'm going to have to write up some sort of proclamation. The Amber-must-let-Donna-cook-for-her clause.

A bit awestruck, Amber grins dumbly at Donna for a moment. Then, she shakes her spatula-clad hand.

AMBER
Hold up, when did you learn how to cook?

DONNA
Touche, mon cheri. Touche.

AMBER (V.O.)
Sometimes I used to fantasize that my Mom had it together like Donna. That it was my Mom who grew up on the other side of the tracks with a Dad who was a janitor and a Mom who skipped out when she was seven.

Amber hands the newspaper to Donna.

AMBER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It was my Mom who didn't let that stop her, who kicked butt in school and got a scholarship to Bryn Mawr, a college for women who don't need a man to take care of them.

Donna opens the paper to the Business Section.

DONNA
(mumbles)
My stocks are shitting the bed.

RICKY
Language!

Amber stifles a GIGGLE.

DONNA
Sorry.

AMBER
You know what they say. Down today, up tomorrow!

RICKY
Down today, up tomorrow!

When Donna's not looking, Amber intentionally spills her glass of orange juice all over herself.

AMBER (CONT'D)
(lying)
Shoot! I am such a klutz!

Donna hops up and grabs a dish towel, helping Amber clean up.

AMBER (CONT'D)
I'm going to reek of citrus all day. You mind if I rinse off real quick?

DONNA
Not at all. Leave your clothes outside the door and I'll toss them in the washing machine. I think I have a sweater and a pair of leggings that will fit you if you want to borrow them.

AMBER
Thanks, Dons.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/DONNA'S BATHROOM - NEXT

Marble tile, oversized bathtub, plush towels. Amber removes her clothes and places the pile outside the door.

AMBER (V.O.)
What if it was my Mom who got a scholarship to Harvard Law and became a killer lawyer slash mother with her own house and a stock portfolio and shampoo that costs...

Amber checks the price tag on the bottle.

INSERT: $36.99

AMBER
Thirty seven buckaroos? Holy moly!

Amber lathers her head with the expensive shampoo. She makes a mohawk with her sudsy hair ala Ferris Bueller.

AMBER (V.O.)
Oh -- and a backbone.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/DONNA'S BATHROOM - NEXT

Wearing Donna's fluffy bathrobe, Amber hastily swipes a comb through her hair. She steals a dollop of Donna's face cream and applies it.

AMBER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Then I realized that part of me was secretly wishing Donna was my Mom, which was a terrible thing to think, even for a minute.

INT. MERCEDES SUV - MORNING

Amber, Donna and Ricky SING along to Dinosaur Jr.'s "Freak Scene" on the car ride to school.

AMBER (V.O.)
So I tried to stop doing that and just admire her, plain and simple, because Donna's my hero.

They pull up in front of the high school. Donna lowers the music as Ricky and Amber hop out.

DONNA
Go be the gentleman I know you are.

Ricky nods, counts inaudibly.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Mr. Franks should be proud today.

She flashes Amber a thumb's up, RAISES THE VOLUME again, and SCREECHES away. Amber grins.

INT. FRANKS' CLASSROOM - DAY

Franks finishes his lesson as the BELL RINGS and the Students leap out of their desks. A balled-up piece of paper lands on Amber's desk.

FRANKS
Before you race out of here, don't forget, you'll each be presenting an original haiku on Friday.

Amber curiously unfurls the piece of paper:

A walk home from school

How much better would it be

With that cool Ty guy?

Amber glances up and finds Ty standing over her.

TY
How 'bout it?

She shrugs.

AMBER
It's a free country.

Ty raises his eyebrows, amused by her feistiness. Amber waits until he exits and the only people remaining are her and Franks.

FRANKS
You're not going to your next class?

AMBER
I have a free period.

FRANKS
Good because I want to talk to you.

AMBER
I kinda figured you would.

Amber positively beams as she gets up from her desk and approaches Franks, very pleased with herself.

FRANKS
I appreciate the sentiment behind what you guys did last night but --

AMBER
But? But what?

FRANKS
I don't want you to think that you can go in guns blazing every time you don't get your way or feel like there's an injustice to be fought.

AMBER
Why not?

FRANKS
Amber, I was in the process of negotiating with the school board. You completely blind-sided me.

AMBER
We saved your job, Franks!

FRANKS
By ambush and threat.

AMBER
So!? Whatever means necessary. It worked, didn't it?

Franks SIGHS. He rifles through his briefcase.

FRANKS
In other news, this came for you.

He pulls out an envelope with a Columbia University insignia.

FRANKS (CONT'D)
I'm not sure why it was mailed to the school instead of your home address.

AMBER
(lying)
Oops. I must have filled out the wrong address box. Those forms are all sorts of confusing.

Amber eagerly tears into the envelope and pulls out a sheet of paper.

AMBER
(reading confidently)
Dear Ms. Appleton, after a thoughtful review of your early application candidacy, the admissions department...
(humbly)
...has elected to defer your acceptance.

As if unable to hold up her own body weight, Amber collapses into the nearest desk seat.

FRANKS
Go on.

She musters her strength.

AMBER
(reading)
As you know, the particular program you have applied to only accepts a total of fifty students per year, and only a select few are admitted through the early admission option. Your status will be evaluated again with the pool of regular decision applicants.

Amber lets the page fall to the ground. She puts her face down on the desk.

FRANKS
Listen Amber, you have plenty of backup schools with strong pre-law majors.

A few beats. Franks watches Amber, unsure if she’s crying or praying. Amber swiftly picks up her head.

AMBER
I mean, they only have fifty frickin’ spots, true?

FRANKS
Exactly! Do you realize how competitive Columbia’s Accelerated Interdisciplinary Legal Education combined degree program is?

AMBER
Yes. Yes I do. I also know that one of those spots is mine. They might not know it yet, but I do.

Struck by her resilience, Franks watches Amber get up and march to the door, a little soldier undeterred by a hit.

AMBER
Oh and Franks?

FRANKS
Yes, Amber?

She turns to face him.

AMBER
You're welcome.

EXT. SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

Ty walks alongside Amber. He carries her backpack.

TY
...We were living in Ohio, but when we came here for Christmas, we realized Grandmama was forgetting a whole bunch of stuff so we moved in with her to make sure she'd be alright. I love it 'cause she makes the best lemon poppy-seed muffins you've ever had in your whole life. Maybe if you let me take you out this Saturday, I'll bring you one.

Amber doesn't respond, distant and clearly still distracted by the deferral letter.

TY
You got a boulder on your brain or what?
(beat)
AMBER?

AMBER
Sorry, what?

TY
Something pretty heavy is happening in there. What's up with you?

He playfully rubs her head. She pulls away.

AMBER
It's nothing.

A yellow school bus drives past them. Amber catches sight of Tina behind the wheel.

AMBER
I have to dash. That's my bus.

Amber retrieves her backpack from Ty and runs over to the school bus. Ty watches the bus come to a stop, allowing a few YOUNG KIDS off as Amber gets on.

TY
(to himself)
Your bus?

INT. HELLO YELLOW - NEXT

Amber climbs into the first seat, right behind her Mom. Young Kids crawl over seats in the back of the bus.

TINA
Look who it is! You haven't been on Hello Yellow in ages.

Amber processes this.

TINA (CONT'D)
(quietly)
I mean you haven't ridden on my route since you were a kid.

Tina steps on the gas as a yellow light turns to red, barely clearing the oncoming traffic.

AMBER
Whoa, careful!

Amber scrutinizes her Mom.

AMBER
You went to the bar last night, didn't you? You're hungover.

TINA
Course not. Why would you ask me a silly quest --
(burps)
Question like that?

The truth being, of course, that Tina is most definitely hungover.

AMBER
Mama bear?

TINA
Yeah, Pokes?

Amber lets it go. She scoots back and leans her head against the window, looking out as the barren winter streets fly by.

AMBER (V.O.)
The reason my mom calls me Pokes comes from my number four all-time-favorite-Amber-and-her-Mom moment.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. AMBER AND TINA'S OLD HOUSE - DAY

An eviction notice and bolted lock on the door stand between Tina and her home. She rips it down before twelve-year-old Amber discovers the unfortunate reality of the situation.

TINA
Amber baby, do I have a surprise for you!

AMBER (V.O.)
We had just finished a unit on Native Americans in Social Studies and I was obsessed with all things Pocahontas.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

A flashlight illuminates the silhouettes of Tina and Amber inside a teepee made out of bedsheets.

INT. TEEPEE - SAME

Sitting Indian-style on sleeping bags, Tina and Amber wear feather head-dresses and snack on Tostitos and root beer.

TINA
(dramatic voice)
Pocahontas, before I give you the gift of the great spirit, you must tell me what you have learned about our people.

12-YEAR-OLD AMBER
I am called Pocahontas because my people, the Alqonquians, gave me this nickname to refer to my frolicsome nature.

TINA
That's a long nickname.

12-YEAR-OLD AMBER
Mom!

TINA
You need a nickname for your nickname. How about Pokes?

Amber smiles.

TINA (CONT'D)
Pokes, daughter of great warrior queen Tina, I bestow upon you a gift to protect you from all harm.

Tina hands Amber an arrowhead. Amber runs her finger against the edges.

12-YEAR-OLD-AMBER
Where did you -- ?

TINA
The great spirit has a way of providing us with what we need.

AMBER (V.O.)
I still don't know how my Mom rigged up our own private Indian campsite, but that night, I thought getting evicted was the best thing that could have happened to me.

BACK TO:

INT. HELLO YELLOW/EXT. ARBY'S - EVENING

Tina pulls up the now vacant bus to the drive-through window.

EXT. POND - LATER

Tina and Amber sit on top of Hello Yellow, overlooking the frozen pond. Amber dives into a bacon double cheeseburger while Tina opens a flask and pours vodka into her Arby's cup.

TINA
Cheers, daughter. I'm proud of you.

Tina taps Amber's Arby's cup with her own spiked beverage.

AMBER
Why? I didn't get in.

TINA
You didn't *not* get in either.
(beat)
That's something, Amber. I know you wanted an acceptance, but I hope you can still see that.

AMBER
I'm going to write a letter of appeal and have this deferral overturned in no time. Just wait.

TINA
Whatever happens, whether you get in or not, know that you did good, kid.

Amber rolls her eyes.

AMBER
Okay, Mom. Let's start giving out trophies to the losers, huh?

