

ORIGIN

Written by

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Inspired by Isabel Wilkerson's CASTE

INT/EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - NIGHT

We glide above a city on the edge of sleep. Amidst the treetops, a streetlamp invades the darkness. We drop through the lace of branches to land at a simple convenience store.

A fresh-faced TEENAGE BOY strolls by. He's Black with close-cropped hair and a bright smile. He flashes it while talking on a cell to his GIRLFRIEND. They chat about nothing, really.

TEENAGE BOY

(laughing)

I know you wanna say it. Go 'head.

GIRLFRIEND (O.S.)

(giggling)

I ain't gotta say it.

TEENAGE BOY

But you wanna. I know. Go 'head.

GIRLFRIEND

I told you so.

TEENAGE BOY

Always with the 'I told you so.'

You did. You right. This time.

He enters the store with a grin as she banters back.

CUT TO: Handing the CLERK a five-dollar bill, he gathers his change, along with a watermelon iced tea and bag of Skittles.

Before he exits the store, he notices DRIZZLE outside. He puts his hoodie up, heading into the night. We watch him until he disappears into the darkness. A title appears:

ORIGIN

EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

The radio is tuned to NPR as Isabel balances a PINK BAKERY BOX on her lap in the car. Next to her is BRETT HAMILTON, white, handsome and attentive. He pulls into the driveway of a well-loved home.

The curtains of the house are closed. A hint of worry on both of their faces.

ISABEL

Not up yet.

BRETT

Later than last week.

They exit the car. Brett heads to the curb to pull in the trash bins. Isabel goes to the front door and uses her key.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Isabel makes her way through the place by heart. In the kitchen, she places the bakery box on the counter and starts a pot of coffee. In the laundry room, she unloads the dryer.

Finally, she comes to her intended destination with a basket of clothes under her arm. She listens at the door, then taps lightly with her fingertips.

ISABEL

Afternoon... Mama?

No answer. She opens the door, then respectfully peeks in. An older woman, RUBY WILKERSON, is asleep. Maybe.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Are you really sleeping or kinda?

RUBY

(beat)

Kinda.

Isabel nods knowingly, then sits on the bed with the laundry. Ruby turns over. A beauty in her early 80s. Sleepy, but spry.

RUBY (CONT'D)

Sweetie with you?

ISABEL

He's bringing the trash round back.

RUBY

Ah, yeah. Garbage day. Everything in its right place.

(regarding the laundry)

He saw these bras like this?

ISABEL

No, ma'am. Of course not.

Ruby struggles to sit up and turn. Isabel helps her by straightening her paralyzed legs, propping a pillow.

RUBY

Where you off to this time?

ISABEL
Birmingham tomorrow.

RUBY
England or Alabama?

ISABEL
Alabama. A quick turnaround trip.

RUBY
Can't keep track. Stay careful.

They fold the clothes. Inside the basket are ISABEL'S KEYS.
Ruby hands them to her without a second thought.

ISABEL
Thanks. After this, I'm taking it
easy on work trips for a while.

RUBY
I think that's silly.

ISABEL
I know you do.

RUBY
What'll your book people say? I
don't want them to let you go.

ISABEL
They're not letting me go, Mama.

RUBY
You don't know that. All you
control is you. Those folks'll do
what they want, how they want.

ISABEL
I've been on tour for ten months.
It's okay to take a break.

RUBY
You don't have to though.

ISABEL
I want to. I want to control my
calendar, my time. I want to.

RUBY
You know, your Father and I used to
wonder how we got a child who was
so bad at lies. Really, Isabel.

(chuckling now)

(MORE)

RUBY (CONT'D)
 Who doesn't know how to tell a tiny
 one? A small fib. My goodness.

Isabel smiles a little, caught. They fold quietly.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE/KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Isabel carefully arranges the donuts and preps the coffee.

In the living room, Ruby attempts to slip on her shoes. Brett rolls her WHEELCHAIR over, then kneels at her feet to help.

BRETT
 Why not let me do that?

RUBY
 'Cause I can still do it.

BRETT
 (charming her)
 I know you *can* do it. I do. But you
 don't *have* to when we're around.

A beat. She relents, nods and watches him tenderly place her shoes on. She touches his head lovingly.

BRETT (CONT'D)
 (quiet, looking up to her)
 You ready?

RUBY
 Not really, Sweetie.

BRETT
 You're gonna be okay. Promise.

She encircles him with her arms. Half hug, half signal. With that, he LIFTS her easily and places her in the wheelchair.

Isabel watches their exchange from the kitchen.

INT. ASSISTED SENIOR LIVING APARTMENTS - LATER THAT DAY

Isabel's hand rests on Brett's as he wheels Ruby through the complex. A SALES EXECUTIVE gives the tour. Dining hall. Game room. Gym. Ruby chats up the exec, who feigns interest.

RUBY
 My husband was a Tuskegee Airman.
 Fought for America in World War II.

The door of the unit opens. It is less than half the size of Ruby's home. Isabel, Brett and Ruby take it in. Underwhelmed.

Ruby commandeers her wheelchair, moving herself to the window. Brett talks to the executive as Isabel watches her mother for a beat. Then goes to her, bending by her side.

RUBY (CONT'D)
At least there's good light.

Isabel nods in agreement. They both gaze at a gorgeous sky.

RUBY (CONT'D)
Look at that cloud. I see a
swimming pool with boys jumping in.

ISABEL
Where do you see boys...?

RUBY
There. Look. There's their arms.

ISABEL
Oh, yeah. I see it!

RUBY
They're a little league team. Just
won the big game. Celebrating and
having a ball. See the splashes?

ISABEL
Little league team? What splashes!?

They crack up. Then, glide back from the clouds to reality.

Ruby holds Isabel's hand, lacing their fingers together.

Brett observes them both, hopeful that this will work out.

INT. ISABEL AND BRETT'S BATHROOM - SAME NIGHT

Isabel is in the bathtub. Brett brushes his teeth.

ISABEL
Being in her own place is better.
With her furniture, her own things.

BRETT
It's her idea, Belle. Her decision.

ISABEL
Because she's lonely. I need to be
around more.

BRETT

We go by three, four times a week. Whenever she calls, you're there. My office is ten minutes away. I'm there. She's not alone. She wants something for herself.

ISABEL

She doesn't want to be a burden. I know what to do. It'll be okay.

He finishes, kisses her on the forehead and heads out.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Can you get that li...

He has already turned it off, leaving her in candlelight. It feels like a nightly ritual. She picks up a book on a nearby table, opens it and reads as she soaks.

EXT. AIRPORT - NEXT DAY

Ruby and Brett pull up to the curb. He gets out to gather her overnight bag from the trunk. Isabel exits, puts on her coat.

BRETT

Got your boarding pass?

She pats her pockets, unsure. He takes the pass out of his pocket with a sly smile.

ISABEL

I knew you had it.

They share a quick peck before she enters the terminal.

She turns to wave at him. He waves back, watching her through the thick glass - until he can't see her anymore.

INT. AIRPORT SECURITY/LARGE AIRPORT - DAY

Isabel navigates through the TSA lines. But at the scanning machines, the bag of the traveler in front of her is flagged for inspection. He's an Indian man in his 30s with a wild bun of the coolest, unruly hair. His skin is a hue that could easily be mistaken for African-American. He is SURAJ YENGDE.

Slipping on latex gloves, A BROTHER WITH TSA taps a SMALL BOX, then lifts it out of the bag.

TSA BROTHER

Who's the owner of this bag?

SURAJ

I am, sir.

TSA BROTHER turns the box upside down, looks underneath. Suraj watches calmly, letting the man do his job. Isabel wants to get going, but is stuck observing the exchange.

TSA BROTHER

I'll have to swipe it again.

As the TSA employee heads to a LARGE SCANNER to send the box through again, Suraj turns back to Isabel. He's embarrassed.

SURAJ

It's an award. I apologize.

ISABEL

It's no problem.

TSA BROTHER

Permission to open the box?

SURAJ

Yes, sir. Of course.

The agent lifts a BRONZE STATUE of a bespectacled Indian man with a serious expression and receding hairline out of the box. He raises it to eye level, reviews it quizzically.

TSA BROTHER

Who is this?

Curious, Isabel leans in to hear the answer.

SURAJ

Um... he was the Dr. King of India.

TSA BROTHER looks to Isabel, the nearest Black person. They eye each other, intrigued and impressed. He rewraps the bust, then places it in the box as if it were King himself.

Isabel moves through security without fanfare. She observes Suraj on a nearby bench, lacing his polished shoes. She grabs her things and heads to the gate in a SEA OF TRAVELERS.

OMITTED

EXT. GERMAN SHIPYARD FACTORY - 1936 - MORNING

A sea of flannel jackets and wool coats lurches forward under gray skies. But though clouds obscure the sun, an eager energy moves among the WHITE MEN who lean against the cold.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Shipyard workers at Blohm and Voss
 gather for a ceremony celebrating
 the company's new 295-foot vessel.

The hundred or so men settle in. Listening intently. And then, all at once, they RAISE their right arms rigidly.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Adopted by the Nazis, a heil salute
 was mandatory for German citizens.
 But if you look closely, you'll
 find someone who defied this.

Amidst a wave of outstretched allegiance to the Third Reich, clouds glide away to shine sunlight on the face of ONE MAN.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 His name is believed to be August
 Landmesser. He had joined the Nazi
 Party two years before this day.
 But in that time, August fell in
 love with a woman unlike any he'd
 ever met...

EXT. WORKING CLASS STREET - 1934 - DAY

Leaning on a light post, AUGUST's face is lined with worry.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Irma Eckler. A Jewish woman.

IRMA rounds the corner with a shopping bag. Her eyes sparkle with intelligence and integrity. She spots him, beams. He smiles back, adoringly. He goes to her. Both speak German.

IRMA
 An unexpected treat. You're early.

AUGUST
 I'm a surprise.

IRMA
 That you are. A handsome one.

He takes the bag from her. She touches his face, unaware of the storm in his mind. He leans down and kisses her sweetly.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Although a member of the dominant
 class, August saw in Irma what
 others like him chose not to see.
 Her humanity. Her beauty. Her love.

EXT. HAMBURG, GERMANY - MORNING

Back at the shipyard. CLOSE on August, defiant.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 So, on this day, he folded his arms
 rather than salute a regime that
 deemed that love illegal. On this
 day, he was brave.

August, unintimidated, stands on his conviction. The camera
 PULLS BACK to find that the shipyard scene is -

INT. MASSIVE LECTURE HALL - 2012 - NIGHT

- an image projected on a LARGE SCREEN in a full auditorium.

In a perfectly tailored dress, Isabel is centerstage at the
 podium. She speaks with conviction and control, exuding both
 humility and authority all at once. From her cadence and
 manner, it's clear that she's made this speech many times.
 Yet, she refers to TYPED NOTE CARDS. Precise in her delivery.

ISABEL
 He couldn't have been the only one
 who felt that something tragic was
 happening. So, why was he the only
 one among those men who didn't go
 along that day? How would history
 have changed if more had resisted?

Attendees listen in rapt attention.

ISABEL (CONT'D)
 Perhaps we can reflect on what it
 would mean to be him today. How can
 we too be brave? Right now. Today.
 I leave you with that. Thank you.

The speech she's clearly given many times is met with robust
 applause as the screen switches from the photo to: "Pulitzer
 Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson."

INT. BACKSTAGE/GREEN ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Isabel makes her way through other SPEAKERS, SCHOLARS and CONFERENCE PERSONNEL backstage.

She passes AMARI SELVAN, a dashing Black newspaper editor, who she knows well. Surprised, they greet one another warmly.

ISABEL

You're speaking? I didn't know.

AMARI

One of our reporters is. I'm cheerleading. You were solid up there. Nice work.

ISABEL

You know I write better than I lecture.

AMARI

You write better than most people do anything.

Amari signals to WAITING COLLEAGUES that he'll join in a few.

AMARI (CONT'D)

I thought about reaching out on something. I'll take seeing you as a sign.

Amari glances arounds quickly, then leans in.

AMARI (CONT'D)

This Trayvon Martin case is...

Isabel nods, leans in too.

ISABEL

I know.

AMARI

Have you heard the tapes?

ISABEL

No. Of what? Not the murder?

AMARI

Yep. 911 calls. The killer called 911 before he did it. Tapes from people who heard the kid screaming too and called the police.

ISABEL
Is that all public?

AMARI
It's being slowly released. We have them. Interested in listening? To consider writing something for us.

ISABEL
You've got a stable of writers.

AMARI
They don't have Pulitzer Prizes.

ISABEL
Some actually do.

AMARI
Well, they aren't as brilliant as you on things like this.

ISABEL
You know what I do now, Amari.

AMARI
Yeah. And I know what you *used* to do. Some of the best reporting I ever edited.

ISABEL
I write books now.

AMARI
That one book took way too damn long. It was a masterpiece and what not. But, too long if you ask me. Writers write. So, write.

ISABEL
I can't do assignments anymore. I want to be inside the story. All the way in. That takes time.

AMARI
Maybe after you hear the tapes...

Amari eyes his colleagues who are eager for him to join them.

AMARI (CONT'D)
(as he heads off)
Sending them to you. No pressure.

INT. CUSTOMER SERVICE CUBICLE - DAY

A quartet of cubicles. Inside of one is MARION WILKERSON, a bright-eyed woman in the midst of a spirited conversation.

MARION

I know keeping our elders at home is supposed to be the noble thing and all. But there's something to her being independent while she can be. Doing things her own way, in her own time, for as long as she can. That's important. It is.

INT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - DAY

Isabel talks to her cousin on SPEAKERPHONE as she calls to her dogs, Chi-Chi and Sophie, then attaches their leashes.

ISABEL

I agree with that.

(beat)

Where are my keys? Shoot.

MARION (V.O.)

And, she's got a dining hall for socializing with other folks her age. Not sitting up in the house withering away so you can say: 'I kept Momma at home.'

ISABEL

She's the only Black person there.

INTERCUT ISABEL/MARION as Isabel searches for her keys.

MARION

Aunt Ruby's been around white folks all her life. If anybody knows how to maneuver, it's your Mom. "My husband was a Tuskegee Airman." She knows what to do. Your Daddy was like that, too. Talk to anybody. Boy, they were a sight to see, weren't they? Best dressed in the family. Always dressed to the nines. You get that from them.

ISABEL

It's how she taught me. And how her mother taught her.

MARION

You know, make sure to put all those pictures of your parents and the grands in archival paper before you lock everything up at her place. It preserves it better.

ISABEL

Good thought. I'll do that.

Brett enters the room, her lost keys now found and in hand.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

(to Brett, relieved)

Where were they?

BRETT

Next to the lamp. Under a scarf. With the ringer off. Gotta keep it on the hook, Belle.

MARION

Is that Mr. Brett?

BRETT

Ms. Marion! You good? How's Teddy?

Now with her keys in hand and dogs ready, Isabel wraps it up.

ISABEL

You two can have your little catch-up another time. We gotta get the babies out before dark.

MARION

Brett. She's just jealous of our relationship. Teddy is too. It's okay though. We know.

BRETT

What we have is special.

MARION

That's right!

INT. ISABEL BEDROOM/OFFICE - SAME NIGHT

We pan across their bed to find Brett, sleeping restlessly. Lost in thought, Isabel rises and walks through their home, knowing the path in the dark. Into her office.

She sits at her desk, only the screen illuminates her face. She reluctantly clicks on an audio file entitled "Martin 911 Dispatch."

EXT. STREETS - NIGHT

Seventeen year old TRAYVON MARTIN grins as he continues on his cell to his girlfriend. He strides down one residential street, then another, minding his business.

He pops Skittles as a CAR PASSES HIM SLOWLY. He doesn't pay any mind, crossing the street, closer to his destination.

We watch Trayvon, but hear THE CALL being placed to police.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

We've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy just walking around. This guy looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something.

Trayvon clocks the car passing again, this time slowing down. We now hear his conversation with his girlfriend on the cell.

TRAYVON

I think this guy's following me. Keeps looping around the block.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

He's just walking around the area, looking at all the houses.

Trayvon tries to glimpse the driver. What do they want?

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

Now, he's just staring at me. He's got his hand on his waistband. He's a Black male.

Trayvon's girlfriend wastes no time.

GIRLFRIEND (O.S.)

Just get home. Run home real quick.

The boy starts to jog towards his destination, uncomfortable.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

Shit, he's running.

The window rolls down to reveal a ROUND-FACED LATINO MAN.

ROUND-FACED
What're you doin' here?

TRAYVON
What you following me for?

ROUND-FACED gets out of the car. We are CLOSE on Trayvon as the man walks up to him, a SEMI-AUTOMATIC 9mm in his hand. Fear flashes on the teen's face. Then, the man grabs his arm.

