

A GENTLE GOODNIGHT

Down on the lake pier, René and Laurence share laughs and maybe a joint or two. On the drive back home, they share their time and comfort a dying animal.

In darkness, a PHONE RINGS. A man answers. His name is LAURENCE.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
Yooo.

No immediate response from the caller.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
Hello?
René?

Finally:

RENÉ (V.O.)
Hey ...

There's anxiety and a bit of sadness in RENÉ's voice.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
You okay?

Beat.

RENÉ (V.O.)
Yeah...
Yeah, I'm fine.
What are you up to?

Laurence exhales hard.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
I'm about to stab this *effin'*
script in the throat.

Laurence tries to be funny, but the joke is lost in silence.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
You?

RENÉ (V.O.)
Just thinking.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
About me, huh?

Another joke lost. Back to back awkward beats for Laurence.

RENÉ (V.O.)
Can you break away and come here?

With concern, Laurence asks:

LAURENCE (V.O.)
You sure you're okay?

RENÉ (V.O.)
I just want to get out.

A short beat.

LAURENCE (V.O.)
Alright. I'll come now.

The connection is cut. And we FADE IN:

EXT. ARIZONA DESERT -- DUSK

The sun sets below the horizon. Soft light deepens across the darkening sky as a CAR moves along a road winding through the desert.

INT. CAR - MOVING THROUGH DESERT -- CONTINUOUS

Just calm road noise. We are close on a heart-shaped LOCKET, caressed by thin fingers belonging to a feeble hand. Engraved across the surface of the silver locket is the word, F.E.A.R.

Pulling up, we reveal the woman who wears the locket, René (29). She's thin and white. Oddly beautiful. She looks sick in her face, cancer most likely, her body beaten and aged by chemo. She wears a head scarf for all the obvious reasons.

LAURENCE (O.S.)
I hope no one's in our spot.

René slowly looks away from the passenger window over at the driver, Laurence (32). Black, well kept, uncommonly handsome.

RENÉ
It's our spot. We wrote our names
on it last time, remember?

Laurence looks over and meets René's eyes. They're weak and show signs of jaundice, but they're beautiful. He smiles, nods.

LAURENCE
That's right. We sure did.

René smiles. Turns away and looks out the passenger window.

PULL OUTSIDE THE CAR

As it passes a yellow **Horse Crossing** sign on the shoulder.

Off the sign...

EXT. SAGUARO LAKE -- LATER NIGHT

A clear starlit night. A desert lake surrounded by mountains. Laurence and René's voices echo from somewhere on the water.

LAURENCE (O.S.)

A black bear walks into a bar and says give me a whiskey and... cola. The bartender then asks, why the big pause? The bear shrugs and says, I'm not sure, I was born with them.

RENÉ (O.S.)

I don't get it.

LAURENCE (O.S.)

Big paws.

RENÉ (O.S.)

Big pause what?

LAURENCE (O.S.)

Not pause. Like paws. On a bear. Why the big paws...

And then, finally...

RENÉ (O.S.)

Oh!

She gets it.

EXT. SAGUARO LAKE - PIER -- SAME

A pier stretches out onto the lake. Laurence and René sit at the end. René has her head on Laurence's shoulder. She's smiling, still laughing pretty hard at that joke. She still looks sick, but much happier. Could be the company. Could be the air. Could be the lit joint she's handing to Laurence.

RENÉ

I don't know why I'm laughing at these jokes. They're terrible!

Laurence is dying laughing, too. He hits the joint. Holds it. Then slowly blows smoke out through his mouth.

LAURENCE

I'm still tryna figure out why the bear's gotta be black? He can't be a brown bear or a polar bear?

René rolls her eyes at Laurence.

RENÉ

Shut up.

She reaches for the joint.

LAURENCE

It's true.

René grins, shakes her head. Laurence passes the joint to her. She takes it. Holds it between her fingers as Laurence points a flashlight down on a book open on his lap.

René lightly kicks her feet in the dark water as Laurence searches for another joke.

LAURENCE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Okay, here's one.

Laurence looks over at René. She glances sideways.

RENÉ

What?

LAURENCE

If you don't get this one, there's seriously no hope for you.

She smiles. Brings the joint to her lips--

RENÉ

Just read it.

She takes a masterful drag.

LAURENCE

(reading)

What do race horses eat?

René's eyes narrow as she holds the smoke in. She exhales, coughs.

