

The Hellebore Girl

A Story By

Branson Stowell

A man writes a letter at a desk staring out a window, snow falls outside. He sighs, folds up the letter with the name ESME on it, places it on his satchel and leaves.

CUT TO BLACK THEN FADE IN

A black screen. We open on a french woman's silhouette from behind. It's early morning in Paris and she's washing dishes and listening to the news. She hums to herself as she dries the dishes and takes note to carefully put an engagement ring back on as soon as she dries her hands.

The phone rings.

ESME

Oui? Ah, yes Mrs. Ellan.

She listens intently. The audience only hears muddled french.

CLOSE UP

Her face begins to recede to a deeply catatonic look. The phone slips through her hand. She is frozen. A tear runs down her face.

ESME

I am so sorry.

Title flashes onscreen: THE HELLEBORE GIRL.

ESME packs quickly. In her taxi, she alerts her driver to head to the airport. While waiting in line for the plane, she speaks with her assistant on the phone.

ESME

(in french)

Unfortunately, yes. (*What about those meetings*) You're going to have to push everything until I get back. (*How many days will you be gone again?*) Ten. (*That's more than before. Where is it again?*) America.

CUT TO BLACK

2

INT. AIRPORT - LATE EVENING.

2

Now we see an older couple (late 50's/early 60's) waiting from afar by the greeters gate. The room is mostly empty and the couple looks anxious that they won't find ESME.

PAUL

Did you check her flight confirmation?

JAN

I just did five minutes ago.

PAUL

Oh, okay.

JAN and PAUL stand there as airport announcements drone on in the background.

PAUL

People are finally coming up. Do you know what she looks like?

JAN

I've only seen her in pictures, but that's enough to- that's her!

ESME steps off the escalator and looks around for a moment before she sees the couple stumble to hold up a sign with her name on it. She forces a smile and approaches them. They go to hug her.

JAN

Hello darling! Come here.

PAUL

Come in here! Bonjour!

ESME

Yes, hello.

The couple greet her with the warmth of a bonfire and ESME finds it a bit overwhelming.

JAN

Oh Paul, please.

PAUL

What? I'm trying to be polite.

ESME

No really, it's fine.

(CONTINUED)

JAN

Wow, you are quite gorgeous in person. Such a doll.

ESME

Thank you so much.

JAN

Paul, could you get her bags?

The three of them make their way out to the car and drive back on empty, snow dusted roads. ESME sits in the back seat, nervously looking at the couple. Christmas music plays in the background.

PAUL

Apologies for the slow driving! You must be exhausted from your flight.

ESME remains silent.

I can safely say that this is the latest that we've ever picked someone up from the airport.

ESME

Yes, I am so sorry-

JAN

No. No apologies necessary. We're really happy to have you here.

ESME

Yes, it's quite lovely to finally meet you both in person.

JAN AND PAUL

It's lovely to meet you too.

JAN

(poking her head towards the back to face her)

We've spoken quite a few times on the phone and, I have to say, it is so nice to have you here in real life. I mean your accent is just so charming. It's so lucky of your people to be blessed with that language. And you look just as you did online: absolutely beautiful.

PAUL

Absolutely!

(CONTINUED)

There's a brief silence where JAN looks at PAUL with disgust.

JAN

Anyway, Esme, we're very happy to have you here. We hope you find this part of America lovely.

ESME

Well, yes. I was excited for this trip a long time ago. I've only ever been to New York on business and I didn't really get to see anything. So, I'm happy that you're still having me.

JAN

Of course! And the family will still be getting together later this week. Will you be around?

ESME

Yes. If it is okay with you, I will be here for, I think, a little over a week.

PAUL

I'm on sabbatical and Jan now only works two days a week, so we have time to spend with you, if you like.

JAN

Yeah, that will be perfect. Stay as long as you like sweetie.

ESME stares out the window looking into the cold night with a sense of longing.

3

INT. ELLAN'S HOUSE - MIDNIGHT

3

They ALL arrive at the house and shuffle her belongings through a dimmed entryway. They congregate in the kitchen.

JAN

Well, I hope we got everything.
(*She nods*) Not so bad coming all the way from Paris, huh?

PAUL

Follow me upstairs and I'll show you to where you'll be staying.
(*They walk up a creaky staircase together. On the way*)

(CONTINUED)

up, ESME notices old family portraits.)
So if you take a left right here, this is the room you'll be staying in.

JAN
...it was his room. I hope that doesn't make you uncomfortable. If you prefer, there's a pull-out couch in the study.

ESME
No, no. It's fine.

PAUL
The room was missing a-uh, feminine touch. So Jan and I went out and bought some new sheets and pillows.

JAN
I also put some magazines in case you wanted something to read. If you need of course, the bathroom is down the hall on the left and we left a glass in there in case you wanted some water. Oh! The light switch to your bedside lamp is right here. In the morning, you can get the most beautiful view of the mountains over there - just stunning. We're awake by around 7:15, but please don't think that means you have to be! Jack was always more of a night owl. Sometimes we'd say goodnight and not see him until almost noon the next day.

JAN looks toward the floor to avoid showing emotion.

ESME
No worries. I think if I don't have jet lag too badly, I'll be awake early.

PAUL
Of course. Well, we'll leave you to it! Again, it was lovely to meet you. (to Jan) Don't forget to grab those books on the way out.

PAUL exits.

(CONTINUED)

JAN grabs some books from the shelf in the room.

JAN

Sweetheart, its nice to finally see
you in person. You look so
tired...you should get some good
rest.

ESME

Thank you Mrs. Ellan.

JAN smiles. She begins to turn away when ESME interrupts her.

ESME

And, I'm- I'm so sorry for your
loss.

JAN looks stunned and tries to avoid eye contact for a moment.

JAN

Thank you dear. I'm sorry for
yours. I know he loved you and its
not just us two having to deal with
the heaviness of misery. We know
that.

ESME nods. They both begin to head their separate ways when Jan pops her head back around the corner and provided a little levity.

JAN

Oh and by the way dear, you can
call me whatever makes you
comfortable. You don't have to call
me Mrs. Ellan. As for him, I don't
even think his students ever called
him anything but Paul, so he
wouldn't expect it either. You're
practically family in our eyes.
Goodnight!

JAN heads to bed and leaves ESME with only her thoughts.

END SCENE. CUT TO BLACK

4

SCENE 2: INT. JACK'S ROOM - AFTER MIDNIGHT.

4

ESME sighs with frustration. She buries her head in her palms. She questions why she came here in the first place.

She looks online for tickets back to France and considers replying to a text asking her to come back.

She takes a moment and explores the room with poignancy. There's an invisible barrier that prevents her from touching anything and eventually causes her to retreat to the bed. She stares out the window and watches the snow trickle down through the night sky. Her thoughts weigh heavy on her mind. She breathes deeply and closes her eyes. When she opens them, it's still early. Dawn is breaking on the horizon. ESME lies on her side and stares at the same window and the same snow falling and notices a dark silhouette in the distance: a mountain. It's beauty is truly awesome and it begins to trigger a memory within her. She remembers when JACK told her of mornings like this. Nostalgia takes over and she is transported back to the moment that they talked about the majestic beauty of the mountains in the morning.

SEEN ONSCREEN: Paris. Four Years Ago.

5

EXT. STREET CAFE - EVENING.

5

Two young people admire each other from afar at a late night cafe. They sit down next to each other and begin to converse in French. It's the Fall and they sit under a blanket of stars, barely visible from the city lights.

ESME

A dare? So, you didn't approach me on your own?

JACK

I just needed...a little inspiration. You can be a bit disarming.

ESME

Disarming? How?

JACK

It's your mystery. You look like a woman that's difficult to get to know.

JACK mispronounces something in the last sentence which gives him away. ESME smiles as she has caught him in the act.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Me, a what? Hmmm... You are not French. (*He looks surprised*)
That's cute, but your accent needs some serious work.

JACK

(Exaggerating his accent)
Me? No. But, of course I am!

ESME

So where are you really from?

JACK

Guess. What do my clothes,
appearance and mannerisms tell you?

ESME

Hmm. Your style is very European...
You are quite vain... I can tell by
the way you do your hair - you
spend too much time in the mirror.
Your arrogance, sense of humor and
well, the fact you won't shut up
makes me think Italy.

JACK grins

But, your pasty skin and lighter
hair suggest otherwise. And your
accent wasn't very attractive
either. I want to say Scandinavian,
but you are much too friendly...
are you Swiss?

JACK

No.

ESME

Scottish, then?

JACK

(In English)
Actually, I'm English.

ESME

Really? I would have never guessed.
But, all the better because I find
your language so fascinating. I
spent a long time in London for
business. I do see that you try and
look quite "proper", which was
something I noticed about the
Londoners.

(CONTINUED)

JACK
You mean uptight?

ESME
A bit. But also very well-read and cunning. It could be worse! You could be American. Especially with that arrogance.

JACK
And we certainly wouldn't want that.

ESME
No!

JACK
Have you ever met one?

ESME
Oh, but of course. I spent most of my life just outside Paris.

JACK
Have you gotten to know one?

ESME
No. But, we see enough films and hear enough songs. You understand.

JACK
I do indeed. They all tend to be the same really. It's just one big homogenous country. Coast to coast it tends to be more and more of the same-

ESME
-Exactly!-

JACK
-People who all believe the same things, watch the same things, eat - well, everything! It's all just one really big homogenous blob, that country.

ESME
Yes!

JACK
Certainly no room for people like you and I.

(CONTINUED)

ESME nods. A frenchman and friend of JACK'S approaches them waving anxiously to JACK, who tries to subtly send him away. His efforts are fruitless.

ROMAN

(In French)

Hey Jack. At it again? Who's this lovely lady? I can tell you right now she's too good for you. Anyway, I saw you over there and wanted to invite you for Tennis tomorrow. We'll see how late you end up tonight? (to ESME) I hope my American friend here doesn't offend you too much.

ROMAN EXITS

JACK

(Using his normal voice)

Me too.

ESME

Oh my god, I am an idiot. This whole time, I should have known.

Attempting to eliminate some of the awkwardness, she tries to probe him further.

Where in America?

JACK

Umm. (*He avoids eye contact*)
Colorado. It's rectangular and kind of in the middle of the country.

ESME

Yes, I've heard of it. What is the best part of Colorado?

JACK

That's a great question. Where I live, there are a few towns, like Winter's Grove, Linnell, Copper Springs that are nice. Sometimes even my hometown has this phenomenon: I'm looking out my bedroom window very very early on a cold winter morning and seeing the beautiful, massive mountains come into view and start to soak up some of the morning color.

CUT TO BEDROOM

(CONTINUED)

ESME leaves her mind. She stares right at the very mountains he spoke of. The last of his words echo through her mind.

"You don't get that many other places in the world."

END SCENE. CUT TO BLACK

6

SCENE 3:INT. MORNING - ELLAN'S KITCHEN.

6

ESME makes her way to the kitchen wrapped in a sweater and says 'Good Morning' to JAN and PAUL. They provide her with coffee and she listens in on their morning discussion of the news. Moments later, heavy footsteps make their way down the stairs and into the kitchen. JACK'S sister NINA yawns her way down the corridor and stops in the entryway once she sees ESME. She is so happy to see her, she runs and picks her up. Emotionally unstable, NINA begins to cry tears of happiness.

NINA

Esme! I didn't know you were still coming. I'm so happy! Mom! Why didn't you tell me?

PAUL

Nina, we told you we were going to the airport last night.

NINA

Yeah, but you didn't say you were going to get Esme. Damn, I love this girl.

JAN

Well, I'm sorry. I didn't even think you had met before.

NINA

Yes we have, Mom. Remember? I met them out when they were in Barcelona. I was there that semester FOR RESEARCH? We really hit it off. Plus, we Skype every once in a while. Okay, we skyped *once for a while*. Anyway, how are you? I'm glad you're here. What are you up to today? You should join me in town.

ESME

Well, I had no formal plans. I thought I might just catch up on some work.

(CONTINUED)

NINA

No! Come with me. I wanna go into town and give these two some time "together". And we can go shop and look around. Does that work Mom?

JAN

Well, we were supposed to speak with the the church and see about later this week, but I don't know if that's something you girls are interested in anyway.

NINA

Nah, I trust you.

JAN smiles and starts the dishes. NINA bolts upstairs to change her clothes.

JAN

Okay, well then you two have a good time. Get out there and have some fun.

NINA returns and slightly adjusts her outfit before grabbing ESME and pulling her out of the room. JAN and PAUL give them a wave goodbye.

END SCENE

7

SCENE 4:EXT. MORNING - STREETS OF TOWN.

7

In town, ESME is in awe at the quaintness of America in the snow. All the warm drinks, boutiques and star dusted trees are familiar, yet different to ESME. It's exciting! The music, mannerisms and the markets all catch her eye. For a minute, she is able to forget what she came here for. For a minute, she is seeing America for the first time.

The girls stroll along the streets together catching up.

ESME

You seem so much more alive now and full of energy. Not that I didn't enjoy Barcelona, but you just seemed different.

NINA

No, I was just overworked and suffering from perpetual jet-lag. I'm actually glad you get to see me more normally.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Well, I did think you were normal in Spain, just so you know. But, I'm happy to have you any way that I can!

NINA

Oh, yeah! I'm really glad you're here! I can't believe Mom didn't mention you were still coming. I swear she keeps things from me as ransom just so I have to talk to her.

They stop at a little cafe to warm themselves and talk.

CUT TO INT. CAFE

NINA

So, what did you think of ol' mom and pop?

ESME

They were mostly what I expected. They seem so American! Both of them are so friendly and hospitable. Your mother was always offering to help me and give me different things. Your father just wanted to make sure I was comfortable. They're cute.

NINA

Yeah? Lucky you! My comfort is the last thing he is concerned with.

ESME

Really? That surprises me. He seems like a good father.

NINA

Look. They're great people. Very nice people. But, they don't have a lot of patience for free-spirits like me. I just go where the wind takes me. Carpe diem dammit! As a college professor, my dad doesn't exactly agree with that approach to life. He's much more cut and dry. It doesn't surprise me that they love you though! You're the successful, focused, entrepreneur daughter they never had.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

I am sure they appreciate you! You are a wonderful girl, who's proven herself to be quite studious. I mean, you've basically been living in the university for the last five years and you're finally onto your masters. These are signs of progress. I just think you're a bit curious and I can see where that worries him. He just wants you to be safe and happy! As a father, he's just trying to guide you. Maybe you are too resistant?