TRAYVON (CONT'D)
Get off me! Get off!

Trayvon SWINGS to defend himself, grabs the man and wrestles him to the ground. After a few moments, the man is on top.

CLOSE on Trayvon's face. The man is trying to POINT THE GUN at him. Trayvon swings, then grabs the man's hands, his legs, anything he can. He's fighting for his life.

And then, a GUNSHOT.

Trayvon's fear disappears. Skittles candy scattered nearby.

INT. ISABEL'S OFFICE/KITCHEN - NIGHT

Isabel stands at her desk, head bowed as if in prayer, as the GUNSHOT rings out. The sound of Trayvon's fate echoes in the room as if it's happening in the moment. Then, SILENCE.

She opens the desk drawer and takes out a file. She's been keeping articles about the murder. She moves her fingertips across them with reverence.

She opens her laptop, types: *"His middle name was Benjamin."*

She doesn't notice Brett at the door, watching for a moment, pleased and admiring. He then disappears down the hall.

She rises to search her shelves, picking up one book in particular like a treasure. THREE BLACK PEOPLE IN A 1930s PICKUP TRUCK are on the cover. It's entitled "DEEP SOUTH."

As she leafs through the pages, her eyes drift to FRAMED PHOTOS on the shelves, looking back at her at eye level. Images of her family. Her father in his military uniform as a TUSKEGEE AIRMAN. Marion and Isabel at various ages, always together. Brett and Isabel, traveling the world.

And a PICTURE OF RUBY, in earlier years, standing in front of her home, on her two feet, smiling and gorgeous. A moment of everyday joy. Isabel picks up the picture and brings it close, reveling in the details of her mother.

After some reflection, Isabel places the picture back. Places the book back. She turns off her computer, abandoning the writing.

On the way to the bedroom, she notices the KITCHEN LIGHT on. She enters to find Brett about to boil water.

BRETT
Honey or sugar?

She goes to him and kisses him with thanks.

ISABEL
I'm going to Mama's early. Pottery class.

She exits wearily. A confused beat. Then, he follows.

INT. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY - NIGHT

A lavish black-tie affair. Luxury oozes from every corner.

Isabel and Brett enter hand in hand. She's a knock-out. He is in a tux and the most handsome we've seen him.

Isabel's editor, KATE MEDINA, early 50s, genuine and grounded, and her agent, BINKY URBAN, 60s, a spirited mix of sass and class, approach them warmly. Hugs and air kisses.

BINKY
Looking gorgeous, dear. And he's wearing that tux very well.

KATE
He can hear you.

BRETT
He agrees and thanks you.

KATE
(to Isabel)
Amari Selvan asked me twice if you were coming. He wants something for the paper.

ISABEL
He's made that clear.

KATE
You interested? We can time it to the audiobook. Get a lift.

Binky overhears and steps in.

BINKY

She doesn't want to do that. Do you, dear? I'll handle him.

ISABEL

I'll talk to him. It's okay.

Smiles and good vibes all around as party patrons vector around them. Isabel is a big writer. Kate is a big editor. Binky is a big agent. And everyone in the room knows it.

While making their way through the party, Brett takes the lead in their interactions. Isabel prefers it. As guests approach, he blocks and tackles for her - picking up the volley of a conversation, excusing them when it's run its course. Always with his hand on the small of her back.

Brett is chatting with two guests when Amari approaches Isabel from the opposite side.

AMARI

You listen?
(off her nod)
And?

ISABEL

A lot of ideas came to mind, but...
longer form stuff. Questions that I
don't have answers to.

Amari glances arounds quickly, catches Brett's eye and nods politely while Brett is still otherwise engaged.

AMARI

Ask them in a piece.

ISABEL

I don't write questions. I write
answers.

A slow smile from Amari. Brett has one eye on their exchange while still listening to the other guest. Kate does too.

AMARI

Questions like what?

ISABEL

Like, why does a Latino guy
deputize himself to stalk a Black
kid so he can "protect" a mostly
white community? What is that?

AMARI

The racist bias I want to explore.
Excavate for readers.

ISABEL

We call everything racism. What
does it mean anymore? It's the
default. When'd that start?

Amari laughs. At this, Brett breaks from his convo and makes
his way over. The men shake hands. Isabel observes them both.

AMARI

Brett.

BRETT

Hi, Amari.

Amari immediately refocuses on the conversation with Isabel.

AMARI

You're saying the man isn't racist?

ISABEL

Not that *he* isn't racist. I'm
wondering why *everything* is racist.

Brett looks from Isabel to Amari, proud of his wife.

AMARI

This feels like a set-up.

ISABEL

(beat, then she dives in)
Unmarked graves. Millions of
enslaved people stripped of their
legacy, their dignity, even in
death. White people wouldn't allow
us to properly bury our departed.
To even mark where they were laid
to rest. Is that the same racism
that murdered Trayvon?

AMARI

Yes. Absolutely.

Isabel straightens her back, feeling the challenge. Brett is
enjoying this, having already been on the other side.

ISABEL

Okay. Home ownership. Covenants
written into land deeds barring
Black people from having *wills*. No
generational wealth allowed. You
could not legally pass down what
you earned to your kids if you were
Black. For almost 500 years.

AMARI

And still we rise.

ISABEL

Amen.

AMARI

Black family, black love, I tell you, it's our mighty underestimated weapon. They tried, but it can't be destroyed. By law or anything else.

ISABEL

That's right.

(they nod as Brett looks on)

So, was not being allowed by law to will the fruits of our labor to our families the same racism that took Trayvon's life?

AMARI

Systemic racism. Yes. Same.

ISABEL

You're sure? If it's the same, why give it different categories to hold all the meaning we've placed on it? The subtle kind. The systemic kind. What does it mean?

Amari likes this. Brett listens intently.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Murders of Black people by police. We call that racism. Corporations say Black people can't wear the natural hair growing from our heads in the workplace. We call *that* racism. Everything's the same?

AMARI

I get it. Being followed at a department store and being lynched shouldn't be called the same thing.

ISABEL

Racism, as our primary language to understand *everything*, seems insufficient. That's all.

AMARI

Good. I need a piece delving into what the Martin case means.

(MORE)

AMARI (CONT'D)

Set the context with these questions. It's what you do best. Making the hard stuff digestible. And this is a hard one. What does it all mean? These questions are the piece.

Brett wants her to say yes. She hesitates.

AMARI (CONT'D)

We'll make it splashy. Prime placement. Sunday. Maybe a cover.

ISABEL

There's something to it, but... I'm on hiatus.

AMARI

Isabel, c'mon.

ISABEL

I am. Family responsibilities.

Brett covers his disappointment. Amari looks to him, wondering what's going on. Then, gives up.

AMARI

Listen, good for you for taking time. We'll talk again. Take care you two.

He nods to the couple and leaves. Brett wants to discuss and starts to ask her about the decision to decline, but a FELLOW AUTHOR approaches. They put on their smiles.

OMITTED

INT. RUBY'S SENIOR APARTMENT - NIGHT

The TV in the now fully furnished unit is tuned to JEOPARDY. They all watch, shouting answers to questions. Then -

RUBY

I want you to go on over to the house and check on my yard. That big ol' tree sheds this time of year. I don't want the neighbors getting the wrong idea.

ISABEL/BRETT

Yes, ma'am.

Jeopardy ends. Brett turns the channel to cable news. A story about President Obama speaking about the Trayvon Martin case. They watch, flooded with equal measures of sadness and rage.

RUBY

That poor child's mother. Wish he'd answered the man right.

ISABEL

What was that, Mama?

RUBY

I wish he'd have answered the man when he asked him why he was there in the neighborhood. Maybe he would still be with us.

Brett looks to Isabel, wide-eyed. *This* is unexpected.

ISABEL

You're saying it's the boy's fault?

RUBY

No, of course not. Don't be silly. I'm saying there's a way to act that keeps you safe. He was too young to know it. Like Emmett. They think it's fair. Think they're the same. Got hurt before they learned.

ISABEL

They are the same. And he shouldn't have to had to answer to anyone.

RUBY

Should've and real life are two different things, darling. You know that. You can't be walking around at night on a white street and not expect trouble. That's intimidating to most whites.

(to Brett)

True or not?

Brett struggles with how to answer.

BRETT

Unfortunately, yes. But you can't live your life based on what other people are intimidated by.

RUBY

Sure you can, Sweetie.

INT/EXT. RUBY'S SENIOR APARTMENT COMPLEX - CONTINUOUS

Isabel and Brett cross the parking lot. A quiet tension builds. No words as they walk together - but apart.

They climb in the car and drive. She finally looks to him.

ISABEL

What's wrong?

He drives on, wrestling with his feelings. She waits.

BRETT

She asked me that... like I was a stranger. Not her son.

(beat)

She doesn't think of me like I think of her.

ISABEL

That's not true, baby. She loves you.

BRETT

I know she loves me. That's not what I'm saying.

ISABEL

She's from a different time. She was just trying to sort through her feelings about...

BRETT

You're on a hiatus?

ISABEL

Huh?

BRETT

You told Amari you're on a hiatus.

(beat)

You told me you were going to travel less.

Isabel is processing, trying to catch up to this turn in the conversation.

BRETT (CONT'D)

You never told me you weren't going to write at all.

ISABEL

I said I want to focus on her.

BRETT

What's that got to do with writing?

ISABEL

She shouldn't be at that place. She should be home. She moved because she was lonely. I should have spent more time. Daddy would want me to fix this.

BRETT

Your father wanted you both happy. Sacrificing your work does exactly the opposite. She told you what she wants. This is not it.

The conversation is becoming intense. She tries to diffuse.

ISABEL

(beat)

She's my responsibility.

BRETT

And you're mine.

(beat)

People are asking you to write for a reason. Your voice. The way you think. And you're zoning out. Hanging out at an old folks' home all day. Making cups?

(beat)

What are you doing?

ISABEL

I'm taking care of someone I love.

BRETT

This was her choice. Dammit, Isabel!

His outburst stuns her.

BRETT (CONT'D)

Let the woman make her own decisions! You're hiding. And I don't get it.

ISABEL

Hiding from what?! I'm not hiding.

He doesn't respond. Isabel is stunned.

Quiet.

INT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - A SHORT TIME LATER

They enter their home. Separate in all of their movements. Unusual.

BRETT

I'm gonna have some of that pasta.
Want some?

ISABEL

Yes, please. Save me some.

He heads into the kitchen. She heads to the bedroom.

INT. ISABEL'S BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Isabel ties up her hair, exhausted. She runs hot water, adds bath salts. She reclines in the tub, a table of books nearby.

A moment to think, process. She opens a small BIOGRAPHY on BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR and begins to read to unwind.

INT. TRAIN STATION - 1913 - NIGHT

From inside of a train car, Black passengers with luggage in hand trail behind white passengers who have disembarked and are headed for the exit. Proud Black men known as Pullman Porters cater to the whims of the white customers.

The voice of Suraj Yengde, the author, narrates the scenes.

SURAJ (V.O.)

In the early 1900s, a young Indian graduate student found himself in New York City on a scholarship to Columbia University. Upon his arrival, he immediately recognized the similarities between how African-Americans were treated and the treatment of Indian people like him known as Dalits.

OMITTED

EXT. NEW YORK STREETS - 1913 - DAY

A 24-year old Indian man, BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR, walks down the Harlem street transfixed by his surroundings. All curiosity and wonder. Observing Black joy and community.

SURAJ (V.O.)

Bhimrao Ambedkar's presence in the United States was a highly unusual endeavor, for a Dalit is also known by some as a so-called Untouchable. Not the lowest caste in India. Not even *below* the lowest caste. They are outcast. Disposable. Despised. Considered untouchable. He saw kindred spirits among Black people in America. Both in the oppression they face and in their survival.

INT. AMBEDKAR HOUSE - 1918 - LONDON - DAY

In a cozy library room, Ambedkar reads with intensity.

SURAJ (V.O.)

He then studied in London earning two PhDs and passing the bar before returning to India as a heralded scholar to help draft India's new constitution.

EXT. INDIA SEASIDE - 1925 - DAY

Dr. Ambedkar is cheered by Dalit workers upon arrival.

SURAJ (V.O.)

Ambedkar wielded his pen for his people like a weapon against injustice. He said: "The emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people. Education all must have. Means of defense all must have. These are paramount requirements for self-preservation."

INT. ISABEL'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Isabel drinks in every word. Her eyes jumping from line to line, reacting with nods and murmurs of agreement.

SURAJ (V.O.)

"Religion, social status and property are all sources of power and authority, which one man has, to control the liberty of another."

She reads a line and sits up. She looks around for a pen, something to mark the passage.

SURAJ (V.O.)

"The strength of a society depends upon the presence of points of contact, possibilities of interaction between different groups which exist in it. Caste in India divides groups into fixed units that cannot be moved. The destruction of caste does not mean destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change."

She dog ears the page. Then takes a bit of wax from the nearby candle and drips it gently on the word... "CASTE."

INT. ISABEL AND BRETT'S BATHROOM/BEDROOM - LATER

She closes the book, eager to share her excitement with Brett. She emerges from the bathroom in her robe, applying lotion to her hands, WHEN SHE SEES HIM.

From the other side of the bed, only his legs are in view. Brett is on the floor. Face down. Still. She tries to compute the image. Then, she calls out.

ISABEL

Brett.

No answer. Her greatest fear.

She scrambles over the bed to reach him. At the edge, she screams. But we hear NO SOUND. *She falls toward him.*

INT. FUNERAL - DAY

In the front row is Isabel, Ruby, Brett's parents and children. Then, rows of friends and loved ones. Marion is behind Isabel with her partner, TEDDY. Most are crying.

PASTOR

By *trade*, Brett Hamilton was a mathematician, a financial analyst. By *heart*, he was a passionate champion of those he loved deeply.

With bloodshot eyes, Isabel is in her head - far away.

INT. ISABEL AND BRETT'S BEDROOM - DREAM

Surrounded by darkness, Isabel lies in a LARGE PILE OF LEAVES with her eyes closed. She opens them slowly to find herself facing Brett. His eyes are closed. So, she closes hers again.

EXT. ISABEL'S FOYER - DAY

Mrs. Copeland is in the foyer in tears, baked goods in hand. Marion receives the package.

INT. RUBY'S SENIOR APARTMENT - DAY

The TV flickers in Ruby's dark apartment, making shapes across Isabel's expressionless face. She is on the couch next to her mother, both covered in a crocheted blanket as Donald Trump demands to see President Obama's birth certificate.

Ruby looks to Isabel, recognizing her daughter's pain.

RUBY

Your father was supposed to be here
too. They're supposed to be here.

Teary, she holds her daughter's hand. Isabel can't move.

INT. ISABEL'S OFFICE - DAY

INTERCUT CALL with Isabel's editor, Kate, in her office.

MARION

Isabel Wilkerson's office.

KATE

Hello. Hi. This is Kate. I'm
Isabel's editor and I...

MARION

I know your name. Hi, Kate. This is
her cousin. Marion.

KATE

Marion, hi. My condolences for your
family's losses. I don't have the
words. Unfathomable. Unthinkable.

INT. ISABEL AND BRETT'S BEDROOM - DREAM

Eyes closed, Isabel is still in the leaves in her bedroom. She opens her eyes to find Brett still there, eyes closed. And now, her mother Ruby in front of him, with closed eyes.

INT. HOSPICE UNIT - DAY

Ruby is bedridden, on oxygen, under a crocheted blanket. Isabel sits on the side of the bed, applying lotion to her mother's hands. Lip balm to her lips. Ruby doesn't respond.

KATE (V.O.)

Who can withstand this? The two
closest people to you in a year?
It's just... I don't know how she's
managing. How is she?

INT. ISABEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

The blinds are drawn. It's dark. Marion looks through the door to find Isabel in bed, wrapped in Ruby's crocheted blanket. Huddled into herself in the fetal position, Isabel's hand is over her face, shutting out the world.

Tears brim Marion's eyes. She carefully climbs onto the bed, settling herself closely near her cousin. She wraps her arm around Isabel, then draws her in. Isabel lets herself sink into the tenderness, the sisterhood. Marion holds on tight and close, trying with everything she has to protect her loved one from the darkness.

INT. ISABEL AND BRETT'S BEDROOM - DREAM

In her mind, Isabel is still on the floor in the leaves. Eyes closed. She opens them to find Ruby and Brett, both looking back at her now. She gazes upon them, not wanting to blink. Not wanting to lose them. Ruby reaches out, placing her hand on her daughter's face. Isabel touches her hand. Brett looks on with love. She closes her eyes.

BRETT

Breathe, Belle.

When Isabel reopens her eyes, they are gone.

She rises from the leaves, on her feet, in the room, alone.

