

One Chair At A Time

Written By

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EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Rain falls on black umbrellas. The grass is a muddy green.

Mahogany casket sits over open hole.

BARBARA (40s) grips a damp tissue. Trench coat buttoned to the chin.

STEWART (40s) stands next to her. Thinner than his suit. A dry, rattling cough breaks the silence. He turns his head to clear his throat.

The PRIEST nods.

Stewart steps to the podium. Places a crumpled, damp paper on the wood. The ink bleeds.

The rain intensifies.

Stewart stands at the microphone. Shoulders bunched to his ears. Coughs. Doubles over. Clutches the wood. He wipes his lip with a trembling finger.

He unfolds the paper. His shaking hands hit the mic. A sharp spike through the speakers.

STEWART

My dad... he wasn't big on songs.
Or praise.

He stops. Jaw hitches. Swallows hard. Adam's apple bobs in his throat.

STEWART (CONT'D)

He loved me and Barb. And most of
all...he loved Dr Pepper.

A sad laugh ripples through the crowd. Tear falls down Stewart's cheek.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I remember the championship game in
'87. I'd split my thumb open real
good. It was spraying blood.
Projectile.

He lets out a jagged, wet breath. Presses the heel of his hand into his eye socket.

STEWART (CONT'D)

He just told me to put a band-aid
on it...I did. About 20 of em. We
lost that game.

(MORE)

STEWART (CONT'D)
 But before the final out. He walked
 out to the batter's box and just...

Stewart's voice breaks.

He ducks his head. Closes his eyes.

A sob wracks his chest. Barbara flinches.

STEWART (CONT'D)
 Gave me a hug...I still remember
 that hug.

He's cries openly now. Face contorts.

He looks at Barbara. She's stares at the hole in the ground.
 Face wet with tears.

STEWART (CONT'D)
 He told me once. God sends us
 exactly what we need. When we need
 it.

He chokes on the next breath, a sharp gasp that sounds like
 he's drowning.

STEWART (CONT'D)
 I didn't know then. How much I
 needed him. To be exactly who he
 was.

He fumbles. Folds the paper into a square. Stumbles off the
 grass. Disappears into black umbrellas.

EXT. GRAVESIDE - LATER

The crowd is thin. Muffled car doors slam.

Stewart and Barbara stand by the hole.

Fifty yards away-the cemetery crew-leans against a yellow
 backhoe. Smoke cigarettes.

Barbara adjusts Stewart's collar.

BARBARA
 You're shaking.

Stewart looks at his hands. Shaking. Jams them into his
 pockets.

INT. DAD'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Barbara sits on the floor amidst bubble wrap and boxes. She tapes a box. Three aggressive bursts. Zip. Zip. Zip.

Stewart stands by a heavy oak desk.

Opens a bottom drawer.

He finds a leather-bound journal. Tucked inside: a blue-and-white Pan Am sleeve.

He slides out the ticket. Date: Sep 10, 1974.

He opens the journal. Hand-drawn maps of Bangkok. Hostel names. Bus routes.

Stewart fumbles with his phone.

Eyes dart.

He pinches and spreads the screen.

STEWART

Barb.

She doesn't look up. She's fighting with a roll of bubble wrap.

BARBARA

If it's more tax returns, just burn 'em.

Stewart drops the ticket on the bubble wrap. She stops. Picks it up. Squints through glasses.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Thailand? Since when did Dad go to Thailand?

STEWART

Look at the dates.

She flips it. Sees the Chiang Mai address on the back. Looks at the date: Sept 10, 1974.

Silence.

Barbara's eyes shift to Stewart. Back to the ticket. She sets it on the bubble wrap.

BARBARA

He always said he loved Houston.

Stewart flips through the journal. Page after page of meticulous plans. He stops at the first blank page.

A dry, rattling cough. He covers his mouth. Wipes his palm on his trousers.

He picks up the ticket.

STEWART

This address. I just looked it up.

BARBARA

And?

STEWART

It's just trees. Satellite view shows nothing but jungle.

He slides the ticket into his breast pocket.

Hands her the packing tape.

Barbara shrugs. Folds the flaps of a cardboard box.

INT. CORPORATE OFFICE - DAY

The office is a labyrinth of glass and grey fabric. The only sound: the aggressive clicking of Stewart's mouse.

Stewart sits at his mahogany desk. Suit and silk tie. Stares at a spreadsheet.

A shadow falls over the desk. LEGLER. Expensive suit. Coffee mug. He watches Stewart for a beat.

LEGLER

Stewart. Why are you here?

STEWART

(Without looking up)
Just finishing the Q3 projections,
Boss. Almost done.

LEGLER

The funeral was forty-eight hours ago, Stew.

Stewart's fingers pause. Cursor blinks on screen.

STEWART

No reason for me to sit at home...
staring at a wall.

LEGLER

Go home, Stew...Use the firm's beach house in Galveston. Clear your head.

STEWART

Respectfully sir, we have a lot of work to do around here.

LEGLER

The work will be here. You won't, if you keep this up...Go, Stew. That's an order.

INT. STEWART'S HOUSE - MORNING

Massive kitchen. White. Empty. Stewart sits at the marble island. Boxers and a faded grey t-shirt.

A bowl of cereal in front of him. Murky grey milk. Bloated flakes.

He stares at a neighbor's sprinklers. Chk-chk-chk-fsst. The only noise. Water hits the fence. A dull, repetitive thud.

He unlocks his phone.

Scrolls for a beat.

Locks it. Sets it face down.

A fly buzzes. Struggles against the windowpane. Stewart watches.

Stove clock: 8:14 AM.

He looks to a stray corn flake on the countertop. Back to the clock.

Stove clock: 8:14 AM.

Refrigerator compressor kicks on. Vibrates.

The house settles—wood expands—cracks.

Leaf blower outside.

He tears a strip from a napkin. Then another. Lines them up in a straight row.

He looks at the empty chair.

INT. STEWART'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Stewart stands on the rug. Yellow tennis ball in hand.