NINA

Yeah, but he forgets that he went through three different undergraduate degrees before he finally moved onto his masters. So, when he gets on my ass for being a little indecisive, I just roll my eyes.

ESME

Hmm... It sounds like you two suffer from a similar condition. It's almost as if you're related.

The waiter approaches them. He places their drinks in front of them.

NINA

Yeah, alright maybe... Coffee, huh? I bet Jack got real jealous of that.

ESME

What do you mean?

NINA

I just mean when he was drinking coffee, he was practically breathing it in. You, being a coffee drinker - it must have made it hard for him to resist.

ESME

He never told me he drank coffee. He told me he only enjoyed tea.

(CONTINUED)

NINA

Well, that's weird. This was always one of his favorite places from back home and they definitely don't serve tea here. Even the coffee they serve here you could barely call coffee. But, every Thursday after school, he would head here by himself and just read or do...whatever he did.

There is a long pause while ESME gathers her thoughts.

ESME

Listen, Nina, I- I really wanted to say how sorry I am for everything that happened. Jack- I mean it has to be difficult. You have known him for your whole life and I know only how *I* feel. I can only imagine how you and your parents feel. The whole situation turned out very odd. The plans to come here- the time of year. All I'm trying to say is that I'm very sorry. Very very sorry.

NINA stares blankly at ESME for a moment, then cocks her head back and gives a suspicious-looking smirk.

NINA

Are you trying to say that it was you?

ESME

No!

NINA

You did it?

ESME

I- No! I- Nina! You know, I-

NINA

Relax, I'm just having a little fun with you. The humor didn't translate?

ESME looks shocked and tries to hide the disappointment on her face. She wishes Nina would have taken the situation more seriously.

(CONTINUED)

NINA

Look, first of all, you need to stop apologizing. What did you do? You were like the ultimate girlfriend slash fiancée. You're so sweet and kind and pretty and you always look like you walked off the runway from fashion week. I mean look at you! You spent - from what I understand - almost every day of the past two years with Jack. That's unprecedented. My parents? You think he could stand that? He really struggled with people. I don't know the whole story, but growing up here wasn't easy for him. You? You made him happy. Somehow he could handle you. It's like you gave him some kind of gift. Instead of saying sorry so much, you should say "you're welcome". You don't owe anyone sorries! You're in it with the rest of us. You know? So, seriously, Esme. You're fine. Enjoy being here. Oh, and thank you!

ESME soaks in NINA'S words and stares blankly into her coffee. She is looking anywhere else she can in an attempt to digest what she just heard.

ESME

I see what you're saying... What do you mean he didn't like people?

NINA

(Stern and firmly)

Thank you Esme.

ESME

You're welcome.

NINA

Good. Now what about people? Oh right. Jack was never big on socializing. But you knew that! I mean, he seemed to be perfectly sociable with you, but growing up I think he was a bit more withdrawn. That's all.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Strange... He was very social when I knew him.

NINA

Weird. Maybe it was a, "when in France" thing? Speaking of, what do you think of our humble abode?

ESME

It's nice... I'm not sure I should have booked such a long trip, but it's nice to see Jack's home, his childhood.

NINA

Awww. You just got here. You might as well make the most of it.

ESME

Nina, I feel like it would be good for me, while I am here to go to some more of Jack's favorite places. I'm hoping you would be open to maybe showing me around a bit more during my stay.

NINA

Oh sure! Hell, I'd love to. It's not like I ever have a jam-packed schedule back home anyways. Frankly, I'm excited at the opportunity to leave the house. Yeah, there's a few places I was thinking of: the church, winter's grove, the-

As NINA is talking, a bohemian-looking gentleman makes his way over to her, pushing his curly locks out of his face as he walks.

JERRY

Nina? Is that you? Hello! What are you doing here? It has been too long since I've last heard from you.

NINA

(slightly annoyed)

Hi Jerry! How are things?

(CONTINUED)

JERRY

Pretty good. I'm the cafe owner here. I see you're looking amazing. You look like you've barely aged since High School - maybe only a few years or so.

NINA

Really? Maybe that's because it's only been about that long.

JERRY

And who do we have here? My oh my aren't you enchanting!

ESME

Hello, it is nice to meet you. I'm Esme.

JERRY

"Esme"? Wow, what a beautiful name for a beautiful girl. And may I say your accent is absolutely mesmerizing.

NINA

Yeah... Jerry, this is Esme - my brother's *fiancee*.

JERRY

Oh, sorry about that. I didn't see your ring. Jack scored you? (*disbelief*) Damn, that bastard! How is he doing?

NINA

He died. About three weeks ago.

JERRY freezes up. All of his levity comes crashing down and now every possible response going through his head goes through a series of approvals. After a moment of thawing, he attempts to mend the situation.

JERRY

Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I don't even know what to say. I- I just. I. Don't worry about the bill. It's on the house.

JERRY exits without even the hope for eye contact with the girls. NINA casually tries to re-engage ESME in conversation.

(CONTINUED)

NINA

So...

ESME

How do you do that? How are you able to act so normal in spite of what has happened?

NINA'S smile fades. The gravity of the situation, something which she consistently shrugged off, had finally been brought to light right in front of her. Her face bore great pain.

NINA

Everyone grieves differently.

The girls leave the coffee shop and proceed on to a small clothing shop.

END SCENE

8

SCENE 5: INT. CLOTHING STORE - EVENING.

8

NINA and ESME begin trying on different clothes.

NINA

Oddly enough, the only dress I have here is black and, OF COURSE, my mother refuses to let us wear black dresses to the funeral. I mean I appreciate her willingness to go against the grain, but she's really complicating my wardrobe plans.

ESME

I know what you mean. I brought three different dresses, but each one is black as night. All the dresses that I own for work, events, parties - they're all black! My biggest challenge is finding a color.

NINA

Let me see what you've got. Yellow is definitely a bold option. I think it might send the wrong message though. Even for the Christmas service.

ESME

The what?

(CONTINUED)

NINA

The Christmas service? The annual church service we get dragged to? You never had to do this as a kid? Lucky.

ESME

I've only been to church maybe twice in my life.

NINA

Well, if you're feeling gipped, your opportunity is coming up! I'm one of those christmas/easter churchgoers. It's like an hour and it makes my parents all giddy.

ESME

No, I definitely don't mind. This is definitely too much, but what do you think?

ESME comes out wearing a statement dress: bold red, elegant and complimentary to her body. NINA looks stunned.

NINA

Damn. You know, only a true lady can put on a bold red dress and make it look like they were the only one meant to wear it.

ESME is taken aback for a moment. She has heard those exact words before. She is transported back to her Paris apartment where her and JACK are getting ready for a party. He has his hands clasped over her eyes as he leads her down the stairs.

FADE OUT TO BLACK

9

INT. ESME'S APARTMENT IN PARIS - NIGHT.

9

JACK

Just a few more steps.

ESME

Jack, don't you think it's a bit soon to be getting each other gifts?

JACK removes his hands and ESME lays her eyes on a marvelous red dress, very similar to the one in the clothing store.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Wow, it looks lovely. How do you know that you have the right size?

JACK

I looked at all your tags. Anyway, you should try it on!

ESME

The color is certainly, very...bold.

JACK

I figured your wardrobe needed a little variety. I mean, don't get me wrong, I think you look marvelous in all the dark stuff. I just saw this and thought of you.

ESME

It's very attractive.

JACK

Hence why I thought of you, now put it on!

ESME sighs, but is happy to see JACK so enthusiastic about his gift. She puts it on and makes an entrance. JACK perks up at the sight of her and breaks into an uncontrollable grin.

ESME

What is it?

JACK

Only a true lady can put on a bold red dress and make it look like they were the only one meant to wear it.

ESME

(laughing)

What does that mean?

JACK

It's just something I say! I came up with it the moment I saw you. It means that you're a unique type of beauty. What do you think? Will you wear it?

ESME

Hmmmm.....

ESME returns to the present. She still hears the fading echoes of his request.

FADE BACK IN TO PRESENT DAY

JACK

(voice only)

Please.

ESME looks zoned out.

NINA

Hey, are you okay? You're zoning out on me here.

ESME

So sorry. I- what was that you said again?

NINA

Oh, the dress thing? That's just something my dad always said. It's like a family thing.. My mom used to have this kinda tacky red dress and whenever she would put it on, my father would put his arm around her shoulder and look right at us and say, "*Only a true lady can put on a bold red dress and make it look like they were the only one meant to wear it.*" But, to be honest, I don't even think he thought of that. I'm sure it's just some line from a movie that he's slowly ruined over time.

ESME

I like it. It's a very unique compliment. Very beautiful.

END SCENE

10

SCENE 6: INT. ELLAN HOUSEHOLD LIVING ROOM - NIGHT.

10

Back at home, it's dark and PAUL watches TV while Jan reads under a dimly lit lamp. He is attentively taking notes. He puts down his notepad, takes off his glasses and looks over at JAN.

(CONTINUED)

JAN

They've been gone since ten this morning.

PAUL

Huh, I suppose Nina is an expert in killing time.

JAN

Yeah, but don't worry. She texted me an hour ago. They're just catching a movie. (*she puts down her book*) Do you... do you think she's having a good time?

PAUL

Esme? As much of a good time as you can have with your deceased fiancé's family.

JAN

I know. It's just that it's her first time here, Paul. She should be exploring the culture, seeing things, meeting people.

PAUL

Culture? Here? Well if she wanted that then she shouldn't be out here in the middle of the damn country. She's here to be more than a tourist. Besides, if she wants a taste of "real" America, what better place to be?

JAN

Well, you're right about one thing: this way, she's going to get a real "family" experience.

PAUL

It's what she deserves. (*goes back to taking notes*) That's why we're dragging her to church tomorrow.

CUT TO BLACK

11 INT. ELLAN'S KITCHEN - MORNING

11

ESME wakes up hungover early in the morning. She stumbles downstairs to see PAUL and NINA arguing in a friendly manner. They pause to acknowledge her on her way to get some coffee. There's a knock on the door. They all look at one another for a moment before NINA takes responsibility and goes to see who it is, meanwhile NINA goes to greet PAUL.

PAUL

Some night you guys had last night?

ESME

Yes, Nina took me to this bar and introduced me to a few new drinking games. She won almost every one.

PAUL

Sounds like our Neens.

At the door, Nina seems to be happy to make conversation with Peter, Jack's best friend. She invites him in.

ESME AND PAUL

Peter!

They both go to embrace him.

PETER

Hey you guys! Good to see you. Paul, you're looking like you could still kick my ass! Esme, darling, it's been, what? Eleven months? I think the last time I saw you we were doing a "Thanksgiving in France" and we had to explain to you the importance of stuffing.

ESME

Yes, well I had to raise the stakes. First, Thanksgiving in France and now Christmas in America.

NINA

So Pete, what are you up to these days?

PETER

I just wanted to come by and wish you guys a very personal season's greetings. You really deserve it.

(CONTINUED)

PAUL

Aw Peter, you're too kind.

NINA

Say Pete, do you have any free time over the next few days? I know Esme wanted a cultural guide for her stay here - someone who really knows the town.

PETER

C'est vrai?

ESME

Oui. I mean only if you have the time. I would really appreciate it.

PETER

Of course! Considering how you many times you saved my ass when i came to visit? There was the time I tried to hit on your friend and, uh, ended up half naked after losing about 100 Euros in 12 minutes.

NINA

Pete?!

PETER

What? It all turned out okay! Esme covered my cab fare. Anyways Esme, I'll come get you this afternoon, say 3:30.

ESME

Sounds great. Thank you Peter.

NINA

Hey, don't think you get to hijack her. She's still mine in this town! Got it Pete?!

END SCENE

12

SCENE 7: INT. NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM - AFTERNOON.

12

Snow begins falling on the town again as ESME and PETER pull up to the natural history museum. Almost empty on a weekday, they stroll through the galleries of taxidermic animals.

(CONTINUED)

PETER

How you holding up?

ESME

Each day I feel like I miss more of him. I am starting to see the life he had here and it makes me feel strange. I'm lost here. I feel so uncomfortable.

PETER

Yeah, I can imagine. It must be weird having heard of these places, but never getting to visit.

ESME

Well, most of these places I haven't even heard of. That's the weird thing.

PETER

Oh yeah? He ever tell you about this museum?

ESME

Not once.

They stop in front of an arctic animal exhibition to take a rest. There is a stuffed Polar Bear in front of them.

PETER

Weird. He used to come here all the time. On weekends or rainy days, he would really try and be alone and one place he counted on for that was right here. No one was gonna think it was cool to go to the museum for an afternoon. There was something about these displays - moments of life frozen - that he really cherished. I think it slowed things down for him.

ESME

He always liked to look at things. He loved the art museums in Paris. One of the things he loved most was seeing people's reactions to the art and guessing what they would say about it. (she laughs) He used to play this game where he would point to a group of people and ask you to guess how someone might

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)

react to a piece of art. He would imitate them, stroking their chins, coming up with wild interpretations for the simplest pieces of crap.

PETER

Yeah, he had a knack for that subtly insulting humor. He managed to make it charming, though. It's funny because that side of him really didn't show here. I would have never guessed that man to look at a painting until I saw it with my own two eyes in France. I always knew him as my hockey buddy who laughed his ass off at Will Ferrell movies. He just didn't seem to care about stuff like this.

ESME

How did you find out this was one of his favorite places? He invited you?

PETER

Hardly. There was a week where we were both home from college that he had ignored me everyday. So, one day I saw his car and I decided to tail it for a bit. I saw him pull in here, I got out of the car, followed him in and saw him staring at this display. He looked very out of it. He didn't talk to me for like six minutes, but I just waited. When he finally started talking to me, he perked up almost instantly. Whatever state he was in, he was able to pull out of it pretty quickly. He started up a conversation and we kinda just left it at that. Ever since, he would be up front with me about when he was here.

ESME exchanges a droning stare with the bear in the display. Her eyes become fixated as her mind slowly fades away.

FADE OUT BACKGROUND

She is taken back to a train ride through the French countryside. A year and a half ago, three of their friends joined them on a journey to go see ESME'S family for her birthday.

13

INT. TRAIN - MORNING.

13

CAPUCINE

Moi? An elephant!

All of them laugh.

ESME

Why?