INT/EXT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - DAY

Isabel sits on the couch, still.

She carefully places Brett's watch on her wrist and her mother's wedding band on her finger.

Near the front door, Isabel puts on a sweater. She calls to her dogs, puts on leashes and takes her KEYS off of a hook with a sign that reads: "Keys." She ventures outside for what feels like the first time in a while.

She crosses the lawn, blanketed in leaves, and takes the same path that she and Brett would always take.

And like clockwork, she sees Mrs. Copeland, who approaches.

MRS. COPELAND

Isabel. Hi. I haven't seen you out.
How are you? I mean, you look well.
Do you need anything?

The woman is nervous. Isabel senses it and puts her at ease.

ISABEL

I'm okay. Thanks for asking.

MRS. COPELAND

I brought a basket over when I heard. I hope you got it.

She didn't.

ISABEL

I did. Thank you.

MRS. COPELAND

He was a wonderful man. And you two made the loveliest couple. Both so attractive and accomplished. A beautiful, unlikely pair. May his memory be a blessing. I'm so sorry.

Mrs. Copeland continues to talk. But Isabel is stuck. She can't hear the words. She's upset, but tries not to show it.

EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - DAY

Isabel turns into the driveway under the canopy of trees. She exits the car to find green landscape bins at the curb. It's her job now. She goes to retrieve them.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE/PHARMACY - DAY

In her mother's living room, she opens drapery, allowing the sun in. The reflection of a tree outside duplicates itself on the living room wall as if it's growing there.

In the dining room, she removes a package from her shoulder bag. A bundle of archival paper like Marion instructed.

JUMP CUTS as she takes frames from the walls and pictures from the frames. Carefully wrapping them in the special paper and placing the fragile images in an acid-resistant album.

Her cell rings. It's MARION. She's entering a PHARMACY.
INTERCUT.

MARION

Hey. You made it in okay?

ISABEL

Yep. I'm here. How're you?

Marion enters the megastore's pharmacy. She waits in line.

MARION

(gently)

Tell me how you are. How does it feel to be with all her things?

ISABEL

I'm here, Marion. That's all I am.
(softening)
I walked the babies.

MARION

Good! Good. How'd that feel?

ISABEL

I had a meltdown after.

Noticing a SLIGHT PLASTER WELT in the kitchen, Isabel moves a chair, climbs up, touching the bubble with a knife.

MARION

You went the way you two'd walk.

ISABEL

There's no other way.

Marion mouths her name to the pharmacist to grab her medication and pays with her credit card.

MARION

Right.

ISABEL
I ran into my neighbor. She said something so disrespectful.

MARION
Girl, what?

ISABEL
She called us an unlikely couple.

Isabel waits for a response. Marion waits for the bad part.

ISABEL (CONT'D)
Me and Brett.

MARION
(um...)
That hit a nerve for you?

ISABEL
Hell yeah, it did.

MARION
Why?

Isabel can't believe her ears.

ISABEL
To say that we were improbable?
"Unlikely" as in unbelievable.

MARION
She was just being nice, I think.
That's probably not what she meant.

ISABEL
She meant that we didn't match. But somehow we ended up together. Like it's this unbelievable phenomenon.

MARION
You two were from different places, backgrounds. It's kind of a miracle your paths crossed like they did, that you got together. Isn't it?

Isabel is in disbelief, holding back how hurt she is. Marion is lost as to what the problem is. But stands down.

MARION (CONT'D)
Listen, no one knows what goes on inside a relationship. And we shouldn't talk about things we don't know. My mistake.

ISABEL

I've got to go and get this done.

MARION

You don't have to pack everything up now. I can come next weekend and help. Take it slow.

ISABEL

I've got to get this house packed before I start back to work.

MARION

You're starting back working?

ISABEL

Of course. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to live?

MARION

You've got money saved. Why not...

Isabel sighs, frustrated. Marion's swimming against the tide.

MARION (CONT'D)

... What are you working on? When do you have to start?

ISABEL

I'm already behind on things I should be doing. I gotta go, okay?

MARION

Okay.

And with that, the line disconnects. Off Marion, worried.

EXT. AIRPORT - DAY

The same spot where Brett dropped Isabel off and kissed her goodbye. Now, she's alone, dropped by a TOWNCAR DRIVER. She grabs her bag, tips, then looks up to the sky.

CLOSE on a clear, cloudless sky. No shapes. No Little Leaguers in pools. Clearly thinking of her mother, she enters the terminal. We watch her - until we can't anymore.

INT. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY - NIGHT

Another year. Another gala. But, this night is different.

Isabel enters alone, alongside tuxedoed and gowned guests.

She is a known entity. And a popular one. Her nature as an introvert is challenged as she's stopped every few steps. Smiles here. Hugs there. She's uncomfortable without Brett to buffer the attention. But, covers it well enough.

Her editor, Kate, and her agent, Binky, approach immediately. They all hug. It's heartfelt. These women know her well. And they know what she's been through.

KATE

You came.

ISABEL

I'm here.

These two have a special bond.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

(teasing)

I thought I'd get a couple rounds
in before having to talk business.

As the women talk, they glide around the room, searching for their table assignments, stopping to smile and wave.

BINKY

Darling, we don't have to talk
about anything you don't want to.
The market is hungry for you now
and it'll be hungry tomorrow. We
published "Warmth" how many years
ago, and your touring is still
fully booked whenever you're ready.
You take your time. They've waited
a year. They can wait longer. We
don't have to talk business at all.

Isabel looks to Kate, who is quiet. An awkward beat.

ISABEL

(to Kate)

I take it you don't agree.

KATE

I agree that you should move at
your own pace. I also know what
writing does for you. And maybe,
you need that feeling right now.

BINKY

She has to want to, Kate.

KATE

You're right.

ISABEL
Well, I have an idea.

BINKY
Yes. I knew that's why you came.

KATE
Tell us, Isabel.

CLOSE on Isabel. A deep breath and then she goes for it.

ISABEL
I never really explored the Trayvon Martin case. I know it's been a while, but I think there's still a lot unpacked there. I've been thinking about my Mom and how she insisted that we be polite and buttoned up around white people. And there's Nazi symbolism all over right now. You saw what happened to the young woman in Charlottesville.

BINKY
Yes, the neo-Nazi...

ISABEL
Yes, drove into a crowd at a protest for Black lives. Killed a white woman. Heather Heyer. All those idiots with tiki torches. They're evoking imagery from the KKK and Nazi Germany to stoke fear. This terrific Indian scholar I happened to see randomly. I didn't even meet him. I saw him at an airport and I meant to read about his work, I just haven't, I... He's a Dalit professor. He won a...

The women listen for her to say something that clicks.

BINKY
Sorry, what's a Dalit professor?

ISABEL
He's Dalit and he's a professor. Dalits used to be Untouchables in India. Beneath the lowest caste.

BINKY
Ah, yes, I see.

ISABEL

He won an award. I saw the bust of
Ambedkar. A huge figure among
Dalits. Have you heard of him?

Both women shake their heads no, trying hard to follow Isabel
while partygoers clink glasses and mingle.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Me neither. Why?

As she talks, Kate and Binky share a quick glance of concern.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

There's connective tissue I could
find to build a thesis about...
about how this is all linked.

Isabel notices their glance to each other. They are alarmed.
She stops, regretting talking, being there. Kate notices.

KATE

This is the writer's journey.
Sorting it out. There's a lot going
on in that big brain of yours. I
love that. But I'll be honest, I
don't understand how the woman
killed by the Neo Nazi connects to
the Dalit professor connects to
Trayvon Martin connects to your
Mom. I don't see it right now. But
if you can make people see it,
that's an incredible book.

BINKY

I agree, dear. Wholeheartedly.

Isabel nods, embarrassed, wanting to be anywhere but there.

KATE

Like I said, writing will do you
good. Maybe a research trip? Get
out of the country. Read books,
relax, find the way to say what you
want to say.

BINKY

Keyword there is relax. Let me set
up a trip for you to somewhere
beautiful and tropical. Massages,
blue water. The agency'll arrange
it all for you.

The women look at her with loving concern.

ISABEL
I feel like...

She stops short. ECU on Isabel, lost in her thoughts.

ISABEL (CONT'D)
Okay, I'll get back to you.

They nod in sympathy and support. They don't understand her. She feels like she's reeling, but smiles through it.

INT. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY - A SHORT TIME LATER

Isabel has wandered away from the party. To get her bearings. To breathe. She walks up the stacks, looking for something.

She finds it and relaxes when she tenderly pulls a book from the grand shelf. It is "DEEP SOUTH." We've seen the book before in her office. The cover picture features three Black people in the 1930s, sitting in the bed of a pickup truck.

She leafs through the pages with care, taking in the words like a balm. We pan away from her across the spine of GLORIOUS BOOKS to find ANOTHER READER at the shelves. We are now in...

INT. BERLIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - 1933 - DAY

A movie-star handsome man with a thin mustache, ALLISON DAVIS, peers at book shelves alongside his wife, ELIZABETH DAVIS, a refined beauty of a woman. They are a stunning couple. Both extremely light-skinned African-Americans who could pass for white on first glance.

ALLISON
I don't see it, Lizzy. Do you?

Elizabeth bends to search a bottom row, shaking her head no.

ELIZABETH
Maybe it's checked out.

ALLISON
There are no books here at all by him. Odd, don't you think?

ELIZABETH
At the premiere library in the city. The country.

ALLISON
Beautiful library though.

ELIZABETH

I could get lost in these books forever. All these ideas.

ALLISON

Let's build a little tent over there and read and grow all day.

ELIZABETH

You've never said anything more romantic to me.

They smile flirtatiously. Then continue their search.

INT. BERLIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN'S DESK - CONTINUOUS

The couple waits in line with a few books in hand. The LIBRARIAN, a white man, waves them over, nods in begrudging acknowledgment as he checks them out. *They all speak German.*

LIBRARIAN

Your card.

ALLISON

Good afternoon. Of course.

Allison hands his library card with his passport. Elizabeth has hers in hand too.

ALLISON (CONT'D)

Can you tell us when Erich Remarque's 'All Quiet on the Western Front' is due back?

The librarian looks at them with suspicion, then reviews the passport and card as if it's a matter of national security.

LIBRARIAN

From the United States.

ALLISON

That's correct.

LIBRARIAN

What are you doing this far from home?

ALLISON

My wife and I are studying here.

LIBRARIAN

What are you studying?

ELIZABETH

We work with Dr. Diedrich Westermann.

This satisfies him enough to complete the transaction. He doesn't place the books in the couple's hands. But, drops them on the counter and waves the next person over.

As they exit, they pass a bespectacled white man, ERICH KASTNER, a few spots back in line. He follows them unnoticed.

EXT. BERLIN UNIVERSITY - MOMENTS LATER

Kaster catches the couple as they cross the pristine campus. Nazi Party flags wave on the buildings. *English is spoken.*

KASTNER

Excuse me. I heard you inquire about Remarque, but couldn't hear the librarian's answer. Would you mind sharing what he told you?

ELIZABETH

He actually didn't answer. He began asking why we were in Germany.

Alarm flashes across Kastner's face. The Davises aren't sure what to make of it.

KASTNER

I'm Kastner. I'm from here. I'm not asking in the same way that he did. I'm asking for a different reason. How long have you been in Berlin?

ALLISON

About five weeks. We're anthropologists studying...

Kastner seems distressed.

KASTNER

You have no idea what's happening.

ELIZABETH

Pardon me.

ALLISON

I'm sorry, I didn't catch that.

A pause, then he looks them directly in the eye with an urgency that startles them.

KASTNER

You have no idea what's happening here. Everything is being torn apart.

EXT. THE BEBELPLATZ - NIGHT

A light DRIZZLE falls in the central city square as about forty thousand people gather in a heightened frenzy.

STUDENTS, PROFESSORS in their academic robes and the HITLER YOUTH paramilitary organizations, carrying torches and Nazi banners, walk beside OPEN-BED TRUCKS through Brandenburg Gate. The trucks are filled with BOOKS and have demeaning caricatures of Jewish people emblazoned on the sides.

Through a large crowd of onlookers, we see a FUNERAL PYRE of logs piled twelve feet wide and five feet high. The unified phalanx of marchers cross the square to throw their lit torches onto the logs, setting the pyre AFLAME.

CLOSE on a marcher's torch being tossed. Flying from the hand of a GERMAN STUDENT, it reveals Allison, Elizabeth and Kastner. They are wide-eyed. But, cover their horror as best they can so as not to draw attention to themselves.

A NAZI BAND plays. The crowd sings along. Students gleefully carry ARMFULS OF BOOKS to the FLAMES with cheers, destroying them by fire as the organizers recite "fire oaths" in German.

NAZI STUDENT ORGANIZER

Sigmund Freud! For falsifying our history and degrading our heroes!

The crowd goes wild with cheers and screams of approval.

NAZI STUDENT ORGANIZER (CONT'D)

Erich Remarque! For degrading the German language's patriotic ideals!

Allison shakes his head in disbelief as the crowd roars.

NAZI STUDENT ORGANIZER (CONT'D)

Georg Bernhard! His Jewish kind of journalism is alien to this nation!

Many in the crowd respond with Nazi salutes.

NAZI STUDENT ORGANIZER (CONT'D)

Against decadence and moral decency and custom, I deliver to the flames the works of Heinrich Mann, Ernst Glaeser, and Erich Kästner!"

Elizabeth subtly touches Kastner's arm. The crowd roars like a vicious animal.

KASTNER

I must go. I must go now.

ALLISON

We'll help you.

KASTNER

No. I'll walk one way. Wait a few minutes, then go to your lodging. And I urge you. Leave here.

ELIZABETH

We'll be right behind you.

KASTNER

No, my friends. Leave here. Leave Germany. Go to your home as soon as you can. You'll be safer there.

He walks away at a clip, his hands buried in his pockets and hat brim over his eyes.

Just then, the main attraction begins. The applause and cheers reach a fever pitch as uniformed, high-ranking NAZI OFFICIALS take the stage. One is introduced in the rain.

NAZI STUDENT ORGANIZER

Salute Joseph Goebbels!

The crowd heils like fans at a rock concert. Goebbels stands before a podium draped with the Nazi flag. *In German.*

GOEBBELS

Comrades! The period of exaggerated Jewish intellectualism is now at an end! The German soul can express itself again! These flames do not only illuminate the final end of the old era, they also light up the new! In this late hour, entrust to the flames the intellectual garbage of the past!

Allison and Elizabeth shudder. He takes her hand and they walk in the opposite direction of Kastner. Heads down.

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)

No to decadence and moral corruption! Yes, to decency and morality in family and state!

The crowd is in a complete frenzy. The couple walks at a brisk pace out of the square.

They pass someone very closely.

It is Isabel in the PRESENT DAY, entering the same square.

EXT. THE BEBELPLATZ - PRESENT/NIGHT

Isabel walks across the now EMPTY PLAZA towards a GLOWING WHITE SQUARE cut into the cobblestones. The carved opening emits a surreal light, slicing the shadows of the grand buildings on the perimeter.

Behind Isabel is NIGELLA, a white British woman with ivory hair.

As they approach the light, Nigella explains the solemn sight.

NIGELLA

'Where you burn books, you end up burning men.' A quote by Heinrich Heine. He was a poet. The poets always seem to know best, don't they?

Isabel nods in agreement, then gazes down into the square to find a SUBTERRANEAN WHITE ROOM protected by thick glass. Inside are ROWS AND ROWS OF EMPTY BOOK SHELVES. An eerie reminder of what was lost on the night that the Nazis burned books, burned freedom.

NIGELLA (CONT'D)

The bookshelves stand empty to bear witness. Over 20,000 books filled with ideas and imagination and history were lost that night.

Isabel takes in this space so full of meaning and memory.

NIGELLA (CONT'D)

In Germany, they have a memorial to everyone victimized by the Nazis. A memorial to homosexuals who perished. Memorials for women, for children. Everyone is remembered.

EXT. HOLOCAUST MUSEUM AND MEMORIAL - DAY

Isabel stands amidst a concrete maze the size of three football fields with over 2,700 coffin-shaped rectangles.

NIGELLA (V.O.)

No entry gate. No sign. It's open
both day and night, in all weather.
Just standing. To bear witness.

Isabel enters, weaving among the stones with reverence.

INT. HOLOCAUST MUSEUM AND MEMORIAL - DAY

Inside the museum, she reads the last words of Holocaust victims. She stops in her tracks as she reads one message in particular: *"What is my life worth even if I remain alive. Whom to return to in my hometown of Warsaw? For what and for whom do I carry on this whole pursuit of life? Enduring. Holding out. For what?"* These words hit her heart. They are her questions to herself.