Thump. Pop. Thump. Pop.

He throws it against the bare wall. Each impact leaves a grey smudge on the eggshell paint. He checks the stove clock:
11:15 AM.

He adjusts his stance. Thump. Pop. Targets a spot left of a smudge.

He misses a catch.

Ball skitters. Wedges under leather armchair.

Cable box: 1:42 PM.

He kneels. Joints crack.

He reaches under the chair.

Pulls out the ball and a stray black hair tie. He eyes the tie. Drops it back into the dust.

He stands. Dust his hands on his boxers.

Grandfather clock: 4:00 PM.

Sun dips. A long orange ray illuminates a constellation of grey marks on the wall.

Thump. Pop. Thump. Pop.

He watches the ball pass through a cluster of gold dust.

Wristwatch: 6:12 PM.

The room fades to grey dusk. He stands in the dark. Yellow ball a pale blur in his hand.

INT. STEWART'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is a graveyard of cardboard. Brown boxes stack three high against white walls, flaps open.

Stewart sits on the carpet. Boxers and grey t-shirt. Legs pale in dim light.

He reaches into a shoe box.

Pulls out a stack of baseball cards bound by a rubber band. Peels one back: a 1954 Topps. He stares at the frozen swing.

He digs deeper.

Pulls a silver-framed photo. Wipes the glass.

It's his mother in her twenties. Standing before a turquoise Chevrolet. Hair caught in a breeze. Laughing at something behind the camera.

Stewart's expression softens.

He finds a document tucked behind the frame.

He pulls it out. Her death certificate. Brittle paper. Faded seal. He runs his fingers over it.

He exhales a long, shaky breath.

He sets the photo down.

Reaches for a box.

Pulls out a weathered baseball cap. Navy fabric bleached white by the sun. Brim frayed. He turns it over.

Beneath the cap lies a wooden plaque. Tarnished brass reads: Presented to Arthur Miller. Coach of the Year 1985.

Stewart traces the name.

Looks from the plaque to the empty hallway.

Holds plaque for a long moment.

Places it gently atop the baseball cards.

INT. STEWART'S KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart sits at the island in boxers. Tennis ball motionless next to a bowl of soggy cereal.

The journal is open to a hand-drawn coastline.

He eyes the phone, then the map.

He taps the screen and types: Travel requirements - Houston to Bangkok.

INT. STEWART'S HOME OFFICE - MORNING

The journal is bathed in morning light.

Stewart is in the same clothes. Grey t-shirt and boxers. Hair matted. Half-eaten dry toast sits on a paper towel.

He hunches. Face inches from dual monitors.

Left monitor: currency converters, weather patterns, visa PDFs. Right monitor: a travel site.

He looks at a page in the journal. A messy list of names in ink. Whispers.

STEWART

Phuket. Krabi. Chiang Mai.

He types the names.

Limestone cliffs, neon streets flash across his retinas. He stares.

He flips the page: a crude sketch of a hut on water. Written above the sketch: Khao Sok. The floating houses.

Stewart types. Frantic.

Rainforest cliffs and floating homes appear.

His breath catches.

Holds the journal to the monitor. Compares sketch to reality.

He reaches for his phone. Thumb hovers over Confirm Purchase.

Silence. Save for the hum of computer fans. Stewart looks at the obituary. The divorce decree.

He taps the screen. Accepted.

He leans back. Blue light reflects in his eyes. A sharp, energized breath escapes him.

INT. STEWART'S HOME OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart trembles.

He grabs his phone. Hits a contact labeled Barb. Rings three times. A woman's voice answers. Voice heavy with sleep.

BARB (V.O.)

Stewart? It's six in the morning.
Is everything okay?

Stewart's eyes fix on the monitor. Floating houses. He paces in his boxers. Phone pressed to ear.

STEWART

I'm going, Barb. I just clicked it.
It's done. The seat is mine.

BARB (V.O.)

Going where? What are you talking
about?

STEWART

Thailand. I'm following the map.
All of it. I'm looking at the lake
right now—the one he drew. The
floating houses. It's real. I
thought maybe he made it up, but
it's right here on my screen.

BARB (V.O.)

Stewart, stop. You're not going to
Thailand. You're in the middle of a
divorce. You just buried Dad three
days ago. You're having a
breakdown.

STEWART

I leave in two days, Barb. Legler
told me to go to the beach house.
Can you imagine? Galveston. Sitting
in a condo...staring at brown
water.

He stops in front of the window. Stares at his reflection.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I don't want the beach house. I'm
going to see what was so goddamn
important that he had to write it
down in a book and hide it for 45
years.

BARB (V.O.)

Just stay there, Stew. I'll drive
over. We can talk.

He looks at the computer screen. A frantic smile twitches on
his lips.

STEWART

Don't come over. I won't be here. I
gotta pack.

He hangs up. Tosses phone on desk. It slides. Clips the
obituary.

Stewart stands in the center of the room. Wild-eyed.

EXT. SUVARNABHUMI AIRPORT - DAY

Sliding glass doors hiss open.

Stewart steps through. Stops. Breathes. Shoulders drop.

Sweat beads on his hairline. He swipes a handkerchief across his forehead. It comes away dark. Damp.

He adjusts his bag strap. A circle of moisture bleeds through the center of his shirt.

He opens the journal to a hand-drawn bus terminal map.

He looks up at a forest of concrete pillars. Neon-lit Skytrain hums.

A short, dry cough.

A TAXI DRIVER approaches. Gestures toward a bright pink Toyota.

TAXI DRIVER

Taxi, sir? Meter taxi?

Stewart eyes the journal, then the concrete labyrinth of the airport.

STEWART

No thank you.

TAXI DRIVER

Good price. Air con. Very hot today, boss.

Stewart eyes a distant sign for the Public Bus. He walks. Drags a hard-shell suitcase. Clack-clack-clack on the pavement.

INT. PUBLIC BUS - LATER

The bus is an iron box. Windows pinned open. A rusted fan oscillates at the front.