RENÉ

Wait, what?

LAURENCE

What do race horses eat?

René struggles. Tries stealing a peek, but Laurence quickly moves the light from the book.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)

Hey! No cheating!

RENÉ

Repeat the question.

René passes the joint to Laurence.

LAURENCE

You only get one repeat.

He takes it into his hand.

RENÉ

One repeat? What is that?

LAURENCE

The rules.

RENÉ

I never asked for a repeat, though.
You donated that one.

Laurence takes a moment to consider that.

LAURENCE

Alright, I'll read it again.

RENÉ

Clearly this time.

Laurence smiles, reads painstakingly slow.

LAURENCE

What.. do.. race.. horses.. eat?

He ashes the joint on the pier. Brings it to his lips and takes a hit as René thinks about the possible answers.

RENÉ

I know this question warrants a
dumb answer, but all I can think of
is a beet pulp-based feed high in
fiber.

Laurence CHOKES on the hit and the hilarity of René's answer.

LAURENCE

WHAAAAT??

He LAUGHS so hard he can hardly breathe. René smiles.

RENÉ

What?

Laurence takes several deep breathes, calms himself.

LAURENCE

Please tell me you didn't just say
a beet pulp-based feed high in
fiber?

RENÉ

I did.

Laurence CONVULSES again. Laughs so hard, he nearly falls
into the lake. René starts to laugh.

RENÉ (CONT'D)

What did you expect? I bred horses
all my life!

Laurence is in stitches. René's laughing now, too.

LAURENCE

That is the most complicated answer
I've ever heard.

René playfully hits Laurence on the arm.

RENÉ

What's the answer then jerk?

Laurence show her the book. René reads the answer.

RENÉ (CONT'D)

Fast food. Wow. I should've known.

Laurence ROARS with laughter.

LAURENCE

You said, beet pulp-based feed high
in fiber...

Off another round of shared laughter, we ...

CUT TO:

EXT. PIER -- MOMENTS LATER

The laughter finally tapering off. René and Laurence sit,
catching their breaths, wiping tears from their eyes. Book
closed, flashlight off, it's darker now. Laurence exhales.

LAURENCE

God, that was hilarious. My abs are
killing me.

René's eyes wander off across the lake. She's still smiling.
Laurence looks up at the sky and points.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)
Check out the Milky Way.

René looks up and we see the Milky Way's beautiful band of light arch across the starry night sky.

René's eyes are red and pensive. She's stoned. But more importantly, she's happy. There's a light to her that wasn't there when the night began.

RENÉ
Thank you.

Laurence looks over at René. She's still looking up.

LAURENCE
For what?

René looks to him.

RENÉ
For bringing me here.

She smiles.

RENÉ (CONT'D)
I love it here.

Laurence smiles.

LAURENCE
I know.

A meeting of the eyes. René then leans in, kisses Laurence. It's a tender kiss. Soft. Their lips part. René smiles, turns away and looks back out onto the water. Laurence watches her.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)
(beat)
You never mentioned what was wrong.

René's eyes reflect deep thought. Moments pass before she reveals:

RENÉ
My numbers went up.

This lands hard. Wasn't what Laurence was expecting to hear.

RENÉ (CONT'D)
Oh, look!

René points to the sky. Fortuitously changes the subject having spotted:

RENÉ (CONT'D)
A shooting star!

Laurence looks up a second too late, the shooting star gone. He looks over at René and sees that she has her eyes closed. She's making a wish.

INT. CAR - MOVING -- LATER NIGHT

Laurence thinks as he drives. René stares out the window as she rides in the passenger seat. A beat of them in silence this way and then Laurence takes his eyes off the road and glances over at René.

LAURENCE
This is just another challenge.
You've been down this road before.
Look at your necklace, you know
what you gotta do. Face.
Everything. And. Rise.

René staring out the window, she closes her eyes as if to ask-
how many more challenges God? She then opens her eyes and they alight on an incredible sight glimpsed outside.

RENÉ
Stop! Pull over!

René's outburst STARTLES Laurence.

LAURENCE
What?

RENÉ
I saw them.

LAURENCE
Them who?

RENÉ
The wild horses. Pull over!

Laurence pulls off the road.

EXT. ROAD - SHOULDER -- CONTINUOUS

Brake lights flash as the car slows to a stop on the dirt. The passenger door opens, then the driver side door. Laurence quickly gets out. By the time he circles around to René, she's already getting out on her own.