Tina smiles to herself.

TINA
I have some good news too.

Amber gnaws on a French fry.

AMBER
You met a muchacho?

TINA
Si, senorita. His name is Randy.

AMBER
What does Randy do?

TINA
Something with construction.

AMBER
Sounds promising.

TINA
Fingers crossed.

Amber holds up both of her hands and crosses as many fingers as she can. Tina smiles.

EXT. SCHOOL BUS PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The streetlights blink off and shroud the parking lot in darkness.

INT. HELLO YELLOW - SAME

Wearing a flashlight strapped to her head with a belt, Amber scribbles in a notebook.

AMBER
To the Columbia Admissions Department.

Her pen pauses over the words on the page.

AMBER
(to herself)
No offense, but you made a huge mistake.

Bobby Big Boy nestles in her lap. Amber SIGHS, her breath visible in the frigid air.

AMBER (O.S.)
(singing)
When I wake up in the morning...

INT. MERCEDES SUV - MORNING

Donna drives Ricky and Amber.

AMBER/RICKY
And my Mom gives out a warning, I don't think I'll ever make it on time. By the time I got my books, and I give myself a look, I'm at the corner just in time to see the bus fly by...It's all right cuz I'm saved by the bell.

Ricky claps and bounces along as they pull up to the curb in front of Childress High.

RICKY
Ricky Roberts says thank you for the ride to school. Thank you!

DONNA
You are welcome my wonderful boy. Have a fabulously productive day.

Ricky hops out of the car. As Amber unbuckles her seat belt, Donna places her hand on Amber's arm.

DONNA
Hold up a sec. It's probably none of my business, but Ricky said something about you not getting into Columbia and --

AMBER
(defensively)
I didn't *not* get in.

DONNA
So you got in?!

AMBER
I was deferred.

DONNA
Oh.

Amber watches Ricky put on his mittens, which are attached to his jacket sleeves with clip-on stretchy cords.

DONNA (CONT'D)
I have a friend who works on the admissions board at Columbia. I'd be more than happy to make a call.

Amber shakes her head, resolute.

AMBER
I appreciate the offer, but I can do this on my own.

INT. FRANKS' CLASSROOM - MORNING

Amber stands before Franks, who listens intently as she reads from her notebook.

AMBER
(reading)
If there was ever a girl who was born to be a lawyer, who endeavors to protect and preserve every law, to fight any encroachment against the cornerstones of our society, that girl is me.

She pauses and lowers the page to gauge his reaction.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Franks, we're talking appeal letter here, the sentinel between me and my entire future.
(beat)
You look like you're getting a root canal.

FRANKS
Not so.

He gestures to his face.

FRANKS (CONT'D)
This is my *neutral* expression. It's like Switzerland or a beige sofa from Jennifer Convertibles. Keep going.

Amber clears her throat.

AMBER
(reading)
Just a few nights ago, I led several fellow students in front of the school board to rectify an injustice. Our college advisor's job was jeopardized by budget cuts to our school district, but as a result of our advocacy, his position remains intact. This brings me to the next reason I belong in this program: with the opportunities and resources your university provides, I can --

FRANKS
Let's pause there.

AMBER
I'm not done.

FRANKS
Your initiative is commendable but the message of this appeal letter is no different than the essay you submitted with your application.

AMBER
I didn't mention going before the school board in my original essay.

FRANKS
I know, but it's a slightly different version of what you already said.

AMBER
Which is?

FRANKS
How you're the best thing since sliced bread.

AMBER
Wonder bread?

FRANKS
Very clever.

AMBER
Why thank you, Franks.

FRANKS
If you're going to get into Columbia, into the combined B.A. and law degree program no less, you have to think of yourself as a prism and this is your last chance to present them with a different angle. The most interesting angle. Not a self-promoting angle. Reveal what makes you unique. What makes you Amber.

Franks walks over to the blackboard and picks up a piece of chalk. He writes:

"Vulnerability is the most underrated strength."

AMBER
I call B.S. on that one, Mr. Miyagi.

Franks purses his lips.

INT. HALLWAY/LOCKERS - DAY

Amber trades out a few textbooks. Ty approaches, cornering her between his body and the locker door.

TY
Amber, I --

AMBER
Fine.

TY
Fine what?

AMBER
Fine, I'll go out with you.

Ty pauses, thrown off.

AMBER (CONT'D)
That's what you were going to ask, isn't it? You had a speech prepared, you've been going over it all day, working up the courage to corner me at my locker and make me listen to it until I was so worn out I would simply agree out of sheer exhaustion. Am I right?

TY
Yeah, pretty much.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Then I saved us both the trouble. But just so you know, the whole boyfriend girlfriend thing, letting some guy round the bases or whatever, it's never been my style.

TY
Roger that.

AMBER
Okay then. Saturday night, six o'clock sharp. 1412 Humbolt Lane.

Ty nods.

TY
I was thinking we could --

AMBER
No, no, I get to decide where we're going. You get to drive.

Amber closes her locker. Ty watches her walk away. She turns.

AMBER (CONT'D)
One more thing. Bring a Snickers bar.

KOREAN DIVAS (O.S.)
...Don't throw our love away. Don't throw our love away.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - ESTABLISHING

Back at the former shoe store turned House of God that's wedged between a donut shop and a liquor store...

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - SAME

The Korean Divas bop along to The Supremes' "Baby Love" and work their fiercest divaliciousness.

AMBER
Divas, that was the best I've ever heard you sing anything, like EVER!

The K.D.s bashfully cover their mouths with their hands.

AMBER (CONT'D)
You're so ready for graduation. Give these to your families ASAP.
(beat)
That means as soon as possible. It's a very American expression I encourage you to use AMAP, which means as much as possible. That's one I made up on my own.

CLOSE-UP on the handmade invitations for the "KOREAN DIVA GRADUATION CONCERT. Dress to impress." As Amber passes them out, Kim Lee raises a tentative hand.

AMBER
Yes, Tina Kim Lee Turner?

KIM LEE
We really not sing in front of husbands, sons, and daughters.

AMBER
We've been over this. You ladies are rock stars. No more of that stage fright nonsense!

KOREAN DIVA #2
No rock star. Manicurist.

KORENA DIVA #3
I help husband at dry clean shop.

KIM LEE
I work at Korean restaurant.

All of the other K.D.s chime in with what they do for a living. Yawnfest. Shockingly, not one of them claims “Rock Star” as her main source of income.

AMBER
Whoa, simmer down now! Here’s the thing you’re all not getting. You don’t literally have to be a rock star to be a *rock star*.

Confused faces stare back at Amber.

AMBER (CONT’D)
Literally means actually, or in reality. For example, at the old age home, they call me the “Princess of Hope.” I’m not an actual princess, it’s just an expression. You can be rock stars even though you have other jobs.

KIM LEE
Like how everyone call Princess Di “the people’s princess” but she not really belong to the people?

AMBER
Exactly!

The Divas nod and discuss this idea amongst themselves.

AMBER (CONT’D)
I understand your hesitation, but I know your husbands and children would love to see you rock out. Think about it, Divas.

Amber wraps Donna’s scarf around her neck and puts her jacket on, giving Father Chee a high-five as she heads out the door.

FATHER CHEE
Oh Amber?

She stops.

FATHER CHEE (CONT’D)
Did you hear from Columbia?

AMBER
Not yet. But I’m not worried.

Lies. Lies. Lies.

FATHER CHEE
I say prayers for you. The K.D.s too. We have good feeling.

Amber hides her dismay.

AMBER
Thanks, Father Chee.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/DONNA'S ROOM - EVENING

Amber perches on the bed, watching Donna apply makeup at her vanity table.

AMBER
That color looks great on you.

DONNA
Want to try some?

Donna holds up a tube of Chanel lipstick.

AMBER
No thanks. My Mom bought me all this crazy expensive
(mispronounced)
Channel makeup last year, like you have, but we both agreed I look better without it. I'm just not a makeup kind of girl.

Donna blots, *all woman all the time*.

DONNA
It's only a little lipstick, Amber.

AMBER
I know. But I don't want Ty to get the wrong idea. I am not about to get all dolled up for some guy.

DONNA
Don't you like him?

AMBER
We're friends. I don't have time for romance.

DONNA
No?

AMBER
You know how it is. Men are such a handful.

DONNA
A little romance never hurt anyone.

AMBER
(i.e. Tina)
You'd be surprised.

DONNA
How so?

Amber tenses up. Then exhales, saved by the DOORBELL.

DONNA (CONT'D)
That must be him, I'll get it!

As soon as Donna exits, Amber picks up the lipstick and applies a quick coat to her lips. She blots a la Donna.

EXT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME - EVENING

Amber and Ty approach the building, which is as dignified as old age and its accompanying ailments are not: tall ionic columns support a porch with rocking chairs that overlook a manicured lawn.

She holds her pup in one hand, a Styrofoam cup in the other.

AMBER
Laugh at all the corny jokes, try not to inhale too much, and don't get into a one-on-one with Old Man Linder, 'cause he's a real close-talker. You got the Snickers?

Ty holds it up.

INT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME - CONTINUOUS

They approach a check-in desk manned by DOOR WOMAN LUCY, a boisterous, congenial African American woman who bears a striking resemblance to Queen Latifah.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Ain't no canines allowed in this building, Ms. Amber. You know the rules. I don't make 'em, I just enforce 'em and I need to get paid, so that funky little rat's gonna have to stay outside.

AMBER
Door Woman Lucy, I'd like to introduce you to my new friend Ty.

Ty extends his hand and shakes Door Woman Lucy's.

TY
Nice to meet you Door Woman Lucy.
(off her look)
Uh...I mean, miss.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
You a fine little slice, ain't you?

AMBER
Now, Door Woman Lucy, we both know it's cold out.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Sure is.

AMBER
Too cold for a dog to be outside. Too cold for you to be sitting here, as a matter of fact. I bet you get an arctic blast every time that door opens.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Sure do.

AMBER
I just bought this hot chocolate, but I don't really feel like drinking a deliciously warming winter-time beverage right now. Sure would be a shame to throw away a fresh cup of hot chocolate.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
As you know, Ms. Amber, I'm not allowed to accept bribes from visitors, but if you left that drink on my desk, knowing that it won't change the fact that your ferret has to remain outside the building, maybe I'd see it don't go to waste.