Stewart is jammed into a corner. Suitcase wedged against his shins. Knees forced up. Drenched. Dark patches bloom on his shoulders and back. Sweat beads on his forehead.

He eyes the other passengers.

Teenagers laugh over a phone.

Old woman with a basket of ginger.

Stewart sits rigid. Neck corded with tension.
He pulls the Pan Am ticket from the journal.

FLASHBACK - INT. KITCHEN - DAY (2015)

Stewart wears a sharp suit.
Checks his watch every ten seconds.
Dad sits at the table. Butters toast.

STEWART

I can't stay for lunch, Dad. I've got the regional meeting.

DAD

It's a sandwich, Stew. Takes ten minutes to eat a sandwich.

STEWART

Ten minutes is the difference between traffic and no traffic. I'll see you Sunday.

Dad looks at him. Looks at the silk tie. Polished shoes.

DAD

Don't get so busy life passes you by, son.

STEWART

I'm building something. You wouldn't get it.

BACK TO PRESENT

The bus lurches over a pothole.
Stewart's head cracks against the window frame.
He doesn't flinch. Just stares at the unpunched ticket.

EXT. KHAO SAN ROAD - DAY

The bus screeches to a halt. Hisses black exhaust.
Stewart steps down.
The crowd swallows him. Neon. Cheap tank tops. Thumping bass.

He stands in a river of backpackers.

A man thrusts a tray of fried scorpions toward his face.
Stewart flinches. Clutches his bag.

A dark V of sweat carves down his shirt.

He wipes his forehead. Hand comes away slick.

He checks his phone.

GPS arrow spins in erratic circles.

He rotates.

Walls of moving people.

A tuk-tuk swerves inches from his knees. Engine screams.

TUK-TUK DRIVER

Taxi! You go where? I take you!
Cheap!

Stewart shakes his head no.

Rowdy teenagers in elephant pants shove past. Laugh.

He stumbles into a rack of shirts.

The shopkeeper jumps up. Waves a calculator.

A sharp tug on his elbow. He spins.

A woman holds a massage menu. Rubs his forearm.

Stewart yanks back as if burned.

Eyes wide.

He shifts his gaze from flashing LEDs to the tangled bird's
nest of wires overhead.

Guest house signs stack on boards. Flicker. Missing letters.

He spots a gap between a tailor and a pancake cart. A faded
sign hangs over a crumbling stairwell: SMILE HOME - 200 BAHT.

Stewart lunges. Ducks inside. Shoulder hits concrete to
escape the flow.

He stands in the dim light. Chest heaves. He watches the
street blur past like a film at triple speed.

He looks at his hands. Shaking. Wipes them on his trousers. Stares into the dark above.

INT. GUEST HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Concrete stairs. Steep. Stewart hauls his suitcase. Base screeches against every step. Echoes in the shaft.

At the top. A woman sits behind a desk. Shielded by an iron grate. A Thai game show squeals from a shelf. Bells and laughter cut through the host's frantic voice.

Stewart leans against the grate. Gasps. Drenched. Pulls out a wad of crumpled Baht.

STEWART

One night. Aircon room.

The woman doesn't look up from her phone. Holds up two fingers.

STEWART (CONT'D)

One. One night.

WOMAN

(Without looking up))
Two hun-nit.

STEWART

Ah. Ok.

He counts. Smooths each bill. Thumb trembles.

He pushes the pile through the grate.

The woman swipes the cash. Flicks through it. Tosses it back.

WOMAN

No. Two hun-nit fan. Four hun-nit
air.

STEWART

What?

WOMAN

(Loudly, as if to a child)
Air-con! Four! Hun-nit!

She points to a taped cardboard sign. Hand-drawn: FAN 200 - AIR 400.

Stewart stares.

Fumbles with his wallet. Digs into the folds.

Pulls out a five.

A crumpled ten.

STEWART

Do you take... can you take
dollars?

The woman stares at the green paper.

Shakes her head. Sighs—a long, heavy sound. She points down
the stairs toward the street.

WOMAN

Exchange! Go street!

STEWART

No, please. I just... I can't go
back down there. Just for tonight?

The woman cranks the game show. A whistle blows. Tweet-tweet-
tweet!—followed by glitter and cheers.

She waits. Palm up.

Stewart eyes the stairs. The grate. Then yields the 200 baht.

The woman inspects the cash.

Grabs a brass key on a block of cracked wood.

Clacks it onto the counter.

Points a jagged nail toward a dim hallway.

Stewart snatches the key.

Drags his suitcase into the dark. Wheels rattle over uneven
linoleum.

INT. GUEST HOUSE ROOM - DAY

The room is a cell. Peeling. Hospital-green. A giant neon
Chang sign hums outside. Bathes the space in flickering
light.

Stewart drops his suitcase. Sits.

Thin mattress. Wrapped in blue plastic, crunches.

Above. Rusted fan groans.

He opens his journal to the first page.

His Dad's writing: Day 1: Get settled.

He pulls his wallet out. Eyes the gold ring in the coin slot.
Tucks it under the pillow.

A dry, hollow cough.

He leans back. Stares at the green neon on the ceiling.
Doesn't move.

EXT. KHAO SAN ROAD - DAY (MORNING)

The neon is dead. Street littered. Balloons. Plastic cups.
Green bottles.

Stewart emerges from the stairwell. Checks his watch—6:15 AM.
His shirt is dark with sweat.

He passes a group of revelers. Slumped over a plastic table.

Stewart keeps a hand over his pocket. Feels his wallet's
outline.

He stops at a street cart.

A woman bags bundles of sticky rice.

STEWART

How much?

VENDOR

Ten baht.

Stewart pulls out a coin. Hands over the ten baht.

Takes the rice.

Walks away.

EXT. PHRA ARTHIT PIER - LATER AFTERNOON

The sun is dull. Smog. Stewart's shirt is dark and wet.
Clings to his torso.

He leans toward the circular hole in the plexiglass.

STEWART

Wat Arun.

The woman inside doesn't look up.