Across the room, she watches a MOTHER and ADULT DAUGHTER, arms linked as they mournfully observe the exhibit. She's lost in their gestures of love as they move through the space together. Then, she exits the room, alone.

INT. KOSTLIN TOWNHOME - NIGHT

Voices spill from an architectural gem of a modern townhome. Five stories. Walls drenched with CONTEMPORARY ART in an airy interior illuminated by massive bespoke windows.

This is the home of ULRICH, white, German, mid-60s, with the polish of someone whose been wealthy for a while.

He shares it with his husband NATHAN, Vietnamese-American, 40s, with bright eyes. They host Isabel, Nigella and a European journalist friend SABINE, 50-ish, red hair.

SABINE

It's the American way!

NATHAN

We know! We know! It's ridiculous!

SABINE

Well, that's what I'm looking at with the article. You have 900 shootings a week it seems and keep giving people guns.

ULRICH

I don't understand it.

NATHAN

Dear, we don't even understand ourselves.

Nathan holds Ulrich's hand, who kisses it tenderly.

ISABEL

It's true. There's so much that makes no sense. I read that here displaying the swastika is a crime. Three years in prison?

NIGELLA

That's true. It's not tolerated.

ISABEL

In America, the Confederate flag, which is like your Nazi flag, the flag of murderers and traitors, it's *incorporated into* the official state flag of one of our states. Mississippi. There's a hospital in Hattiesburg today named after a KKK Grand Wizard. Statues of men who went to war for the right to own human beings? They're sprinkled all over the country. Right now.

SABINE

Madness. It's not perfect, but Germany has no monuments that celebrate Nazis.

ULRICH

All the sites we've either made a memorial or paved over.

NIGELLA

Everything Hitler is gone. They paved right over it all. And built new things.

SABINE

You can literally walk right over Nazi places and not know it was ever there.

NATHAN

And the bunker.

ULRICH

Yes, the bunker. Long gone.

NIGELLA

Isabel, we passed it on the way.

ISABEL

We did?

NIGELLA

You'd never know. It looks like nothing. It was 30 feet underground and protected by reinforced concrete. Now it has a Volkswagen or something parked on top of it at any given time of day.

ISABEL

A very different approach than in the States.

SABINE

Well, I think there are many differences between here and there. I mean, we are talking about the systematic murder of 11 million Jews, which is *the new official number*. 11 million. Astonishing. It's very different than your monuments of soldiers and what not.

Isabel is taken aback. Nathan is too.

NATHAN

What are you saying is different?

SABINE

All of it. This was deliberate extermination. Over many years.

NATHAN

Wasn't slavery for, like, *hundreds* of years? Right, Isabel?

Isabel is upset, but swallows it. She speaks calmly. Like a teacher. Even smiling slightly.

ISABEL

Slavery lasted for 246 years. That is thirteen generations of people.
(beat)
And another 100 years of Jim Crow segregation, violence and murder.

SABINE

It's, of course, horrific. I'm not downplaying any of it.

ISABEL

There were so many hundreds of millions of Black lives lost between the Middle Passage and the legal end of segregation that it's beyond the realm of an official number. There *is* no number.

NATHAN

I didn't know that.

NIGELLA

Stunning.

SABINE

It is. And I understand that you want to find a way to make American racism make sense. It's noble. But your thesis to link it with caste in Germany and India is flawed.

ULRICH

Maybe it's not *exactly* the same, but her thesis of structural similarity certainly gives context for a framework.

SABINE

A framework is not enough for a book, my friends. She is trying to connect Germany and India with the United States. And it doesn't fit. It's as if you're trying to fit a square into a circle, as they say.

Everyone, but Sabine, is uncomfortable.

NIGELLA

I've read books with a lot less to go on, Sabine. Honestly, darling...

SABINE

Not good ones. And don't we want Isabel's to be a good one?

NATHAN

She's a Pulitzer Prize winner. I think her book'll be just fine.

SABINE

Of course it will be.

(to Isabel)

(MORE)

SABINE (CONT'D)

But you must just note for yourself that American slavery and the caste system in India are rooted in subjugation. Dominating Dalits and Blacks for the purposes of capitalism. Using bodies and labor for profit. For Jews in the Holocaust, the goal was not subjugation.

(beat)

It was extermination. Kill them all. Wipe them off the face of the earth. There is no need for them.

(beat)

It is different.

The table is quiet. Isabel takes it all in.

SABINE (CONT'D)

I hope you aren't offended by honest critique.

ISABEL

I appreciate your candor.

EXT. GERMAN CANALS/MARION'S RECLINER - NEXT DAY

Isabel walks the canals in mid-conversation with Marion by phone, who reclines in a lounge. INTERCUT.

ISABEL

She's not wrong. Not right either.

MARION

I say leave the Jewish folks alone. They're fine. They don't need you. Black folk need you to do what you do. That's why the first book hit. It was about us. Write about us.

ISABEL

I *am* writing about us. The parts they hid. What was taken, cheated. The manipulation. I couldn't explain to her what's in my head yet. I have to figure out...

MARION

See? You're better than me. I would've had words. She was rude.

ISABEL

She was being what she's been taught to be. And I said words. I said a lot of words.

MARION

Yeah, but none of them were: 'I'm the right one on the wrong day.'

ISABEL

I'm my mother's daughter. You'll never hear that from me.

MARION

That's why you could never bag back. Not since we were kids. Always'll think of a comeback the next day. 'I shoulda said...'

ISABEL

If Brett were there last night...

MARION

Oh Lord. Poor lady.

ISABEL

We'd still be there confronting.

They laugh. Then, settle into a comfortable quiet.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

We were having conversations we didn't get to finish.

MARION

I know.

WIDE on Marion, full of sympathy. We see now that the lounge she sits in is hooked to a DIALYSIS MACHINE. A TECH tends to the process. The cousins are quiet together, worlds away.

INT. BERLIN MUSEUM - LATER

An austere open-air space punctuated with smooth surfaces.

Weaving her way through tourists and students, Isabel overhears a teacher explain that the structure they are standing in is built on top of the former SS headquarters.

She continues into a VIEWING ROOM, where vintage black and white IMAGES are projected on the walls. Transfixed and repulsed, she focuses on every detail of the photographs.

She TAKES PICTURES of the caption card next to the images. The words are in German, but she zeroes in on "United States" and "anti-miscegenation." She takes out her translation book and tries to decipher the passage.

As she continues, her eyes grow large. This can't be right.

She sits on a concrete bench and writes detailed notes on the images of 17 high-ranking Nazi officials. The date the images were taken is June 5, 1934.

She stares at one German official in particular, in a kind of disbelief. He seems to stare right back at her.

INT. MEETING ROOM - JUNE 5, 1934 - DAY

The man staring right into the camera is ACHIM GERCKE, dressed in an official top coat with Nazi insignia that states his rank.

Gercke sits at a long table with the 16 OTHER MEN. All white Germans. All feel like slightly different versions of one person. In this room, they will decide the fate of millions of Jews and others. At points in this debate, various men are denoted here by last name while sharing their opinions. All suited and serious. A STENOGRAPHER captures each word.

GRAU

The American model is useful. The notion that race mixing in marriage is illegal is ingrained in their public opinion. Quite stunning.

LÖSENER

But that takes time. Centuries.

GERCKE

American segregation might provide a possible approach. More recent.

GRAU

Segregation isn't suitable to our circumstance. German Jews are too arrogant and too wealthy. Our problem is different.

EXT. ULRICH AND NATHAN'S TOWNHOME COURTYARD - PRESENT DAY

Nigel and Isabel lean over a LARGE BOOK as he translates the German text. She is eager and excited.

NIGELLA

(reading in English)

'Our problem is different. Their problem is Negroes with nothing to build upon. A problem that plays no role for us in Germany. Our problem is the Jews, who must be kept enduringly apart...'

(shocked)

What is this?

ISABEL

It's a transcript of a meeting I saw a picture of. A meeting where Nazi lawyers study and debate *American laws and customs* to figure out how to pull off the Holocaust.

INT. MEETING ROOM - JUNE 5, 1934 - CONTINUOUS

Various men debate. *Now in translated English.*

GRAU

Our problem is the Jews, who must be kept enduringly apart since there is no doubt that they represent a foreign body in the Volk. Segregation will never achieve the goal, as long as the Jews have economic power in our German Fatherland as they do now.

GERCKE

As long as they have the most beautiful automobiles, the most beautiful motorboats. As long as they play a prominent role in pleasure spots and resorts, and everywhere that costs money.

GRAU

This can only be achieved through measures that forbid sexual mixing of a Jew with a German and imposes criminal punishment.

INT. GERMAN NIGHTCLUB - 1934 - NIGHT

August and Irma Landmesser are in love. Dressed up. Dancing. Twirling. Dipping. Laughing. Kissing. All to the popular music of the day being played by a LIVE BAND.

IRMA
Our rehearsing has paid off.

AUGUST
Has it really? I can't tell.

IRMA
You've become quite decent.

AUGUST
It's only taken six months to get
that twirl down.

IRMA
Give or take. Mostly give.

AUGUST
Has it been more than six?

IRMA
A little over a year. But,
completely worthwhile!

AUGUST
Let's go again.

IRMA
Yes! Let me powder my nose first.

As she heads across the crowded club to the POWDER ROOM, August notices GESTAPO OFFICERS on the sidelines of the dance floor. Scanning. Searching. Discreetly pointing.

Most dancers are completely unaware of what's going on. The harassment and questioning that's about to happen. These are the early days.

But August recognizes it. And he's caught off-guard. His eyes dart to find Irma, just as she disappears into the bathroom.

INT. NIGHTCLUB BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Irma stands in front of the mirror next to SEVERAL OTHER WOMEN, pinning her hair back in place with a smile as the ladies banter on. Their words spilling on top of each other.

LADIES
Did you see them?/I heard they'll
just ask for names/And addresses/
They won't/They're looking for
artists/ And people who listen to
jazz/I don't believe it/It's all
blown out of proportion/No.
(MORE)

LADIES (CONT'D)

This happened at the Wonder Room
last month/Rumors.

With concern, Irma hurries to finish, then heads out.

INT. GERMAN NIGHTCLUB - CONTINUOUS

August waits directly outside the restroom door. Irma stops short when she sees him. They exchange a look.

To Irma, August appears enraged. To August, Irma appears afraid. Expressions that they don't recognize in each other.

He holds out his hand. She takes it.

AUGUST

Laugh, dear. Laugh right now.

She does. He does too. Then, he hugs her tightly and spins her in the opposite direction of the officers, away from the dance floor. The MUSIC STOPS. Officers approach.

August and Irma are already halfway out of the door. CLOSE on their coats on the chairs they've quickly left behind.

INT. MEETING ROOM - JUNE 5, 1934 - DAY

The heated deliberation continues in the wood-paneled room.

LÖSENER

We must answer the question here today as to whether laws that the Reich will institute should declare only the *separation* of races. Or if it should declare the *superiority* of one and *inferiority* of others.

KOHLRAUSCH

The American material gives us a path to an answer. America has succeeded here. Their legislation does not base itself on the idea of mere racial *difference*, but, to the extent this legislation is aimed at Negroes, it bases itself absolutely on the idea of *inferiority*.

KLEE

Germans are already convinced the Jews are an inferior race. German law should reflect that.

FREISLER

Precisely, I am of the opinion that we can proceed with the same primitivity as the American states. Such a procedure would be crude, legally, but it would suffice.

EXT. ULRICH AND NATHAN'S TOWNHOME COURTYARD - DAY

Nigella and Isabel huddle over the document. He stops his translation, comes up for air taking a much needed swig from his wine glass.

ISABEL

(energized)

The Nazi blueprint for the extermination of millions of human beings was patterned directly on America's enslavement and segregation of Black people.

NIGELLA

America taught the Nazis. That's what this is saying. It is... it is jaw-dropping.

ISABEL

Yes. So, if the Holocaust is one of the prime examples of caste... and if America was the blueprint, then...

NIGELLA

Then, America *does* fit.

He marvels at the new information. Isabel is on a roll.

ISABEL

Caste functions in America, India and Germany in the same way. The *outcomes* might be different, like Sabine said. But they *function* the same. The Third Reich's caste system and America's terrorism toward Black people? One was built on the back of the other.

NIGELLA

Yes.

ISABEL

And the Hindu caste system in India, I believe is connected too.

(MORE)

ISABEL (CONT'D)

I have more work to do there,
but... there's something to this,
right? The interconnectedness. That
is my point. That's what I'm trying
to prove.

NIGELLA

You'll find it. You'll put it in
your book. But promise me one
thing?

ISABEL

What's that?

NIGELLA

Promise me you'll send your first
copy to Sabine. That'd be
perfection.

INT. MIDTOWN RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Dinner with Kate, her editor, takes place in a swanky eatery.

KATE

There's work on this...
(refers to her notes)
James Whitman...

ISABEL

"Hilter's American Model." It's
great.

Kate is listening while looking around for a waiter.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

I'm building on his legal angle to
prove that the origins in different
eras, different parts of the globe,
have the same roots. India's next.

KATE

Where is this guy? We've been
sitting here for what... twenty
minutes? No bread. No water.

She sees a server filling the glasses at another table. She
waves and mouths "bread please." The server nods, but
continues in the other direction.

KATE (CONT'D)

I think what you've got is enough.
The Black and Jewish connection
through the Nuremberg Laws? Solid.

(MORE)

KATE (CONT'D)

Using that as scaffolding for the argument is compelling enough.

ISABEL

I'm not arguing anything actually. These are facts in plain sight. In anthropology, psychology, political science, philosophy, history writing for years. I'm synthesizing so people understand how it works in their own lives.

KATE

How Nazis creating the Nuremberg laws works in our own lives? It's heady, Isabel. Let's maybe consider focusing the thesis more. So people have a shot at understanding what you're getting at. You know?

(beat)

Where are these people? I mean, how long do we sit here to be ignored? That table came after us.

(then)

Have you started?

ISABEL

Yes.

KATE

I mean the actual writing.

ISABEL

I'm not ready yet. You know the process.

KATE

I know *your* process. Very well. You're an investigator. It's the way your mind works. And it's beautiful. But even if you slash the time it took to finish "Warmth" in half, we've got to let go of these hold dates.

The waiter finally comes over with water and bread.

KATE (CONT'D)

(to the server)

What's going on? Why are tables that came in after us being served? Can you not see us? Is something about our table different that's made you treat us differently?

At this point, we realize that Isabel is the only Black person in the restaurant. The waiter is taken aback.

SERVER

No, ma'am. Not at all. I apologize.
I'll look into the order right now.

This seems to satisfy Kate. Isabel hasn't said a word about it. She just watches.

ISABEL

You done?

KATE

What?

ISABEL

(moving on)
I want those dates.

KATE

I can't hold dates and personnel
for something that's not on track
to be finished in time.

ISABEL

I'll hit the date.

KATE

How? It's 14 months away. You know
we need six months, minimum, with
the completed material and...

ISABEL

I'll get it done.

KATE

Why are you rushing this?

ISABEL

I'm not rushing. I'm pushing
myself.

KATE

Why? Take your time. That's your
style. What's the rush?

ISABEL

Please hold the date, Kate.

KATE

(long, skeptical beat)
If we miss it, it's my ass.

ISABEL
I won't miss it.

EXT. MIDTOWN RESTAURANT - A SHORT TIME LATER

The women head out of the restaurant onto the street, pulling their coats on. A MAN holds the door open for them.

KATE
I'm not great at this kind of thing, so forgive me if I'm clumsy here. But, how are you holding up?
(beat)
I don't want you to leave thinking: "She didn't ask." "She doesn't care." Because I think of you so often. More than you know. But then by asking, maybe I'm bringing it up and you were having a good day and I messed that up.

ISABEL
I'm glad you asked.

KATE
Yeah?

ISABEL
Yeah. There's no day I don't think about them. Mom crossed my mind just now. She loved when men would hold doors for women. She'd be offended if the door wasn't held. Old-school.

KATE
I'm with her.

Kate tightens her arm around Isabel. They walk on.

INT. RUBY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Isabel sits on her mother's bed. In the empty house. She runs her hand across the pillow. Takes a moment to feel the space. She picks up the pillow and puts it in a packing box. She doesn't want to do this. Her eyes happen upon a crack on the wall. She follows it with her eyes up to the ceiling.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE - LATER THAT DAY

A confident Latina realtor, GINA, explores as Isabel follows.

GINA
Roomy. Fantastic light. Will you
update it or sell as original?

ISABEL
I'm thinking a fresh coat of paint.

GINA
Vintage it is.

Gina points to peeling wallpaper in a spare bedroom.

GINA (CONT'D)
There might be water damage there.

Gina enters the kitchen, turns on the water. No pressure. Two
or three droplets drip out in a sad, little stream.