CAPUCINE

Because, elephants are very smart creatures. They are, what is the word, dexterous? They never forget and are kind to their family. Plus, they are such beautiful creatures, so naturally.

ESME

Except one problem: don't elephants have great memories? You can't remember where you woke up this morning.

They all giggle.

CAPUCINE

Okay Esme, what about you? Which is your animal?

ESME

Me? I would have to say a fox. Because - wait! Because, they are cunning, driven, sneaky and can be intimidating to people from afar.

CAPUCINE

Hmm. I'm thinking you're more like a sloth. You make sure to get everything done - but only after one hundred years

ESME

How sweet you are. I just happen to take time to make sure that everything that I do is absolutely per-

(CONTINUED)

JACK

(emphasizing her last word)
Perfect! The worst part is: she's like a sloth with a full schedule. So by the time she gets everything done, months have gone by.

ESME

It's not as if you are any better.

JACK

Oh, I'm definitely not. I'm like a limbless puppy. I'm just squirming around hoping that I'm cute enough that someone will pick me up, feel sorry for me and take care of me.

They all laugh.

CAPUCINE

Oh, please. You're in a very lucky situation. You have a job in one of the most beautiful cities in one of the most beautiful countries of the world. You're no puppy. She may think you're cute though.

JACK

Aww. I know I'm blessed.

ESME

What is your animal, Jack?
Seriously. A hyena?

JACK

Hmmm.... Probably a polar bear?

Esme looks surprised. Jack forces a grin.

CAPUCINE

A polar bear? Is it because you feel like you're going extinct? Or you think you have a cold heart?

They giggle again, this time without JACK. ESME returns to the display in front of her.

FADE INTO MUSEUM

She notices the bear in front of her, so lonely and cold. She remembers a warm and happy JACK. She hears his words echo.

(CONTINUED)

JACK
 (voice only)
Perhaps a bit of both.

His words feel more poignant now. PETER turns to her.

PETER
 You alright?

ESME
 Can we stay here a little while
 longer?

PETER
 Of course.

Meanwhile, in town, NINA is doing some Christmas shopping at the local markets and talking on the phone.

14

EXT. TOWN STREETS - DUSK.

14

NINA
 (on the phone)
 Well Mom, I can't get everything today. You know how it is. It's like a Zoo out here. People everywhere putting off shopping until the last possible minute.... Yep. It's one of those things that really prevents people from living in the moment. People are so busy up until the last few days and then they spend those days shopping and running around and planning and in the process they end up missing the whole point of the experience. They're so busy trying to be with each other that they end up missing each other entirely. Ooh Peppermint Bark!

She stops at one of the candy stalls, grabs some peppermint bark and goes to purchase it.

It's a huge failure of society. No, I know, I know. I mean everyone loves to make a villain out of technology nowadays... I see where you're coming from.

JERRY, NINA'S old friend and coffee-shop owner sees her from afar and isn't sure how to react. She notices him and tries to avoid eye-contact, but he looks her right in the eyes and heads straight for her.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

NINA (cont'd)

Hold on Mom. I'll call you back in a second. Hey Jerry, what's up?

JERRY

Nina. I just wanted to apologize for the awkwardness of the other day. I know that was weird for you. And I mean, "weird for you" takes SOME effort. Regardless, what happened yesterday was rough. So, I'm sorry.

NINA

Hey, no worries. No need to feel bad about anything. I certainly don't.

NINA starts to move away.

JERRY

Hey wait! Nina, are you alright? You disappear for most of the year, come back and your brother is dead. That's more than any person should have to handle, especially this time of year. Yet, you act like everything is fine.

NINA

That's because I am fine Jerry. Everyone keeps asking me, "Nina, are you okay?" and then they're really disappointed when the answer is "yes". People keep wanting me to grieve in a VERY specific way and all you guys can GO TO HELL. No one - not ONE SINGLE PERSON knows what I've been through exactly. Everyone keeps coming up to me trying to tell their own sob stories as if that's some condolence. Hannah Markescky last week told me this little story about how "her dog died last week too". I mean that's downright insulting. Dammit! I'm not judging you on how weird you reacted yesterday, so please don't judge me.

JERRY

Okay. I'm sorry. Enjoy your peppermint bark.

(CONTINUED)

Frustrated and worn down by accusations that she is not properly accepting her brother's death, NINA strides away. She picks up her phone and begins to dial her mother again.

NINA

Yeah. Merry Christmas asshole.

END SCENE

15

SCENE 8: EXT. FRONT OF ELLAN HOUSEHOLD - DUSK.

15

ESME and PETER pull up to the house. She sighs deeply.

ESME

Thank you Peter. That was very informative.

PETER

Who knew a museum would be *informative*?

ESME

Yes. Well, will I see you again?

PETER

Oh yeah. I'm planning on stopping by on Christmas. So, you'll see me.

ESME opens the door to leave, but pauses.

ESME

This town is nice and he always spoke highly of his years here, as rare as that was. I now realize that I never really asked about it. *(She pauses)* Anyway, from what you said today, he didn't seem very... fond of everything here. Maybe I am mistaken.

PETER

No, you're right. I mean, he liked very specific parts of this town. Jack always had a special tendency to romanticize the past. And, the times he came back here from being away were the only times he really made it feel like home. Things got complicated as soon as we became teenagers. Your perspective on the world changes once hormones hit. Everyone noticed differences in him. But until Susan

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

PETER (cont'd)
came into the picture, we weren't
sure anything was off. So, I
wouldn't

ESME
Susan?

PETER
Susan Orłowski? Jack never
mentioned her.

PAUL walks out to the car to greet the two of them.

ESME
No. Who is she? Who is Susan?

PETER
If Jack didn't say anything then
it's definitely not-

PAUL
Hey! You kids alright? You're gonna
get snowed in here Pete.

PETER
Oh hey Mr. Ellan. We were just
talking.

ESME
Yes, I'll come inside in one
moment.

PAUL
Oh that's alright Pete. Are you
coming to church with us?

PETER
Tonight? Aw gee. I have a strict
"funerals and weddings" policy when
it comes to church, so I'm going to
have to pass tonight. Thanks
though.

PAUL
Well, come on inside then Esme.
We've got to go get ready. Service
starts in an hour and Saturday
nights tend to fill up.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Alright. See you later Peter. We
will be talking *very shortly*.

CUT TO EXT. CITY STREETS

16 EXT.UNNAMED CITY STREETS - NIGHT.

16

It's a rainy night out in a big city JACK and ESME are vacationing in. They are amongst a few who took the journey up to the observation deck tonight. The whole city glows like a precious metal ready to be welded into a masterpiece. The rain calms down enough for them to step outside.

JACK

Here, take my jacket.

ESME

What about you?

JACK

I'll tough it out... and complain
the whole time.

ESME

How American of you.

ESME looks out at the city.
Jack, this is gorgeous.

JACK

Well, one thing about cities like
this-

ESME

I meant the jacket.

They laugh.

JACK

Happy anniversary darling.

ESME

Same to you love. Did I tell you my
parents sent gifts?

JACK

Aw. They didn't have to do that. Is
it more of your mother's homemade
bread? Because that made me sick
last time. And for that matter
every time.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Well, they also sent us a card,
which my mother handmade.

JACK

Well, either way, the gesture is
very sweet. We will have to make it
out to visit them soon.

ESME

What about your parents Jack? When
do I get to meet them?

JACK

Soon. We'll fly them out here in a
bit. I just have to convince them
that Europe isn't snobby and
obnoxious.

ESME

Is that what they think?

JACK

Well, I think that's just about the
French.

ESME

Well, I want to meet your parents
Jack. It's been two years and I
still haven't even seen their
faces. Those two beautiful faces
that came to make this face.

JACK

They ended up making - Oh, hold on.
I'm getting a call. Speak of the
devil. It's my mom.

ESME

Oh, may I tell her hi?

JACK

Well, I don't think right now is
the best.

JACK starts to walk away.

ESME

Why? It's just "hi".

JACK

I know, but she's probably in a
rush today. It's one of those days.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Where are you going?

JACK

I'll be back.

ESME leans over the railing, looking out at the city below squeezing his jacket around her. She scans the city in a panoramic fashion, her thoughts drifting between the various activities which were going on down below: the dancing, the laughter, the kissing.

CLOSE UP DANCING, LAUGHTER AND KISSING.

She smiles as she imagines her and JACK doing all these things. He returns a moment later.

ESME

That was quick. I suppose she was in a rush.

JACK

We'll talk to her soon. I promise.
I talk to her all the time, as you can see.

JACK places his hands on her shoulders and shifts her body to face his - a shimmer in his eye and a grin developing on his face. She looks nonplussed.

Hey.

ESME

Yes?

She regains a sense of comfort and produces a grin to rival his. At this moment, she is returned to the present where she is sitting in a pew with PAUL, JAN and NINA, staring blankly as she is lost in thought. Only the echoes of his last exchange remains.

FADE OUT BACKGROUND

JACK

(voice only)

You're like heaven to me.

END SCENE

17

SCENE 9: INT. CHURCH - EVENING.

17

The PRIEST then calls for the mass to rise for the hymnals. ESME finally stirs as the family rises. She snaps out of her semi-lucid state and thinks back to her hidden disdain for religion. The thought escapes her as her eyes catch NINA'S, who at this point is making mocking gestures about her parents toward ESME.

After the service, everyone begins to lightly socialize. ESME awkwardly wanders around as various family members mingle with the congregation. She walks through the pews away from the rest of the crowd. Staring at the big cross overlooking the room, she feels an emptiness. She wonders what it would have been like to grow up in a community like this - centered around, what she felt was, a crazy belief. The PRIEST approaches her.

PRIEST

The Holy Spirit communicating with you?

ESME

Something like that. I definitely feel at peace.

PRIEST

Really? I feel anxious. But that's only at first. This time of year, the pews are packed and people are all trying to make sure they've repented so they don't feel guilty when they over-indulge on Christmas. After a while, you sort of become numb to it.

ESME

I certainly couldn't do it.

PRIEST

Jan told me about your relationship with Jack. He was a really important part of this place when he was growing up.

ESME

Hmmm... Well do forgive me sir. I definitely didn't help with his ecclesiastic diligence. My parents weren't churchgoers.

(CONTINUED)

PRIEST

(*changing subject*)

That's okay. (*pause*) You know, he used to sit in that pew, right there. I'm not sure if he was really moved by something divine, or just stuck in his mind, but he would come in when no one was here and just sit there. I never knew if it was the actual *church* or more the space. Either way, when he was here, he was at peace and I always found that endearing.

ESME

That's quite sweet. I have to admit, before the Ellan's took me here, I had only been to church a few times before. Both of which were sad experiences.

PRIEST

Well lucky for you, we pride ourselves on being a pretty "happy" church. It can really be a mixed bag with religion.

During their conversation, JAN is making her way through the crowd greeting every church mother she passes along the way. Many of them pass on condolences and happy holidays. But one woman does not. She interrupts her conversation with her friend, SHEILA.

TRACY

Jan? Jan Ellan?

JAN

Hi Tracy. Merry Christmas.

TRACY

Merry Christmas to you too Jan. I'm very sorry to hear about the passing of your son.

JAN

Thank y-

TRACY

-It's unfortunate that he was taken over by darkness.

(CONTINUED)

JAN

What? Tracy Niewliz-Bunnings- I- I would appreciate a Merry Christmas and then for you to let me on my way.

TRACY

Was he doing hard drugs? I hear meth will do that to you.

JAN

Are you out of your damn mind?!!

SHEILA

What is she talking about Jan?

TRACY

Oh, I'm sorry Sheila, I'm just trying to figure out why Jack killed himself.

The talking dies down into whispers. The eyes across the room begin intentionally diverting their attention from JAN. Her face begins to swell up as her body numbs. She looks around at her friends who appear confused at this accusation. They all try and communicate with her to no avail as she slowly leaves the church pushing her way through the crowd stoic and damaged. She would no longer let them see her wounds.

ESME and the PRIEST get lost amongst the mass. But after catching JAN'S exit, ESME forces her way to the front shouting after her. She makes her way next to SHEILA.

ESME

What the hell is going on? Why did she run off like that?

SHEILA

Oh, you didn't hear? Apparently her son killed himself.

ESME looks stunned for a moment and then shifts her attention towards the PRIEST who is trying to usher a group of people (including TRACY) out.

ESME

(looking catatonic)
A "happy church"?

CUT TO APARTMENT

Later that evening, the family and ESME all go out to dinner together. But ESME'S mind is caught on a past memory of JACK, who recounted to her one night in their apartment about the time she would meet his family.

18

SCENE 10: INT. ESME'S APARTMENT - NIGHT.

18

JACK

Finally! All moved in. Damn that took a while. Well, are you happy?

ESME

Hmmm... Well, I'm not entirely sure this dining table is big enough for us.

JACK

(pretend shouting to emphasize the distance of the table)
WHAT???

ESME

Oh, you can't hear me?

She pulls out her phone and dials him. He laughs and answers. He then moves onto the table, where he begins to arrange the furniture.

JACK

This will be perfect for hosting.

ESME

Yes, I definitely will need some guests.

JACK

Definitely. Perfect for when my family comes to visit.

ESME

(she pauses)
Oh your family is visiting? And when is this happening?

JACK

Oh, you didn't hear? They'll be in tomorrow. So, we'd better get this place in order.

ESME

Jack, I really would like to have dinner with your family sometime soon. Can you imagine it here, though? There is no space.

(CONTINUED)

JACK

Oh yeah. It'd be fine. I'd be sitting here - you'd of course be here. My parents would be sitting right here - so that the women face each other and the men face each other. Nina's supposed to sit here, but she's so stubborn, I know she would sit here. And that's how it would go.

ESME

Wait, how are you so sure that's where they would sit?

JACK

My family is painfully predictable. They are the definition of "creatures of habit". Every night we had the same arrangement and it became a strange tradition. There is something nice about their predictability: it's comforting. They have it exactly the same way they always do. They're simple people.

ESME

Don't say that about your family (*playfully*)! They are wonderful people - or at least, I am sure I will love them. Predictability is a virtue that you under appreciate.

JACK

I know something else for sure.

ESME

What's that?

JACK

They're gonna love you. Isn't that right mom? (*motioning toward the chair he designated to his mother*)

19

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT.