She counts a stack of bills. Fingers move in a blur.

STEWART (CONT'D)
Wat Arun. The temple.

She speaks—a sharp, rising tone.

Her finger stabs a laminated grid. Faded colors. Jagged Thai script.

STEWART (CONT'D)
Across the river?

She holds up three fingers. Five. Waves him toward a different pier.

Stewart wipes his forehead. Hand comes away wet.

Behind him. Crowd presses. Damp shoulders jostle his back. Plastic bag scrapes his thigh.

He points toward the white spire on the horizon.

STEWART (CONT'D)
The temple. There.

The woman sighs—a sharp puff. Shouts over his head. Beckons a saffron-robed monk forward.

WOMAN
(louder)
Cross-river! Five baht!

She points to a sagging wooden gate.

Stewart shoves a coin through the slot. She slides back a translucent slip of paper.

The boat is a flat wooden barge. Vibrates with a naked truck engine that spits blue smoke.

Stewart is packed tight.

Hip wedged against the rusted handlebars of a motorbike.

EXT. WAT ARUN - SUNSET

The ferry thuds against wooden pilings.

Stewart is last off.

He stops at the central prang. Looks up.

Thousands of porcelain shards. Broken bowls. Plates, Cups—
form intricate flowers. They climb hundreds of feet. Catch
the dying light. Shimmer like a mountain of jewels.

He climbs. Steep. Narrow steps.

By the second gallery. Breath is ragged.

Drenched.

He leans his forehead against a stone pillar. Chest heaves.

He turns.

The river below is a ribbon of liquid gold.

Across the water. Skyline is a jagged silhouette against
purple.

Stewart exhales—a long, shaky breath.

He pulls the journal from his bag.

Holds the '74 sketch to the horizon.

The lines match. The spire's shadow stretches across the
water. He whispers.

STEWART
I'm here, Dad.

EXT. RIVERSIDE CAFE - NIGHT

Mismatched plastic chairs line a concrete deck over the
water. Stewart is the only customer. A yellow bulb hums
overhead. Swarmed by gnats.

He sits at a red-and-white checkered table. A Singha beer
pools in condensation.

The sun has dipped. Pink sky. Floodlights snap on at the base
of Wat Arun. The white porcelain spires ignite. Glow gold
against the dark.

Stewart pauses. Beer at his lips. Stares at the gold tower
shimmering in the river.

He sets the beer down. Pulls a bowl of steaming rice close.

Scoops a spoonful.

Winces as it hits his tongue. Steam clouds his vision.

FLASHBACK - INT. DAD'S KITCHEN - NIGHT (2022)

The house is dark, save for the stove light. A half-packed box labeled "KITCHEN"—sits on the counter.

Stewart sits at the marble island. Stares at a blank wall. Face gaunt. Eyes red-rimmed.

Dad stirs soup at the stove. Beside him, an empty can—lid half-cocked. Steam plumes from the pot.

He grabs a mug. Ladles soup in. Slides it across the table.

STEWART

I don't think I can eat, Dad.

DAD

Eat the soup, Stew.

STEWART

The house is so quiet, Dad. I can hear myself think.

Dad pulls out the chair opposite him. Sits.

DAD

Loneliness is just a room with no furniture. You've gotta start moving things back in. One chair at a time.

Dad looks at Stewart.

DAD (CONT'D)

First chair is the soup. Drink it.

Stewart takes a sip. It's scalding. He winces.

DAD (CONT'D)

There. You're still alive. That's the second chair.

BACK TO PRESENT

Stewart swallows.

He eyes the empty chair, then the golden temple.

He takes a long pull of beer. Sets the bottle precisely in its condensation ring.

He pulls the journal from his bag. Flips to the final blank page.

He grips a pen. Eyes fixed on the golden spire across the water. Mutters.

STEWART
One chair at a time.

He writes.

The ink is black and thick against the cream paper.

EXT. SIDEWALK COFFEE STALL - PRE-DAWN

The sky is grey-blue. Streetlights flicker. Tangled shadows of power lines overhead.

Stewart sits on a red plastic stool. Knees jackknifed to his chest. A foot taller than the crowd.

Behind a metal cart, a woman in a floral apron moves through steam. She stirs condensed milk into black coffee.

She slides the glass toward him: an old jelly jar steams.

STEWART
Thank you.

She eyes him. Her gaze drops to the stool. Plastic legs bow under his weight.

VENDOR
Big.

She levels a hand a foot above her own head. Points at Stewart.

She stifles a giggle behind her palm.

STEWART
Yeah. Big.

He gestures to the coffee, then to a basket of fried dough sticks—patonggo.

STEWART (CONT'D)
How much?

VENDOR
Sip. Sip baht.

STEWART
Sip?

She holds up ten fingers. Wiggles them. Eyes crinkle at the corners.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Ah, ten.

Stewart pulls a ten-baht coin from his pocket. Sets it on the metal table.

VENDOR

(pointing to dough)

Sweet? You want sweet?

She mimes dipping bread. Grins. Laughs. The sound cuts through the city's low morning hum.

STEWART

No...no.just the coffee.

She nods. Smiles. Turns back to her steaming pots.

Stewart grips the glass. Watches a group of saffron-robed monks emerge from a side-street. They move silent. Single-file.

INT. WAT PHO - DAY

Stewart stands at the entrance.

A GIRL (20s) in a yellow polo sits on a low stool. Fans herself with a tourist map. She points at Stewart's boots.

GIRL

No shoe. Inside, no shoe.

Stewart eyes his laces. Shirt soaked.

He kneels. Joints crack. He yanks the knots. Shucks the boots. Sets them on a rack beside a pair of tiny, glittering sandals.

GIRL (CONT'D)

(giggling)

Big shoe.

She mimes a giant walking. Hands heavy in the air.

STEWART

Yeah. Big feet.

GIRL

(pointing to his socks)

Hole.

Stewart looks down.

Left big toe pokes through his sock. He tucks it behind his right foot.