ISABEL
With everything going on, I
basically locked the house up. I
have to deal with it.

GINA
It's a process. Isn't everything?

ISABEL
What's the price difference between
fixing it up and selling as is?

GINA
As is? You're basically giving this
little jewel away. The area is hot
right now with hipsters. These
older homes, when they're fixed up,
sometimes double in value. If you
can put in couple hundred or so to
fix it up, you'd have a competitive
situation with multiple bidders.
(off Isabel's shock)
You write books, right?

ISABEL
One book. Working on another. But
books don't pay like people think.

GINA
I get it. Sell as a fixer and don't
worry about it. Let someone else do
the work.

EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - DAY

Neighbors on their lawn peer with curiosity. A jogger snoops mid-stride. Dogs bark in protest. Isabel speaks with an ARBORIST beneath the magnificent oak tree that has adorned Ruby's house with beauty for ten decades.

ARBORIST

The heartwood's infected, but it ain't spread. I'd take it down now, if I was you.

ISABEL

If it hasn't spread, then it can be saved, right?

ARBORIST

I ain't a roof guy, but yours ain't safe. Got water coming in. If water's getting in, other things get in. Termites. Mold. What not.

ISABEL

Yes. Of course.

ARBORIST

It's bad up there. Exposed holes to the insulation, whole nine. My guys can fix it with the tree removal.

ISABEL

Oh, but... I'm not sure yet. My mother loved that tree. I don't want to cut it down.

ARBORIST

You need it done.
(impatient beat)
Lady, I can fix this or I can leave. What do you want?

Isabel freezes. He's trying to strong-arm her. She's upset.

And then, we hear a CAR DOOR BANG SHUT across the street. Isabel turns to find...

EXT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - EARLY EVENING - FLASHBACK

Brett waves to her from across the street.

BRETT

Mornin'.

ISABEL
Hi. Good morning.

He observes a PEST CONTROL WORKER working on a BUG NEST under the eaves of her house.

BRETT
Looks like they decided to move in.
Even built their own guesthouse.

They both squint at the bad joke. The pest man climbs down from a ladder with the DRIPPING HORNET'S NEST in his gloved hands, heading to the back of Isabel's house.

PEST CONTROL
Puttin' it in the backyard to empty out. Have your gardener get rid of it in a day or two.

ISABEL
Wait, sir. Sir? I... I'd rather not have it in the yard. I have dogs. That spray can't be good for them.

He keeps moving towards the back gate.

PEST CONTROL
It's fine. It won't hurt 'em.

Isabel blinks back her frustration. Doesn't push or protest. Brett's been watching. He crosses the street toward her.

BRETT
(quietly to her)
Can I help?

She thinks for a second, then nods. He steps forward.

BRETT (CONT'D)
Hey. She said she doesn't want it back there. You didn't hear her?

PEST CONTROL
I heard her, but I can't take it with me today. My bins are full.

BRETT
You gotta figure something out then, don't you? Or did you just remove that for free? If it's your treat, then you can drop it right there. If you wanna get paid, buddy, you gotta finish the job.

Pest Control looks to Isabel, then back to Brett. He goes to his truck in the driveway and pushes the hive in a bin.

Isabel and Brett watch. Standing on the curb, together.

BRETT (CONT'D)

Did I just mansplain?

ISABEL

You asked for permission. If you hadn't...

BRETT

I'd be in white savior mode.

ISABEL

(surprised)

What do you know about that?

BRETT

I try to break bad habits.

ISABEL

(beat)

You asked for permission. Let's call it being neighborly.

(then)

I haven't seen your Mom and Dad on their walks much. How are they?

BRETT

They're slowing down. Talking about moving to Florida. But, they're okay. Hanging in, ya know?

ISABEL

The same with my mother. I get it.

BRETT

My Mom made me promise to come by. She always wants to see me on my birthday.

ISABEL

Wait? Is today your birthday?

BRETT

(nodding)

She still bakes me cake like a kid.

ISABEL

Cause you're still her baby. It's sweet. Happy birthday...

BRETT

Brett.

ISABEL

Happy birthday, Brett. Isabel.
(shaking his hand)
Birthdays are a big deal.

BRETT

They are?

ISABEL

They should be.

He takes her in. Somehow, he doesn't want to leave her.

BRETT

Why not come over and grab a slice
of cake? Mom'd love it. You could
help me make it a big deal. I have
no idea how to do that.

She takes him in, calculating. Then...

ISABEL

I haven't seen your folks in a
while. Sure, I'll come and say hi.

EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - DAY

Isabel allows her memory to guide her now.

ARBORIST

Lady, I can fix this or I can
leave. What do you want?

ISABEL

My mother loved this tree. If
there's a solution that doesn't
involve cutting it down, I'm happy
to consider it. If not, I'll pay
the service fee and we can call it
a day. No hard feelings.

ARBORIST

(sigh)
Let me take another look.

Isabel nods with no satisfaction.

EXT. CITY PARK - UNITED STATES - DAY

If you've never been to a Black family reunion, feast your eyes on the food, the fun and the festivities.

FRANKIE BEVERLY AND MAZE's "Happy Feelings" plays on a large speaker that shimmies with sound. Old folks and young-uns and everyone in between dance and take delight in each other.

Several BBQs are on full blast. A spades game at one table. Uno at another. Loud boasts and brags can be heard from both.

Standing near the BBQ pit and the long serving table are Marion and Isabel working on replenishing the food.

Marion moves around like a pro, but this time with a CANE.

MARION

An arborist? What the hell is that?

ISABEL

It's a tree doctor.

MARION

Is it that serious? Lord. What's it all costing?

Two twentysomethings, PATRICE and ANDRE, saunter through.

MARION (CONT'D)

What?

ANDRE

Respectfully, we - and everybody - are wondering about an ETA?

Marion looks at Isabel, deadpan. Isabel muffles a laugh.

MARION

The ETA is when I say it's ready.

ANDRE

Yes, ma'am.

(then)

Aunt Isabel, how you been?

PATRICE

Yeah, how are you holding up?

The sympathy they offer changes the tone.

ISABEL

All's well. You both good?

PATRICE

Oh yeah. Everything's good. I was going to ask if you knew one of my professors. Dr. Montgomery. I think he studies the things you do.

ISABEL

Doesn't ring a bell, but I haven't been keeping up like I used to.

PATRICE

Of course. Yeah. Well, he's a smart man. A nice older gentleman. I thought you might like to meet him. Handsome for his age. Black.

This catches Isabel off-guard. Marion steps in.

MARION

Here, take this to the Uno table. Let folks know we'll start in ten.

Patrice and Andre grab the bag of chips and head off.

MARION (CONT'D)

They mean well.

ISABEL

Brett always looked forward to these. Only you and Mama really let him in.

MARION

People weren't mean.

ISABEL

No, but there was always *that*. What's she doing with him when she could have a good brother? I even thought it at one point, I guess.

(beat)

The containers we're in. Maybe the label on your container says Black woman, maybe it says white man, maybe it says Muslim or immigrant or Asian, whatever it says. We assume that because we read the label, we know what's inside. Trust the label, put the container on the shelf and that's it. That's what the book is about in a way.

MARION

About interracial relationships?

ISABEL

No. I'm looking at caste, the phenomenon of setting one group of people over another and the consequences to the victims and presumed beneficiaries.

Marion looks back at her with a blank stare.

MARION

Can you repeat that in English?
Pulitzer Prize-less.
(a challenge)
If you can.

ISABEL

Of course, I can.

MARION

Then do it. Please. Make it plain.
The Nazi stuff got me all twisted
around. How's that in the same book
about Brett? I don't get it.

ISABEL

(thinking, then new idea)
Was slavery a system of torture and
terrorism that Europeans used to
profit on the labor of Black people
who they considered inferior?

MARION

Yes. Hell, yeah, it was.

Isabel shakes her head no.

MARION (CONT'D)

Yes, it was.

ISABEL

They made it up, Marion. Race is
not real. It's pseudoscientific
nonsense that they used in their
quest for supremacy. They made it
all up. Toni Morrison said, you
don't give your children to be
nursed and raised by people you
feel aren't human. Who are animals.

MARION

Yes, Toni.

ISABEL

They knew that was a lie. They knew we weren't inferior. All of it was lies. But they magnified those myths and codified them - set them in stone - inside systems. In our laws, our medical care, where we live, how we learn, what work we do, even our food.

MARION

Racism at its finest.

ISABEL

Caste.

MARION

Everything you said is racist.

ISABEL

Then what do you call the same thing happening in India? They're all brown. All Indian. They have a whole system with generations of people forced to clean sewers *with their hands* to this day. Right now. A certain kind of person some call Dalits. They're beneath the bottom of the hierarchy. At one point, they were forced to wear brooms tied around their waists because their shadow was supposedly polluted. *Their shadow*. Had to sweep behind themselves when they walked. How's it racist if they're the same race?

Marion raises an eyebrow. Good point.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

(on a roll)

You consider Jews to be white?

MARION

Definitely.

ISABEL

Okay, the majority are and the same thing happened to them during the Holocaust. Nazis wanted an all-white republic. And they hated Jews. So how did they make the Jews not white? Put them at the bottom of the hierarchy.

(MORE)

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Start with they're greedy, they're dishonest, they're to blame for all that's wrong in Germany. They're dogs. Gas them. Kill them. Wipe them out. Nazis and Jews were the same color.

Marion nods, getting it.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

We've got to consider oppression without always centralizing race. It's hard to grasp being American because it's all we know. But these three containers have a lot in common - and the label called race isn't one of them. It's caste.

MARION

(a long, smiling beat)

Only took you 10 minutes for that comeback.

Isabel smiles, feeling good about herself.

MARION (CONT'D)

Figure out how to say more of what you just said. Make it plain. Talk to real people. Like you just did to me. Real people. Real things.

Marion goes back to her tasks. Isabel takes in the advice.

INT. HOME OF MISS HALE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

FIVE ADORABLE SMALL CHILDREN of varying ages run towards Isabel. She kneels down and opens her arms wide to receive a gaggle of hugs and giggles.

Their mother, MISS HALE, the picture of energetic motherhood, enters with a smile. She wipes her hands with a dishcloth.

MISS HALE

(to the kids)

You have 30 minutes of reading time left please. Back in the school room, please.

The 12-year-old and 9-year-old grab their chubby-cheeked three- and 4-year-old siblings, with the 7-year-old trailing to get one last word with Isabel before running off.

SEVEN

Mommie made your favorite.

ISABEL

She did!?

SEVEN

Yep. It's my favorite, too. It's so good, Ms. Isabel. She only makes it when you come because you love it.

ISABEL

I do love it. It's the sauce that's my favorite part.

MISS HALE

(from the other room)

I'm missing a child in here please!

SEVEN

(whisper)

Me, too.

Seven runs off. Isabel, familiar with the house, heads into the kitchen, grabs a spoon and takes a taste of the sauce.

MISS HALE

Isabel!

ISABEL

(caught, laughing)

I'm sorry, it's just...

MISS HALE

You're just as bad as these kids!

INT. MISS HALE/DINING ROOM TO KITCHEN - DAY

The homemade lasagna has been enthusiastically eaten and the kids are getting put to bed by Miss Hale's husband, JAMES. Before they leave, they all bid her a good night.

KIDS

Good night, Ms. Isabel./See you next time./Night, night!

JAMES

Isabel, come by more often, will ya? We seem to only get the lasagna when you're around.

Hugs and good vibes. Clearing the table commences.

MISS HALE

I can't believe you want to interview me of all people.

ISABEL

Of course, I do. You're a dynamo.

(beat)

Your kids are perfect. Your husband is a sweetheart. I mean...

Isabel smiles at Miss. A beat as Miss looks back at her friend, her heart full. She goes to hug Isabel. A sisterly embrace that takes on new meaning with how long Miss hangs on. Isabel holds her tight, appreciating her sympathy.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

I'm okay. Promise.

EXT. MISS HALE'S BACKYARD PATIO - A SHORT TIME LATER

Miss sits in the backyard on a deck chair across from Isabel who has her PORTABLE TAPE RECORDER going and her notebook out. We catch the women in mid-conversation.

MISS HALE

Growing up, he watched white folk - complete strangers, children even - call his mother and grandmother by their first names. Teenagers had the nerve to call out 'Pearlie' to his mother instead of 'Mrs. Hale.' He hated that disrespect.

ISABEL

This is in Alabama, right?

MISS HALE

Selma. The family house is a few blocks from the Bridge. He marched the day the bridge was attacked.

ISABEL

Wow. I didn't know that.

MISS HALE

He was a kid. Was way in the back of the group. He didn't get hurt, but what he saw never left him. So, he decided if there was one thing he would do, he'd make them respect the next generation in his line. Imagine a young Black man plotting to force respect from white folks.

(MORE)

MISS HALE (CONT'D)

Decided he'd name his firstborn
'Miss' so they'd have no option but
to call me with the respect my
grandmother never got.

Isabel takes furious notes.

ISABEL

That's direct defiance of caste.
The most personal I've heard yet.

MISS HALE

I think one of the happiest times I
ever saw him was when this name
payed off exactly the way he always
dreamed it.

ISABEL

I need all the details.

MISS HALE

You sound like Dad. The day I came
home from school and told him what
happened, he needed every detail.
'What'd they say? And then what'd
you say? And what after that?'
Could barely contain himself.

ISABEL

That's me right now.

MISS HALE

Okay! So I was in tenth grade and
we'd just moved to Texas. My friend
and I had these walkie-talkies we'd
use between classes to talk or
whatever. Pre-cell phones, of
course. This is the late 80s. One
day, the principal calls me into
his office, all suspicious, wanting
to know why these people were
gathered around my locker. So I
showed him the walkie-talkie. He
asked my name. 'Miss Hale,' I said.
'What's your first name?' 'It's
Miss.' 'I said, what is your first
name?' 'My name is Miss.' 'I don't
have time for this foolishness,
gal. What's your real name?' I
repeated my damn name about four
times.

ISABEL

Your father tore a loophole in the hierarchy. It's brilliant.

MISS HALE

So, the principal is furious. Tells the secretary to check my records. Of course, they confirm that my legal name is Miss Hale. He then says: 'Hale. I don't know any Hales. You're not from around here. Where is your father from?' I said 'He's from Alabama.'

(a sad beat)

He said: 'I knew you weren't from around here. Know how I knew?' I said no. He said, real cold, 'You looking me in the eye. Colored folk 'round here know better.' Then told me to get the hell out.

The moment still hurts. Miss shakes her head, gazing out.

MISS HALE (CONT'D)

My Daddy'd told me again and again to live up to my name. He'd say: 'They don't have the corner on humanity. They don't have the corner on femininity. They don't have the corner on what it means to be a whole, noble, honorable person.' Quite the opposite.

She takes a sip of her red wine, defiant - like her Dad.

INT. ISABEL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Isabel is curled up on her couch watching a video on her laptop of an academic conference.

ON THE VIDEO: An ornate room with a small group of prominent academics, a mix of Indian-Americans and Indian nationals. An INDIAN-AMERICAN WOMAN, a conference leader, speaks.

A man shifts in his seat uncomfortably. It is Dr. Suraj Yengde. The traveler that Isabel saw years ago in the airport with the Ambedkar bust.

INDIAN WOMAN

We proudly bestow this Ambedkar Award to Dr. Suraj Yengde, postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School.

As he takes the award, Suraj doesn't meet anyone's eyes.
CLOSE on Isabel, clocking his discomfort and taking notes.

EXT. AMHERST CONFERENCE - ANOTHER DAY

Isabel sits on a bench on campus with Suraj.

SURAJ

It was the people in the room.
Their last names. Names have little
meaning in America, but they
signify rank in India. And the last
names in that room? Some of the
most revered back home.

Isabel nods, trying to understand.

SURAJ (CONT'D)

(confiding)

I can't look them in the eye. In
India, they would not speak to me.

ISABEL

I guess I assumed the caste system
in India didn't follow people here.
In the modern day. Naive of me.

He looks at her with kind eyes, wrestling with how to
explain. Then, he points down to his leather sneakers, bends
and presses the toe area to make an indentation.

SURAJ

These shoes I bought back home are
not my size. They're too big for
me. I did not have the confidence
to ask for my size. I bought them
because I could not trouble the
salesman. I bought what he gave me.

ISABEL

What would he have done if you
asked for your size?

SURAJ

Thrown me out. Called the police.
Worse. You must stay in your place.
My place isn't freely buying things
I want from their stores.

Her surprise pushes him to elaborate. He leans in.

SURAJ (CONT'D)

We have a feeling of danger with them. Even in that room that day. Getting an award. To them, I'm not where I should be. They don't like that, no matter what they say. I have been here in the States for three years. On a university campus, where we all have the same degrees. Still, they are a danger to me. That's how I feel. Alone.

