

FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY

"Pilot"

Written by

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INT. CIRCUS TRAIN - DAY (1981)

We OPEN ON TERRANCE BARCLAY, staring directly at us. He's 40, African-American. Scenery through the window is static, telling us the train is stationed.

TERRANCE

(to O.S.)

This used to be the land of small business, you know? I mean, look at us. Take the circus...

EXT./ESTAB. CIRCUS GROUNDS - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A BIG TOP merges into the star-lit sky. STRING LIGHTS spangle the canvas as GUESTS funnel inside.

TERRANCE (V.O.)

Used to be every town, every summer, here comes the calliope music and neon lights. But now, nothing. It's just us.

INT. TICKET OFFICE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK, CONT'D)

We see a row of REGISTERS frantically POPPING OPEN with each transaction. Tickets exchanging hands.

TERRANCE (V.O.)

It's really the distraction, that's how you frame it. Folks worried about the mortgage, accounts getting thin. But all that gets lost for one night, one weekend.

ANGLE ON Terrance at the back of the booth, monitoring the operation.

INT. BIG TOP - NIGHT (FLASHBACK, CONT'D)

A packed house. ANNA OSWELL, mid-20s, Osage, stands in the ring, sumptuously dressed. She speaks into a microphone, the words DROWNED by audience ANTICIPATION.

TERRANCE (V.O.)

So maybe things go well. But, at some point, you find yourself on the wrong side of a red line.

Anna points upward. A SPOTLIGHT tracks and holds on the trapeze artist, THERESA WILLIAMSON (30s), African-American, suspended fifty feet in the air. She pulls herself across the horizontal bar, then wraps her legs around it, allowing herself to dangle.

TERRANCE (V.O.)

All these textbooks, you'd think they'd teach you how to recognize it before you get there. You'd think.

From THERESA'S POV, we look down onto the harrowing depths. A net is set up in the center of the ring.

ANGLE ON Terrance, at the edge of the canvas, surveying the captivated faces.

TERRANCE (V.O.)

So you try to innovate, you know? Seek answers from the divine.

ANGLE ON Theresa, who pulls herself back up. She balances her stomach on the bar, extends her arms, drawing "oohs" from below. Kicking her feet back, she gently sways. On the third swing, she grips the bar and flips forward, contorting her body. In the transition, her hand slips; the audience GASPS.

ANGLE BACK ON Terrance, holding his composure -- *that's why the net is there*. But when he glances O.S., panic seizes him.

From his POV: we see one of the ropes has become loose.

Above, Theresa extends her other hand, but can't quite reach.

In SLOW MOTION, she lets go -- silence envelops the arena.

TERRANCE (V.O.)

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Devil told Jesus, "Throw yourself down. For He will command his angels, and they will lift you in their hands, so you will not strike your foot against stone."

Terrance hurtles forward in desperation. He's ten feet away. Five. Reaches out...

TERRANCE (V.O.)

Weird thing was...

INT. CIRCUS TRAIN - BACK TO PRESENT

We're back on Terrance, lost in the memory.

TERRANCE

(to O.S.)

...he told me something completely different.

REVERSE TO REVEAL: he's speaking to a befuddled TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BOY.

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD

Uhh, you said this was work-related?

Terrance snaps from the reverie.

TERRANCE

Right, yeah. See, the thing is: entertainment breeds a meritocracy. And when you're cuttin' excess, the first place you look is the bottom row.

(extends hand)

What I'm trying to say is: while we appreciated your service here with the Regal Circus Company, as of today, your employment's no longer.

His hand hangs there for a beat, waiting to be shook.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)

And while I can't pay for your cab fare, I feel your experience here was invaluable. Hope you look at it that way, too.

ANGLE BACK on the kid, unsure what just hit him.

TITLE CREDITS.

EXT. CIRCUS TRAIN - CAT CAR - DAY

A caged LION lazily flicks his tail. An amber-haired 22-year-old, JAY REGIS, enters FRAME in double denim, reaching his hand through the bars.