The girl laughs. Hides behind her map.

He enters the main hall.

The Reclining Buddha stretches into the distance, a horizon of shimmering gold.

Its head the size of a garage.

Half-closed eyes fixed on the far ceiling.

Stewart walks the length of it. Socks slide over polished stone.

He stops at the feet. Ten feet high. Inlaid with swirling mother-of-pearl.

Along the back wall, a rhythmic clink... clink... clink echoes.

Stewart pulls a cloth bag of bronze coins from his pocket.

He approaches the first of 108 bowls.

He drops a coin. Clink.

Next. Clink.

His pace quickens. He moves down the line. Arm swings in a mechanical arc.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Stewart reaches the final bowl. The last coin circles the bronze rim twice before settling.

He stands at the end of the line. Above him. Buddha's golden ear.

Stewart wipes sweat from his eyelid.

He turns. Walks back toward the glare of the entrance.

EXT. WAT PHO - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart sits on the stone ledge. Yanks on his boots. Stuffs the laces into the leather.

He stands.

Eyes the girl in the yellow polo. Still fans herself.

He gives an awkward nod. She waves a tiny hand.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

The rhythm of the tracks is a heavy, metallic: da-dum, da-dum, da-dum.

Stewart is wedged into a third-class corner. Overhead fans hang still. Blades velvety with dust.

The journal open on his knees. He stares at a shift in ink. Black to faded blue.

Written in cursive: August 14. Head south. Krabi. The limestone is breath-taking.

Stewart checks the map.

A jagged line traces the coast. Ends in a cluster of islands.

He looks out. The train cuts through black jungle.

Every few miles, a lone light from a stilt house flickers through the trees. Vanishes.

FLASHBACK - INT. DAD'S GARAGE - DAY (1998)

Stewart (18) leans against a workbench.

Rhythmically tosses a baseball into his glove.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Dad hunches over a lawnmower engine.

Grease blackens his arms to the elbows. He wrestles a rusted bolt.

STEWART

I'm just saying, Dallas is the safe bet. Business school. It's a straight line, Dad.

The wrench slips.

Dad's hand slams the metal frame.

He winces. Eyes clamp shut.

He watches blood bloom on his knuckle.

DAD

Straight lines are for people who
are afraid of getting lost, Stew.

Dad wipes his hand on a rag.

DAD (CONT'D)

You spend your whole life avoiding
the curves, you're gonna wake up
and realize you never actually
drove the car.

He turns back to the engine.

BACK TO PRESENT

The train lurches. Stewart's shoulder slams the wood
paneling.

Across the aisle, an old man sleeps atop a sack of rice.
Unmoved.

Stewart grips a pen. His hand shakes. Under his father's blue
ink, he scrawls: Drive the car.

He snaps the journal shut.

He leans his head against the vibrating wall. Watches the
moon.

EXT. KRABI - BEACH RESTAURANT - SUNSET

High-tide. Water slaps the concrete pillars.

Stewart sits in the corner. Hides in shadows. He stares at a
journal. An unopened beer sweats before him.

He coughs sharply into his shoulder.

Apple (30s), sun-darkened. Salt-matted hair. Watches from the
railing. She tracks his thumb-circling the leather cover.
Over and over.

She pushes off the rail.

Her bare feet silent on the weathered wood. She approaches.

APPLE

The beer is better when the cap is
off.

Stewart flinches. Looks up. Blinks as if waking from a dream.

STEWART

Right. Yeah.

He fumbles for the opener. Misses it.

APPLE

You are the first person I see come
to Krabi to look at the table.
Usually, people look at the rocks.

She points to the karsts jutting from the sea.

Stewart eyes the monoliths.

STEWART

I'm just making sure I have the
directions for tomorrow.

She pulls the chair.

Sits. Drops a waterproof bag.

She picks up the opener and pops the beer—one clean motion.
The hiss is loud in the quiet.

APPLE

I'm Apple.

STEWART

Stewart.

APPLE

And where does a Stewart come from?
Somewhere with a lot of air
conditioning, I think.

STEWART

Texas. Is it that obvious?

APPLE

Texas. You look like Texas. Big.
Lonely. Too much clothes for a
beach.

She motions toward the journal. Her eyes dance between him
and the worn leather.

APPLE (CONT'D)

What is in the book, Texas? Is it a
treasure map? Are you looking for
gold?

STEWART

It was my father's. He came here in the 70s. He wrote about...

He stops. Shakes his head.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I'm trying to— I don't know what I'm doing. I'm just here.

Apple reaches out. Taps the cover of the book.

APPLE

You come to the most beautiful water in the world and you stare at a piece of paper.

She gestures toward the horizon. The sun sets behind the limestone peaks.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Thailand is not in a book, Texas. It is out there. You should try it. Enjoying yourself. It is allowed here.

Stewart looks at his beer. At her.

STEWART

I'm working on it.

APPLE

You are working at resting. That is very American.

She stands. Grabs her bag. Looks at him. Head tilted.

APPLE (CONT'D)

I go up the coast tomorrow. No maps. No schedules. Just the boat and the water.

STEWART

I have to get to the north tomorrow.

APPLE

The north will be there the day after tomorrow, too.

She leans in closer.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Six o'clock. The pier with the blue flags. If you bring that book, keep it in your bag. Come see the real Thailand. Or stay here and read. Your choice, Texas.

She walks away.

Bare feet thud against wood.

Stewart looks at the beer. The journal. He takes a long drink of the lager.

He turns his chair. Watches the sun go down.

EXT. BEACHFRONT CAFE - MORNING

The sun is high. Sand a white glare.

The blue flag pier sits in the distance. A skiff pulls away. Cuts a white line across turquoise water.

Stewart sits at a metal table. Eggs, white toast, sliced watermelon.

He picks up a piece of toast. He doesn't bite. Holds it.

The journal sits weighted by a salt shaker. He looks at the empty pier.

He looks back at his eggs.

Drops the toast. Looks around.

He's the only person in a collared shirt.