A moment of understanding between them.

ISABEL

I've read your work on Dr. Ambedkar. I'm embarrassed to say I'd never heard of him until that day at the airport. It seems unbelievable to me now. His work is central to my thoughts these days.

SURAJ

We call him Babasaheb. It means 'Respected Father.' He wrote and spoke extensively about people in the so-called upper caste, and it's the same as what's happening here to your people.

ISABEL

There's something to that correlation, don't you think? Between us. Black people and Dalits. And others?

SURAJ

Indigenous. Palestinian. Yes. That's a part of my work. There's been some scholarship about this, but it needs continued analysis. And amplification. From all sides. Because those who don't want us to acknowledge it benefit from it remaining unexamined, don't they?

INT. MARION'S HOME - DAY

A much thinner Marion sits in her bed covered in a quilt, working on a family photo album as Isabel looks through pictures in an album of her own.

Each time, we've seen Marion, we've seen her at a pharmacy or with a cane. This time there is no doubt. She's not well. But, her spirit is still lively. The cousins are in mid-conversation, smiling and laughing.

MARION

How much is it?

ISABEL

All four estimates came in over 10,000 dollars.

MARION

You have a picture of Uncle Irving at all? I can't find one of him alone. Only with the cousins.

ISABEL

I'll look.

MARION

Well, you can't sell a roofless house.

ISABEL

It'll have to wait 'til I'm back.

MARION

You leave when again?

ISABEL

Next month. I have so much research to do here and I have to start a draft soon.

MARION

Been saying that for six months.

ISABEL

I'm not ready yet.

MARION

And saying *that* for six months. Do you even know anyone in India?

ISABEL

That's the point of traveling.

MARION

Traveling to places where you're warmly welcomed by familiar faces is underrated.

ISABEL

I've been emailing with a professor who might help me navigate.

MARION

Might?

Marion reaches for something we hadn't noticed before now: oxygen. She has a tank nearby and takes relief. Isabel's worry is apparent as she watches Marion struggle.

ISABEL

You know, I could stay for a bit.

MARION

Go, so when you get home, you can finally start writing this thing. Folks should know about it.

Isabel takes that in. High praise from Marion.

MARION (CONT'D)

I don't have my arms all the way around it, but I was thinking about those containers, with the labels. Like, Uncle Dennis...

She holds up a picture of a young Black man playing dice with friends and smiling circa 1940.

MARION (CONT'D)

Most people would look at him and never know what was inside. He loved Beethoven and the Beatles made the best peach cheesecake you ever tasted and loved Twilight Zone. Knew the titles of every single damn episode. Unlikely.

(beat)

Maybe... Maybe not.

Marion places the picture carefully back into her album as Isabel watches.

INT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - DAY

Isabel nuzzles her dogs and goes to grab her purse. Then, she looks to the hook marked KEYS and they aren't there.

She freezes as she looks at the empty hook.

QUICK FLASHBACKS: Brett finding keys in the laundry room, Ruby finding keys behind the blender another day, Brett finding keys still in the ignition, Ruby finding keys still in the door. When they hand them to Isabel, they laugh at her, or kiss her, or scold her, or toss them without fanfare.

She begins to look for the keys, retracing her steps. Behind cushions. On top of the fridge. In the bathroom. She finally finds them on her desk.

Isabel stares at the keys in her hand. Then, in an aggressive move that we've not seen from her, she **THROWS THEM HARD** across the room, knocking a plant over.

She stands alone in the house, trembling.

EXT/INT. DELHI AIRPORT - NIGHT

Out of immigration, Isabel searches. Becoming anxious as she looks closely at each driver with a sign. Her name isn't on any of them. She goes outside. Searching. Checking her cell phone. No service.

Finally, she spies an OLD INDIAN MAN with deeply lined, dark brown skin standing far away from the crowd. He holds a small sign. She walks closer with high hopes and, alas, sees her name. She waves. He waves sweetly.

EXT. DELHI STREETS - CONTINUOUS

She sits in the back seat of the TUK-TUK, a open air three-wheel motorized cart. He skillfully drives within a crush of cars, mopeds, pedestrians and other vehicles on the road, speeding into the unmarked lanes like the rest.

She sends an email with the subject header "Marion" on her Blackberry to Marion's partner, Teddy. "Hi Teddy: I've just landed in India. How is she?"

Isabel watches this new world passing by. Scenes of life in Delhi. People shopping. People cooking on the street. A DELHI MOTHER cleaning the face of her YOUNG SON. MEN huddled near a food stall awaiting a courtesy meal. Teenagers holding hands.

All the while, her heart heavy.

EXT. DELHI BOUTIQUE INN - LATER THAT NIGHT

Throngs of people, even in the middle of the night. The Tuk-Tuk pulls up to one of many boutique hotels.

Isabel exits with her roller bag. She pays the driver, asking him if it's enough. He nods and actually gives her a couple of coins back. She hands them back to him.

Neither speaks each other's language, but they communicate through the kindness in both their eyes.

INT. BOUTIQUE INN - NIGHT

The INNKEEPER opens the door and Isabel walks into a clean stark room. The overhead fan causes the CLOSED BRIGHT GOLD CURTAINS to dance on the far wall.

She turns to thank the woman, who closes the door with a nod.

Her email pings. There's a reply from Teddy. It reads: "She's comfortable. Not able to talk now, but hanging in."

Isabel sets down her suitcase and takes off her jacket and blouse in the heat, heads to the window, drenched.

She opens the curtains to reveal a STUNNING VIEW of the city, the energy of lights rushing into the dim room. Both the poverty and the majesty of all this humanity overwhelm her, especially so far from Marion. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply.

EXT. DELHI STREETS - DAY

Isabel stands on the edge of the roadside. With a fanny pack strapped around her waist, she considers how to cross the busiest street she's ever seen.

No lanes. No speed limits. No rules. Just a wide open stretch of asphalt with cars, mopeds, bikes and vans hurtling in every direction. She'll never make it across.

A tall, distinguished Indian man, waves as he comes toward her. It is Suraj. He's accompanied by a colleague, RAM. They embrace warmly.

	SURAJ		ISABEL
Isabel!		Suraj!	

	SURAJ
	Allow me to introduce my colleague, Professor Rawat.

	ISABEL
	Hello, Professor. It's a pleasure.

RAM

Please call me Ram. And the
pleasure is mine.

CUT TO:

The trio race across the intersection and down the road,
passing sidewalk shrines to Hindu deities, adorned with
garlands. The men point out various people and places.

Isabel stops to browse a cart with brightly colored handmade
scarves. She selects one proudly.

ISABEL

For my cousin.

They pass a STATUE in a cage. The figure is of a stocky man,
in a western suit, tie and glasses. There's a pen in his
front pocket and he holds the Indian constitution.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Why is the statue caged?

RAM

Ah. Observant. Babasaheb. Leader of
the Dalits.

SURAJ

Isabel. It's Dr. Ambedkar.

ISABEL

Oh wow. He looks different here.

SURAJ

This is an image from when he
converted to Buddhism.

ISABEL

Ah, I see.

(drawn in)

He looks hopeful here. Beautiful.

SURAJ

He is those things to many of us.
All over the country, you'll see
his statues. Parks, road crossings,
railway stations, in villages and
cities both. To us, he's revered.
To others, they revile him. The
cage is to keep the vandals away.

They walk on. We linger with Ambedkar.

99A EXT/INT. AMBEDKAR NATIONAL MEMORIAL - DAY

99A

Walking towards the memorial building, Isabel is transfixed.

SURAJ

The site of Dr. Ambedkar's original home is now a museum. Quite magnificent. The building is shaped like an open book to commemorate the Indian Constitution that he helped draft.

They enter the building. Inside an INDIAN WOMAN DOCENT, shows the trio around. There is a beautiful statue of Ambedkar, life-sized. Dynamic.

ISABEL

Hello, Sir.
(beat)
No cages here.

She sits on a small bench near a schoolhouse exhibit. The docent begins to tell a story.

INDIAN WOMAN DOCENT

As a boy, Dr. Ambedkar walked to the schoolhouse carrying a gunny.

EXT./INT. INDIA SCHOOLHOUSE - 1900 - DAY

Dozens of little legs run up steps to a classroom. One boy lags behind, waiting his turn to enter after the others. This is YOUNG AMBEDKAR, 9. He carries a mat, rolled under his arm.

Inside the class, his small, brown hands smooth the edges of the jute mat that he places on the floor in the corner of the room. CLASSMATES go to great lengths to avoid passing him.

INDIAN WOMAN DOCENT (V.O.)

He was separated from kids of high caste, so as not to pollute them.

Watching instruction by the TEACHER from across the room, Young Ambedkar is not upset. He's not emotional. The sweet boy counts on his fingers to solve a math problem with the rest of the students. But his big brown eyes take in a view of the blackboard through the little legs of his classmates at their desks because Young Ambedkar is seated on the floor.

INDIAN WOMAN DOCENT (V.O.)

He was not allowed to touch things his classmates would touch. Desk included. He was not allowed to even touch the school's water.

Students dunk a wooden cup in a large water vessel to refresh themselves. Young Ambedkar waits alone at a separate pump until a GARDENER approaches and opens the tap.

The boy twists his head upside down as water rushes straight into his mouth and all over his face. He is trying to drink, unable to touch anything. Struggling to breath and swallow.

Once the tap is closed, he wipes his little hands on his shorts and his sweet face with the sleeve of his shirt. As if this is perfectly normal. Because for him, it is.

EXT. CAMPUS COURTYARD - LATER

Isabel records Suraj, Ram and Dalit intellectuals on an L-shaped sofa, including JAJULA, a Dalit woman scholar.

SURAJ

Are you a vegetarian or a pure vegetarian? Not a question you would expect on an application for a new flat in 2023. But, it is a legal way to determine if we are Dalits. Brahmins are mostly vegetarians. Most Dalits aren't pure vegetarian. So landlords will ask that. And our answer is a basis for denial of an apartment without them *technically* breaking anti-caste laws.

Isabel takes it all in, her eyes opening to what they share.

JAJULA

My thesis centered on Dr. King's visit to India. He saw many of these things first-hand while he and Mrs. King toured the country.

ISABEL

Wow. What was the specific focus on your work?

JAJULA

I explored his own analysis of his visit.

(MORE)

JAJULA (CONT'D)

I found the way in which he wrote about India to be fascinating as someone afflicted by caste in his own country. I used his essay in a magazine in the United States as the core of the research. Do you know Ebony Magazine?

ISABEL

He wrote about India in Ebony?

JAJULA

Yes! July 1959. It is quite extraordinary. He goes into great detail about the five weeks that they visited. They toured the whole country. Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta. Dr. King wrote specifically about caste in that article.

ISABEL

He used the word 'caste'?

JAJULA

Several times. He's explaining it to the readers of 'Ebony.' Those are African-American readers, correct?

ISABEL

Yes! Yes, they are.

(beat)

Did Dr. Ambedkar ever offer a solution on how to fight caste?

They respond enthusiastically in the affirmative. Isabel holds her recorder closer to them, capturing it all.

JAJULA

He believed that the custom of only marrying within one's social group and barring marriages between different types of people was the culprit.

ISABEL

Endogamy. Preventing intermarriage.

SURAJ

Yes. He called caste the artificial chopping up of the population into fixed and definite units. For Americans, the units are Black, Brown, Asian, white, etc.

(MORE)

SURAJ (CONT'D)

Here it is Brahmins and Dalits and others in between. That is one of the tenets of arranged marriages here. He believed keeping people of different kinds from marrying each other was the origin of caste.

Isabel takes notes as the group continues to chatter. Her mind is spinning.

INT. SHUTTLE - DAY

Her kind Indian driver commandeers the van through the hectic city streets. Isabel, her luggage by her side, is in the backseat. The urban landscape of Delhi zips past the window.

We hear Dr. King's voice from the referenced Ebony article.

DR. KING (V.O.)

In contrast to those in poverty, there are Indians who are rich, have luxurious estates, land, fine clothes. And then there is the problem of segregation. We call it race in America. They call it caste in India. In both places, it means that some are considered inferior, treated as though they deserve less. The bourgeoisie behaves the same the world over.

As she says goodbye to India, Isabel receives a TEXT ALERT.

It's from Teddy. It simply reads: "I think it will be today."

Her face falls. She starts to dial while gesturing to the driver to please pull over somewhere.

Her eyes begin to glisten. He tries to find a place to stop.

He pulls up to SAFDARJANG'S TOMB, a marble and red sandstone structure with several courtyards and octagonal towers.

EXT. SAFDARJANG'S TOMB - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Isabel holds the phone close to her ear, not clocking where she is as she walks through a long shadowed TUNNEL.

INT. MARION'S HOUSE - SAME TIME

Teddy stands at the window on the phone with Isabel. Then, walks to the bed revealing Marion.

Her state is alarming. Completely still, eyes closed, on a breathing machine.

INTERCUT ISABEL IN INDIA and MARION'S HOME.

TEDDY
(into the phone)
I'll hold up the phone.

He touches Marion's shoulder gently.

TEDDY (CONT'D)
(to Marion)
Baby.

She doesn't rouse. Just labored breathing through the machine. He puts the phone on SPEAKER.

TEDDY (CONT'D)
You're on speaker. She's... she's
not responding to folks.

ISABEL
I understand.

CLOSE on Isabel. Trying to get her bearings. Control her emotions, which are overflowing. She emerges from the tunnel into the stunning architectural surroundings.

But she looks to the sky. To the clouds over this majestic place. She focuses on ONE CLOUD.

ISABEL (CONT'D)
(then, softly)
Marion. It's Isabel. I believe that
you can hear me. I'm calling you
now to say goodbye.

Teddy drops his head, covers his mouth with one hand and holds the phone with the other.

ISABEL (CONT'D)
I want you to know that you have
meant so much to me. I will never
forget our talks. I've remembered
everything you said. Everything.
From when we were kids to the last
time I heard your voice. I promise
you...

(MORE)

ISABEL (CONT'D)

I'll never forget you for as long as I'm still here. You will walk and live in me. I'll never forget you.

Teddy takes Marion's hand, overcome. Isabel continues. Focusing on the cloud that is taking shape.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

My father and your father were so close. They loved each other so much, didn't they? They passed it on to us. We were so lucky. Watch out for me please. Cover me, okay? You'll have that power soon. I won't see you. But you'll see me. There's more to life than what we can see. You're going to experience it all.

Marion's face relaxes in a way that feels like peace. Her head moves ever so slightly. Teddy kisses her cheek.

WIDE on Isabel. She drops to her knees.

INT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - DAY

The door opens to reveal Isabel with her luggage. She steps inside, sets down her bags.

Then, she stands there. Still. There will be no hug from Brett. There will be no visit to Ruby. There will be no call from Marion. We feel their absence as we watch her.

But something has changed, she has a resolve. Something internal, intimate. A light within her guides her forward.

She removes her coat. Underneath, she wears the scarf she bought for Marion. She loops it around her neck.

She's ready to WRITE THIS BOOK. She steps PAST THE CAMERA.

INT. ISABEL'S OFFICE - MULTIPLE DAYS

Isabel rolls a suitcase into the room and kneels to open it. She unzips the suitcase to reveal a BEVY of BOOKS. She removes them like treasures, stopping at one by Ambedkar.

Over a montage, we hear her voice in her head. Writing.

Isabel reaches for a marker and makes notes on a LARGE WHITEBOARD near her desk entitled "*The Pillars of Caste.*"

ISABEL (V.O.)

Dr. Ambedkar wrote: Caste is an artificial chopping up of the population into fixed units.

She writes the words: Pillar #1: *"Endogamy: Control of Marriage and Mating."*

ISABEL (V.O.)

Each unit is prevented from fusing into another through the custom called endogamy. In showing how endogamy is maintained, we can prove the genesis and mechanism of caste.

FRAMED PHOTOGRAPHS. We jump across images of HER PARENTS in a loving embrace and of her and Brett, hugging and smiling.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Endogamy is defined as restricting marriage to people within the same caste.

She sits at her desk, with great focus. Sets down a piping hot cup of tea.

ISABEL (V.O.)

This is an ironclad foundation of any caste system - from ancient India, to the Nazi regime to the American colonizers.

Isabel opens her laptop with purpose. She punches keys to bring up a fresh document.

CLOSE on her face. Ready. Typing: *CASTE. By Isabel Wilkerson*

INT. GERMANY/DENMARK BORDER 1937 - NIGHT

August and Irma drive down a dusty road in a truck through the grasslands, holding hands. Worried, but determined.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Endogamy enforces caste boundaries by forbidding marriage, sexual relations or even the appearance of romantic interest across caste lines. It builds a firewall between certain people.