NATHAN (O.S.)

Here for labor work?

Jay turns to see NATHAN TOLLIVER (30s), on crutches, addressing him from down the track.

JAY  
Yes, sir. Jay Regis. I--

NATHAN  
-- Let's go.

JAY  
Okay. Yes, sir. One sec.

Jay retrieves his SUITCASE and catches up.

JAY (CONT'D)  
(re: crutches)  
Hey, what happened? You sprain  
your ankle in the show or  
something?

NATHAN  
I got polio. It's a show for some  
people.

JAY  
I didn't know anyone still got  
that.

NATHAN  
Yeah, well, it's the circus, dude --  
we're all lottery winners.

They reach a ladder, extending to a car.

NATHAN (CONT'D)  
Go on, man, go on up. Don't wanna  
see me try to scale this thing.

INT. TERRANCE'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Cigarette smoke hazes the air. Terrance has his feet up on  
the desk. Jay settles into the seat the young boy just  
vacated.

TERRANCE  
Felony or misdemeanor?

JAY  
What's that?

TERRANCE  
This is transient work. We don't  
get a lotta clean resumes.

JAY

Oh, well, not me. Honest. I know the ad said labor work, but I'm here to be a performer.

TERRANCE

Oh, yeah? What's your act?

JAY

It, uh-... well, it needs some time to develop. But I can help wherever you need me till then, you know? I'm versatile.

TERRANCE

Versatile just means you're not good at anything.

JAY

Well, I was the best athlete in my class. I played wide receiver. Shortstop. Lead in three school plays. Mister Leason said I was the best Biff Loman--

TERRANCE

-- Everything come outta you in past tense?

Jay flushes crimson, vanity rattled.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)

Look, I get it, you had your picture in the yearbook. But if you're here for the conversation piece, there're better ways. We're still getting back on our feet here, and I need everyone down in the trenches.

JAY

(resolute)

Alright, well then I'll stack sandbags until you send me over the top.

Terrance, amused, takes another drag.

TERRANCE

A real tactician, huh?

(then)

Tell you what: I'll give you a two-week trial period. You'll have a place to sleep, no pay.

(MORE)

TERRANCE (CONT'D)

Help set up tents, whatever. You prove your worth, we'll talk about a wage. Settled?

EXT. TERRANCE'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Nathan waits by the tracks as Jay and Terrance exit.

TERRANCE

(re: Jay)

Nathan, you show him the ropes?

NATHAN

(to Jay)

Meet me back here in ten.

JAY

(re: suitcase)

Actually I'm all set.

NATHAN

Well, go check the tracks for dynamite or something then. I need a word here.

Jay crosses away, suitcase in hand. As he goes:

NATHAN (CONT'D)

It's awfully arrogant to bring your shit to the interview.

With Jay out of hearing, Nathan addresses Terrance.

NATHAN (CONT'D)

So what's up? Beaux said we're headed to Oregon now?

TERRANCE

Oregon's been good to us.

NATHAN

Yeah, nothing says profit like a tent full of loggers. But what's the plan here? I've seen the numbers.

TERRANCE

They don't tell the whole story.

NATHAN

Yeah, well, the bank seems to think they do.

Nathan produces a letter from his pocket.

NATHAN (CONT'D)

Lucas left me this. Probably thought it was a medical bill -- this rare time it wasn't. Says loan payment's due. Four grand by Monday.

TERRANCE

S'not a problem.

NATHAN

Cut the shit, dude.  
(re: letter)  
I can show this around.

Terrance scans for eavesdroppers, then:

TERRANCE

(admitting)

Alright, between us? It's gonna be tight. But that's between us. The crew finds out, panic sets in, it's not gonna help anybody. So, we get to Oakridge, we put on our best show, sell out our product. And we'll be alright.

Nathan nods, skeptical.