EXT. BEACH - LATER

Stewart walks the shoreline. Boots dangle from his hand by their laces. Slacks rolled to mid-calf. His skin is bright pink.

He stops. Looks at the ocean.

A splash. An engine cuts out.

Apple's skiff drifts into the shallows. She stands in the back. Holds a long pole. Drips. Hair slicked.

She jumps into knee-deep water. Guides the boat toward sand. She walks past him. Hauls a mesh bag of green coconuts.

She stops beside him. Eyes on the horizon.

APPLE

The eggs were good, Texas?

Stewart clears his throat.

STEWART

They were fine.

APPLE

Fine is a very sad word.

She turns. Looks with clinical pity.

APPLE (CONT'D)

You stood on the pier. I saw you.
5:45. You were there.

Stewart looks down. Feet sink into wet sand.

STEWART

I didn't want to miss my connection
to the north. I have a ticket.

APPLE

You have a piece of paper.

She drops the bag of coconuts. Heavy thud echoes.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Your father isn't here in Thailand,
Texas. But you are. Enjoy it.

Stewart's eyes well. He looks at her.

STEWART

I don't even know if I know how to
anymore.

She reaches into mesh. Pulls a green coconut. Holds it out.
Stewart takes it.

APPLE

Tonight. No boats. No lagoons.

STEWART

My train...

APPLE

(cutting him off)

Your train is a metal box. Forget
the box. There is a market. Not for
the tourists with the cameras.

(MORE)

APPLE (CONT'D)
 For the real people who live here.
 Real food. Real noise.

She shoulders her bag. Walks toward the palms. Sand kicks behind her heels.

She shouts as she departs.

APPLE (CONT'D)
 Wear a t-shirt, Texas. You look like a banker at a funeral. Meet me at the big banyan tree behind the temple at eight.

STEWART
 (calling after her)
 Is it... is it far?

Apple stops. Looks back. She smirks.

APPLE
 Everything is far if you're afraid of the walk.

She disappears into the green shadow.

Stewart stands alone in the surf.

A wave rolls in. Swirls around his ankles. Pulls the sand from under his heels. He stumbles. Catches himself. He looks at the green coconut, then the empty pier.

EXT. KRABI - VILLAGE STREET - NIGHT

Bare lightbulbs hang from frayed wires. Casts a yellow glow over stalls.

Iridescent fish.

Bruised mangosteens.

Mountains of bird's-eye chilies.

The air is thick with blue charcoal smoke.

Stewart stands at the edge of the crowd. He wears a plain, oversized grey T-shirt. Sun-reddened neck visible.

He spots the banyan tree. Rope-like roots fall from branches.

Apple leans against the tree. Drinks from a plastic bag. She looks him up and down.

APPLE
Look at that. A human being.

STEWART
(adjusting the shirt
nervously)
I feel naked.

APPLE
That is the point, Texas.

She grabs his wrist. Pulls him into the crowd.

APPLE (CONT'D)
Tonight, we don't look at the book.
We eat.

EXT. NIGHT MARKET - NIGHT

Stewart follows Apple into the maze.

Apple stops at a stall.

A man flash-fries dark shapes in a blackened wok.

She hands him coins and receives a newspaper cone.

She holds it out.

APPLE
Crunchy. Like popcorn.

Stewart looks into the cone.

Fried grasshoppers stare back.

He recoils. Hits a display of pineapples.

STEWART
Nah. Absolutely not.

APPLE
(popping one into her
mouth)
Texas. Your father wasn't coming
here for hamburgers.

She holds one to his lips.

Stewart looks at the crowds. Kids run. Old men laugh over
rice whiskey.

He looks at Apple.

He opens his mouth and chews.

STEWART

Dang..That's actually kinda good.

APPLE

Don't sound so surprised, Texas.

They move to the next stall.

A woman with a weathered face pounds green papaya. Thump-thump-thump.

Apple holds up two fingers. Tosses crumpled baht onto the counter. The woman doesn't break her rhythm. Tosses in bird's eye chilies and palm sugar. The mortar echoes.

The woman scrapes the mixture into a plastic bag. Secures it with a red rubber band. Hands over a fork.

Apple tears the bag open.

She looks past the stall. Toward the dark maze of the market.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Look. See the man with the birds?

Stewart turns.

He squints toward shadows where a vendor hangs bamboo cages from a tin roof. Tiny yellow wings beat against the wood.

Apple loads the fork. Piles it with shredded papaya and a red chili.

Stewart turns back. Mouth opens to speak-

Apple shoves the fork in.

Stewart's eyes go wide.

He freezes.

Cheeks bulge. Eyes stream. Face turns from pink to purple.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Don't think, Texas. Just chew.

STEWART

It's like eating a battery! Why is it so hot?

APPLE

To make sure you're still alive!
Drink this.

She hands him a plastic bag of orange Thai tea. He frantically sucks the straw.

He sweats, eyes water.

To his left. Vendor with a cigarette carves flutes. Shavings pile at his feet.

To his right. Dried squid hang from clothespins. Translucent bodies glow orange under heat lamps.

A man in a grease-stained undershirt hacks a jackfruit with a rusted cleaver.

A stray dog weaves through a forest of legs.

A wall of knock-off sneakers hangs from a wire.

The noise is a wall. Oil sizzles. Spoons clack. Fruit sellers chant.

He reaches for a skewer of glazed Moo Ping. Takes a bite.

STEWART

Oh my God! This might be best thing
I ever tasted.

APPLE

Better than the hotel eggs?

STEWART

(mouth full)
Don't talk to me about the eggs.

A smudge of chili sauce on his grey T-shirt. Messy hair.

Apple watches him wipe his mouth.

She nods. Smile replaces the smirk.

APPLE

There he is.

STEWART

Who?

APPLE

The man who enjoy himself.

Stewart looks at the crowd. At Apple. He smiles.

EXT. PIER - LATER

The roar of the market is a dull hum.

Stewart and Apple sit on the edge of a concrete pier. Feet dangle.

The moon reflects off the water.