19

Stunned, ESME looks up to see JAN sitting in the exact same chair. PAUL, NINA and a relative (CATHY) all share a meal at a diner-type establishment. JAN just stares at her food. CATHY breaks the silence in a boisterous manner.

(CONTINUED)

CATHY

Crap service here or what? I've been waiting to order my cocktail for like ten freakin' minutes!

NINA

Well Aunt Cathy, we are eating at a place just about one level up from an iHop. They aren't exactly worried about waiting on you hand and foot.

CATHY

Well, I want a cocktail. How about you Esme? Two sidecars for the both of us. We're classy gals, right?

ESME

I'm actually feeling more of like a beer right now.

PAUL

Good thing too because I'm pretty sure beer is all they have here.

CATHY

Esme, how was Church?

ESME

Well, it had been a while since I last went.

CATHY

And?

PAUL

Cathy, please.

CATHY

What? I'm just curious? She could be a damn buddhist for all I really care. I'm just making conversation.

ESME

Well, it definitely gave me perspective.

NINA

Don't tell me you had an epiphany.

ESME

No, but I feel like I understand Jack a lot better because of it.

(CONTINUED)

Everyone is quiet.

ESME

You see, from the very moment we were together, I thought we had shared everything with each other. All of his past girlfriends, most embarrassing childhood moments... But when it came to religion and a few other things, he was quite silent. He didn't really mention his affiliation with the church or the fact that he went there to think. He mentioned that he went, of course, but in a very casual way. Looking back, I remember the few times he and I stepped into a church, he would get lost in his head. It was something I never really understood. I'm now feeling like I didn't understand a lot.

JAN

I know what you mean. I feel like having you with us has given me more insight as a mother and a mother-in-law.

Everyone is still pretty awkward except CATHY.

CATHY

Almost mother-in-law.

NINA turns her head slowly to give Cathy an intense look.

CATHY

What? Espy over here just pointed out how important it is to be clear. I was just following suit.

The WAITER comes over.

Excuse me, can we get two Sidecars?
Me and my Parisian friend.

WAITER

Are you serious?

CATHY

Two... Gin and Tonics?

WAITER

... I'll bring out a bottle of the house wine.

CUT TO JACK'S ROOM

20

SCENE 11: INT. JACK'S ROOM - NIGHT.

20

Back at the house, ESME sits with a book by the window. The rest of the house seems to be dark except for the lamp which she reads by. Snow falls slowly outside and she begins to drift into the memory of a winter drive with JACK. He's looking at her and laughing. They are playing cheesy music and singing along. In the middle of the memory, she hears a loud tap. This disorients her for a moment before she resumes. Right as JACK looks like he is about to converse with her, another loud tap. ESME is pulled out of the fantasy. She closes her book for a moment and again hears a tap. She looks out the window and sees PETER, who has been throwing pebbles at her. He waves and she goes around to open the door.

ESME

Peter! What are you doing?

PETER

Sneaking you out. We've got to take you to have a good old fashioned American time, like we did when we were teenagers.

ESME

Why are you...Why are you sweating? You look like you just had a race or something.

PETER

It's kind of thrilling! Sneaking you out undercover without the Ellan's knowing! Going out to hit the town the night before Christmas Eve! Wild late night adventures in America's heartland!

ESME

(checks clock)

It's only 9:07...

PETER

Yeah, but if there's anything I know about Jan and Paul, it's that they've pretty much been 84 years old my whole life and are always in bed for the fun stuff. Anyway, get a hat on! I'm going to get Nina.

PETER runs back outside.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Peter! Where are you going? Nina is just upstairs.

PETER

That would be no fun.

ESME gathers her hat. Meanwhile, PETER starts throwing pebbles at NINA'S window. Moments later ESME hears NINA'S window slam open.

NINA

PETER YOU ASSHOLE. WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT?

She hears NINA stomp down the stairs looking a little more put together than usual.

ESME

Should I do my make-up? What exactly are we doing?

NINA

Girl! You're fine. We are about to show you a piece of this place, *hell* - a piece of America, that you deserve to see! We're having a little throwback night.

ESME

What exactly is involved in throwback night?

NINA

Well, there's a few steps. First, sneak outta the house - just like real American teenagers do. Step two: get tossed. For that, I've got a flask of 151 whisky and the bitch flask here which has raspberry vodka.

NINA begins to lead ESME outside.

Step three: find something fun to do for under eight dollars. Step f-

The door to the house reopens. Immediately ESME runs behind the car and NINA follows close behind.

NINA

Well you knew *exactly* what to do there. Damn.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

This is exciting!

NINA

Well, we are adults. The thrill of getting in trouble is a bit dulled.

NINA stands up. She turns around and looks surprised.
Aunt Cathy?

CATHY

I heard whispers of 'getting tossed' and I was stirred out of my sleep. This neighborhood is dryer than the Sahara desert in the middle of July.

ESME

Do you want to come with us?

CATHY

Of course the french one is the polite one!

They all begin to drive downtown passing the flask between one another.

INT SHOT OF CAR.

NINA

Peter, I don't know if you've been formally introduced, but this is my dad's sister - Aunt Cathy.

PETER

Paul's sister, huh? You look way too young.

CATHY

Holy shit! He's good looking and a good liar. Yeah, there's quite a few years between Paul and I. Listen, thanks for letting me come along. (to *Esme*) Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, which means for the next few days, they decide to go full on dictator and limit the drinks.

ESME

Oh, they don't drink during Christmas?

(CONTINUED)

CATHY

Well, last year they cut me off
after a few frickin' glasses of
wine.

NINA motions to her 8.

They're freaking dictatorial, I
tell ya. I mean, you're French, you
know. Your family had to deal with
Hitler and shit.

PETER

Maybe I'll sneak you a flask
tomorrow Aunt Cathy.

CATHY

You would be a dear.

NINA

So, 'The Buffalo' first?

PETER

Oh yeah. Get excited Esme.

They all continue on to an outdoor skating rink where they pass a flask between one another. They all get hot dogs and skate around one another, playfully chasing after one another as they go. For once, ESME is entirely immersed in what she is doing. Thoughts of JACK are far away. They proceed to go bowling where they order another round and playfully compete against one another. They move on from bowling and hit up a couple of bars, where they run into friends from High School, who sneak them into their old gymnasium. There, they engage in games and challenge each others to a dance contest. From there, they move onto a holiday house party, where everyone is singing Christmas songs. Some of the partygoers mingle with ESME.

21 INT. HOUSE PARTY - MIDNIGHT.

21

PARTY GIRL

Well, I'm glad you at least got to
try a street hot dog.

ESME

Me too! I *actually* like it.

PARTY GUY

You are... Esme? (Pronounced
incorrectly) You're about up for
Karaoke! You got a song?

(CONTINUED)

ESME goes up and sings a bit of Wham's "Last Christmas", later on NINA and PETER join in. The party quiets down and ESME finds herself talking in a circle.

ESME

You see, from a young age, so many images of America: the statue of Liberty, Hollywood, the White House. And, it is intimidating in a way, it's so larger than life. We are hit with these images time and time again. And, to be honest, it takes away from the "awesome" quality they possess. But it's these places and these people, I've come to realize, that you can't really know unless you come here. Perhaps the same can be said of Paris. But, I have had friends go to New York or Los Angeles and talk about all of the tourist activities they do and then they seem to leave. But, being here and being so welcome here and a part of the conversation - it makes me feel like I really am part of America.

PARTY GIRL

That's so sweet!

DRUNK PARTYGOER

We're happy to have you!

SANTA PARTYGOER

Why didn't you come earlier?

ESME

To be honest, I think I was so wrapped up in my work. My life in Paris was so... consuming. I could hardly breathe.

PARTY GIRL

Yeah it sounds to me like you didn't really get to engage there much either.

ESME

I guess I didn't. I mean I had people I would see and do things with, but in the end, I was so focused on creating a stable life. I was living in the Paris bubble.

(CONTINUED)

PETER

I mean, I loved Paris, but I hear so many great things about the countryside. *That's* what I want to experience.

ESME

Yes, you wouldn't believe the simple things that can happen when you change your perspective. I wouldn't leave the city often, but when I did, it was a completely relieving experience.

The party dies down and they begin to gather their things.

SANTA PARTYGOER

Well, Santa makes priority deliveries to this area, so consider yourself lucky miss!

PARTY GIRL

Please come back and see us soon. I know we're pretty much like any other middle America town, but no matter what the others tell you - we have the best iHop.

CATHY

I can absolutely confirm that.

ESME

I will! You all have been so lovely. See you soon. (to the Santa) And I'll be seeing you tomorrow night!

SANTA PARTYGOER

That would be quite the Christmas for Santa!

They leave and hop in the car, seemingly done with their activities for the night.

NINA

One more stop Pete.

PETER

Neens. I am WAY tired.

NINA

Please Pete! Just a stop by Mount Rodin.

(CONTINUED)

PETER

I don't know. Aunt Cathy looks pretty tired.

CATHY

Are you joking me? I got gas in the tank that could take me to Canada and back. If your ass is kaput, then let me take the reigns.

PETER

Considering that I'm expecting new headphones from my parents tomorrow, I would prefer not to die at 2 am after leaving a Taco Bell parking lot. So, I'll be driving. To Mount Rodin we go!

They drive to an overlook of the city, where the glowing lights hypnotize the tired bunch. Seats reclined, they take the opportunity to pick ESME'S mind. They pass around a joint. It's 2 AM.

EXT. LS OF OVERLOOK FOLLOWED BY INT. SHOT OF CAR.

NINA

So, not to be judgey or anything like that.... but it sounds to me like you weren't a whole lot of until tonight.

ESME

(takes a drag) That's because none of the karaoke machines in Paris had Wham! As you might say, "Wham is my jam!"

PETER

Okay, that is a boldfaced lie. Wham is on pretty much every karaoke machine that exists - it's basically a default. And also, if I know Europeans, they eat that shit up.

Everyone chuckles.

ESME

It just takes time for me to open up to people. You all know. Nina, when we first went out, I do not know how you could stand me. I was so quiet. Thank God you all talk.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)

In fact, thank God you people never shut up. I might have never become comfortable otherwise. It's just the way I grew up. You have to grow into people.

CATHY

Did your family teach you that?

NINA

Aunt Cathy! You'll have to be careful with her Esme, Aunt Cathy is the family snoop.

CATHY

I prefer the term "personal affair archivist". I just like to be in the know within the family. I'm bouncing between boyfriends trying my hardest not to work for a living, this gossip is the crap that I live for!

ESME

Well, to answer your question, my parents were really strict, when they were around. They did everything they could to push us towards success. We were taught to be quiet around adults - that sort of thing. Underneath their organized lives, they were actually very unhappy. They never paid attention to one another. They didn't take time to work on their relationship.

CATHY

And they're still together?

ESME

Yes.

CATHY

Damn. That sucks. No bueno.

ESME

I think my parents were pretty successful in their programming, but I fight it everyday. Nights like these really help to remind me how fun casual conversation could

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)

be. Jack really helped with that. I could have tried harder to be that way with him.

NINA and PETER are snoring in the front seat. *Merde*. It looks like I won't have to worry about these two stealing my secrets.

CATHY

Oh, these dopes? They're a couple of grade A bustas, who couldn't hang if they were sitting in a harness. Don't mind them. (*drags from the blunt*) From what I heard, Jackie really loved you.

ESME

That's good to know. Are you joining the "bustas" in the front?

CATHY at this point is getting exhausted herself and has closed her eyes.

CATHY

No, just resting my eyes... Did you love him?

ESME

(after a brief moment to check with herself) Yes. I... did. I do.

CATHY

Sorry, I don't mean to pry honey, but as I told you - I'm in the business of knowing other's business. I knew all about you from Jackie way before I met you. Well, I guess not all about you. Anyways, everyone in the family has had to deal with it. Even Jackie himself.

ESME'S ears perk up for a moment.

ESME

Ah, so you know all of Jack's secrets too?

CATHY

Oh yeah.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Tell me, Cathy, did he ever mention a woman named Susan to you?

CATHY

Oh, Sue? Sure. Yeah, I knew Sue well. Not really a secret, was she? He never mentioned Sue to you? Actually, now that I think about it, I completely get why he never mentioned her to you.

ESME

So, you know her? I would really like to speak with her.

CATHY

Oh, I knew her. But, she moved away a while back. Don't really know much besides that. Jan knows... I think.

CATHY seems to slip into a deep sleep. ESME sits for a moment to contemplate the situation.

ESME

Cathy?... Do you also know about what happened to Jack?... Was it - did he-?

ESME waits patiently for a response. Just as CATHY opens her mouth to speak, a light flashes on the window. Everyone is startled. PETER rolls down his window to speak to the POLICE OFFICER outside.

OFFICER

Sorry folks, but you can't -
(*sniffing*) what's that smell? Is that what I think it is?

CATHY

Are you thinking that it's pot? Because then it is what you think it is.

The OFFICER looks appalled.

Oh, relax. Stuff's legal here. Besides, I have a card. I've got a chronic pain in my ass. In fact, I think it's flaring up right now.

(CONTINUED)

OFFICER

You folks just get home okay?
Consider it a Christmas gift.

They begin to drive away.

PETER

Tomorrow is freaking Christmas Eve.
Lord help us.

NINA

You're telling me! They're my
relatives. *All of them.* Brace
yourself Esme. Christmas is coming.

CU OF ESME.

CUT TO BLACK. END SCENE.

22

SCENE 12: INT. ELLAN HOUSEHOLD - CHRISTMAS EVE.

22

JAN is running around frantically trying to prepare the meals. Various relatives mingle with christmas cocktails. PETER and PAUL talk about golf clubs in the corner. JACK'S absence seems to be felt rather intensely. Aunts and uncles make their rounds to pat NINA, JAN and PAUL on the shoulder. NINA and PAUL are receptive, but JAN tries her best to ignore them all. ESME finds herself on a couch with several "senior" relatives, who remain relatively quiet. The TV in the background captures a few of them, but most of them remain focused on ESME.

RON

What was your name again?

CAROL

Ron! Please. Esme, dear, I'm sorry.
Ron seems to have forgotten how to
act around ladies.

RON

What? I just like to hear her say
it. Have you been liking it here?

ESME

Yeah, I've been getting to see
quite a bit.

RON

Yeah? Foreign exchange must be so
fun. In college, I had a roommate
from Athens. He didn't talk much.
Stayed in his room mostly and

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

RON (cont'd)
 whispered to himself in the middle
 of the night... Come to think of
 it, the man was a bit of an
 oddball. But, I mean - he was
 foreign! (*Carol smacks him*) What?
 (*to Esme*) You ever been to Greece?