NATHAN

Yeah, sounds like you got all covered.  
(tossing letter over)  
You need me, I'll be up in the crow's nest, tying cinderblocks to my feet.

EXT. CIRCUS TRAIN - LATER

Laborers pack cars for departure as Nathan leads Jay down the tracks.

NATHAN

This isn't like of one those big operations where grunts and talent are segregated. We only got four performers, so everybody's gotta chip in.

JAY  
 (re: O.S.)  
 She's the animal trainer, right? I  
 saw her earlier.

As they pass, we see inside a chic SLEEPER CAR (velour couch, mauve-painted). MAGGIE MAYNOR (the trainer), mid-20s, freckles, unpacks a suitcase. Anna, the ring leader, brushes her hair at a gold-trimmed vanity.

NATHAN  
 Yeah, I guess that's her official title. Terrance keeps her around 'cause she doesn't mind cleaning up animal shit. Everyone's gotta bring something to the table.

JAY  
 Who's that with her?

NATHAN  
 That'd be Anna. Wouldn't get any ideas, though. She's the type of girl you buy breakfast, next thing you know you're not invited to lunch.

They reach a CAR second to the front.

NATHAN (CONT'D)  
 And on that note, welcome to your new abode. As you probably guessed, it's a no-key situation.

Jay steps forward, SLIDES OPEN the door to reveal a COT and a DESK. He pulls himself up, looks it over.

NATHAN (CONT'D)  
 So, whaddya think? See yourself raising kids here?

Jay notices maroon stains on the floor.

JAY  
 What-- is that blood?

NATHAN  
 Yes, sir. This beauty's an old stock car seized by the government as part of a human trafficking operation. Few hundred cattle took a bullet to the dome right on this very spot. Anyway, we got it on a discount.

(MORE)

NATHAN (CONT'D)  
 (then, gesturing to pilot  
 car)  
 But before you go arranging  
 furniture, there's one last person  
 you should meet.

INT. PILOT CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Manning the controls is a corpulent man with a thick,  
 straggly white beard, BEAUX TUMMS (late 50s). Jay shakes his  
 hand, Nathan beside him.

BEAUX  
 (to Jay)  
 Very good. Beaux. Glad to get  
 another man like you aboard. Ever  
 worked a show before?

JAY  
 (shaking head)  
 No, but I'm a natural performer.

BEAUX  
 Oh, you'll love it. Joined at just  
 the right time, too, Oakridge is  
 one of my favorites. They got this  
 bar along the main street - three  
 stories with a pole goin' down the  
 center.

NATHAN  
 Sounds like had a few and wandered  
 into a fire station.

BEAUX  
 Buddy of mine and I went on a  
 fishing trip. You'll see once we  
 get there. I swear to ya, boys,  
 there's a Heaven on earth, and who  
 knew it was this far west of the  
 Mississippi?

SMASH TO:

EXT./ESTAB. OAKRIDGE, OREGON - MORNING

SUPERIMPOSE: OAKRIDGE, OREGON - 1963

We're looking out at idyllic small town Americana: crisply-  
 painted storefronts demarcate streets teeming with  
 PEDESTRIANS as boat-sized VEHICLES pass.

In the distance, smoke billows from a LUMBER MILL. We hang here for a beat, noticing the energy, the gaiety, the warmth.

Then, we RAPIDLY TIME-LAPSE: drab suits become jeans and neon shirts. Buildings droop, streets thin out and molder. Activity at the mill ceases. We slow to NORMAL SPEED; the once flourishing town is now squalid.

On-screen text transitions to read: OAKRIDGE, OREGON - 1981

NATHAN (O.S.)

Well, shit.

REVERSE TO REVEAL Nathan, Jay, and Beaux on the train station platform, looking out over the dismal scene.

NATHAN (CONT'D)

Damn. Who woulda guessed an economy reliant upon a lumber mill wouldn't last?

BEAUX

(to Jay)

I'll show you to the trucks, kiddo.

(re: Jay's suitcase)

That all you brought? What about the sportcoat?