Stewart holds a plastic bag of Thai tea. Down to the ice.

He looks at his orange-stained fingers. At the leather journal on his lap.

STEWART

I haven't eaten like that in... I don't even know. Maybe ever.

APPLE

In Texas, do you only eat things that come in boxes?

STEWART

Sometimes. Or steak you don't have time to taste because you're looking at a spreadsheet.

Brief silence.

STEWART (CONT'D)

(lifts the journal)

He never told me about any of this.

APPLE

Thailand?

STEWART

Yeah. I thought...I thought I knew him.

Stewart pauses. Looks at the moon. Sighs.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Then I find this... and it's like he had this whole other life planned out. Every stop, every meal.

He looks to his feet.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I thought he was just Dad...But he was a dreamer...He drew this map, and just put it in a drawer.

Apple looks at Stewart's face.

APPLE

Maybe he put it in the drawer so you could find it.

STEWART

I feel like I'm trespassing on his dreams.

APPLE

You are not trespassing, Texas. You are living them.

She stands up. Brushes the sand off her shorts. Looks at Stewart.

APPLE (CONT'D)

I'm going to the North tomorrow. There is a bus at noon. It is very slow. It stops for chickens. It has no air conditioning.

STEWART

Yeah. I think I'm gonna miss my train.

APPLE

Good. Wear a t-shirt. Or I will pretend I don't know you.

She walks away. Stops. Silhouetted against the distant market lights.

APPLE (CONT'D)

You did good tonight, Texas.

Stewart stays on the pier. He opens the journal to a blank page at the back.

He writes: The papaya salad tastes like a battery.

He closes the book.

INT. BUS - DAY

The bus is a technicolor relic. A rolling box of murals and chrome. Oscillating fans bolted to the ceiling whir with a metallic rattle.

Stewart's knees jam against the seatback.

Beside him. Elderly woman in straw hat. Wicker basket on her lap. A cluck emerges from the slats.

Apple is sprawled opposite the aisle. She sleeps through the noise.

Stewart pulls the journal from his lap. Pages curl.

He flips to a sketch. A jagged mountain rising from water.

Underneath, his father's handwriting: Find the floating houses. Sleep where the floor moves.

Stewart looks out the window. Tangled teak and bamboo reclaim the road.

The bus hits a pothole.

Stewart's head cracks against the frame. He winces. Rubs his temple.

The woman with the basket offers a toothless smile.

Stewart looks at Apple. Motionless. He looks back at the jungle. Whispers.

STEWART

Khao Sok.

EXT. KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK - AFTERNOON

The bus exhales black smoke. Rumbles away. Leaves Stewart and Apple at the gravel's edge.

The jungle is a roar of cicadas, like high-voltage wires.

They start down a narrow trail. Canopy closes over. Blocks the sun.

APPLE

Eyes up, Texas.

A sharp crack of a branch.

Stewart stops. Glances up.

High above. Troop of macaques moves through the canopy. Large male hangs by a single arm. Watches.

He barks once.

Sound echoes off the limestone cliffs.

STEWART

Man, they're everywhere.

APPLE

It's their house. We are just the messy guests.

Further down the trail. Brush rustles.

A monitor lizard slithers across the path.

It stops.

Flicks a forked tongue at Stewart's boots. Vanishes into the ferns.

Stewart doesn't move. He breathes hard.

STEWART

Did you see the size of that thing?

APPLE

He thought you looked like a very large snack.

EXT. CHEOW LAN LAKE - LATE AFTERNOON

They break the treeline. Stewart stops.

The lake is a mirror of emerald. It reflects limestone karsts that shoot into the mist.

A string of bamboo rafts. Floating houses—bob along the shoreline. Tied by frayed ropes.

Stewart pulls out the journal.

He looks at the sketch. Looks at the real thing.

STEWART

He was right.

APPLE

(walking onto the creaking boardwalk)

He was a good architect, your father.

Stewart follows.

The wood shifts. Water laps between bamboo slats.

He wobbles. Arms out.

He looks up.

A pair of great hornbills soar between the peaks.

Stewart takes a deep breath.

A small, dry cough into his shoulder.

INT. FLOATING BUNGALOW - NIGHT

The room is a bamboo box on a plastic pontoon. Walls of woven palm. Thin mattress on the floor. Mosquito net.

The lake is pitch black.

Water laps against the bamboo. A rhythmic, hollow slap-slap-slap.

Stewart sits on the edge of the porch. Legs dangle.

He shines a flashlight into the depths. Silver fish dart in and out of the beam.

Apple sits a few feet away. Cuts fruit with a folding knife.

STEWART

The floor really doesn't stop moving, does it?

APPLE

(without looking up)
If it stops moving, we are sinking.
The movement is how you know you are safe.

Stewart kills the light. Darkness is absolute. He reaches for the journal.

He looks at Apple. She watches the silhouettes of the limestone cliffs.

STEWART

How'd you learn English... you don't sound like the people in the village.

Apple laughs. Shears a long strip of peel off the fruit.

APPLE

My father is a General. Royal Thai Army. Very decorated. Very loud.

Stewart blinks. Surprised.

STEWART

A General?

APPLE

He wanted a daughter who stayed in line. International schools in Singapore. University in London. I was supposed to be a diplomat. Or a lawyer.

She holds up the knife. Blade glints in the starlight.

APPLE (CONT'D)

But I didn't like the shoes. Or the rooms with no windows.

STEWART

He must've been-

APPLE

Furious. He still is. He thinks I am "messy guest" in my own country.

Apple chuckles. Looks to the dark sky.

APPLE (CONT'D)

But I know the name of every bird in this forest. He only knows the name of the men he commands.

She hands Stewart a slice of the fruit.

APPLE (CONT'D)

You are running away from a ghost, Texas. I am running away from a General.

Stewart takes the fruit. Eats in silence.

The booming howl of a gibbon echoes across the water. Stewart doesn't flinch.