ESME
 No. Sorry.

RON
 Really? It's so close! I mean all
 of Europe really is though.

ESME
 Well, from where I live to get to
 Athens is about the distance you
 are from New York City.

RON
 Oh, is that it?

ESME
 Have you been to New York?

RON
 No.

ESME goes to sit down for dinner and a slew of relatives
 come up and give her their condolences subtly. The table
 seems to stretch between two rooms and there are many faces
 she doesn't recognize. She scans each person as she goes
 from chair to chair. Eventually, she comes across JACK, who
 seems to be sitting right across from her. He leans in as if
 to tell her a secret.

23 INT. ELLAN DINING ROOM - NIGHT.

23

JACK
 You gotta hold hands! You know, for
 the prayer?

ESME looks completely stunned. She has no idea how to react-
 she stares blankly at him. After he motions her a second
 time, she realizes she's been staring at an uncle. She looks
 away embarrassed.

PAUL
 Alright. Any volunteers for the
 prayer? (silence) Nina?

(CONTINUED)

NINA

You don't want that.

PAUL

Uncle Dave?

JAN

I'd actually like to deliver the prayer tonight dear. If you don't mind? (surprised, he motions her to continue) Bless us O Lord for these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive and from thy bounty, Christ our Lord, Amen. Lord thank you for bringing me family from all over. It's rare at this house that we get to have so many family members here for Christmas... Christmas is your holiday Lord. It was the day you were brought into the world and this evening, Mother Mary took shelter in that small abandoned manger so very far away from here. You, their precious child Jesus, would not only bring them great joy, but joy to the world. This family - every single person at this table is a gift from you. And all of us...

JAN struggles to finish her sentence.

All of us...In the coming days will pay our respects....to Jack.

ESME opens her eyes to look at JAN'S bowed head. She notices that other family members are doing this too.

Jack, my beloved son has joined you dear Lord. He is having Christmas dinner with you and your glorious family this year. But, he hasn't left us without one parting gift: all the people at this table. We are happy to have family that we might not normally have. We are happy to have friends. We are especially happy to have the lovely Esme, who has been a wonderful guest and was a special woman in my son's eyes.

At this point, there are tears coming from JAN'S eyes.

We are truly blessed. Amen.

(CONTINUED)

She looks up and everyone in awe looks around uncomfortably at first. ESME makes strong eye contact with JAN who raises a glass to her. After which, everyone raises their glasses. The meal returns to normal. Chatter around the table quiets down when PAUL engages Esme from across the table.

PAUL

So, Esme, is this at all like the Christmases back home?

ESME

Perhaps there is a bit more wine.

Everyone laughs.

CATHY

Oh, hello! Sign me right up!

NINA

No, but I am curious. Is it chaotic like this?

ESME

Not really. It's always just my parents, my sister and I. Every other year my grandparents would come or something like that. I remember from a young age, we would travel up to Chamonix where my father had a chalet with several sleds and there was a big hill out back that laid right next to the house. We would always get really excited because for the two or three days my father was there, he banned all electronics, which meant we would all have to spend time with each other. My mother hated this, but she made due. My father also promised to never answer a work call while he was there, which was really special. Unusual, but special. When it came time for dinner, my mother would put on classical music and we would eat by candlelight. There was not a prayer unless my grandparents were there, but the candlelit dinner was supposed to take you back to a time when families did not have so much. There was not as much talking as there is here. Just a lot of space to think. Often we would discuss

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)

the music we were listening to or talk about the day we had. Occasionally my parents would share stories of childhood christmases. It was quite nice actually.

PAUL

That sounds really lovely. I think we should do that. Peter, wanna come with me to get another candle?

ESME

Oh, you don't have to-

JAN

No, I actually think it's a good idea.

They light another candle on the table and turn off the lights.

ESME

This is so strange. It's a good strange though.

NINA

Yeah? You feel like you're back in Chamonix?

ESME

A little bit, yeah.

PETER, though eating, looks as though he's been waiting to speak for a while.

PETER

Esme, it was around Christmas last year that I saw you, right?

ESME

Yes, you just missed all of this part actually.

RON

You were in France last year for Christmas?

PETER

No, I was actually here, but I went to see her and Jack right afterwards.

(CONTINUED)

LISA
Jack was in France last Christmas?

JAN
Yes, didn't I tell you Lisa?

LISA
Well, what did he think?

ESME
He...he had a good time. I think.

ESME retreats to her mind again after zoning out. She finds herself in the quiet Chamonix chalet where nothing lights the table but a few flickers of the candle. On her right sat JACK who, with a grin on his face, was exchanging in banter with MARIE and OLIVER, ESME'S parents. The snow falling outside the window at the Ellan's became the same snow falling on that cold Chamonix night.

CUT TO WS OF CHALET

24

INT. CHAMONIX CHALET - NIGHT.

24

ESME drops in on her father, OLIVER, in the middle of a story.

OLIVER
-and so my grandfather made his way down the stairs. He had the big red suit on and stuffed his belly with pillows. He comes through the living room and my sisters look at me, then they look back at him and say, "*Papi! Why have you become so fat?*". I thought they were insulting him! But his costume just didn't work.

JACK
Can't sneak anything past them, can you? Did you every try and get your girls, Oliver?

MARIE
Oh, dear Jack, do you know my husband? He would never wear such a suit.

OLIVER is opening another bottle of wine.

(CONTINUED)

OLIVER

That was the way it was back then.
I was tied up in my work when the
children were young. More wine?

JACK

No thanks.

MARIE

Oh, please, Oliver *s'il vous plait*.
Il doit boire ce vin. C'est un
classique.

OLIVER pours them a glass.

OLIVER

What about this? This must be
different, no? Our family
Christmas?

JACK

Oh, this? No, I kind of like it.

OLIVER

But, I must imagine that your
family does not have wine by
candlelight? Or listen to
Rachmaninoff?

JACK

No. It's not that different. I
mean, we do a boring basic American
Christmas.

OLIVER

Ah. But, this interests me! I have
not experienced anything outside
this. So I would not even know what
that might involve.

JACK

I think it's really what you'd
expect. I'd rather hear more
stories of your childhood.

MARIE

Jack, come on. You have been so
quiet about your family. I will not
let you get away with giving us
another vague answer and let my
husband do any more talking.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

I am curious too.

OLIVER

Jack. I am trying to exercise my language skills. You are helping me so much! Without you, I could not *pratiquer mon anglais!*

JACK sits for a moment with a grin on his face, his eyes unable to make contact with anyone else.

JACK

Well, there's usually a few people. My immediate family and maybe my grandparents. But, we also have music playing and dancing. We're always moving. Maybe we're playing games or we're cleaning up, watching a movie, but it's activity after activity. We might talk about current events or a few things that happened in the last week. Even though it's just a few of us there, it's chaotic. My mom and sister are talkers and with the music and all the moving around my family does, it can be hard to keep up. We play a game at the end to wind down. But it's always us together. No matter what we're doing. It's us. It's nothing interesting. Could be the story of anyone's Christmas.

ESME

To me, that is a very different story.

OLIVER

Finally! We get some details.

MARIE

Is there snow where you live?

JACK

Sometimes.

OLIVER

Are there *libations*?

JACK

Not *this* much, but some.

(CONTINUED)

OLIVER

Good. We can keep the tradition alive. It is settled: next year, we will be at yours for Christmas.

ESME

I agree.

OLIVER

You see, your mother has been begging me to take her on vacation for the holiday. I told her, IF we were to go - which I am extremely against - but IF we were, there would have to be snow and drinks.

JACK

Well, we'll definitely see. You're more than welcome, of course.

ESME senses his hesitation.

ESME

What? Do you think we might cause a stir?

JACK

Well, maybe a bit. I just don't know that you would entirely enjoy it. It's a bit different.

OLIVER

Well, we will get to see, won't we? For now, we are happy to have you here.

JACK

Aw, thanks. I'm very happy to be here. You guys have been amazing hosts. Anyone interested in a round of cards, now that we've finished eating?

MARIE

No, thank you Jack. We have to get ready for tomorrow.

ESME

I'll play with you.

JACK

No, that's alright. We should just go to bed.

(CONTINUED)

ESME begins to return to the table. She hears JACK'S words echo.

FADE TO BLACK. END SCENE.

25

SCENE 13: INT. ELLAN'S KITCHEN - NIGHT.

25

Later on, after the festivities die down, we find a very determined JAN cleaning every last spot off of the dishes. Patsy Cline's "*I Fall to Pieces*" is playing. The light in the kitchen seems to be the last remaining light in the house. ESME approaches.

ESME

Can I help you with that?

JAN

Oh, no thank you dear. Are you having trouble sleeping?

ESME

No, it's only 10:15. I was just reading upstairs and I thought I might offer my help.

JAN

Thank you, but I'm almost finished. It's basically therapy for me anyways.

ESME

You wouldn't want to play a game with Nina and I, would you? She found an old game of Sorry! with most of the pieces still remaining...

JAN

You really knew my son, didn't you? He always wanted to play a game after Christmas dinner. *(she sighs)* We never got around to playing with him. I'm just not much of a night owl, I'm afraid. But, you girls have fun.

ESME

That was a beautiful prayer you said earlier.

JAN

Thank you dear. You know, what was said at the church - they... those women don't understand.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Of course.

JAN

Anyway, I'm very happy to spend this Merry Christmas with a strong, young woman like yourself. I wish I was as resilient at your age. (*bows her head*) Anyway...

As JAN goes over to turn off the stereo, ESME stops her.

CU OF JAN STUNNED.

ESME

Mrs. Ellan...

JAN

Yes dear?

ESME

Can I ask you something about your son?

JAN looks stunned. A look of concern flushes over her face.

JAN

I suppose. What is it?

ESME

Do you know someone by the name of Sue or Susan who was connected to Jack?

JAN stays silent and stares blankly for a moment. She collects her breath.

JAN

Yes. I knew Sue. We all knew her.

ESME

Mrs. Ellan. I hope you don't think me overstepping my bounds, but I would like to see her.

JAN

Hmmm. Well, she doesn't live around here anymo-

ESME

And I know you know where she is now.

(CONTINUED)

JAN
 I haven't spoken to Sue in years.
 I'm sorry that you had to hear
 about her, but I can't help you
 darling.

ESME senses her hostility on the subject and retracts a bit.

ESME
 I need to speak with her, she-

JAN
 (shouting)
 -I DON'T KNOW WHERE SHE IS. (*She
 takes a moment to calm down*)
 Anyway, even if you found her, she
 couldn't help you dear. She
 couldn't help any of us.

JAN goes back to cleaning the same spot on the plate. She
 avoids eye contact with ESME.

ESME
 (*With much chagrin, she forces
 a polite smile*)
 I understand. I'm going upstairs
 now. Goodnight.

JAN
 (*Without looking up*)
 Joyeaux Noël Esme.

ESME
 Joyeaux Noël.

26 INT. NINA'S ROOM - MIDNIGHT.

26

Back upstairs, PETER and NINA are sprawled out on the floor
 of NINA'S room in the midst of a Sorry! game with bottles of
 wine all over the place. CATHY is snoring in the corner with
 a bottle of wine in her hand.

PETER
 Well? Is she playing?

ESME
 No, she's actually going to bed.

NINA
 I could of guessed. Aunt Cathy, if
 you want, you can join in now.

(CONTINUED)

CATHY

Er- hrm. Wha? Oh honey, I've got to go straight to bed and pray to Santa to bring me some Advil for Christmas.

PETER

I'll give you a hand Aunt Cathy.

CATHY

Better watch out. It always starts as just a hand.

ESME takes advantage of her moment alone with NINA.

ESME

Nina, do your parents have an office or somewhere where they keep documents or letters? I am going to write some thank you notes and I don't want to have to go to the store for supplies.

NINA

Yeah. We're not *supposed* to go in there because they keep presents and shit in there, but if you go now, I'm not gonna rat you out. Last door on the left.

ESME quietly creaks open the door to the office. The room itself has an essence of regality to it. Huge portraits of family members from the past, collections of family jewelry and a religious shrine covered in very precious Christian decorations. She notices letters everywhere and she begins to sift through them. Quickly, she scans each letter one by one, letting the names bounce off her lips as she grasps in hopes of finding a "Sue" or "Susan".

One of the letters falls to the floor. She lunges down to check the name, but on the floor, she finds a small chest with a lock labeled "Jack's Final Things". Immediately, she drops the letter and shakes the chest. She fidgets with the lock for a few moments before putting it down. She gets back up to look for the key, spreading papers all over the place. She hears noises downstairs and begins looking through a folder of letters. She finds one that says "S.O." inside is a collection of letters from SUSAN. She sifts through dates until she finds the most recent one: it was dated a week ago.

She begins to look at the letter, which begins with condolences for their lost son. Hearing footsteps up the

(CONTINUED)

stairs, she quickly writes down the address in her phone: some place called Winter's Grove.

She starts to make her way out, but freezes on a letter by the door. It looks like this letter is in progress. She examines closely: it seems to be from JAN to relatives discussing ESME. ESME can't help but indulge. The letter reads "Esme has proven herself a sweet and intelligent woman, though her sense of style and her drinking habits could use some work." ESME rolls her eyes. "And sometimes, I can't understand her accent, so I just nod and say 'sure!'. That can get really annoying." ESME smirks.

The door opens and, panicked, ESME straightens the papers and turns around. It's NINA.

NINA

Hey, did you find what you needed?

ESME

(Esme reaches for some blank pieces of paper)

Yep.

NINA

Good because I was stalling my mom downstairs, but she's coming up any second now, so-

ESME

Of course.

They exit.

NINA

What was taking so long in there? Were you snooping on the Christmas gifts? Do you know what I'm getting?

ESME

No. Why? What do you want?

NINA

Fatherly approval too much to ask for? Permission to spend the summer in Belgium?

ESME

Oh, uh, no.

NINA

Okay, okay fine. Does what I'm
getting at least rhyme with boffee
brinder?

Back in her room, ESME is writing a letter to SUE. A knock
on her door.

PETER

Hello? Just seeing if you were up.
I'm heading out for the night and
I'll be with my own family
tomorrow. I just wanted to say
goodbye and an early Merry
Christmas.

ESME

Thank you Peter.