LAURENCE
Careful.

RENÉ
We gotta hurry.

Laurence helps René out of the car when suddenly, neighing that sounds like squealing, ECHOES through the black night.

RENÉ (CONT'D)
Did you hear that?

LAURENCE
Yeah.

Laurence and René look around. Laurence thinks he sees something. He squints. Points.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)
What's that over there?

They look beyond a field of Saguaros where A WILD HORSE stands like a spectral image in the darkness.

René smiles. Laurence stares.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)
Whoa.

And then, René moves toward it. Laurence reaches for her.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)
Where you going?

She looks back at him.

RENÉ
To the horse.

Laurence looks at René like she's crazy.

LAURENCE
Are you still high?

She smiles.

RENÉ
A little. It'll be fine though.
(off his look)
I promise.

LAURENCE
Famous last words.

René stares at him.

RENÉ

C'mon.

He stares back, considering. Then...

LAURENCE

Fuck it.

Laurence breathes out hard. Points his key fob at his car and presses the button. They walk. Lights flash as the car locks.

EXT. DESERT -- MOMENTS LATER

A night environment washed over by the glow of the stars. The wild horse trots slowly through the desert forest. The way it moves, it's as if it's leading us to something. Laurence and René whisper to each other as they trail several yards back.

RENÉ

Look how it keeps looking back at us. It's taking us somewhere.

LAURENCE

We're probably the main entrée on the dinner menu. The only entrée.

RENÉ

Stop. It's just a horse.

LAURENCE

A wild horse. A wild horse with wild horse friends that are all hungry as shit!

The horse stops. Looks back at Laurence and René. They pause.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)

What'd I tell you.

The horse inhales quickly and huffs out through its nostrils.

RENÉ

He's glad we're here. I can tell by the sound he made.

LAURENCE

Of course he is.

(beat)

Wait, how do you know it's a he?

René shoots Laurence an obvious look. She smiles. He gets it.

RENÉ

C'mon.

They continue on.

EXT. DESERT -- LATER NIGHT

The desert terrain opens up to a clearing. The wild horse is there, alongside several others. They are gathered around a GAUNT HORSE lying on the ground on its side. We can see the outline of its ribs pressing against its skin. The horse is groaning, huffing, squealing in pain. Its young eyes fading.

Laurence and René watch the horses from several yards back.

RENÉ

The horse on the ground is sick.
I'm going to find out what's wrong.

LAURENCE

You're what?!

RENÉ

I'm going to find out what's wrong.

LAURENCE

René, are you nuts? Those horses
will trample you!

René looks Laurence in the eyes, lightly smiles.

RENÉ

They're not going to trample me.

LAURENCE

How do you know that?

RENÉ

Because I can feel their energy.
It's good energy. It'll be fine.

Nothing from Laurence. René grins and walks off. Laurence watches her go. First with fear, then concern, then with worry. No longer able to take it, he sighs and walks over.

EXT. CLEARING -- CONTINUOUS

René kneels down beside the gaunt horse. The other horses stand around sighing. Laurence watches them scared to death. René speaks to the gaunt horse like a patient as she examines it.

RENÉ

What's causing you pain beautiful?
(to Laurence)
It's a mare.

LAURENCE

A what?

RENÉ

A female.

LAURENCE

That's great. Now can we go?

RENÉ

Not yet. I need to find out what's--

René RECOILS, startled. She puts her hand over her mouth.

LAURENCE

What?

René has spotted the problem in the shape of a large tumor under the horse's jaw.

A sad beat.

RENÉ

It has cancer.

LAURENCE

Should've brought the weed then.

René looks back at Laurence and shots him a look.

LAURENCE (CONT'D)

It was a joke.

René not amused, turns back to the horse and thinks. At this stage, it's too late for the horse. She knows this. Laurence, too. And so she reaches around her neck and unfastens the locket. René places the locket on the horse, right above its belly. The horse squirms a bit. René gently pets its coat.

RENÉ

It's okay.

She looks back at Laurence, standing still taking it all in. He smiles at what's implied. Nods his head in assent.

René smiles. Turns back to the horse and lies down on the ground beside it, keeps it company.

Pull up to the locket. It rises and falls with the rhythms of the horse's breaths until it moves no more. **FADE TO BLACK.**