Ty smiles, watching what is clearly a familiar charade go down. Amber places the cup on her desk and signals Ty, who sweetens the deal by laying the Snickers across the lid. They sign into the Visitor Log and make their way inside with Triple B still tucked under Amber's arm.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT'D)
Thanks for leaving that dog outside, Ms. Amber. You understand rules are rules.

Amber salutes her.

INT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME/COMMON ROOM - NEXT

Amber spins the lever of an oval cage filled with ping-pong sized balls. A ball is dispensed and Amber picks it up as she leans into the microphone.

AMBER
B 9. That's B as in Bozo and 9 as in the year Joan of Old was born.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
If it isn't malignant, it's B 9.

Ty LAUGHS politely. The Old People check their squares. A NURSE wheels in Joan of Old despite her protests and scowls.

JOAN OF OLD
(to the Nurse)
I can't play Bingo, you numb-nut, I'm blind!

The Nurse parks Joan of Old's wheelchair, shoves a Bingo card in her hand, and leaves without further discussion.

AMBER
Ty, would you help Joan of Old here with her Bingo card? She really loves the game, wouldn't want her to miss out.

Ty obligingly scoots a chair next to Joan of Old and reviews her Bingo card. Joan scowls.

JOAN OF OLD
I love the game like I love to fart. And I have hemorrhoids.

At the front of the room, Amber spins the cage again.

AMBER
O 55. That's O as in --

Joan of Old tries without success to budge her wheelchair.

JOAN OF OLD
Let me out of here, you insipid tyrants!

AMBER
O as in odious. Offensive. Obnoxious.

OLD MAN LINDER
Bingo!

AMBER
You sure this time?

OLD MAN LINDER
B 9, I 22, N 47, G 12, O 55.

AMBER
Ladies and Gentlemen, Old Man Linder's got a Bingo!

A few of the Old People CLAP.

JOAN OF OLD
Whoop-di-do. Careful you don't have a coronary from the excitement.

Old Man Linder uses a walker to approach Amber at the front of the room, his face beaming like he won a car.

AMBER
Ta da! Your prize is a Tempur-Pedic pillow!

JOAN OF OLD
Here's hoping you use it to smother yourself.

AMBER
That's enough out of you!

Old Man Linder faces the crowd.

OLD MAN LINDER
I would like to thank everyone who helped me achieve this Bingo today.

He hoists up the pillow like it's a trophy. CLOSE-UP on Ty's face as he ogles Amber, completely smitten.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - NIGHT

Ty's same love stricken face as he and Amber stand outside the front door.

TY
This was the best date I've ever been on. Those old people love you.

AMBER
It wasn't a date and that's only because I treat them like normal people. That's all they want.

Ty smiles and starts to go in for the kiss. Amber responds by stepping back and sticking out her hand for a fist bump.

Ty eyes her protruding fist. He re-calibrates and bumps it.

TY
You're going to want to kiss me one day. Just wait. You'll see.

AMBER
Good night, Ty.

TY
See you later, Ms. Appleton.

Amber waits until Ty gets into his car and drives away before sneaking around back and collecting her bike.

EXT. TOWN OF CHILDRESS - NIGHT

Amber rides with Bobby Big Boy in her basket. Alarmed by a NOISE in the night, her eyes dart around the isolated surroundings.

AMBER
Nothin' to worry 'bout, Triple B. Just you and me out here.

The wind picks up and rips into her. Amber pulls Donna's scarf over her head.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Don't you get nervous.

EXT. SCHOOL BUS PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Amber spots Tina doubled over. Amber joins her Mom's side and offers her a crumpled napkin.

AMBER
Mom, are you okay?

Before she can answer, Tina is overtaken by a bout of VOMITING.

AMBER (CONT'D)
I'll get you some water.

TINA
Will you grab my smokes, Pokes?

She spits on the ground. Amber averts her eyes.

AMBER
(defeated)
Sure.

EXT. SCHOOL BUS PARKING LOT - NEXT

With fear coating her face, Amber offers her Mom the cigarettes.

TINA
Thanks.

She grabs the Newports and takes a swig of a nearly empty vodka bottle.

TINA (CONT'D)
Just a little, to clear out my system.

Amber goes to the front of Hello Yellow and pulls out a rag and a bottle of cleaning fluid.

INT./EXT. HELLO YELLOW - EVENING

Tears stream down her face as Amber cleans up the vomit, GAGGING and trying to hold her nose. Triple B WHIMPERS.

TINA (O.C.)
Amber? Honey?

Amber stands so she can see her Mom.

AMBER
Yeah?

TINA
I have to go out for a bit.

AMBER
Where are you going?

Her Mom exhales through her nostrils. Smoke curls into the night air and disappears like a whisper.

TINA
I need to get medicine for my stomach.

AMBER
Where?

TINA
The drug store.

AMBER
Rite Aid?

TINA
(lying)
Yeah.

AMBER
Let me come with you. It’s late.

TINA
You have school tomorrow. I’ll be fine.

AMBER
Are you going to get more vodka? You can tell me, Mom. I won’t try to stop you. I just want to know the truth.

Tina can’t meet her gaze.

TINA
I’m going to the drug store. I need some Pepto. You get to sleep, I’ll be back before you know it.

Amber watches her Mom stumble away into the night.

INT. HELLO YELLOW - NIGHT

Amber startles awake.

AMBER
Mom?

It’s pitch black. Amber darts to her feet and looks around. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, she searches every seat with her hands.

AMBER (CONT’D)
Mom? Mom? Mom!

Panic is spelled across her face.

EXT. CHILDRESS GHETTO - NIGHT

Clutching Triple B in the crook of her arm, Amber walks rapidly towards a dive bar with a metal door and windows plated by mesh wire.

EXT. CHARLIE’S BAR - CONTINUOUS

She pulls on the front door. It’s locked. She checks the neon beer sign. It’s off.

AMBER
Hello? Anyone in there? Tina?!

RANDOM PERSON (O.C.)
Shut up, bitch!

Amber whips around. No one is there. The wind picks up and trash swirls on the sidewalk. A crushed, empty beer can nearly hits Bobby Big Boy.

Amber looks at the liquor store down the street, next to the Korean Church. She starts running, passing a BEARDED BUM who CHANTS to himself.

BEARDED BUM
Catch a cat by the tail ‘til you spin around and drown! Catch a cat by the...

Amber picks up her pace, tugging at Triple B’s leash. A CAR ALARM goes off in the distance.

EXT. LIQUOR STORE - NEXT

Amber notes the store’s CLOSED sign. She yanks on the chains sealing the security gate and POUNDS on the door with desperation.

AMBER
Mom? Mom!

Tears slide down her face and plop onto the dirty sidewalk. A car pulls up and idles next to her, its silver rims, tinted windows, booming bass and neon-pink lights loudly announcing its presence.

The car follows, keeping pace with her gait. After a block, Amber breaks into a run. The car speeds up and turns, then SCREECHES to a stop, cutting her off at the corner. Amber freezes.

A sketchy white WANGSTER, 30's, blonde spiky haircut and far too many gold chains, gets out of the car.

WANGSTER
Where you goin' so fast, shorty?

He smiles lecherously at Amber. She tries to summon her courage but can do nothing to quench her tears.

WANGSTER (CONT'D)
Don't cry, it's coo.

He takes a step towards her.

WANGSTER (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

Bobby Big Boy BARKS furiously.

AMBER
I'm trying to find my Mom.

WANGSTER
Get in the car, angel. I'll help you look.
(beat)
You're a sweet piece of ass, you know that?

Amber backs away.

AMBER
I'm just going to walk.

WANGSTER
Bad things can happen to cute girls like you in this hood, this time of night. You should roll with me.

He advances another step. Amber remains paralyzed in place.

FATHER CHEE (O.C.)
Amber!

Father Chee runs towards her in his slippers and pajamas.

WANGSTER
Who called Jackie Chan?

Amber's face floods with relief. Father Chee reaches her and takes her hand.

FATHER CHEE
Amber, come with me.

WANGSTER
He your pimp or something?

Father Chee leads her away.

WANGSTER (CONT'D)
Aight, it's coo. Another time.

He gets back into his car.

FATHER CHEE
What on earth are you doing here at this hour?

Racked with fear, fatigue and nerves, Amber unravels.

AMBER
My Mom...I think something's really wrong. She didn't come back and I have this horrible feeling that something bad happened.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - NIGHT

Ricky eavesdrops from the next room as a bathrobe-clad Donna, Father Chee and Amber sit at the dining room table.

DONNA
Two years?

Amber looks down. She tugs on a hangnail.

DONNA (CONT'D)
You've been living on a bus for *two years*? I knew things were bad, but I had no idea. How could you not tell me you were living on a bus?

Donna and Father Chee exchange pained expressions. Donna switches tracks.

DONNA (CONT'D)
We'll discuss that later. First thing's first, where might your Mom have gone?

AMBER
Maybe she's with this new guy she's been talking about? She probably lost track of time, or fell asleep, and I'm totally overreacting and she'll be back in the morning.

Amber looks down at her hands again.

AMBER (CONT'D)
(quietly)
She said he does construction. She's always trying to land a guy with a solid job so we'll have somewhere to live.

FATHER CHEE
Has she ever left you alone all night before?

AMBER
No.
(beat)
Not often. Sometimes. But tonight's different. I sorta just know it somehow. I can't explain it, but I have this bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Amber bites her hangnail, drawing blood. Donna tries to reassure her by rubbing her back.

DONNA
We're going to get through this.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - DAY

Amber opens the door, looking like she hasn't slept in days.

TWO POLICE OFFICERS stand on the stoop with somber expressions that require no explanation.

AMBER (V.O.)
Just like there are some memories you want to keep close, there are others you'd do absolutely anything to erase.

One Police Officer CLEARS his throat. Donna appears behind Amber, catching her just as she collapses.

REPORTER ON T.V. (O.S.)
The gruesome sexual assault and murder of a local woman is the lead news tonight.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

A female OFFICER behind the front desk watches the news. On the television screen, a blonde REPORTER tempers her usual perkiness.

REPORTER ON T.V.
The killer remains on the loose, sparking a state-wide search.

INT. MORGUE - NEXT

The CORONER retrieves a body bag.

REPORTER ON T.V. (CONT'D)
Authorities have released information linking this most recent killing with several other female victims in the area.

The sound goes completely MUTE as the Coroner unzips the body bag. Amber loses it like an animal being pierced through the heart, watching its guts spill out from inside its own chest.