PETER

Good luck tomorrow! I'm sure it
will be much more relaxed.

ESME

I... I won't actually be there
tomorrow.

PETER

What? You're leaving on Christmas?
Where? Not back to France.

ESME

No, I am going to Winter's Grove.

PETER

What? Why? If you need an escape
from the Ellan's, come to my place,
don't go sightseeing by yourself.

ESME

(Speaking through a sigh)

I am going to find her.

PETER

(Taking a minute to think)

Sue? No, it's not- Don't drive all
the way out there on Christmas to -
She's probably going to be with her
family! It's Christmas.

ESME

I know. I have a letter for her and
it has to get to her by tomorrow. I

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)
 can't wait any longer. I will be
 there for a few days and I will
 come back just in time for the
 funeral.

PETER
 Wait, how are you getting there?
 Let me drive you.

ESME
 Nina is letting me borrow her car.
 I need to do this alone.

PETER
 Okay. (*long pause*) Be safe. It's
 supposed to snow tomorrow.

CU OF SHUTTING DOOR. CUT TO BLACK.

END SCENE.

27

SCENE 14: EXT. ELLAN HOUSE - MORNING.

27

Before the break of dawn the next morning, ESME prepares herself in the mirror. She quickly gathers her things and makes her way out the door. She enters NINA'S room and grabs the keys from a half-asleep NINA. She leaves a note on the door and a few gifts for the family under the tree. As she makes her way to the door, PAUL looks on from the steps in his morning robe and his coffee mug in hand. He sips loudly and she looks back at him. He holds up the newspaper and gives her a light smile and a nod of approval before she leaves.

In the car, ESME twists and winds deep into the mountains. Her mind is racing with thoughts of her time with JACK, while her eyes appear fixated on the endless white flurry that lies directly in front of her. The words "Winter's Grove" echo through her mind.

She remembers back to the time she first heard that name spoken.

ZOOM IN ON ESME FACE WITH VOICEOVER CONVO IN BACKGROUND.

JACK
 I've got a surprise for you.

ESME
 The last time you said that, you
 showed up naked in my bed.

(CONTINUED)

JACK
I guess I don't have a surprise for
you then.

ESME laughs.

RAPID CUT BETWEEN CAR AND STREET CONVERSATION.

In the flashbacks, ESME and JACK are walking down the street talking. ESME has her eyes frequently glued to her phone.

JACK
I'm taking us somewhere special on
New Years.

ESME
Taking me home finally?

JACK
No. I'm actually taking us to my
company party.

ESME
Ah. I hoped it would be to see your
family.

JACK
You're too busy to go to America.
Look at you right now! You're eyes
are glazed over after looking at
that screen.

She puts her phone in her pocket and looks at JACK
curiously.

ESME
So you want to go?

JACK
*(Getting into a relaxing
position)*
Well, I'd have to say this is
pretty nice.

ESME
No I mean back home.

JACK
Esme I-

ESME
No. You don't understand Jack. You
have your childhood that your can
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)
revisit. And me? My parents have moved us around our whole lives. We don't have that. If I could remember what it was like, If I could just have a place, like a happy place, you understand?

JACK
I actually know what you mean. I feel like everyone needs that place.

ESME
You have one back home?

She takes a sip of her drink. She seems to be fully invested in his every move. Work is far away to her.

JACK
Well, there's a place back home. It's deep in the mountains, far away from where my family lives; It's a really small town surrounded by forest. Something about being there, being so far away from everything I know brings me peace. I used to go there when I was feeling off - I'd drive hours to get there. When I was a kid, my family would take me there and everything seemed perfect. I don't know how to explain it, but I felt really understood there. You know?

ESME
I've never heard you talk about a place like that.

JACK
You've never asked.

ESME
What is it called?

JACK
Winter's Grove.

CUT TO BLACK. FADE IN TO CU OF WINTER'S GROVE SIGN.

ZOOM OUT

28 EXT. WINTER'S GROVE - MIDDAY.

28

ESME drives through the quiet town. No one is out on the streets, but she sees families inside having a merry Christmastime with one another. The town has a quaint, yet eerie feeling to it. She can't quite determine the cause of that feeling.

She pulls up to SUE'S address. With heavy steps, she slowly makes her way to the door, letter in-hand. She considers knocking, but after seeing the lights off, decides to walk away.

SUE opens up the door.

SUE

Hello?

CUT TO SUE'S HOUSE.

29 INT. SUE'S HOUSE - MIDDAY.

29

Inside SUE'S house, SUE gleefully prepares the space for a guest. ESME sits on a couch scanning every photo for a picture of JACK. SUE heads to her room while still trying to keep conversation alive.

SUE

Sorry about this! I normally wouldn't be just hanging around in my underwear, I didn't expect any guests today. Not that I mind, of course.

SUE goes to put on some more suitable clothes.

ESME

You're not spending today with your family?

SUE

(Pulling up her pants)

Oh, they passed away a while ago.

ESME

I'm so sorry.

SUE

No, it's not a big deal. My mom died of cancer seven years ago and my dad died in a car accident when I was fourteen. I never had any siblings and my closest cousin

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SUE (cont'd)
lives in Memphis, so the quiet
Christmas has become a bit of a
ritual.

ESME sits in an uncomfortable silence.
But, what about you? Are you okay?
To get lost in a storm like this is
really unfortunate, especially on
Christmas. Normally, I don't just
invite strangers into my house.
But, seeing as it's Christmas and
seeing how the weather has only
gotten progressively worse, I
couldn't leave you like that.

ESME
Well, I appreciate it.

SUE
Is that your car out front?

ESME
No, it was loaned to me by some
friends.

SUE
Sorry, it just looks familiar. (*she
brings in tea*) Well, you're welcome
to stay here the night. I know how
intimidating it can be to drive in
these conditions, especially when
you're headed all the way to...
Hockinson, was it?

ESME
Yes, thank you. And I will only
stay until I feel comfortable to
drive.

SUE
Well you won't be inconveniencing
me, if that's what you're worried
about. So if you don't mind me
asking, who are you visiting here
on Christmas exactly?

ESME
Oh, a while back before I got into
business, I worked as a nanny. The
family I'm going to see has a
summer home in Nice and I worked
for them for a few summers. Then,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)

earlier this year, they graciously extended the invitation to come visit them during the holidays. I was free and voila!

SUE

I can't believe they're making you drive all this way after that long flight from France...

ESME

I don't mind. (*smiling*) Have you ever been?

SUE

France? Um, no. I've always wanted to go, but life caught up with me. I had a french phase when I was a little girl, as many little girls do - I wanted nothing more than to go see the streets of Paris. But, my childhood was tumultuous and I just couldn't make it happen. Time slips away.

ESME

You should go. You would make a great impression, you're charming and well-spoken.

SUE

You're being too sweet.

ESME

You know anyone that's been?

SUE

Let's see... My mother went once. A few coworkers have gone... maybe an ex-boyfriend or two. But that's probably it. Everyone knows someone who has been though. What about you? Ever been to America? Probably somewhere more notable than Winter's Grove.

ESME

I've come to New York for business a few times, but no. It's really my first time here.

(CONTINUED)

SUE

I'm surprised! Your English is incredible. I'm sorry you had to come during such rotten weather, this area really is so lovely when you can see it.

ESME

So I've heard.

SUE

Anyway, don't feel like you have to keep me entertained. I'm just going to watch some Christmas specials on TV and you're welcome to join me. But if you want to read, I have a collection of books over there. The guest room is down the hall, so if you're tired, you can lie down for a bit. Oh, and you're probably feeling gross after being in the car for so many hours. If you want to shower, it's the door on the left before the bedroom.

ESME

Yes, I think I might.

SUE

And I'll lay out some fresh clothes for you in case you want to change.

ESME

Thank you.

SUE

Of course! Once you're out, we can have some dinner and maybe play a game.

ESME

No worries. Thanks again Sue.

SUE

No problem Dominique!

CUT TO ELLAN FAMILY. END SCENE.

30

SCENE 15: INT. ELLAN LIVING ROOM - DUSK.

30

Back at the Ellan house, all we see is NINA, staring longingly across from her mother, her lip quivering. There is still something not genuine about this moment.

CU OF NINA'S LIP

NINA

Sorry mom.

She breaks into a giggle.

ZOOM OUT

It turns out they are playing the game Sorry! JAN looks very unimpressed with the last move.

JAN

You can't do that! I knew this game was horrid...

NINA

Don't be a sore loser mom. It's a game. That's how you play. I captured your piece and now you have to go home.

JAN

This is why we don't play games. Because it's silly.

JAN sits in silence stewing over ESME'S absence.

NINA

Mom. (*she sighs*) She's coming back, I told you already.

JAN

I... I can't believe you let her go! Both of you, you just sat there as she drove off.

NINA

Sat there? I gave her my car. I was *active* in her leaving.

JAN

(*Noticeably mad*)

It is Christmas day. I won't sit around listening to-

(CONTINUED)

PAUL

Dammit Jan. Honestly? She's probably had enough of us already. Give the girl a break!

JAN

But she's out there all on her own...

NINA

She's also a full grown-ass woman who makes more money than this table combined.

JAN AND PAUL

Language!

31 INT. SUE'S KITCHEN - DUSK.

31

Back in Winter's Grove, ESME and SUE are in the midst of an intense game of Clue. Take-out Chinese boxes litter the table as well as a few pictures Sue was sharing. The women are looking intently at each other. Each has her eye on a prize.

SUE

Your roll, Mrs. White.

The girls laugh. At this point, the intensity is merely a rouse.

ESME

It must get so lonely here, no? You seem to be so far away from everything.

SUE

It must seem that way, right? I'm definitely a bit of a hermit. I've learned to cope with the lack of people. I see plenty of people at my job. What about you? Not to be presumptuous of course, but you seem a bit lonely... Especially considering it's Christmas.

ESME

I think it's just a french thing (*slides piece*) Ms. Scarlett.

SUE

I think you and I both know that's not true (*sips wine*).

(CONTINUED)

ESME

There was... a death in my family recently.

SUE

Oh, I'm so sorry. Someone close to you?

ESME

(Rolls dice and moves piece)
Yes...

SUE

Were you there when they passed?

ESME

No. There is still a lot I don't know. There is also a lot of people who probably do know things I don't. *(She mindlessly plays with pieces and does everything to avoid eye contact with Sue)* I'll figure it out soon, I'm sure of that.

SUE

That must be painful. You seem like you really miss him.

ESME

Well, Ms. Scarlett. How did you know it was a him?

SUE

I'm good at reading people. I wouldn't be in this position if I wasn't. Death is hard, sweetie. It's the ultimate deadline. But it's better to let go. The more you search for answers, the more pain you'll find. Give your heart time to heal.

ESME

(Noticeably irritated)
It was you.

SUE

Are you making an accusation?

ESME

All the evidence is here. All signs indicate only one answer... and it's right in front of me.

(CONTINUED)

The room quiets down to an unsettling stillness. The women stare at each other. ESME is flooded with memories of JACK and tying them to every subtle movement in her surroundings. She thinks of every time he's mentioned Winter's Grove, every phone call he's made. She begins to think about the possibility of his relationship with SUE. She thinks of them together and she begins to boil over. In some way, she feels like SUE is responsible for his death. SUE carefully looks back at her with her striking eyes, suspicious, yet engaged. SUE sips on her wine and gives a smirk as she gestures toward ESME.

SUE

You need a weapon, you know.

ESME

It's already here, right in front of me. Right here.

SUE

You know that - if you make an accusation and you're wrong, you lose? Are you prepared to make that leap?

ESME just stares into SUE'S eyes. She puts down the wine and leans in toward her.

SUE

You really think it's me, don't you? You've been hinting at it this whole time. Really? You've been blind to all other possibilities.

ESME reaches forward toward the confidential envelope of the game.

SUE

Then do it. Open it.

ESME opens the confidential envelope and without looking at the cards, pulls them out and lays them on the table. It turns out that none of the clues match the room her character is in and the culprit is Mr. Green.

SUE

Well, you lose. I had Ms. Scarlett the whole game and you never even bothered to ask.

ESME seems stunned at this point. She drops her hand and she also has one of the cards that was in her guess. She scoots her wine glass away and looks down at the table.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SUE (cont'd)
 No worries though. Don't be so gloomy about it, it's just a game after all.

ESME
(after a long beat)
 Jack Ellan. You knew him.

SUE
 I'm sorry you- *(She realizes what is going on and takes a moment to collect herself)* The french girl...
 You're not-

ESME shakes her head.

SUE
 You should come with me.

CUT TO NIGHT SKY. PAN DOWN

END SCENE.

32 SCENE 16: INT. LITTLE TOWN HOUSES - NIGHT.

32

MONTAGE SEQUENCE

Christmas night. Everyone is settling in for a quiet evening. PETER'S parents each embrace him a bit longer than they might have. They are grateful for their son. His mother looks him in the eyes and tells him she loves him. At the ELLAN'S, JAN sits by her bedside and prays while tears run down her face. CATHY awakens next to her giant empty wine glass gift and starts to clean up. She looks at a big picture of JACK hanging in the middle of the room.

CATHY
 I love ya, kid.

She continues on and blankets RON who's snoring loudly on the couch. NINA sits and looks through a small stack of books her parents gave her. She looks at her coffee grinder and smiles. PAUL knocks on her door and peeks in.

PAUL
 Hey darling.

NINA
 Hey Professor. What are you doing awake?

(CONTINUED)

PAUL

I just wanted to tell you how much
I love you.

NINA

Aw, dad! Come here.

He sits next to her and they hug each other tightly. He seems very emotional.

PAUL

I'm really proud of you, I don't
know that I've told you that. But,
I am. And, I think (*deep breath*),
that you should do the research
opportunity in Belgium this summer.

NINA

(Thank you dad. Love you too.)

They embrace.

ESME, caught again in a memory, thinks herself back to a Christmas party that she and JACK attended. Both of them, dressed for an amazing night out are with some friends at an apartment. JACK is trying to dance in front of ESME while talking to their friends.

33

INT. FRIEND'S CITY APARTMENT - NIGHT.

33

ROMAN

That is how you danced?

JACK

Oh yeah! And *your* dad had no idea
how to react. I about lost it!

CAPUCINE

Esme, did you join him?

ROMAN

Esme? Please! She is too stiff to
dance!

ESME

Too stiff? Roman, *est-tu aveugle?*
Connais moi?