Then, the couple's expressions become wrought with fear. Up ahead, is a BLOCKADE of law enforcement.

IRMA
 (whispers)
 August.

AUGUST
 No.

IRMA
 Oh my God.

He looks to her and kisses her hand. It's all he can do.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 By closing off legal family
 connection, endogamy purposely
 blocks a sense of empathy and
 shared destiny between people.

They exit the car at GUNPOINT, eyes locked on each other over the hood. And then their worst fear -- the officials lift the canvas in the back of the truck.

CLOSE on what they find: A FIVE YEAR OLD GIRL huddled in the corner with a teddy bear in her arms. Irma screams. August wrestles with the officers.

Their daughter is lifted from the truck by uniformed men as August and Irma are arrested, taken in different directions.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE - PRESENT DAY

A CABINET REFURBISHER walks through with a drill one minute. Passing back with cabinets doors and hinges the next.

In the dining room, Isabel is buried in a book.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 One of the foremost scholars of
 caste in America once wrote: 'Tied
 to what one looked like, membership
 in either the upper or the lowest
 caste is immutable, primordial,
 fixed from birth to death,
 inescapable. One may neither earn
 nor wed their way out.'

She writes on a WHITEBOARD in Ruby's dining room: Pillar #5:
"Occupational Hierarchy."

EXT. MISSISSIPPI DELTA COTTON FIELD - DAY

The scene depicted on the cover of a book that she took from her home office shelf long ago: Three Black people in a 1930s pick-up truck.

The TRUCK zooms by as the three people in the truck watch a conversation happening on the side of the dirt road.

Those having the conversation seem uneasy with being watched.

A WHITE MAN, Burleigh Gardner and a WHITE WOMAN, Mary Gardner are clearly uncomfortable with the passersby. From behind, a BLACK MAN tips his straw hat to the people in the truck.

ISABEL (V.O.)

That scholar was Dr. Allison Davis.

(beat)

And he did the majority of his ground-breaking work undercover.

The CAMERA PANS from Burleigh and Mary to reveal Allison Davis, standing next to his wife, Elizabeth. The couple we followed in Berlin during the Nazi book burning.

They look very different from the dapper pair we saw in Germany. Allison is in overalls while Elizabeth wears a simple handmade sundress.

ALLISON

(to Burleigh and Mary)

They're okay.

MARY

You sure? There's no telling what this town'll do if they find out.

ELIZABETH

We all know what they'd do.

A beat of trepidation, then...

ALLISON

Let's stay on topic. There's nothing we can do about it now. And we have quite a bit to review.

They nod and listen to him intently. He's clearly the boss.

ELIZABETH

Well, we finally got proof that that one land owner, Bailey, has been whipping sharecroppers.

(MORE)

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

A tenant farmer named Bo told me
Bailey said if he didn't stop
'acting so big,' the next time it'd
be "a bullet or a rope."

Mary shakes her head in disgust.

MARY

Bailey's wife told me...
(reading from her notes)
'That's the way to manage 'em when
they get *too uppity*.'

Allison nods with encouragement.

BURLEIGH

We heard about a tenant farmer next
county over who was beaten so badly
by a store merchant, he can't bring
in a crop. We're heading over there
tomorrow to the store.

ALLISON

Do we know what sparked that?

MARY

The Negro MAN asked for a receipt.

BURLEIGH

Beat him right there in the store.

The quartet stands in a field far from the town. As they
speak, they look up and down the road, constantly monitoring
their surroundings with an air of apprehension.

ISABEL (V.O.)

In the fall of 1933, Alison Davis
and his wife Elizabeth cut short
their advanced studies at the
University of Berlin and fled
Germany when Hitler took power.
They'd seen the Nazis burn books
and jail teachers, and this gave
Dr. Davis new insight into the
nature of hate. It inspired him to
study the *process* of injustice.

The team finish their meeting and head to their cars.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Davis was a young anthropologist
with two degrees from Harvard
University and a wealth of
experience abroad.

(MORE)

ISABEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 But, once in Mississippi, he had to
 conceal all of that to survive. One
 slip-up, one breach of the social
 order, could cost them all their
 lives.

Inside the car, Allison adjusts the GUN tucked into the back
 of his belt. Elizabeth glances down at it for a moment as he
 adjusts it to drive, satisfied that they have it.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 And this was exactly what they were
 doing in Natchez, Mississippi:
 breaching the social order to study
 the social hierarchy of the South.
 A mission that would render them
 undercover investigators in order
 to fit into the community. The
 other half of their team was...

Burleigh and Mary Gardner start their car and make a U-turn.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 ... a white couple named Burleigh
 and Mary Gardner, also Harvard
 anthropologists. Less experienced,
 but passionate about the topic. The
 mission was quietly revolutionary.
 Together, all four would embed
 themselves in an isolated southern
 town from both sides of the caste
 divide. This would be one of the
 first studies of its kind.

Both cars take off in different directions.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 But coming from the North, neither
 couple fully knew what they were
 getting themselves into.

EXT/INT. NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI - VARIOUS LOCATIONS

The elaborate process taken to conduct the landmark research.

QUICK CUT: Elizabeth Davis pushing her cart in the GROCERY
 STORE. She stops to inspect the canned goods, when Mary
 passes her without acknowledgement. A BLACK MAID pushes her
 cart for her. Elizabeth makes eye contact with the maid, nods
 out of respect. While Elizabeth distracts the Black woman,
 Mary retrieves a SMALL NOTEBOOK from near the canned goods.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Out in public, they had to remain in character at all times, with the Davises required to show deference to the Gardners and never give the appearance that they were, in fact, colleagues in the trenches.

QUICK CUT: Allison Davis tips his hat and steps aside to allow Burleigh to pass as he and a RED-HAIRED MAN cross paths ON THE STREET. Burleigh doesn't acknowledge him as he passes.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Davis was the leader of the team, but they couldn't let the locals know that. They had to keep to their own caste performance. Everyone had to play the part expected of them. It was imperative that the white man appear to be the leader. That the Black people be subservient to the whites. It was perilous to step out of character.

QUICK CUT: Red Hair looks back at Allison, scornfully.

RED-HAIRED

That monkey's too big for his britches. Might have to train him.

Burleigh nods and plays along.

QUICK CUT: A thicket of trees obscure TWO CARS parking side by side. The passenger and back doors of one side are open facing the same profile of the opposite car. The four discuss and share information as if they are in a true office.

MARY

I don't see how we stay much longer. Our neighbor practically invited us to a lynching yesterday. We can't skirt that kind of thing too many more times without it becoming obvious we're avoiding.

BURLEIGH

And Allison, there've been some unkind things said about you. I can't be sure some of these folks don't get a mind to do something.

ELIZABETH

(rattled)

We're seeing similar suspicion. We should consider...

ALLISON

(rallying)

Not yet. If they're inviting you places and talking freely around you, you're getting into the white inner circle of this town and *that* is what we need to observe. Liz and I made our way into the Black inner circle, day by day, hard fought. This is the core of our research.

(beat)

You can't smash the system, if you don't understand how it works.

(beat)

We show people how it works. That's our job. Right here. We're close.

They listen and agree.

QUICK CUT: The Gardners on the porch of their quaint home in the white side of town, reading, researching, debating, typing. The street is alive with warmth and family bonds.

ISABEL (V.O.)

The two couples kept on the move. Constantly changing clandestine locations for safety. They couldn't go to each other's homes. Mixing of races was not allowed publicly, in any form except subservience.

Kids ride shiny bikes with tassels as a POLICE CRUISER rolls by. The children bicycle after the car, waving admiringly.

QUICK CUT: The Davises on the porch of a ramshackled house in the Black part of town, reading, researching, debating, typing. The community is alive with warmth and family bonds.

ELIZABETH

The most striking tenant of their embrace of supremacy is deference. That has to be the core of the chapter, don't you think?

ALLISON

Maybe you're right. Deference goes beyond mere observance of certain formalities - we call them "sir" and they call us "boy" and "gal." It extends to what the Negro is allowed to *express* and how.

ELIZABETH

Exactly. Never contradicting whites. Never correcting them. Always agreeing with them.

ALLISON

Yes, Lizzy. Good. Not only having to *observe* rules of deferential speech and conduct, but also...
(writing, thinking)
... Negroes better *believe* them wholeheartedly and act accordingly. No reservations.

ELIZABETH

It's not enough to conform reluctantly.

ALLISON

Right. Conform willingly. Cheerfully even. Or else.

Then, they notice Essie, the maid Elizabeth saw in the store. She observes them a few yards away with raised eyebrows.

ESSIE

Evenin'. Ya'll eat? Been out he' readin' and writin' fah hours. Ya'll ain't wont nothin'? Greens wit' fatback. Gone git cold.

They immediately CODE SWITCH, changing their language and intonation from academic exploration to colloquial greeting.

ALLISON

Hey nah! Ain't gotta tell me twice!

ELIZABETH

We comin'. We ready. Thank ya.

They put away their books and follow their neighbor inside while exchanging looks to each other. Did she hear them?

Kids play with homemade baseball sticks as a POLICE CRUISER slowly rolls by. The kids stop and watch - on guard.

Allison nods and casts his eyes down deferentially as the SHERIFF eyes him with a sneer of disdain. Then drives on.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

We barely made it out of Germany,
Allison. Let's not wait for the
same thing to happen here.

CLOSE on Allison. It might be time to go.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE - DAY

It's RAINING. WORKMEN carry plaster and hoses to the back of the house, leaving muddy footprints on the hardwood floors.

Isabel clocks it, but goes back to reading a book. It's the same one that she took off of her shelf long ago when she attempted to write about Trayvon Martin. The same one she held dearly at the gala event in the stacks alone.

Now, for the first time, we see that the back cover shows THE PORTRAIT OF TWO COUPLES: the Davises and The Gardners.

INT. EAST COAST PORTRAIT STUDIO - DAY

Both couples pose for a picture being taken in a portrait studio. They fuss over their ties and smooth their hair, patting their skirts, raising their posture.

ISABEL (V.O.)

In 1941, the Davis and Gardner team emerged with perhaps the most comprehensive study, to this day, of the American caste system. Their ethnographic fieldwork was a choice to risk their lives to document the structure of human division. The Davises and The Gardners remained lifelong friends.

They look quite serious. Then, at the photographer's urging, they all smile as the FLASH bursts.

EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - ANOTHER DAY

The Arborist from before is working in the yard as Isabel writes on her laptop on the porch. A POSTAL WORKER approaches with mail and a warm greeting.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Their book "Deep South" is a quietly revolutionary, landmark experiment in interracial scholarship. A brilliant, compassionate, rigorous testimony of a long ago era.

Isabel puts down the computer to receive the package.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 With each passing year, it becomes an even more valuable gift to those who seek to understand the divisions of caste.

She opens it with care. Then, removes a sheet of stamps.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Dr. Allison Davis became the first Black tenured professor at a major white American university. His work would go on to inspire Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Stokely Carmichael and countless others who want to understand the origin of our discontent.

CLOSE on the face of the stamp. An older Allison Davis gazes back, proudly enshrined on the postage. Silver-haired. Regal.

INT. NEW YORK PUBLISHING OFFICE - DAY

A swanky Manhattan office with chic decor. Isabel is escorted past the open work spaces into the office of her editor, Kate, who greets her with genuine warmth.

CUT TO:

Both women sit in Swedish designer chairs with their laptops.

KATE
 The pillars are working. They give it shape. How many do you think there'll be?

ISABEL
 Six or seven, I think. I'm close to finalizing it.

KATE
 You're going to make this deadline.

ISABEL

I am going to make this deadline.

KATE

This self-imposed deadline.

ISABEL

There's no one to push me anymore.
I have to push myself.

This stops Kate, finally understanding.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

(pivoting)

Pillar five. Heritability.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

This one is fascinating. Horrifying
and fascinating.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

In India, generally one's social
rank is passed down by the father.
What he is, you are. In America
though, colonial Virginia, children
inherited the caste of their mother
by law.

KATE

Right. But why?

ISABEL

(a twinkle in her eye)

Caste.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

White men put it into a law so they
could claim the children that came
from their rapes of Black women as
property.

KATE

(dawning on her)

The more Black women they
impregnated, the richer they got.

ISABEL

They protected their "property" and
their profit. But they also
protected so-called "whiteness."
Which leads to the key pillar. One
that's central to all of this.

(MORE)

ISABEL (CONT'D)

The destruction of relationship
between people of different kinds.
Often through violence.

INT. MONTGOMERY AIRPORT - DAY

Isabel walks through the small terminal, passing historical exhibits that highlight the city's civil rights movement. Dr. King, Rosa Parks, the Montgomery bus boycott.

INT/EXT. THE LEGACY MUSEUM - DAY

She enters the dazzling museum dedicated to tracing American history from enslavement to mass incarceration. The exhibits are dynamic and emotional. She browses, notebook in use.

Isabel comes to a double height wall with laws written on squared panels to illustrate the injustice of the American legal system. One reads: "Marriage or cohabitation with knowledge of the difference in race between a person of Caucasian or white race and a person of the colored or negro race shall result in imprisonment, with or without hard labor, for not more than five years." The law is attributed to the Louisiana Criminal Code.

There are others outlining harsh laws to regulate matters of the heart. We JUMPCUT through the policies of several states.

ISABEL (V.O.)

It was the caste system - through the practice of endogamy which essentially regulated people's romantic choices over the course of centuries - that created and reinforced the idea of "races," by permitting only those with similar physical traits to legally mate. Endogamy laws written and enforced by white men designed the population of the United States. This social engineering maintained the superficial differences that the American hierarchy is based on. The idea of your "race" was the result of who was officially allowed to procreate with whom. And, if you were not a white man, and you violated that...

EXT. NATIONAL MEMORIAL FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE - DAY

Isabel stands amidst a majestic memorial which outlines the crimes for which Black people were lynched.

Arthur St. Clair, a minister, was lynched in Hernando County, Florida, in 1877 for performing the wedding of a black man and white woman.

David Walker, his wife, and their four children were lynched in Hickman, Kentucky, in 1908 after Mr. Walker was accused of using inappropriate language with a white woman.

Lacy Mitchell was lynched in Thomasville, Georgia, in 1930 for testifying against a white man accused of raping a black woman.

Isabel walks within a pavilion of more than 800 6-foot-tall steel beams suspended from above. Each is inscribed with the name of a state and a county where an African-American was lynched. As she walks through, the beams hang high and higher, conjuring the sensation of a body being strung up, rising from the ground by rope.

ISABEL (V.O.)

An unknowable number of lives were lost due to endogamy, the defining pillar of caste. It triggered the most publicized cases of lynchings in America. A protocol strictly enforced against Black men and white women. While white men kept full and flagrant access to Black women, whatever their age or marital status. In this way, the dominant gender of the dominant caste, in addition to controlling the livelihood and lives of everyone "beneath" them, also eliminated the competition for its own women and controlled who had access to whom for romantic relationships and reproduction.

Isabel touches Brett's watch as she stands beneath the ascending steel structures.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE - ANOTHER DAY

Books and files are scattered across the dining room table. A white board with various pillars of caste listed, crossed through and circled, commands the middle of the living room. Isabel is typing intensely when there is a KNOCK at the door.

She opens it to find a PLUMBER in uniform. A plumber with a Trump hat on. He's surprised to see her. She's shocked by the hat. But of course, she covers.

INT. RUBY'S BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

They descend the stairs to the basement. She leads.

They both step into about two inches of water. She goes to move things and make room for him to inspect the problem. Her mother's portable wheelchair. A lampshade. Stacks of her father's engineering books. An old bucket.

ISABEL

(to the plumber)

There had been three or four inches of water, but the HVAC guy helped get the sump pump restarted to drain most of the water out.

(off his silence)

This has never happened before.

She begins sweeping water as he looks down at the wet floor.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

I hardly ever come into the basement. We had that drought, so I didn't think about water in the basement. My husband was the one who came down here. He was the one who checked the filter on the furnace, checked the fuse box. He died last year.

He just nods with disinterest, then digs into his tool bag.

PLUMBER

Uh-huh.

He steps over a few boxes, knocking a wreath to the wet floor and not bothering to pick it up. Isabel observes this with frustration, but keeps sweeping - as is her way.

He finally points to the sink.

PLUMBER (CONT'D)

That's where the water's coming in.

ISABEL

(with subtle disagreement)

But the sink's never overflowed before. Maybe there's a drain somewhere. Maybe it's clogged.

She begins to move boxes, feeling alone and upset. At his inaction. At his lack of empathy. At his hat. At everything.

PLUMBER

Probably the pump needs clearing out. I'll write an estimate.

Why was he not looking to fix it? Wasn't that what he was here for? She's not upset. She's sad. As if humanity has failed her. We watch her watching him write an estimate. And then, almost involuntarily...