AMBER (V.O.)
People tell you that in time, these memories will lessen in intensity. But you know better.

The Coroner re-covers Tina's body and pushes her back into the dark freezer.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

Amber watches the wood coffin as it is slowly lowered into the freshly dug hole in the ground. Franks, Donna, Ricky, Wheelchair Chad, Ty, and several CITIZENS OF CHILDRESS listen solemnly as Father Chee finishes his eulogy.

FATHER CHEE
Tina Appleton will not be forgotten. We will carry her in our hearts and in our memories.

Amber places the arrowhead her Mother gave her on the coffin. She closes her eyes.

AMBER (V.O.)
It sounds terrible, but all I could think about in that moment was that my Mom had flunked out of Life 101. I wanted desperately to erase that thought, to remember how she used to be.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. AMBER AND TINA'S OLD HOUSE - DAY

Fourteen-year-old Amber sits on the floor with her Algebra book propped up before her.

AMBER (V.O.)
Like in my number three all-time-favorite-Amber-and-her-Mom-moment.

She bites her No. 2 pencil as she tackles her homework assignment. Tina brings her a plate of Oreos and plops down on the ground next to her.

AMBER
Algebra sucks. I'm seriously going fail out of this class.

TINA
Let me see.

Tina takes the book and looks over the complicated equation.

TINA
This looks like what you were doing last year, with the, what do you call 'em?

AMBER
Variables?

TINA
Yeah. The variables.

Amber shakes her head.

AMBER
It's much harder.

She throws her pencil in frustration. Tina uses her index finger to read the explanation in the text. Mid-way through, she gives up and passes Amber the book back.

TINA
I get it now. It's not so bad.

AMBER
You do? It's impossible.

AMBER (V.O.)
She didn't get it. We both knew my Mom could solve a quadratic equation like she could build a pyramid.

TINA
No, it's not impossible and I know you can do it so why don't you read this again, then explain it to me. They say the best way to learn something's by teaching it to someone else.

AMBER (V.O.)
But that wasn't the point. The point was, my Mom thought I could do it. Maybe she couldn't teach me Algebra, but she could teach me perseverance.

Amber takes the textbook and re-reads the explanation.

AMBER (V.O.)
She could give me permission to leave her behind. She could tell me that it was okay to pass her and to keep on going as far as I could take myself.
(beat)
I never thought I'd have to take myself anywhere while she was six feet under.

BACK TO:

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - MORNING

Amber lies in bed, wide awake. She stares at the ceiling, motionless.

AMBER (V.O.)
And now that she was gone, I had no reason to want to take myself anywhere.

Amber turns over. She looks at the wall.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Donna KNOCKS softly and enters with Ricky. Amber remains in the same prostrate position as hours earlier.

RICKY
Amber?

Donna sits on the edge of her bed.

DONNA
I talked this over with Ricky last night and we have something we want to ask you. We were hoping you'd like to move in with us. Officially.

Amber slowly moves her head over so Donna and Ricky are within her line of sight.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Obviously, I'm not trying to take anyone's place, and I know you'll be eighteen in a few months, but until then, I'd like you to legally be a part of our family.

Amber blinks, but otherwise remains expressionless.

AMBER
Fine.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY

Donna talks on the phone, flipping through a pile of legal documents spread across the counter.

DONNA
(on the phone)
No, she has no known relatives. Doesn't even know her father's last name. Call Judge Williams to fast track the petition for guardianship.
(MORE)

DONNA (cont'd)
I want it done this week and I will slash any red tape that gets in my way with a nail scissor if I have to.

Ricky enters and picks up a newspaper. Donna listens, then hangs up.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Give me that, sweetheart. I don't want Amber to see --

A CREAK on the staircase causes Donna to look over. Amber wordlessly walks towards Ricky and studies the newspaper in his hand.

RICKY
Bad boys, bad boys, whatchya gonna do? Whatchya gonna do when they come for you?

CLOSE-UP on an eerie mugshot. The killer, RANDY, has huge brown glasses, crazy eyes, and long, stringy hair.

DONNA
Ricky, can you give Amber and me a minute alone?

RICKY
There are one thousand four hundred and forty minutes in a day. Ricky Roberts will give you one. Yes.

Ricky exits. Amber stares at the mugshot.

DONNA
He's a sick, disturbed man with a long criminal history. He'll be in jail for life where he'll be punished over and over again by the other inmates in terrible ways we can't even begin to imagine.

AMBER
I don't care. I don't care what happens to him.

DONNA
I know it may feel like justice is irrelevant. I'm sure that right now, it seems like it doesn't matter because it can't change what happened.

Donna tries to take the newspaper from Amber. Amber won't let go of it. Donna softens and takes Amber's hand.

DONNA (CONT'D)
I can't even begin to imagine what you're going through. There aren't enough words in the English language for me to express how sorry I am that this happened to you. More than anything in the world, I wish I had the power to make it go away.

AMBER
I know. But you can't. Life's a bitch and then you die so what's the point of any of it?

DONNA
You have every right to your feelings and I'm not going to pretend you don't have a long, tough road ahead of you after a horrible and unfair tragedy like this, but you can't give up on life.

AMBER
That's where you're wrong, Donna.
(beat)
There's a first time for everything.

DONNA
Amber --

AMBER
No. I quit.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Amber sets Donna's iPod to play Dinosaur Junior's "Puke and Cry" on repeat. The SONG plays again and again over the following scenes:

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Amber throws out flowers and consolation cards.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - AFTERNOON

Amber stares, unblinking, at Ty and Wheelchair Chad. Ty holds up a plate of lemon poppy-seed muffins. Amber shakes her head. Finally they give up and leave.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Father Chee sits in a desk chair. Bobby Big Boy lies on Amber's feet at the end of her bed.

AMBER
Father Chee?

FATHER CHEE
Yes, Amber?

AMBER
Why do terrible things happen to decent people?

FATHER CHEE
I don't know.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Donna offers Amber soup and crackers, which she refuses. Triple B curls up next to her.

DONNA
It will be the first of the month in a couple weeks.

AMBER
So?

DONNA
Mr. Franks mentioned that it's the deadline to mail in your appeal essay to Columbia before they make their decision.

AMBER
Donna, do you honestly still think I'm going to Columbia?

Amber scoffs and turns away.

INT. FRANKS' OFFICE - DAY

Ricky, Ty and Wheelchair Chad sit with Franks in front of the television console. None of them makes a move to pick up the video game controllers.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
I heard she's not coming back to school.

RICKY
Mommy Roberts says Amber Appleton might not go to college anymore.

TY
(to Franks)
What do we say? What can we do?

FRANKS
All you can do is be there for her.

RICKY
Amber Appleton will not leave her room. Amber Appleton is very sad.

TY
She's gonna come back eventually, though, right? You guys do think she'll come back?

They all look at each other wordlessly. Franks finally breaks the silence.

FRANKS
I hope so.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Father Chee arrives for his daily visit.

AMBER
Father Chee?

FATHER CHEE
Yes, Amber?

AMBER
When will it stop hurting so much?

FATHER CHEE
I don't know.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Donna delivers school assignments and mail for Amber.

Amber reads a haiku written on an index card in Ty's handwriting:

I'm growing a beard

Will shave it when you come out

But hairy for now

Amber goes to throw it out. She pauses over the trash can, then tapes up the index card on the wall.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Father Chee sits at the foot of Amber's bed.

AMBER
Father Chee?

FATHER CHEE
Yes, Amber?

AMBER
Why do some people go through life without ever having to deal with anything bad and others have shitty things happen to them over and over again?

FATHER CHEE
I don't know.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

IN FAST-MO, more index cards cover the walls, the growing collection of haiku testifying to the progression of time.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY

Donna greets Old Man Linder, who arrives with his oxygen tank in tow.

OLD MAN LINDER
How's she doing?

Donna shakes her head.

OLD MAN LINDER (CONT'D)
We're all worried about her.

DONNA
I am too. She hasn't left the house in a month. The school's been sending her lessons home so she's keeping up with her schoolwork, but barely.

OLD MAN LINDER
It's a terrible thing. Unspeakable.

Donna nods.

DONNA
Let me go get her.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - NEXT

Donna stands over Amber's bed.

DONNA
He can't walk up the stairs. The man has tubes running up his nose, for God's sake.

AMBER
I didn't ask him to come.

DONNA
No, but he did, and he made a big effort because he really wants to see you, so please come down. He's an old man.

AMBER
I know he's old. I do know him.

DONNA
Amber, what's happening to you?

Amber stares her down. Donna retreats.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - NEXT

Amber lies flat on her back and looks at the ceiling. The SOUNDS of slow FOOTSTEPS and HEAVY BREATHING can be heard coming from the staircase. Old Man Linder's oxygen tank makes a CLUNK each time he reaches the next step.

DONNA (O.S.)
Mr. Linder, you really shouldn't --

OLD MAN LINDER (O.S.)
I'm halfway and I'm going to reach the top if it damn near kills me.

There are more SOUNDS of FOOTSTEPS, CLUNKING, and HEAVY BREATHING. Triple B WHIMPERS.

Old Man Linder enters and hands Amber a Snickers.

OLD MAN LINDER (CONT'D)
(wheezing)
Courtesy of Door Woman Lucy.

She sits up and accepts the chocolate bar.

AMBER
Thanks.

Old Man Linder adjusts the nozzle on his oxygen tank.

OLD MAN LINDER
How are you holding up?

Amber shrugs.

OLD MAN LINDER (CONT'D)
When you're knocked down, you have to pull yourself up by the bootstraps and --

AMBER
Please don't. I don't have bootstraps and I don't want to hear it.

Old Man Linder looks at her sadly.

OLD MAN LINDER
We miss you. Grandpa Thompson's cheating at Bingo and Joan of Old is demanding a Word Battle rematch. She's still contesting your win on grounds that physical contact is against the rules.

AMBER
It was only a stupid game. I'm retired. Joan of Old can have the title by forfeit.

OLD MAN LINDER
Forfeit? Retired? Are you kidding me? You haven't even begun to peak and you --

AMBER
Don't you get it? I'm done making old people smile. It's over.

OLD MAN LINDER
Amber. Life goes on whether we choose to enjoy it or not so you might as well find a way to enjoy the parts you can. You're our Princess of Hope.

AMBER
Don't you mean Princess of false hope?