ESME uncharacteristically begins dancing to a poppy-sounding song.

(CONTINUED)

JACK

There you go!

He joins her for a second. After a while, JACK retires to the balcony. He looks at his phone hopeful for a message and sighs. ESME, exhausted from dancing, comes outside to find him.

ESME

Well look at the party animal now?
Tired already?

JACK

Yeah, I'm just a little worn out.

ESME

What's wrong? You seem like you've
been off lately.

JACK

I'm fine. I just can't really be
here right now.

ESME

What?

JACK

I never got you a Christmas
present.

ESME

Oh, Jack. What is it? Are you
homesick?

JACK

No. I- I didn't get you a Christmas
present.

ESME

Neither did I. We agreed we
wouldn't get each other one!

JACK

Right. I was thinking (*he takes her
hands and looks her in the eye*),
what if I gave you something else?
Like took you on an adventure?

ESME

Sure! When?

(CONTINUED)

JACK

After the holiday, very beginning of next year. C'mon, it will be fun! We'll go somewhere wild and random. We can even stop back in America by next fall-

ESME

-wait, what? Next *fall*? Jack, I have to work. I can't go anywhere for more than a few days. I just started my own business. I don't have that kind of time.

JACK looks disappointed, but keeps a smile.

ESME

Hey, you have to work too, don't you?

JACK

Yeah.

ESME

I mean, I've been so busy with everything in the office, but you also seem like you've been busy too. I do want to go to America though. I want to meet the rest of your family. I'll have time later on next year - I think.

JACK

My contract is almost over Esme.

ESME

What? Already?

JACK

Yeah, my Visa has almost expired. I've been through just about every loophole I could to stay here. But, my time is almost up.

ESME

No, that can't be! I'll call my lawyer, he'll know-

JACK

It's okay Esme. I'm okay with it. There's many other places I've yet to go.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Why would you want to leave? We'll find something! And listen, I'm serious about the America trip.

JACK

I know.

ESME

That can be your gift for me. Next year we can go see your family together? Promise me.

JACK

I don't know that I can promise that Esme.

She holds him close and looks him in the eyes. They share a moment together. ROMAN pokes his head outside and gestures for them to come in.

He looks at her again and they kiss. They look at each other and smile again.

ESME

That was the Jack I was looking for!

JACK laughs.

You know that I love you, don't you?

They sit there silently as the smile on her face fades and the background fades. She finds herself in a room full of memories where SUE brought her. She breaks out of her momentary trance and examines her surroundings. She finds herself in a musty old room where the dust settled on the cabinets creates a layer of uninviting film that your fingers slide across. She looks at all the pictures throughout the room - many of them appear to be a young SUE with her parents. Trinkets and family heirlooms fill the shelves and important documents hang in glass frames on the back wall. The entire room has some kind of a medieval feel to it - full of ominous poignancy; an important history which might not ever be known.

FADE IN. END SCENE.

34

SCENE 17: INT. SUE'S ATTIC - NIGHT.

34

SUE dusts off a picture frame that she hands to ESME. It is a picture of JACK with his head in his palms looking distressed.

ESME

What's this?

SUE

That's Jack. He's about twenty in that picture. Hold on, I have a few more here.

SUE ushers ESME toward a collection of pictures sitting on a desk. Each picture is of JACK and each reveals a side of him that ESME is unfamiliar with. Most of them show him sad, torn down, disinterested, alone, etc. One picture even shows him with a tear streaming down his face. ESME looks stunned.

ESME

I...I don't understand.

SUE

I know.

ESME

*(she takes a deep breath,
while still examining the
pictures intently)*

You knew him very well.

SUE

Yes, personally and professionally. Here's probably the earliest picture of us together.

SUE holds out a picture of her and JACK together. He has long hair and is smiling with her.

ESME

I can't believe how long he has his hair.

SUE

Yep. We had just met a few days earlier and he was giving me a hard time about my favorite boy band of the moment.

ESME

You said professionally?

(CONTINUED)

SUE

Esme...Jack was severely depressed. He was riddled with depression for the better part of his adult life. That's how he and I met.

SUE looks at a picture of her young self. We met at a mental health clinic. I was twenty-two at the time and, as you might expect, losing so much of your family along with a few horrible people in your life does things to you. I was a girl in tatters. I wanted to live in any reality that wasn't this one. I took drugs and stayed out late - pretty much avoided responsibility at every turn. When I ended up at the clinic for the fourth time, I knew something might be wrong. But, one day there was this kid wandering the halls who was a few years younger than me and he came over and really wanted someone to talk to. He had been peeping his head into rooms to see if anyone else was awake enough to keep him company and play games with him. I wasn't really sleeping at all at that point in my life, so we talked! He seemed so happy that I assumed he wasn't even a patient there, I thought maybe he was visiting or something. We got along, you know? He would tell me all these conspiracy theories and how much he loved the show "Lost". It all seemed so odd to me, but he spoke with conviction and it was fun to see him so passionate. I showed him the art I would look at to help me cope with everything going on inside and he seemed to respond to that.

ESME

So, you two just started seeing each other after that?

SUE

(gives a light chuckle)

No. We were never- It was all very platonic... After we left the

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SUE (cont'd)

clinic, we ended up staying friends. He lived pretty close to me, so we would see each other now and then. He always wanted to go explore local urban legends or sneak out late at night (*she let's out a reminiscent sigh*). We kept our friendship going through the years. Anytime either of us ended up getting in trouble, we would lean on one another to get better. It was sweet. I remember the first time I ever saw this town was when he took me here. He had many fond memories of Winter's Grove from childhood. I loved it. I completely understood why. It was an escape from all the chaos of the world, all while still *living in the world*.

ESME

A livable part of reality?

SUE

Exactly. But the mind is a very difficult beast. You have to really try to tame it. I was never going to be enough.

ESME

But you seem quite composed right now. I don't understand.

SUE

Well that's because I tamed my beast. I used my career path to help others. I went to school and focused on helping people like me. I'm became a psychologist and tried to help as many people as possible. I worked to help Jack even though it was discouraged in my profession to work on your friends. He would call me whenever he felt bad or needed someone to talk to. But I could only help him so much.

ESME

But his family-

(CONTINUED)

SUE

You think Jan Ellan is going to understand why her son is sad? I tried to talk to her about it once and she didn't take it well, so I didn't bring it up with her or anyone else in the family ever again after that.

ESME looks noticeably stunned and has a tear streaming down her face. She can't look SUE in the eyes.

ESME

When did you last speak to him?

SUE

About a month ago. (*takes a beat*) When he told me he was leaving for France, he was at his nadir. But when he was transferred to the job, he was flooded with optimism. It was like he was a whole new person. He was convinced that things were going to be different. It was amazing to see him so chipper, but I never heard from him as much when he was away. The last conversation I had with him... we discussed you. He told me you two were getting married.

ESME

He told you about me?

SUE

Of course Esme. I believe he loved you. He was so excited when he met you. (*impersonating Jack*) *Sue! Sue! I've met this beautiful, ambitious, amazing girl who's really intelligent and I- I feel something with her!*

ESME

He was so different from any guy I had met at that point. I had no idea... I didn't know about any of this.

SUE

Of course you didn't. He didn't want anyone to know.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

I'm so sorry. You must think me a fool. I thought you-

SUE

No, I don't blame you. You did what any curious fiancée would.

ESME takes another minute to examine the photos laid in front of her.

What goes on inside the mind of a man might forever remain a mystery to us. Anyways, I'm heading to sleep soon. I have work tomorrow, but in the morning, I can take you through town a bit.

SUE exits and ESME remains motionless. She runs her finger across one picture of him and then breathes a big sigh of relief. As the night concludes, she sits with a relieved mind and a heavy heart.

35

EXT. SLEDDING HILL - MORNING.

35

The next morning, SUE and ESME drive through town on a quiet December morning. A few people scatter the streets and SUE keeps conversation light as she points out a few places in town. Eventually, they come to a clearing outside of town where they stop the car. In front of them is a large white hill set against an almost equally white sky. The hill has a few young children sledding, but is otherwise empty. They both look on.

LS OF HILL WITH SLED TRACKS. RACK FOCUS TO SIGN WITH POLAR BEAR SYMBOL ON IT AND THE WORDS "SAFE SLIDE DOWN".

SUE

This was his favorite spot in town - as a kid, I mean. This little hill. I guess he would come up here with his family and sled all the time. In recent years, he spent quite a bit of time just thinking here. I kind of like the remote sense of security I get here. It feels really honest and serene. It's almost supernatural. That's why I moved here a few years ago: I know how special this place is...

ESME

So will I see you again?

(CONTINUED)

SUE
Are you going to ever come back
here?

ESME
Never.

SUE
Then no.

ESME
But what about-

SUE
-I won't be attending the service
Esme. It's another part of my life.
Plus, I couldn't really say enough
about him. Though I spent many
years with Jack, I don't know if I
could say that even *I really ever*
knew him.

They head back to SUE'S house and ESME gathers her things.
They get together one more time in front to say goodbye.

ESME
Thank you... for everything.

SUE
Please. I'm the one who's honored
to meet you. You made Jack a lucky
man - I hope he told you that.

ESME
I'll give him your best.

SUE
Thanks. Oh and Esme? A bit of
unsolicited advice from someone who
normally charges people? You've got
a long drive ahead of you. It means
you don't have to spend the whole
trip thinking about this. Take a
breather - you deserve it.

ESME nods and she drives away.

LS OF CAR DISAPPEARING INTO THE DISTANCE

FADE TO BLACK.

The next morning at the Ellans - JAN, PAUL, NINA, CATHY, RON and CAROL gather around the breakfast table. JAN is attempting to makes crepes for breakfast but her anxiety is getting the best of her. Everyone else sits quietly at the table munching on the fruit and bacon laid out.

RON
Can we eat yet?

JAN
The food is not done, Ron. Please wait until the food is all ready.

NINA
What, are you trying to feed the whole State? Look at all the crêpes you've made! You have enough freaking food to open up a damn bakery!

EVERYONE
(*except NINA*)
Language!

CAROL
She's not wrong though. It is plenty of food.

NINA
Mom, is this about Esme?

RON
Who's Esme? (*mispronounced*)

JAN stops what she's doing, let's out a deep sigh.

CAROL
She left? Where did she go?

PAUL
She'll come back. She-

Just then, ESME descends the stairs into the kitchen. Everyone seems stunned except NINA.

ESME
Good morning. I hope I'm not interrupting anything.

CATHY

You were. We were talking about you! But you arrived as Jan's attempting to make french toast! *(Aunt Cathy takes a bite and looks visibly displeased)* You came just in time! We need you in there to fix this - make us some crêpes.

PAUL

Cathy, please.

JAN

Esme... I- I didn't know you were back.

NINA

I was going to tell you guys. She got back really late last night.

ESME

Yes. I hope I did not wake anyone.

JAN and ESME look at one another. ESME comes up to her with a smile and embraces her. JAN looks stunned. In her ears, ESME whispers to her.

ESME

(whispers)

You have a really wonderful son.

JAN

I know.

They separate from one another and, in that moment, JAN'S cold interior seems to have melted. She hands ESME the letter that JACK had written her for Christmas.

JAN

This was in a box of things that he left behind...Merry Christmas.

Everyone at the table revels in the warm moment.

CATHY

Were we supposed to get her something?

Everyone chuckles and returns to eating. Esme joins them and feels comfortable and quite convincingly so.

CUT TO FLORISTS

37

INT. FLORISTS - AFTERNOON.

37

Later that day, JAN and ESME stop at a florist's. They are looking for flowers for Jack's funeral. A woman places two distinctly different types of flowers in front of them. One of the arrangements features Hellebore, the other contains a collection of ornate, bright poinsettias. The women stare at both, dumbfounded by the stark juxtaposition in front of them.

JAN

(quietly)

Thank you for coming with me to look at flowers for the service tomorrow. I know it's last minute.

ESME

Of course. I am sorry that their options are limited.

JAN

Yeah. (to the cranky florist) Are you sure these are the only flower options you have left available?

FLORIST

Yes, unfortunately the holiday season does limit your options. Those two are the only ones we have left.... unless, of course, you want a wreath.

ESME gives the florist a snarky smirk.

ESME

At least there is significant difference between the two.

JAN

I think we should go with the poinsettias. They'll brighten the mood a bit, don't you think?

ESME

Actually, I think perhaps we should pick the other ones. (to the florist) These are which ones?

FLORIST

The Hellebores?

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Yes, the Hellebores. They feel appropriate.

JAN

Those? They seem so...purple. It is a funeral, but I just don't know!
(to florist) What do you think?

FLORIST

(under her breath) He's dead isn't he? (Esme glares at her) I don't know. Either would be perfect.

JAN

Listen, Esme, I was thinking that you might want to say something tomorrow at the service. Seeing as you are his fiancée and all.

ESME

I would be honored, Mrs. Ellan.

JAN

Please dear, call me Jan.

FLORIST

You know, the Hellebores are very in season now. They could help with your funeraly-vibe.

ESME

Why is that?

FLORIST

They have the ability to bloom in the middle of the winter. These ones are pretty rare and the color doesn't hurt.

JAN

Really? Do you not think the daisies?

ESME

The daisies are nice, but... I *still think* we should go with the Hellebores.

JAN

Okay, we'll take them.

CUT TO CHURCH

END SCENE

38

SCENE 19: INT. CHURCH - AFTERNOON.

38

Slow, somber music fills the room with a sense of longing. The orange afternoon light floods the church and reflects off the tears from the audience's eyes. Everyone has gathered here to celebrate the life of a fallen man. The priest commands center stage in the room and one by one, different family members approach the podium to speak about JACK. During this time, we see NINA, who has looked the saddest she has ever looked, watching the speakers as she disappears into her mind. Finally, PETER finishes reading the scripture for the service and invites ESME up to read. Slowly, she approaches the podium. No shaking hands, no deep breaths. The ESME we now see does not feel like she is surrounded by strangers any longer. She opens up a bible and reads.

ESME

*Jeremiah 17:9 says the heart is
deceitful above all things and
beyond cure. Who can understand it?*

I just found that last night. I
thought it was...fitting.

She pauses a moment before continuing. She closes her bible.