ISABEL

My mother just died a few months ago. Is your mother still alive?

PLUMBER

(caught off-guard)
No, no, she's not. Died in 1991. Fifty-two years old.

ISABEL

Goodness. That's not old at all.

PLUMBER

(with regret)
Sure ain't. I'm about that age now. Father's still alive though. He's seventy-eight.

ISABEL

You're lucky to still have him.

PLUMBER

Well, he's mean as they come.

She takes this in, imagining what it's meant in his life.

ISABEL

You miss them when they're gone no matter what they were like.

PLUMBER

(nods)
Got an aunt in her eighties who still smokes and'll ask for a swig of beer if you got a can nearby. On my daddy's side.

ISABEL

Your father's side is long-lived.

PLUMBER
 (a small smile to himself)
 Yeah. I guess they are.

He goes to the pump, bends down and starts to clear it out.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 It is harder to dehumanize a single
 person standing in front of you.
 Harder to dehumanize an individual
 you've gotten the chance to know.

He takes off his Trump hat to get a better look.

PLUMBER
 If you get one end, we can move
 this and see if there's a drain.

Together, they move the table and find the drain. He trains
 his flashlight along the floor, inspecting the perimeter,
 along the base of the furnace, every corner up and down.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Which is why people and groups who
 seek power and division don't
 bother with dehumanizing an
individual. Better to attach a
 stigma, a taint of pollution, to an
entire group. Dehumanize the group
 and you've successfully dehumanized
 every individual person within it.

PLUMBER
 I found it. Found the problem.

ISABEL
 What was it?

PLUMBER
 Water heater's gone bad.

EXT. RUBY'S PORCH - A SHORT TIME LATER

The plumber completes her receipt on his clipboard and hands
 it to her. His hat is in his hand. Not on his head. He nods,
 then heads to his pickup.

ISABEL (V.O.)
 Nazi Germany, the United States and
 India all reduced Jews, African-
 Americans and Dalits to an
 undifferentiated mass of nameless,
 faceless scapegoats.

She's relieved he's gone and that she got what she needed. No sentimentality. Just stark recognition of what just occurred.

INT. RUBY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

She immediately goes to the whiteboard and writes furiously, sparked by a new idea. She writes: Pillar #7: *Dehumanization*.

QUICK CUTS: DALIT WOMEN knee deep in HUMAN EXCREMENT, cleaning a large latrine BY HAND.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Millennia ago, Dalits were called the Untouchables of India and forced into the degrading work of manual scavenging, the practice of cleaning excrement from toilets and open drains by hand in exchange for leftover food. This persists to this day. To refuse is to invite severe punishment or death.

QUICK CUTS: Close of the women loading the waste with their hands into cane baskets and carrying it on their heads for disposal. This isn't feudal India. It is now. A CAR passes.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Indian activists explain that the manual scavenger is not a form of employment, but an injustice akin to slavery. It is one of the most prominent forms of discrimination against Dalits, and it is central to the violation of their human rights. To their dehumanization.

QUICK CUTS: Black people stacked horizontally, naked, gasping for air, chained together, starving.

ISABEL (V.O.)

More than sixty million human beings were tortured to death and thrown overboard on slave ships during the Middle Passage. Sixty million. Sixty. Million. Souls. The trade and sale of African people demolished communities, obliterated families and tore flesh from spirit.

(MORE)

ISABEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Through violent storms at sea,
starvation, mutilation and rape,
Black people were stacked and
squeezed into the hulls of ships to
be sold into further unfathomable
terror.

QUICK CUTS: Closer now. Among them, some are dead. A horror.

ISABEL (V.O.)
Their bodies did not belong to
them, but to the dominating caste
to do with however it wished.

QUICK CUTS: Close on their faces now. An unspeakable anguish.

ISABEL (V.O.)
A piece of property to be possessed
with complete disregard for human
dignity. To be worked until dead.
No longer daughter of a fisherman
or a nephew of the midwife. Now, a
soul-less animal. Not human.

QUICK CUTS: Jewish people being stripped, their heads shaved.
Then they are lined up, all in the same striped uniforms.

ISABEL (V.O.)
Upon their arrival at the
concentration camps, Jews were
stripped of the clothing of their
former lives. Their heads were
shaved, distinguishing features,
like sideburns or red hair, were
deleted from them. They were no
longer personalities to engage
with. They became a single mass,
purposely easier for SS officers to
distance themselves from.

QUICK CUTS: Close on their faces now.

ISABEL (V.O.)
Loving mothers, headstrong nephews,
dedicated bakers and watchmakers
all merged into a single mass of
undifferentiated bodies. No longer
seen as humans deserving empathy,
but as objects over whom control
could be exerted. They were no
longer people, they were numbers.
Dehumanized.

CLOSE on one face at the camp in particular. It is Irma. August's love. Once vibrant and full of life. Now, with her hair gone. Her smile gone. The light in her eyes gone.

INT. VARIOUS PLACES - DAY

We see FLASHES of IMAGES toppling onto one another, the culmination of Isabel's research now cascading into words that will be the foundation of her book.

- Isabel reads passages in the office to Kate.
- Isabel researches in a LIBRARY.
- She writes "*Terror and Cruelty*" on the whiteboard at home.
- QUICK CUTS of a rope roughly looped around the neck of the battered, BARELY CONSCIOUS BLACK MAN, circa 1933. A LITTLE WHITE GIRL points in awe from her father's shoulders. We recognize him as the Red Haired Man from Natchez. They are among dozens of WHITE ONLOOKERS who revel in the carnival-like atmosphere of murder.
- QUICK CUTS of a WHITE MAN IN A SUIT, circa 1933, grabbing his mail after a long day. He rifles through envelopes to find a POSTCARD. The front has a PHOTOGRAPH of the lynching. He flips it over to read the inscription on the back: "Token of a great day. This is the barbecue that we had."
- Isabel writes at a patio table in front of the bakery when Amari, the editor who wanted her to write an essay, happens by. They greet each other warmly. He sits and they chat.
- She writes the words: "*Inherent Superiority vs. Inherent Inferiority*" on the whiteboard.
- We see ASHES falling from the sky during the second world war. Germans go about their daily lives, trying to normalize the human remains that blanket their cars and bikes.
- Isabel sits on her mother's bed. We've seen her here before. Packing begrudgingly. This time, she works with purpose. She opens the bottom drawer of Ruby's dresser and removes the whole thing, bringing it to the bed. She rummages through and finds loose newspaper clippings - of sports events, wedding announcements and local stories. One catches her eye. The headline: "Little League Baseball Team Rewarded With Swim Day At Local Pool." CLOSE on Isabel, remembering her mom's story in the clouds.
- In her home, she writes "*Purity vs. Pollution*" on the whiteboard. Then the name "Al Bright."

EXT. LITTLE LEAGUE GAME - YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO - 1951

A chubby-cheeked sweetheart of an 8-year-old boy, AL BRIGHT, is on second base of a Little League baseball field. He watches wide-eyed as his white teammate slams the bat, sending the ball far into the outfield.

As the opposing side scrambles to recover, Al yelps in excitement and takes off to the next plate. His teammates, all white except for Al, do the same. Four boys hurdle over home base one after the other in ECSTATIC TRIUMPH as the kids in the dugout GO BANANAS. Al is euphoric as are his mother and father in the stands, and all the parents and spectators. The team starts to chant.

TEAM MEMBERS
City! Champs! City! Champs!

INT. SCHOOL BUS - NEXT DAY

Al is on the school bus with his teammates. All the boys are happy and eagerly anticipating their destination. As the bus pulls in front of the municipal pool, the COACH, a sturdy white man in a baseball cap, makes a few announcements.

COACH
(stern)
Boys. I want you to behave
yourselves in here.

The boys nod solemnly. No intention of getting out of line.

COACH (CONT'D)
But the biggest thing I want...
(switches to joyful)
I want you to enjoy! You earned it!

The boys hoop and holler.

COACH (CONT'D)
We'll have the championship picnic
on the lawn right after we swim a
little. How's that sound?!

Sounds perfect! The champs are here!

EXT. MUNICIPAL PARK - PRESENT DAY

Isabel walks into the park to meet an ELDERLY WHITE MAN. She shakes his hand as he rises from the picnic table to shake hers. He begins to tell a story as she records and writes.

EXT. MUNICIPAL PARK - 1951

The boys eagerly stream through the gates of the park with coaches and some parents. Al happily enters with his friends when a WHITE PARK WORKER approaches.

WHITE PARK WORKER

Hey, boy.

All the boys turn, but they know immediately which one is being spoken to. And Al does too. The tone made it clear.

Al steps forward tentatively.

AL BRIGHT

Yessir?

PARK WORKER

You can't be in here right now. You know better.

Al is confused. He looks at his teammates and then to the COACH who is approaching the WHITE PARK WORKER.

COACH

Everything okay here?

PARK WORKER

This boy with your team?

COACH

Yes. He's one of my players.

The Park Worker steps away from the boys with the Coach. We stay with Al's little face as he watches, wondering what's happening. His friends do too. The boys watch an animated conversation between the men. Wisps of the conversation: "The maintenance crew won't have time to disinfect it."

ISABEL (V.O.)

The coach hadn't calculated for Al in that setting as the only Black player. He tried to bargain.

We see a couple of WHITE MALE PARENTS approach the huddle with the coach. "Most of these boys' parents are at work. His too. He has to stay with us."

ISABEL (V.O.)

They tried to persuade the pool officials to let Al in, but the park people weren't budging.

(MORE)

ISABEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

They agreed to one thing to lessen the coach's embarrassment and not spoil the day for the others.

CUT TO:

A pool full of energetic boys DIVING AND SPLASHING. Picnic tables overflow with hot dogs, chips, punch and cookies.

And outside the CHAIN LINK FENCE in a small sliver of grass near the cement sidewalk, Al sits alone on a blanket.

Watching from afar, he's not crying. He's not emotional. Sadly, he's watching as if its a scene on a television show or a movie. A spectator.

His big brown eyes track friends from picnic table to diving board. His little hands holding a hot dog that's been brought to him. He takes a small bite. Then looks back to the boys. Chewing slowly. Observing the fun. Even smiling at something he sees here or there.

ISABEL (V.O.)

From time to time, one or another of the players or adults came out and sat with him before returning to join the others.

QUICK CUTS: A WHITE MOTHER bringing a paper bowl of potato salad. TWO TEAMMATES wandering over to talk with him through the fence. Al rises to talk with them, then sits down again when they head back.

Coaches and parents in a group with park officials again.

ISABEL (V.O.)

It took an hour or so to finally convince the lifeguards that they should at least allow Al into the pool for just a few minutes. The supervisor agreed to let him in, but only...

Boys and others scurry out of the pool.

ISABEL (V.O.)

...if everyone - teammates, parents, all the white people in the pool - got out of the water. And only if Al followed the rules they set for him.

EXT. POOL - MOMENTS LATER

Al walks past his friends and classmates led by a LIFEGUARD who places a SMALL BRIGHT YELLOW RUBBER RAFT in the pool and waits for him to climb in. He struggles to do it alone, with no one touching or helping him and with the mandate that...

LIFEGUARD

You cannot touch that water, boy.
Hear me?

AL BRIGHT

(quietly)
Yessir.

Once Al is in, the Lifeguard gets into the pool and begins to PUSH THE RAFT with Al on top for a single turn around the pool.

Dozens of teammates, coaches and parents watch from the side. Some satisfied, some ashamed, all letting it happen.

LIFEGUARD

(to Al)
Don't touch that water. Keep your
balance.

Al holds his small body completely still, except for his eyes which dart away from his teammates and onto the untouchable water lapping against the shiny white tiles of the pool.

ISABEL (V.O.)

After the few minutes that it took
to complete the lap, Al was taken
back to his assigned spot on the
other side of the fence.

EXT. MUNICIPAL PARK - MOMENTS LATER

The little boy lays on his blanket alone again. This time, not watching the poolside activity. But playing with a blade of grass in his beautiful, brown hands.

ISABEL (V.O.)

The lifeguard had managed to keep
the water pure, untainted by Black
skin, for all the white patrons.

PRESENT DAY ISABEL approaches Al. He looks up at her.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Al Bright went on to become an
artist and educator.

(MORE)

ISABEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
He was the first full-time Black
faculty member at his alma mater,
Youngstown State University.

She reclines next to him on the grass, side by side. When he turns his head to her, we see that he's been crying. A tear falls down his cheek.

ISABEL (V.O.)
I missed talking to him for the
book by a matter of months. He
passed away at age 82. But a part
of him died that afternoon in 1951.
I'm told he was never the same.

She looks at him with tears in her eyes too. And for the first time, she allows them to fall freely. No restraint.

ISABEL
(to Al)
You're gonna be okay. All is well.

She smiles at him. And he smiles back.

She reaches to wipe his tears. Then, her own.

END MONTAGE

INT. ISABEL'S BEDROOM - DAWN

The first rays of the day stream into her bedroom. Isabel sits on the floor at the foot of her bed.

She's clearly been up all night, but she's in the zone. Her energy is serene and powerful.

She strokes Sophie's fur, deep in thought. Deep in gratitude. Then, takes a deep breath and types with great satisfaction.

Then, closes her laptop, quietly triumphant.

EXT. ISABEL'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

She walks onto the lawn, every inch covered by leaves. And with a rake in hand, begins to move them into tidy piles.

INT/EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - DAY

A completely refurbished house. The home is empty, clear and pristine. The doorknobs are polished. The paint is fresh and new. Isabel takes stock as she says goodbye.

She moves down the hallway, taking a last look in each room.

ISABEL

When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have brought. But, choose not to look at your own peril.

She enters the living room and takes stock.

ISABEL (V.O.)

We're all like homeowners who've inherited a house on a piece of land that's beautiful on the outside, but the soil is unstable. People say, 'I had nothing to do with how this all started. I never owned slaves. I didn't mistreat Untouchables. I didn't gas Jews.' And, yes. Not one of us was around when this house was built. But here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks built into the foundation and a roof that must be replaced.

Still and satisfied, she relishes the achievement.

ISABEL (V.O.)

We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We didn't erect the uneven pillars, but they are ours to deal with now. The cracks won't fix themselves. Any more deterioration is on our watch.

She closes the curtains and makes her way to the door, then looks back at the home one last time.

EXT. RUBY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

WIDE on the house from the street as Isabel closes the door.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Caste is not hatred. It is the worn grooves of routine and expectation. Patterns of a social order that have been in place so long it looks natural - when it isn't.

She starts down the path to the curb. As she walks away from the home, there are PEOPLE ON THE LAWN. She doesn't see them, but they see her.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Caste is everywhere, yet invisible.
No one avoids exposure to its
message. And the message is simple:
one kind of person is more
deserving of freedom than another
kind.

On the lawn, she passes Trayvon Martin, the teenager who bought Skittles, who watches her calmly in his black hoodie.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Freedom to go wherever you want to
go.

She passes August and Irma, the lovely couple from Germany.

ISABEL

Freedom to love whoever you want to
love.

She passes Allison and Elizabeth, the couple who traveled from Berlin to Natchez.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Freedom to express yourself however
you want to express yourself.

And then she passes Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, who tips his hat.

ISABEL (V.O.)

Freedom to resist and fight for
your human right to do so.

Isabel passes the camera to reveal Ruby, Marion and Brett on the front porch. They watch her go with pride.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

Isabel speaks with confidence and candor to a standing room only crowd. She speaks without notecards.

The cover of her new book CASTE is projected behind her.

ISABEL

The tragedy of caste is that we are
judged on the very things we cannot
change: the signposts on our body
of gender and ancestry.

(MORE)

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Superficial differences that have nothing to do with *who we are inside*.

(beat)

The goal of this work has not been to resolve all of the problems of a millennia old phenomenon. But to *bear witness* to it's presence in our everyday lives and to shine light on its history - despite those who try to deny it and withhold it. Despite those try to convince us that we don't need to know. We need to know.

(beat)

We don't escape trauma by ignoring it. We escape trauma by confronting it.

(beat)

You can be born to the dominant caste, but choose not to dominate. You can be born to a subordinated caste and choose to take this information -- and fight.

(beat)

My mother once told me: "All you control is you." So, now that you know what caste is and how it works, how will you be brave?

(beat)

I'll leave you with that. And I thank you very much for having me.

FADE TO BLACK.

END CARD:

CASTE, written by Isabel Wilkerson, debuted at Number Two on the New York Times Best Seller List in August 2020, two and a half months after the murder of George Floyd.

The critically-acclaimed book remained among the top in the nation for 57 weeks, rising to number one on the week of Donald Trump's defeat in the U.S. Presidential Election.

Wilkerson book's dedication reads:

"To the memory of Brett who defied caste and to the memory of my mother, father and family who survived it."