Bobby Big Boy digs at the comforter. Amber pushes him to make him stop. She breaks into tears.

OLD MAN LINDER
I'm sorry I upset you. I was only trying to --

AMBER
I can't be what you need me to be anymore, don't you get it? Can you please just leave?

It takes Old Man Linder a long time to stand. His short, GASPY breaths indicate he's crying too. He takes something out of his sweater pocket and leaves it on Amber's desk.

Once he's gone, Amber sees that it's a pudding cup.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - NEXT

Donna hugs Old Man Linder.

DONNA
Thank you for coming. She's not in a good place, but I know she appreciates it on some level.

OLD MAN LINDER
I'm worried about her. You take care of our girl.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Donna barrels through the closed door without knocking.

DONNA
Amber, you should be ashamed of yourself! Making that old man walk up all of those stairs! This isn't you, Amber. You don't treat people like that. You're better than this.

AMBER
Am I? Says who?

DONNA
I do.

AMBER
And you're the expert on everything, aren't you, Donna? You think you have it all figured out. You're so great, you're so smart, you're so successful, you don't need a man. Well you went to the sperm bank and look how that turned out for you. So obviously you don't have all the answers.

Donna stands completely still for a moment before she begins speaking in a clipped, measured tone that belies her fury.

DONNA
I love my son and you do too or else you wouldn't have been his best friend for all these years. Ricky is perfect exactly the way he is. You're in a great deal of pain, but you'll overcome this. This person is not who you are. This kind of cruelty does not live inside of you.

AMBER
(through tears)
Screw you, Donna.

Donna looks at Amber for a second like she's been slapped.

DONNA
Did that make you feel better?
(beat)
Didn't think so.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Father Chee sits with Amber.

AMBER
Father Chee?

FATHER CHEE
Yes, Amber?

AMBER
I miss my Mom. She was a terrible Mom, but I miss her. I really do.

FATHER CHEE
I know.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

"Puke and Cry" plays for the millionth time. Index cards cover an entire wall. There's a KNOCK, then Ty enters.

TY
Hey. I brought you this 'cause it goes with today's poem.

He hands her an invitation to the Childress High School Prom, then recites from an index card.

TY (CONT'D)
Do me the honor
Bad dress, punch, and a lame tux
Go to prom with me?

Still under her comforter with her head on her pillow, Amber just looks at him. Ty shifts on his feet.

TY (CONT'D)
I want you to come to prom with me. I miss you, Amber. I mean, we all miss you, you know?

AMBER
Gosh, I'm sorry my mother's murder has inconvenienced you.

Ty's eyes narrow.

TY
Why are you being like that?

AMBER
'Cause I'm a real bitch, so don't waste your time coming here.

TY
No you're not. You're the coolest girl I know and I miss hanging with you. I thought maybe The Freaks Force could go for sundaes at Friendly's? Sort of a belated birthday thing? I sent you an invite to my party last week. Did you get it?

Amber sneaks a glance at her garbage can. The crumpled invitation lays on top.

AMBER
Dunno.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

IN FAST-MO, index cards cover the walls to show time elapsed.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - DAY

Donna enters. All four walls are papered by haiku. Donna sits next to her on the bed and strokes Amber's hair.

DONNA
I'm still waiting for my apology, but when was the last time you saw Bobby Big Boy?

Amber suddenly sits upright.

AMBER
I don't know. I guess it's been days.
(calls out)
Bobby Big Boy?

DONNA
Shhh. He's sleeping downstairs.

AMBER
Why? Is something wrong with him?

DONNA
He's been acting a little funny so I called the veterinarian today.
(MORE)

DONNA (cont'd)
He hasn't been eating regularly. He's been sleepy and...

AMBER
What? What aren't you telling me?

DONNA
When I took him for a walk today...he collapsed.

AMBER
What?!

DONNA
He's fine now, but I'm taking him to the vet in a few minutes. Do you want to come with me?

Amber throws off the comforter and stands up. The Dinosaur Junior song, "Puke and Cry" FADES OUT.

INT. MERCEDES SUV - DAY

Amber rides in the passenger seat, clutching Triple B.

AMBER
I'm a terrible dog Mom.

DONNA
No you're not. Don't beat yourself up.

AMBER
I was supposed to take care of him.

DONNA
And someone was supposed to be taking care of you. And I was supposed to notice that no one was doing that. We can't revise history and we can't predict the future, we can only write the present.

Amber digests this. She bends over to whisper into Bobby Big Boy's ear.

AMBER
I'm never going to abandon you again, Triple B.

AMBER (V.O.)
I begged my Mom for a puppy every day for six straight years.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. HUMANE SOCIETY - DAY

Fourteen-year-old Amber hops up and down with excitement as she walks through the aisles of rescued dogs.

AMBER (V.O.)
The day she finally agreed was my number two all-time-favorite-Amber-and-her-Mom-moment.

TINA
Do you see one you like? Remember, not too big.

AMBER
I know, I know. Mid-size for convenience and stowing underneath my airplane seat or in an overhead compartment.

TINA
You joke now, but this is a big commitment, Amber. A dog is a lot of responsibility.

AMBER
I know.

She stops in front of a cage. A pitiful heap of ragged fur and bones curls up in the back corner.

AMBER
This is it. That’s my dog.

Tina peers in.

TINA
That thing? He’s knocking on death’s door! He has three legs, for Christ’s sake.

AMBER
Three’s my lucky number.

TINA
You’re sure? You want the gimpy little runt?

Amber nods.

AMBER
He just needs a good mommy and he'll be okay. He's the one. That's my dog.

BACK TO:

INT. VET'S OFFICE - DAY/PRESENT DAY

Amber speaks with the FRONT DESK ATTENDANT, 40's.

FRONT DESK ATTENDANT
Have you been here before?

AMBER
No.

FRONT DESK ATTENDANT
Do you have your dog's medical records or anything that would show he's had all of his shots?

Amber looks at Donna, blank-faced.

DONNA
Where'd you take him before you started living with us?

AMBER
Nowhere. He was never sick before.

FRONT DESK ATTENDANT
(with attitude)
You've never taken your dog to the vet before?

AMBER
I rescued him from the pound. He was going to be euthanized and I know there were probably a whole lot of prospective owners for a three-legged mutt, but I've been doing the best I can. Incidentally, I lived on a frickin' school bus for the past couple of years and we were so poor we couldn't afford to get two happy meals, much less pay for dog shots. Plus my Mom was killed by a psychopath, so I don't need any extra crap, okay?

The Front Desk Attendant's face drains of all color.

FRONT DESK ATTENDANT
Oh my god. You're Amber Appleton. I am so sorry. The name on the file says Roberts. I didn't know. I'll get the doctor right away.

INT. VET'S OFFICE/EXAMINATION ROOM - NEXT

The vet, DR. WEISSMULLER, inserts a needle into Bobby Big Boy's stomach.

DR. WEISSMULLER
Do you see the blood?

Donna and Amber both nod.

DR. WEISSMULLER (CONT'D)
We'll do an ultrasound to determine if the tumor is on the spleen or liver.

AMBER
What's the difference?

DR. WEISSMULLER
If it's on the liver, there's not much I can do for your dog. If it's on the spleen, we can operate.

AMBER
How much is the ultrasound?

DR. WEISSMULLER
Seventy-five dollars.

DONNA
Do it.

Dr. Weissmuller gently picks up Triple B and takes him into another room, leaving Donna and Amber alone.

AMBER
I don't have the money to pay for the ultrasound.

DONNA
Don't worry about it.

AMBER
What if he needs surgery?

DONNA
Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it, but if Bobby Big Boy needs surgery, I can afford it.

Amber crosses her arms.

AMBER
No.

DONNA
No, I can’t afford it?
(joking)
Have you been checking my stocks this week?

AMBER
No, I can’t let you pay. Triple B is my responsibility. My Mom let me get him because she thought I could take care of him and if he needs surgery, I’m going to pay for it.

DONNA
Amber, you just worry about --

Dr. Weissmuller returns, cutting off their conversation. He places Triple B on the metal examination table.

DR. WEISSMULLER
The tumor’s on the spleen. I can remove it and do a biopsy. If the tumor’s benign, your dog will live.

AMBER
I can’t take two deaths in one year.
(beat)
How much is the surgery?

DR. WEISSMULLER
There can be complications, but all told, the cost should be around two or three thousand dollars. Should I leave you alone to discuss it?

Donna nods and Dr. Weissmuller exits.

AMBER
Can I borrow the money until I figure out how I’m going to pay for it?

DONNA
I've got it covered, Amber.

AMBER
No. I'm asking you for a loan. Charity's for old people and orphans.

The implications of this resonate, but neither calls it out.

AMBER (CONT'D)
I need to take care of this. He's my responsibility.

Donna stands.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Can I have a minute with him?

DONNA
Of course.

Donna exits. Amber murmurs into Triple B's fur.

AMBER (CONT'D)
You focus on staying alive, Triple B. I'll figure out a way to fix you, I swear. I won't let you down.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/KITCHEN - THE NEXT MORNING

Ricky and Donna enter. An apron-clad Amber cracks eggs and whisks them in a bowl. She flips pancakes on the griddle.

RICKY
Amber Appleton is out of her room!

Donna pours herself a cup of coffee as Amber pulls out a chair for Ricky to sit at the table set for two.

AMBER
Sorry, Ricky. I'm sorry I was mean to you.

RICKY
Amber Appleton is out of her room.

AMBER
That's right. Amber Appleton is officially out of her room.

RICKY
(to Donna)
Ricky Roberts is supposed to leave Amber Appleton alone because her mother was killed and it wasn't fair, so she is mad at everyone for now, but she will snap out of it in the future. Yes. In the future.

Amber serves Ricky and Donna breakfast.

AMBER
Guess what, Ricky? It's the future.

TY (O.S.)
Amber, you're back!

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

Amber walks in. The entire room comes to a standstill. Ty sports a heavy beard per his haiku.

AMBER
I'm back.

The tension in the room is palpable.

AMBER (CONT'D)
I know you're all probably freaked out by what happened to my Mom, but murder's not contagious, alright?

No one laughs. Blank faces gawk at her.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Jeez, let's not make this awkward or anything.

She puts her books down on a desk.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Alright, you guys, listen up. I don't want to talk about it. You can act normal. You can stop looking at me like I'm an alien. Cool?

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
Cool.