Jack Ellan. Jack Ellan had a powerful heart. I, like all of us here, was fortunate enough to have Jack as a part of my life. When I knew Jack, he was living in Paris, working hard and partying almost as hard. He was a fun, metropolitan young man with an almost aristocratic sensibility about him. He charmed me instantly and, even though his French was terrible and he insisted on watching football every Sunday, there was something unique about him. I never quite understood it..... I have been in America for a bit over a week now and it is much more different than I ever thought it would be. Growing up in Paris, you get these grandiose commercial representations of what this country is like. New York, Los Angeles - the media creates a horrendous facsimile of what life is like. It is, how you say a

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)

"bubble". A bubble of reality in which a manufactured narrative exists. Paris suffers from this plague as well. Of course, being the most visited city in the world, there are expectations built up about the way things operate. Most of it is a projection of experience and dreams dissolved into one another until they are indiscernible from one another.... Since I have come here, the experiences I have shared with each one of you have provided me a new perspective. This town, this family, these people are all very real. That is not to say that everything I have in Paris is not real, it's just...things move at a different pace. Things here are significantly different. After coming here myself, I can say: Jack was very lucky to have each one of you. His relatives come from all over to see him here.

CATHY and the rest of his Aunts and Uncles smile.
He has friends who have traveled from here all the way to Europe to see him.

PETER looks down.
He has parents, who worked hard and brought him up the best they could here.

PAUL and JAN begin to tremble.
And his sister, the sweet Nina. She has been his greatest asset here: a reliable confidant, a friend.

NINA lets tears slowly roll down her face as we see her collapse for the first time.

But. I did not know about all of this until I came here. I wouldn't know about any of this unless I came here. The Jack I knew was not a particularly mysterious man, but the Jack I knew was in Europe. He was a wonderfully optimistic man who was happy almost to a fault. But, I would have never known him

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ESME (cont'd)
 as well as I do now if it weren't
 for you all. I have grown to know
 Jack as a very complex man. He was
 as I have described him... but, he
 was also curious, troubled, sad and
 ultimately (*chokes up*) broken.

Silence.

He was a broken man. A man with a
 powerful heart which sutured
 together this complex gathering of
 individuals. A heart which was
 perhaps so powerful that - perhaps
 - no one could understand it. He
 knew this and he didn't like it. It
 distanced him.

ESME pauses again.

But, he was loved. And seeing all
 of you, knowing that he had this
 much love coming from your hearts
 gives me great peace. I loved him
 and whether he knew that or not, I
 wanted to spend the rest of my life
 with him. He had a unique heart.
 One which loved and desired to be
 understood. Let us allow his heart
 now to rest in peace.

She bows her head.

CUT TO BLACK. END SCENE.

39 SCENE 20: INT. WAKE RECEPTION - DAY.

39

FADE IN.

The next day downtown, everyone gathers for a party in an
 event space. The room is visibly brighter and the denouement
 has begun. The clothes are more casual and the interactions
 more light. Everyone seems to be having a generally pleasant
 time. Positive stories of times with JACK float from group
 to group. PETER approaches ESME.

PETER

Hey, you gave a great speech
 yesterday.

ESME

Thank you! It really has been a
 wonderful trip thanks to you.

(CONTINUED)

PETER

You're not leaving soon, are you?

ESME

I fly out New Years Eve.

PETER

What? That soon? You can't! When will I see you next?

ESME

I have work. I have to try and get back to business.

PETER looks forlorn. He wonders if this is the last time he will see her.

ESME

Come visit me in Paris again sometime. Then, I can get you drunk and make you do karaoke!

PETER

Of course. Don't forget to introduce me to a few of your single friends while I'm there.

ESME

Oh, I have a few girls who are *just* foolish enough for you Pete!

Elsewhere, NINA is talking to people at the party when JERRY shows up.

JERRY

Hey Nina, great party.

NINA

Hey Jerry, thanks!

JERRY

Just out of curiosity, how come you didn't do *this thing* yesterday?

NINA

Oh yeah, my mom didn't want it to be associated with the funeral since, you know, it's a bit more upbeat, so...

JERRY

Oh god. Does she know?

(CONTINUED)

NINA

Oh yeah, she and my dad are over there! They don't *really* care so long as it's not on the same day and what not. It's my mom, she's particular like that.

JERRY

Hey, have you ever heard of Coriander Willis?

NINA

No, what's that?

JERRY

It's this amazing tea and dessert store where they have these peppermint macarons that you get with this peppermint tea and it's delicious. You feel like you've been sucking on a pack of mints by the time you're done and breathing room temperature air feels like Antarctica, but it's good. I remember you having that Peppermint bark a while back.

NINA

Yeah, that sounds yum. It sounds really delicious. Maybe we should go sometime soon.

JERRY

As long as you promise we stay inside for about half an hour after we're done. That cold air will do a number on your breathing after all that peppermint.

They laugh. Meanwhile, Aunt CATHY comes and approaches ESME for her goodbye.

CATHY

That was one hell of a speech you gave yesterday.

ESME

I know. I saw you crying Aunt Cathy, it was really sweet.

CATHY

Yeah, yeah. (*yelling*) What the hell kind of a wake is this? Where is

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CATHY (cont'd)

the champagne? Why are they not playing Madonna? (*back to Esme*) Honestly, Jackie would have wanted us all to get sloshed. You and I know it's true.

ESME

Well, I don't know. I definitely don't think that Madonna would have been his first choice though.

CATHY

Yeah, that kid never had any taste, bless his soul. Anyways, I'm just here to say goodbye.

ESME

Ah, the libations run out and then so do you?

CATHY

Ah Mademoiselle, you've got me pegged! Damn, there is some truth to that.

ESME

I would have expected you to *at least* stay for New Years.

CATHY

Are you going to be here?

ESME

No, I fly back New Years Eve.

CATHY

Right, you see, classy broads like us, we have plans on New Years. We have to get out of this one-horse town and that's exactly why I have to leave tomorrow.

ESME

I've really enjoyed your company Cathy. I hope we can meet again soon.

CATHY

It's Aunt Cathy to you. And we will. I'll be hitting you up the next time I'm in France.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Which is?

CATHY

It's...looming on my calendar. I have to shift some dates around, socially important stuff, you know? But I can definitely say *very soon*.

They smile and hug. JAN walks over and raises her glass to ESME.

JAN

I have to applaud you.

ESME

Oh yeah? On what?

JAN

On your choice in flowers. The Hellebores went over fabulously. All the ladies from bible study came to compliment me on them.

ESME

I'm glad. I think in the end, they were a good choice. Jack would have been a "Hellebore" kind of guy.

JAN

I don't know. But, I know that you're definitely a Hellebore kind of girl.

JAN hands her a Hellebore and walks away. ESME smells the flower and smiles.

40

INT. ELLAN'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON.

40

Back home, ESME packs. Her time here is done. PAUL and NINA laugh outside the door. PAUL peeks his head inside.

PAUL

Hey you! All packed already, huh?

ESME

I know I don't leave for a few days, but it is coming up soon.

PAUL

Listen, I wanted to thank you personally.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

Me? Why?

PAUL

I think you really helped me with Nina.

ESME looks confused, but flattered.

I was always worried that if Nina left here, she would be like Jack.

ESME

That would be quite a twist. Those two are very different.

PAUL

Right? But, it was difficult for me to connect with my son. I will always love him, but our interests were very different. I mean, as a Professor, my interests are pretty specific, of course. And, I have to admit, connecting with my daughter hasn't been easy either. So, I worried that she would go abroad, disappear like him and become more like her brother.

ESME

Mr. Ellan, how can you not see? Nina is your child through and through. Her interest in academics, her desire to travel and the way she deals with her emotions. All you.

PAUL and ESME share a smile. She puts a hand on his shoulder.

PAUL

I think seeing you and hearing what you've had to say over the past few days has been really inspiring. You're a model woman Esme. Nina looks up to you. I think you've made me realize the importance of context in my relationship with my daughter. I can't entirely verbalize how, but I know that you helped.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

I understand Paul. Some things cannot be put into words, no matter how many books you've read or how much research you've done. Matters of the heart can be complex beyond realization.

ESME leaves and gets in the car with JERRY and NINA. They head out for one last big night on the town.

Over the next day or two, the sun comes out and the cold begins to thaw. All of the decorations are put away at the house. JAN enters ESME'S room and tightens the already clean sheets. The house seems a bit emptier. After examining the effects of a slightly emptier house, she comes downstairs to the living room where PAUL is working on some University papers. She watches him as he seems enthralled in his work. She smiles and enjoys being a passive observer, noting the way PAUL has adjusted considering the recent events. She feels comforted. She sits next to him and puts her hand on his. He looks over for a moment, comforted and the continues with his work, she opens up a book. It's early morning December 31st.

41 SCENE 21: INT. NINA'S CAR - MORNING.

41

Elsewhere, NINA and ESME drive towards the airport. During the drive, the two discuss their time together. They keep conversation light and talk about how they will be seeing each other again very soon. But, during this whole exchange, ESME is lost in her head. She holds the opened letter from JACK in her hand. A tear escapes underneath her sunglasses. She feels the cool air on the trail of her tears, but refuses to dry it with her hand. She opens the letter once again and we hear the sound of JACK'S voice echo over his actions.

MONTAGE SEQUENCE.

We hear the voiceover of JACK while ESME reads the letter in the car.

JACK

My darling Esme. If you are reading this letter, you know I'm undoubtedly a fraud...

We are now shown ESME reflecting on the last New Years with Jack: We are transported to the Tour Montparnasse near midnight, exactly one year ago. Jack leads Esme up to the top. He greets a few people on the way up, each who look confused by his greeting.

(CONTINUED)

JACK

I told you my coworkers are a bit strange.

They make their way up to the rooftop, where people are mingling. These images turn into flashes as ESME oscillates in and out of the present. She loses her grip on these moments.

JACK

I think if anyone deserves to know the truth, it's you. By now, you've realized that I never had the family I said I had.

She looks over at NINA, who seems to be focused on the road.

In a **third timeframe(3)**(outside of last New Years and the present), we now see a JACK, writing this letter, staring out the window from Winter's Grove.

JACK

I never had the job I told you about. In fact, most of my time there, I was struggling to get by.

Back in her **memory of last New Years(2)**, JACK and ESME laugh and dance on the rooftop as the lights of the city flood the background. They seem to be genuinely happy.

In the **present(1)**, ESME starts to skim through the letter as his admissions begin to tumble over one another.

JACK

I never met Banksy. I spent a lot of time in Church as a child. I never spent a summer in China. I never took a yacht on the Seine. I was a stranger to my family. I didn't graduate from a prestigious school. I never learned how to play guitar. I never was invited to Fashion week. My family never had any money....

As JACK'S droplets of information begin to collect into a puddle, ESME looks back on all the moments they had together, searching through the fondness to find the foreshadowing. And while glimpses of a different man pass through her memory, she struggles to find something significant.

In her memory of **last new years(2)**, they embrace on the rooftop and leave holding hands.

(CONTINUED)

ESME

What time is your train to the airport?

JACK

It leaves in about forty minutes.

ESME

We better hurry then!

She playfully drags him through the streets.

In the **third timeframe(3)**, where JACK is writing the letter, we see Jack sealing the letter to ESME and putting it in his briefcase next to other letters with family members and friend's names on it. He picks up the briefcase and leaves.

JACK

This letter you're receiving is different than the one's I am giving my family. I feel like you - more than anyone else - deserve to hear the truth.

In her **memory of last new years (2)**, JACK and ESME make their way to the Paris train station, quietly holding hands and exchanging looks with one another.

In the **third timeframe (3)**, JACK - alone - walks to a train station platform and sets his briefcase down. He checks his phone and sees a text from Esme which says "Cannot wait to meet your family! See you next month." He sighs.

You're more than I could have ever asked for. You were a dream to me, but a dream I never had.

Yours forever, Jack

We return to her memory **(2)** at the train station in Paris, where JACK steps onboard the train and kisses ESME. They look at each other longingly.

JACK

Come with me. Let's get out of here. Let's take this train to the last stop and keep going.

ESME laughs.

ESME

Oh, Jack. I think-

The train begins to signal its imminent departure. In the third scenario, the train announces it's arrival. We immediately cut back to her memory.

-I think we should get married.

JACK hesitates to smile. He takes a moment before he forces a reassuring nod.

JACK

Yeah.

The doors shut on him as the train begins to take off.

ESME

Yeah?

JACK looks at his feet in contemplation. Her smile fades. He looks back up at her and nods with an almost unnoticeably forced smile. As this train disappears into the tunnel, she watches and sighs.

In the third scenario **(3)**, he stands in the exact place she was in the Paris station, but in a station in America. He casually steps in front of the train as it passes through. We are left with two empty train platforms.

There is nothing but silence for a moment. When ESME comes back to the present **(1)**, she feels underneath her eye and notices the teardrop trail has already faded. She folds the letter in half and puts it amongst her other gifts and souvenirs. She looks at NINA, who smiles at her.

NINA

You know, when I'm in Belgium, I'll only be a hop, skip and a jump away from you. If you think you've escaped me, you're delusional.

ESME breaks into a soft smile.

ESME

Oh, I suppose you're going to stalk me then?

NINA

Um, hello? Who just showed you some freaking five-star level hospitality! I helped treat you damn well.

ESME

Probably knowing you would be able to call in this favor later!

NINA

Oh, ABSOLUTELY knowing I could call in this favor! We're going to go clubbing together. I'm going to be your ultimate night-out accessory. Best wing-woman you'll meet in your life right here!

ESME

I don't know. I think you have me to thank for Jerry!

NINA

Yeah *thanks*.

The girls chuckle. NINA pulls up curbside and helps ESME get her bags out.

NINA

It's too bad you're going to miss the New Years celebration, Peter's got a -

ESME interrupts her with a powerful, warm hug.
Are you going to be okay?

ESME takes her bags and starts to roll into the airport.

The song "*Turn to Stone*" by *ELO* begins as a non-diegetic song that will continue into the credits.

ESME

Yeah, I think so.

NINA

Happy New Years Esme.

With that final, confident affirmation, she rolls into the airport. With a new stride in her step, she boards her plane and stares out the window as she reflects on her time in the US. As she lands in Paris, everyone begins to count down to the New Year in French. After a convivial, "Bonne Annee" echoes through the airport, ESME exits the building and lets the cool air welcome her back as she looks confidently towards the future. The whole sequence lasts maybe 15 seconds. She lets out a sigh of relief. The screen turns black.

ROLL CREDITS

THE END