JAY

(shrugs)

Never really got into accumulating things.

Beaux smiles, nods.

BEAUX

Zeus energy. Like it. Some might not understand, but that's okay.

INT. CARGO TRUCK - MORNING

LUCAS (16, black) drives. He wears football pants and a T-shirt (and will continue to do so) for reasons later explained. Anna is in the middle, Terrance shotgun.

TERRANCE

(noticing O.S.)

When's the last time they vacuumed?

SHELL CASINGS are scattered across the floor of the cab.

LUCAS

I don't know, I guess they rented the truck out to an Army base or something. Oh, and the first two checks bounced, by the way.

TERRANCE

(snapping)

Anna doesn't wanna hear that.

ANNA

Actually, I'd like to know where we stand.

LUCAS

Well, I talked to the guy in parks--

TERRANCE

-- Luc, I said we're good. Numbers get tossed around--

ANNA

-- And I said I'd like to hear.

Terrance goes silent, stares out the window. Lucas continues, oblivious to his boss's discontent.

LUCAS

Well, the guy told me we only sold six hundred worth of tickets.

ANNA

Six hundred? Terrance, does that sound right?

We follow Terrance's gaze as the truck passes a strand of decrepit HOMES, separated by chainlink.

TERRANCE

(still looking out window)

Liquor sales oughta be up. We'll set general admission at ten.

LUCAS

The flyer says six.

TERRANCE

And when they get to the gate, they'll pay ten. It's four bucks, or a disappointed kid. What do you think they're going with?

LUCAS

The flyer also says "One night only," but we're here through the weekend.

TERRANCE

It's basic marketing. Weekend says, "I'll get around to it." But one night means, "I can't miss it." Do you ever listen? I'm trying to teach you these things.

LUCAS

(re: road ahead)  
Man, this shit...

We ANGLE THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD to see traffic has stalled up ahead. A DUMP TRUCK is pulled onto the shoulder; TRASH BAGS litter the street. PEDESTRIANS have gotten out of their cars to rubberneck as the DRIVER clears the debris.

Lucas comes to a stop. Terrance waves him on--

TERRANCE

Let's go on, man. We gotta set up.

Lucas checks his side mirror.

LUCAS

I don't know if this thing's capable of three-point turns.

TERRANCE

Just pull around these cars. Go on, go 'head.

LUCAS

I don't--

TERRANCE

(volatile)  
-- Dammit, Luc, what's so hard?! I said hit the gas and go around!

LUCAS

But there's people--

TERRANCE

-- What, and you think they're gonna play martyr?! Jesus Christ. When I say something, you listen!

Lucas takes a beat, then pulls into the left lane. The truck ACCELERATES, bystanders parting to let it pass. Lucas winces as we hear a CRUNCHING sound.

OUTSIDE THE TRUCK

A trash bag is now lodged between the tire and the wheel well.

INSIDE

Terrance shakes his head, checks his watch.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)

No delays, no delays. It's a red-line schedule. We get there, get games set up...

Lucas struggles to handle the steering wheel.

LUCAS

This piece of shit, dude. You guys got room on that side?

He THRUSTS the gas a few times.

LUCAS (CONT'D)

I don't-- can you see--

He stoops to examines the gas pedal.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD, we see the truck start to veer into the oncoming lane.

TERRANCE

Luc! Watch the road!

Luc sees the impending danger. Furiously jerks the wheel to the right.

OUTSIDE

The bag of debris dislodges. The truck swerves violently, and off the road... where it COLLIDES headfirst into a tree.

INSIDE

Lucas sits at the wheel, mortified.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)

You gotta be fucking kidding me.  
(peering over dash)  
Engine looks all right, back it up.

Terrance notices Anna leaned over the dash, hair obscuring her face.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)

Anna, you good?

(beat, then)

Anna?

Anna slowly leans back. She parts her hair, revealing a gash on her forehead; blood flows from it in a steady stream.