AMBER
Good, ‘cause I have bigger problems than dealing with your weird stares. Triple B could have the big C and he has to have an operation. I need to raise like, two or three grand to pay for it.

WHEELCHAIR CHAD
Damn. I’m sorry, Amber. That blows.

AMBER
Sure does. I’m thinking about arranging a variety show and selling tickets to raise money. I just need to find some acts. Who’s in?

TY
Amber, if you need money --

AMBER
I don’t want anyone to give me money. I want to *raise* it for myself.

The BELL RINGS.

AMBER (CONT’D)
If you’re down to perform, find me after class.

INT. HALLWAY/LOCKERS - LATER

Ty joins Ricky at his locker.

TY
Yo Ricky, what are you going to do for the variety show?

RICKY
Ricky Roberts is going to do math problems on stage. Duh. What is Ty going to do?

TY
I don’t know yet, man. Something good. Lemme know if you have any ideas.

AMBER (O.S.)
(over the P.A. system)
Attention Childress High School classmates. This is Amber Appleton.

Ricky and Ty stop what they're doing to listen.

AMBER (O.S.)
(over the P.A. system)
I'd like to invite you to participate in The Save Bobby Big Boy Variety Show, which will raise money for my dog's operation. Please help me by signing up to perform in the show or by buying a ticket, which will go on sale after I iron out the details. Thanks. Peace out. Amber Appleton.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - ESTABLISHING SHOT

The moon illuminates the familiar building, wedged between the donut shop and the liquor store.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - NIGHT

In the corner of the rinky dink room, an old wooden photobooth has been converted into a confessional chamber.

INT. PHOTOBOOTH CONFESSIONAL - CONTINUOUS

Amber leans her head against the partition separating her from Father Chee.

INTERCUT between Amber and Father Chee within the booth.

AMBER
Forgive me Father, for I have sinned.
(beat)
That's what you're supposed to say, isn't it? I've never done this before. I'm not Catholic and right now, I'm starting to wonder if I even believe in God, which I know is a supercalifragilistic sin in itself so I guess it's another thing I should be atoning for, but that's not why I'm really here.
(beat)
(MORE)

AMBER (cont'd)
I’m here because I’ve committed...what’s the commandment that has to do with lying?

FATHER CHEE
Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbors.

AMBER
Bulls’ eye. That’s the one.
(beat)
I’ve told a lot of lies. I’ve been lying every day for a long time.

FATHER CHEE
What is the nature of these lies?

AMBER
I thought the best way to get me and my Mom out of our pathetic lives was to fake it ‘til you make it, you know? But that didn’t work. We didn’t make it. She didn’t make it. All the lies were for nothing.

FATHER CHEE
Who did you lie to?

AMBER
To everyone.

FATHER CHEE
To everyone. But also, to yourself.

AMBER
Mostly to myself.

FATHER CHEE
A wise man once told me that when someone say “I love you,” the “I” has to be strongest part. Once the “I” is true to itself, the “love you” can follow. You cannot save someone else if you are not there for yourself.

Amber reflects.

AMBER
That’s sort of like in an airplane, how if there’s an emergency landing, you’re supposed to put on your own oxygen mask before helping kids or old people with theirs.

FATHER CHEE
Exactly. When were you on airplane?

AMBER
Never. I saw it in a movie once. I didn't understand that until now.
(beat)
So what's next? Is this the Hail Mary portion?

FATHER CHEE
You don't need a Hail Mary for forgiveness, Amber. From now on, put on your own oxygen mask first.

AMBER
You knew it was me all along?

FATHER CHEE
Yes, I knew.

Amber smiles to herself.

AMBER
Thanks, Father Chee.

INT. KOREAN CATHOLIC CHURCH/SANCTUARY - LATER

Amber is mid-explanation in front of the Korean Divas.

AMBER
...so that's why we're doing The Save Bobby Big Boy Variety show and I was hoping you'd perform a few songs.

Silence.

AMBER (CONT'D)
You guys?!

Father Chee confers with them in Korean. The K.D.s start BICKERING amongst themselves.

AMBER (CONT'D)
STOOOOOOOPPPPPP!

Everyone in the room quiets down.

AMBER (CONT'D)
I've been coming here for over a year, teaching you English and some rocking Motown classics, and I've never asked for anything in return. But now I need my Divas! I've had a shabby last few months and if any of you ever cared about me or my dog or appreciated the times we've spent rocking out together in this room, then please find it in your hearts to swallow your fear and do this for me.

The Korean Divas look at each other with wide eyes, having never witnessed an outburst or request like this from Amber. Father Chee smiles from the back of the room.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Since I'm not taking no for an answer, I'll say thanks in advance and bye, since I have to go catch up on a lot of homework.

Amber high-fives Father Chee on her way out.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Oxygen mask.

FATHER CHEE
Oxygen mask.

EXT. CHILDRESS HIGH SCHOOL - THE NEXT DAY

The first signs of spring are starting to show. Franks and Amber walk together.

FRANKS
Everyone wants to put together the show for you, then have you emcee the event.

AMBER
They want the acts to be a surprise? Why?

FRANKS
They think it would be fun. They want to do this for you.

AMBER
How will I announce the acts if I don't even know what they are?

FRANKS
We'll make you note cards.

AMBER
Okay, I guess.

FRANKS
Let your friends help you. Trust us.

Amber smiles.

AMBER
Just leave one slot open because I have an act lined up already. As soon as I confirm it, I'll put you in touch.

EXT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME - AFTERNOON

Amber carries Triple B, who has a shaved belly and a plastic lamp shade on his head. Door Woman Lucy looks up.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
If it ain't Amber A!

She engulfs Amber in her arms.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT'D)
You get the Snickers I sent you?

AMBER
I did. Thanks, Door Woman Lucy.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Ain't right, what happened to you. Ain't right at all.

AMBER
Tell me about it.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Your little boyfriends been 'round here selling tickets to some show they say you're puttin' on.

AMBER
Boyfriends?

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Pervy kid in a wheelchair checking out my rack?
(MORE)

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (cont'd)
Skinny white boy counting out numbers? And that mini-Denzel with a beard?

AMBER
Got it.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
You let me know if you need any help, Amber A.

AMBER
You wouldn’t happen to be an undercover diva, like in the Whitney and Aretha department, would you?

Door Woman Lucy checks out Amber.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
You kiddin’ me? Gospel choir for twenty five years, thank you very much.

AMBER
For real?

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Please chile’, I just work this job for the health insurance.

INT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME/COMMON ROOM - NEXT

Amber peeks in. The Old People sit in two rows. Old Man Linder and Grandpa Thompson wear red sports coats and SING Louis Armstrong’s “Makin Whoopee.”

AMBER (V.O.)
There’s another kind of moment, the kind that sneaks up on you, that you’re not expecting at all, but you instantly know you’ll always cherish.

The Old People are smiling, LAUGHING, and SINGING along.

AMBER (V.O.) (CONT’D)
That’s how it was when I realized Old Man Linder had taken me up on my challenge.

Grandpa Thompson SINGS his heart out.

AMBER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
He was giving the old people something to look forward to, something to break up the days and weeks. He was keeping hope alive.

They finish the song to raucous APPLAUSE.

KNITTING CAROL
Amber?

The white-haired heads turn. Amber shyly walks in.

AMBER
Hi.

She hugs Old Man Linder.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Who knew these old guys could sing?

GRANDPA THOMPSON
We were really worried about you.

KNITTING CAROL
We didn't think you'd visit us again.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
I hope they fry that awful man who killed your poor mother.

AMBER
Speaking of awful, where's Joan of Old?

OLD MAN LINDER
She had a heart attack.

AMBER
What?

INT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME/HOSPITAL WING - NEXT

Amber sits by the bedside in the mauve-colored room. Joan of Old's eyes are closed. She is a wisp of a presence amidst the blankets and tubes.

AMBER
Joan?

Amber reaches under the blanket and takes her hand.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Squeeze if you can hear me.

Joan of Old doesn't react.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Man, I skip a few word battles and you go and coma-out on me.
(beat)
I never thought I'd say these words, but I've kinda missed you.

Amber checks for movement from Joan of Old. Nothing.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Guess you heard about my Mom and stuff. I spent a lot of time in my room, pretty much being a bitch to everyone. I've been crying a lot too.
(beat)
But what you probably don't realize is that I cried a whole bunch before my Mom was killed. The Amber you saw during our battles, that was all an act. I'm not so strong. I've started to think you're right about life, Joan. Maybe it is all meaningless. That guy who killed my Mom - he's not human, and he scares me, because he *is* a human, and yet he did what he did. That will never make sense, no matter how long I think about it.

Joan of Old squeezes Amber's hand, scaring the hell out of her. Amber GASPS and retracts her hand.

JOAN OF OLD
Why are you squawking my ear off?

AMBER
You rotten old lady! You were awake this whole time! Why'd you do that?

JOAN OF OLD
I had to gather information for our last battle, when I'll finally make you cry.

AMBER
You can't be that evil.

Joan of Old gives Amber a devious smirk.

JOAN OF OLD
Why did you really come here, Amber?

AMBER
I don't know. I really don't. Are you going to die?

JOAN OF OLD
We all do eventually. That's just about the only thing he got right.

AMBER
Except when someone's raped and killed by a crazed murderer. I don't think there's anything right about that.

JOAN OF OLD
Then it's a good thing you finally got out of your room and told someone that.
(beat)
As long as that someone isn't me. Scram already, you hear?

INT. FRANKS' OFFICE - DAY

Amber settles into the couch across from Franks' desk.

AMBER
I already sent it in, but I still want to know what you think.

FRANKS
I'd love to hear it.

Amber rifles through her backpack and pulls out a piece of paper. She stands and without further ado...

AMBER
(reading)
Dear Columbia Admissions Department. In my initial application, I presented plenty of evidence to promote the idea of Amber Appleton the rock star. The truth is, that's not the full story. Behind every rock star, there is a person who is far from perfect. Who can't solve every problem. Who can't save everyone.
(MORE)

AMBER (cont'd)
This year, I have learned to acknowledge that there are many facets of who I am. There is the girl who lived on a school bus. The girl who is an orphan. The girl who is a Mother to a three-legged puppy. The girl who will be a lawyer. I cannot pick and choose which aspects of my identity I would like to represent myself, for I am a constellation of many things.

Amber pauses to look up at Franks, who's rapt by her oration.

AMBER (CONT'D)
(reading)
Which brings me to my number one all-time-favorite-Amber-and-her-Mom-moment.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

16-year-old Amber does homework while sitting in the waiting area. A small placard denotes, "RECEPTIONIST WANTED."

AMBER (V.O.)
Here it is, without lies or pretense. Because these moments informed who I am.

Tina, spruced up but looking odd in a salvaged pencil skirt and ill-fitting blazer, walks into the waiting area. Amber looks up hopefully. Tina fakes a smile.

AMBER (V.O.)
And because I couldn't save my Mother, I can only learn from her mistakes.

TINA
Ready to go, Pokes?

INT. OFFICE BUILDING HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Tina walks quickly.

AMBER
How was the interview?

TINA
Okay.

AMBER
Just okay? Tell me more. Tell me everything! What questions did they ask? Do you think you'll get it?

Tina stops short.

TINA
No. I'm not going to get the job. Happy now?

AMBER
Sorry.

Amber blinks back hurt feelings. Tina SIGHS.

TINA
No, I'm sorry. Come here.

Tina hugs her daughter.

TINA
I messed up. I lied. I said I went to Haverford. I confused it with Harvard. I said I majored in English and was on the Honors Society. The guy started asking me all these questions I didn't have answers for. Turns out, it's a Quaker school and they don't even have an Honors Society. I blew it.

She releases her daughter and looks into Amber's eyes.

TINA (CONT'D)
Never feel like you have to be anything other than who you are, Amber.

AMBER
Okay.

TINA
No, promise me. Promise me that you'll be true to yourself. That you won't live your life afraid, that you'll grow up and live a better life than your mother could ever imagine.

AMBER (V.O.)
For some reason, I felt like I was saying goodbye, that my Mom was going to descend into a place that doesn't allow you to return. That this was the beginning of the end of something for her, but in that moment, she had hope: the hope that I would amount to something more.

Amber and her Mom both start to CRY a little.

TINA
Promise me.

AMBER
I promise, Mom.

BACK TO:

INT. FRANKS' OFFICE - DAY

Amber looks at the piece of paper.

AMBER
(reading)
It was a promise I did not take lightly then and I certainly do not now.

She looks up at Franks.

AMBER (CONT'D)
That's it.

With glassy eyes, he stands and pulls Amber into a bear hug.

INT. TY'S VOLVO - DAY

Amber fidgets in the passenger seat. Ty - still bearded - glances at a map and mans the wheel.

TY
You're really not going to let me know where we're going?

AMBER
Nope, but like I said, you keep it a secret and I'll go to Friendly's. You can finally shave off that nasty fur ball that's growing on your face.

TY
You know, some women find it sexy when a man can grow a full beard. Especially when that man's not even eighteen yet.

AMBER
Oh yeah? What are you going to do next, flex your guns at me?

TY
You asked for it!

Ty grins and makes a muscle with his skinny stick-arm.

EXT. MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON - DAY

Per Amber's direction, Ty pulls into the parking lot.

TY
Ummm. What are we doing here?

AMBER
(matter-of-fact)
I have a non-contact visit scheduled with my Mom's killer.

TY
What?

AMBER
I need to face him.

TY
I'm not sure this is a good idea.

She gets out of the car.

TY (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Amber? Amber!

INT. MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON - DAY

A PRISON GUARD takes Amber's license and searches her.

INT. MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON/HALLWAY - DAY

The Prison Guard leads her though a set of locked doors.

PRISON GUARD
Visitor coming through, searched and clean!

INT. MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON/VISITATION ROOM - DAY

Amber takes a deep breath and steps inside. Her Mom's killer, RANDY, sits on the other side of thick Plexiglas.

Amber takes in his presence: huge brown glasses, mussed hair, orange jumpsuit, handcuffs around his wrists. Madness in his eyes. He already wears the headphones and mouths, "Put it on." She looks into his eyes and quivers.

Amber pulls out an index card. She unfolds it with trembling hands and hold it up to the glass so he can read it:

You may exist in

This world - but I exist too

And I will not yield

He gestures toward the headset again.

RANDY
PUT IT ON, YOU LITTLE --

From the other side, the glass MUFFLES his screams. Amber keeps holding up her haiku. She shakes her head no.

Randy lunges toward the glass. He attacks her haiku with his head, banging it against the glass several times. The GUARDS come and drag him away.

EXT. MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON - DAY

Amber steps out. She looks around. She glances up at the sky, the clouds, the trees, and then at the bearded boy leaning against his Volvo waiting for her.

EXT. TY'S VOLVO - DAY

Ty scans Amber's face.

TY
How was it? Are you okay?

AMBER
I did what I had to do. Will you open your presents now?

TY
You didn't have to get me anything.

AMBER
I missed your birthday. My Mom was murdered, so open your damn presents, okay?

TY
You're really gonna play that card?

AMBER
If I have to, you bet I am.

She reaches into the car and hands him a wrapped gift.

TY
This is sort of weird, you know. Opening a gift in the parking lot of a maximum security prison.

He rips off the wrapping paper.

TY
Batteries?

AMBER
You'll need them for this.

She hands him another gift. He unwraps an electric razor and smiles. Amber inserts the batteries in the razor.

TY
So you'll go to Friendly's for sundaes with The Freaks Force? Those were the terms.

Amber looks into his brown eyes, full of boyish potential, possibility, and innocence. Coldplay's "Fix You" KICKS IN. Amber slowly nods without breaking her gaze.

As the SONG PLAYS, Amber shaves off Ty's beard.

AMBER
Welcome back.

TY
You too.

Their eyes connect, and then Amber leans in and kisses him.

The SONG TRANSITIONS US TO...

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - AFTERNOON

Amber enters, tosses her jacket over her desk chair, and drops her backpack on the ground. Then, she freezes, her eyes fixed upon an envelope on her desk with a Columbia insignia.

Slowly, Amber approaches it, stares at it for a second, then opens the letter. She reads for several moments, sinks into her desk chair, and clasps the letter against her chest.

AMBER
(to herself)
I promise, Mom.

A beat. Then Amber raises her head and smiles triumphantly at the acceptance letter.

THE SONG FADES OUT.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/GUEST ROOM - LATER

Amber tries on a homemade dress with "Home-Ec Project" written all over it. A few other wrinkled options lay strewn across the bed. She SIGHS with frustration at her reflection in the mirror.

Unbeknownst to her, Donna observes from the doorway with a shopping bag clutched at her side.

DONNA
Knock knock!

AMBER
(startled)
Oh, hey Donna.

DONNA
Hey. Is that what you're wearing?

AMBER
I guess. Does it look really hand-made and crappy? The sewing machine and I got into a little war and I'm sorry to report, I think I lost.

DONNA
I thought you liked making your own clothes.

Amber shakes her head no.

AMBER
That was just something I said.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Well, I'm glad we're done with that phase so I don't have to pretend I went to the mall to buy myself a little something and got the wrong size. I bought you something to wear tonight.

Amber's face lights up as Donna hands over the bag. She pulls out a rock-star-eqsue L.B.D. (Little Black Dress). Amber SQUEALS with delight.

AMBER
Donna! Thank you, I love it. This dress is awesome.

Donna pulls out a tube of Chanel lipstick from another shopping bag.

DONNA
It would look even awesom*er* with some of this.

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE/DONNA'S ROOM - NEXT

Donna plays makeup artist to Amber at her vanity table.

DONNA
Always wipe your mascara wand to get rid of the excess before you apply it so you don't get clumpy tarantula eyes.

Donna demonstrates.

DONNA (CONT'D)
Now look up and try not the blink.

Amber looks up. Donna coats her lashes with mascara.

AMBER
Donna, I'm really sorry about those horrible things I said to you. You know I don't think that about you. I never have. In fact, I used to wish my Mom was more like you.

DONNA
I appreciate and accept your apology, honey.
(beat)
(MORE)

DONNA (cont'd)
I wouldn’t trade Ricky for the world, but sometimes I wish I had a daughter to dish out boy advice to and put makeup on. A girl a lot like you.

Donna places the mascara tube down and moves on to eyeshadow.

AMBER
See, even now? You know exactly what to say. You always have everything perfectly together.

DONNA
None of us has everything together.

AMBER
True. I guess I’m starting to figure that out.
(beat)
You could use a little work in the kitchen.

Amber and Donna CHUCKLE together.

INT. AUDITORIUM - EVENING

The seats are packed: there’s a section of KOREAN FAMILY MEMBERS, a group of Old People from the home, all of the Students from school, Principal Fiorelli and the School Board Members, and many other Citizens of Childress.

INT. AUDITORIUM/BACKSTAGE - EVENING

Amber arrives, carrying Triple B under one arm.

She takes in the comings and goings: the CHILDRESS FOOTBALL PLAYERS form a huddle, the K.D.s WHISPER in Korean and sport gold dresses, and across the way, Door Woman Lucy wears a tight red dress, high heels and hair extensions. She doles out instructions to a group of BLACK MEN with instruments.

Ty stands at a table off stage, typing on a laptop that controls the lights and sound system. Clad in their uniforms, the Childress CHEERLEADERS perform group stretches.

OLD MAN LINDER (O.S.)
She’s here!

Amber turns and sees Old Man Linder and Grandpa Thompson wearing their red sports jackets.

AMBER
You guys are singing tonight?

OLD MAN LINDER
You know it.

He pinches her cheek.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
We're opening the show!

AMBER
But how did --

GRANDPA THOMPSON
Against our best judgment, that bearded friend of yours convinced us that people might want to hear us old farts sing tonight.

Amber steals a glance at Ty.

KIM LEE
Amber have to make power circle!

The K.D.s nod enthusiastically. Everyone forms a circle.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
Let's hear it for Amber!

Standing in the middle, Amber looks around at their faces.

AMBER
I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight. It means a lot to me and Bobby Big Boy, who I'm happy to announce is now Cancer-free. Everyone form a big old circle. Arms around your neighbors' shoulders. Feel the love, people!

Everyone in the circle wraps their arms around each other.

AMBER (CONT'D)
We have some great people gathered here tonight. Thank you all, from the bottom of my heart, for stepping up to help me pay my vet bill. Are we going to rock the house tonight?

EVERYONE
Yeah!

AMBER (CONT'D)
I said, are we going to rock the house tonight?

EVERYONE
HELL YEAH!

INT. AUDITORIUM/STAGE - EVENING

The spotlight illuminates Amber. She holds a stack of note cards and a microphone. Triple B sits at her feet. She scans the crowd: it's a packed house.

AMBER
Bobby Big Boy and I would like to thank you all for being here. You have a very special evening in store.

She reads from the note card.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Ladies and Gentlemen, to start off the show, I have a special treat. Backed by tonight's house band, The Hard-Working Brothers, singing the old-time classic, "Makin' Whoopee," let's give it up for Old Man Linder and Grandpa Thompson, better known as the Red Coats!

Amber exits. The curtain rises. Old Man Linder and Grandpa Thompson start SNAPPING their fingers.

QUICK CUTS:

- The audience SNAPS along to the tune of "Makin' Whoopee" with the Red Coats.

- Amber announces other acts.

- A CLASSMATE plays the violin.

- Another Student juggles knives and flaming tennis balls, which gets Principal Fiorilli up out of his seat.

- Amber announces Ricky's act as Franks doles out several calculators to the audience.

INT. AUDITORIUM/STAGE - EVENING

Franks and a tuxedo-clad Ricky stand with microphones.

FRANKS
I have a genius with me here tonight.

RICKY
Yes.

FRANKS
Anyone with a calculator can ask Ricky to multiply any number and he'll do it in his head in less than five seconds. You're welcome to check his math, though I assure you it won't be necessary.

RICKY
Yes.

A DUDE in the audience raises his hand.

DUDE IN AUDIENCE
157 times 521.

RICKY
Eighty-one thousand, seven-hundred and ninety-seven.

FRANKS
Is he right, sir?

The Dude punches the numbers into the calculator and marvels.

DUDE IN AUDIENCE
That's correct!

Donna sits in the front row.

DONNA
Of course it's correct. That's my boy.

Franks calls on Knitting Carol.

KNITTING CAROL
1,268 times 12,960.

RICKY
Sixteen million, four-hundred and thirty-three thousand, two-hundred and eighty.

Hands fly up. The crowd MURMURS with amazement.

STUDENT #1
He's like freakin' Rainman!

QUICK SHOTS:

- Offstage, Amber smiles proudly.

- Amber announces additional acts.

- A KID IN A JESTER SUIT performs magic tricks.

- Wheelchair Chad sits in his wheelchair, BELTING OUT Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back." Suddenly, the Cheerleaders come flying across the stage doing cartwheels, skirts flying up and down, ponytails bouncing. The Football Players follow them. Clutching microphones, they provide back-up vocals for Wheelchair Chad's killer rendition of a modern day classic.

INT. AUDITORIUM/STAGE - EVENING

Amber takes the stage again.

AMBER
We've come to the headliner of our evening, which combines two very talented groups of people. People I know well and love very much. I give you the Korean Divas and Door Woman Lucy and her Hard-Working Brothers!

The curtain lifts. The K.D.s stand on risers. Door Woman Lucy holds a sparkly microphone front and center.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY
You know, they say the way to a woman's heart is through chocolate.

The audience LAUGHS.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT'D)
Before she knew I was a diva, when she thought I was just a door woman at the old people's home, when she was homeless herself, Amber brought me a hot chocolate and a Snickers bar every week. Might not sound like much to some, but it was something I looked forward to each Wednesday. I'm sorry about what happened to your mom, Amber. It ain't right. This one's for you.

Father Chee begins PLAYING the first notes of The Beatles on an electric organ. Door Woman Lucy SINGS an R&B version of “Let it Be” with a voice that is deep and rich. The Hard-Working Brothers kick in with the drums, bass, and horns and the K.D.s back her up with harmony.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT’D)
And when the broken hearted people living in the world agree, there will be an answer, let it be. For though they may be parted there is still a chance that they will see, there will be an answer, let it be. Let it be, let it be...

Offstage, Amber is overcome by emotion. She lets herself get swept up in the moment and tears well up in her eyes.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT’D)
(belts it out)
There is still a light that shines on me!

In the audience, Donna dabs at her mascara. Even Rex Pinkston appears affected. Door Woman Lucy finishes the song to thunderous APPLAUSE.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT’D)
Let it be, Amber. Let it be.
(to the crowd)
Now are you people ready to dance your butts off?

QUICK SHOTS OF:

- The Hard-Working Brothers, Door Woman Lucy, and the K.D.s get down to Aretha Franklin’s “Think.”

- The crowd rocks out.

- Door Woman Lucy raises the roof with “Respect.”

- Door Woman Lucy pulls Amber out on stage during “O-o-h Child.” Though Amber initially resists, she relents and takes a microphone, SINGING along.

- Door Woman Lucy bows as she receives a standing ovation.

DOOR WOMAN LUCY (CONT’D)
Now that’s what I call the big O!

INT. AUDITORIUM/STAGE - EVENING

A movie screen is set up on the stage. Amber stands in the center. Ty is off to the side with his computer.

AMBER
Thank you again for coming here tonight. I'd like to give a special shout-out to my friend Ty, who's been running the show behind the scenes.

She pauses to wait for the APPLAUSE to subside.

AMBER (CONT'D)
He's now going to post the total amount of money we raised tonight.

Ty flashes her a thumb's up. $0000.00 appears on the huge screen and the numbers start to spin. "We're Not Alone" by Dinosaur Jr. begins PLAYING.

$375 FLASHES on the screen. People APPLAUD politely. Amber nods with a tinge of disappointment. The numbers spin again.

$657 FLASHES on the screen. People CHEER.

$2,089 FLASHES on the screen. They CHEER louder.

$3,998 FLASHES on the screen. Amber raises her arm over her head in victory and lets out a little CRY of glee.

$5,003 FLASHES on the screen. She looks at it with amazement.

$7,493 FLASHES on the screen. She peers behind the stage curtain with confusion. Franks, Wheelchair Chad and Ricky grin.

$36,930 FLASHES on the screen. Amber double-takes. Ty keeps typing on his laptop.

$62,426 FLASHES on the screen. Amber puts her hand over her mouth in amazement. The crowd is on their feet.

$121,521 FLASHES on the screen. She shakes her head back and forth, not comprehending. Several CAMERA CREWS and NEWS REPORTERS inch forward in the aisles.

The words "GRAND TOTAL" blink on the screen several times before they're replaced with:

$215,671

Amber stares with disbelief. Dinosaur Jr.'s "We Are Not Alone" STOPS. Ty approaches her with a microphone and addresses the audience.

TY
And now for your viewing pleasure, we have a message from Amber's nemesis.

Joan of Old's head fills the movie screen.

JOAN OF OLD
(on the screen)
I'm probably already dead as a doorknob. For those of you who don't know, Amber and I used to battle every Wednesday. Her strange little boyfriends recorded this several days ago, which is fortuitous, because like I said, I'm probably dust by now, but especially because I vowed to make Amber cry before I died. I always keep my word, Ms. Appleton. Today is the day I defeat you, once and for all!

Joan smiles devilishly at the camera.

JOAN OF OLD (CONT'D)
(on the screen)
I hear you've lost hope and regardless of my philosophical views, you're far too young for that. What will you have to look forward to if you become a nihilist before eighteen?

Joan of Old starts COUGHING badly, but recovers.

JOAN OF OLD (CONT'D)
(on the screen)
I want to say two things to you before I die. My husband was a German philosophy professor, hence my obsession with Nietzsche. Here's a Nietzsche quote I never got around to sharing with you. 'We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.'

Joan of Old fights another COUGHING fit.

JOAN OF OLD (CONT'D)
(on the screen)
That was my husband's favorite. Keep making people laugh, Amber. At least until you're old and gray like me.
(beat)
That was the first thing. Second: I'm leaving my entire estate to the Amber Appleton Community Service College Fund, which your friends have established without you knowing it. My son hasn't visited in years, so screw him! Bye bye, Amber. See you in hell.

Joan of Old smiles the last grin of a dying woman.

JOAN OF OLD (CONT'D)
I got you, didn't I? I finally made you cry!

Tears stream down Amber's face. She simultaneously LAUGHS and CRIES to herself. The film cuts away from Joan's face to the common room at the retirement home. On the screen:

INT. CHILDRESS RETIREMENT HOME/COMMON ROOM - DAY

Old People gather before the camera.

OLD MAN LINDER
Kid, you brightened our weeks and filled a special place in our lives. Life can be a long race and the finish is often lonely. Even some of our own flesh and blood have abandoned us, so when we heard what happened to your mother, we wrote you into our wills.

GRANDPA THOMPSON
You should be all set covering your tuition over the next four years.

KNITTING CAROL
Maybe there will even be some left over for law school.

INT. AUDITORIUM/STAGE - EVENING

Amber is absolutely flabbergasted. In the audience, women cry. Men choke up. Camera Crews record. Franks comes on stage and takes the microphone from Amber.

FRANKS
I've never met a person with more spirit, more hope and more love in her heart than Amber Appleton. She's always thinking up some crazy scheme to help others, whether they want it or not. Well, Amber, this time it was The Freaks Force who thought up a plan to help you in your time of need.

Ty, Wheelchair Chad and Ricky beam at her.

AMBER
But...I...what?

The vet, Dr. Weismuller, stands up in the third row.

DR. WEISSMULLER
And Bobby Big Boy's surgery is on the house!

The audience CHEERS and calls for a speech. Franks gives the microphone back to Amber.

AMBER
Thank you, everyone! I'm so shocked, I don't exactly know what to say. I hope my Mom is looking down on us because she would have liked to see this.

Amber pauses and tries to stave off an influx of tears.

AMBER (CONT'D)
She would have peed her pants if she saw that last number on the screen.

The audience LAUGHS. Amber reflects for a moment. She looks around at Ty, Wheelchair Chad, Ricky, Franks, Donna, Door Woman Lucy, Old Man Linder, the K.D.s, etc.

AMBER
A lot has happened this year that made me want to give up.
(MORE)

AMBER (cont'd)
But you all wouldn’t let me do that, as hard as I tried. So thank you. Thank you for not giving up on me.

Amber catches sight of her worn boots from the first scene.

AMBER (CONT’D)
Thank you for believing in me. And know that I am not going to give up! Because I’m Amber - PRINCESS OF HOPE - Appletooooooon!

She puts a triumphant arm in the air. The crowd raises to their feet and ROARS with APPLAUSE for someone sorta amazing, sorta iconic. And definitely like a rock star.

FADE TO BLACK.