EXT. KHAO SOK - DIRT ROAD - MORNING

The mist peels off the jungle. Stewart and Apple stand at the edge of the gravel. Stewart's backpack is cinched tight. His skin sun-baked.

Apple leans against a rusted signpost. Checks the horizon.

STEWART

Apple... I've been thinking. I don't want to just...

(MORE)

STEWART (CONT'D)

I mean, you've done a lot. I don't want to be a burden. I know you probably have a life to get back to.

Apple looks at him. Squints against the morning glare.

APPLE

A life? You think I have a cat and a microwave waiting for me?

STEWART

No, I just—I don't want to assume you're heading all the way to Chiang Mai. I can find the train station.

Apple pushes off the signpost.

She walks over and adjusts the strap on his backpack.

APPLE

I told you—I am a "messy guest." I go where the air is good. And right now... the air is better in the mountains.

She looks him in the eye.

STEWART

So you're coming to Chiang Mai?

APPLE

I am going to Chiang Mai. You are just lucky you are going the same way.

The roar of an engine echoes through the trees. A colorful, battered bus rounds the bend.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Now, get your bags. This driver doesn't like to stop for more than ten seconds.

EXT. SUKHOTHAI - ROADWAY - AFTERNOON

The horizon is flat. Bleached by sun.

The bus rumbles down a straight road. Outside. A blur of lotus ponds. Golden rice fields.

Ancient, red-brick stupas rise from tall grass. Weathered.
Reclaimed by vines.

Stewart leans his head out the window.

The wind hits his face.

He closes his eyes.

He opens them and looks at the rice fields.

A lone farmer in a straw hat stands. Knee-deep in the water.
Still. Stewart watches until the man is a dark speck against
the gold.

He looks at the brick ruins.

Shadows stretch long and jagged across the road.

The bus hits a pothole. Jars him. He doesn't pull his head
inside. He stays. Hair blows in the wind.

EXT. SUKHOTHAI - WAT SI CHUM - LATE AFTERNOON

Stewart and Apple walk through the narrow stone slit.

The space is tight. Shoulders brush the jagged, moss-covered
blocks.

They emerge into the central chamber. Walls fall away. Reveal
the Great Buddha.

Sixty feet of white stone. The face is a mask of ancient,
cracked plaster. Eyes look down.

The Buddha's hand rests on its knee. Fingers long. They reach
toward the dirt. Tips worn to the polished grain.

Stewart stands before the hand.

He hesitates.

His own hand hovers. He reaches out.

He touches the stone middle finger. Wraps his fingers around
the knuckle and holds it.

Eyes drift shut.

Forehead leans against the white forearm.

STEWART

It's warm.

Apple stands a few paces back. Hands shoved into her pockets.

APPLE

A thousand people touched it today.
They leave their heat behind.

Stewart rubs his thumb over the stone knuckle.

He stays for a long beat.

He pulls his hand back. Fingertips linger.

He looks at his palm. At the massive, unmoving limb.

INT. SLEEPER TRAIN - NIGHT

The carriage is a blue-tinted tube of metal. Hums. A steady thrum-thrum vibrates through the floor.

Stewart lies in lower berth. Navy-blue curtain shut.

Outside. The muffled cough of a passenger. The slide of a metal door. Breaks the drone.

He holds his hand up in the reading lamp. Light flickers.

He stares at his palm. Turns it slowly.

He rubs his thumb over his knuckles. Presses hard.

Follows the lines of his palm.

He closes his eyes.

FLASHBACK - INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

The room is cast in rhythmic blue from a heart monitor. The steady pulse-pulse-pulse is the only sound.

Five-year-old STEWART stands on a cracked plastic chair. His chin rests on the metal guardrail.

STEWART'S MOTHER is barely a shape under the thin white sheet.

An oxygen mask fogs with every shallow breath.

IV tubes snake from her arm to a tall metal pole.

Father sits in the shadows.

He holds her hand between his palms.

His thumb rubs her knuckles in a repetitive motion.

The Father watches the green line spike and dip.

BACK TO SCENE

Stewart stops rubbing his hand.

Looks out the window. Dark silhouettes of mountains appear.

The curtain ripples.

Apple's head pokes through. She holds two steaming paper cups.

APPLE

Drink. It's hot.

Stewart sits up.

Takes the cup.

He grips the cardboard with both hands.

STEWART

The air is getting colder.

APPLE

We are climbing. In the morning,
the clouds will be below us.

She lets the curtain fall.

Stewart takes a sip.

A sharp cough jerks his shoulders. He hunches over the cup. Chest heaves as he muffles the sound into his elbow.

EXT. CHIANG MAI TRAIN STATION - MORNING

The train exhales a cloud of white steam.

Stewart and Apple step off the metal stairs.

The station is a swarm of backpackers. Red trucks Monks in saffron.

Stewart stops at the edge of the platform.

He looks at his hands. They are shaky.

He looks at the mist clinging to the mountains.

APPLE
 (adjusting her bag)
 Welcome to the North, Texas.

STEWART
 Where do we start?

Apple points to a red truck-taxi. The driver is shouting "Doi Suthep!" over the crowd.

APPLE
 Higher.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY

A red songthaew grinds its gears. Crawls up the switchbacks.

Engine spits blue exhaust.

Stewart and Apple are crammed in the back.

Two locals sit opposite. They clutch sacks of rice. A crate of clucking chickens.

A pair of European backpackers huddle together. Neon rucksacks take up the aisle.

A monk in a faded saffron robe sits near the cab. Eyes closed. Sways with the tilt of the truck.

Stewart leans his head near the tailgate.

He zips his jacket to the chin. A thin vapor escapes with every breath.

He watches the road drop away.

APPLE
 (Shouting over the engine)
 You're turning blue, Texas.

STEWART
 I didn't know it got cold in Thailand.

She pulls a wool beanie over her ears.

One of the farmers smiles at Stewart. Shows a row of stained teeth. Offers a small, peeled tangerine.

Stewart takes it. Peels a segment. Takes a bite.

STEWART (CONT'D)
How much higher?

APPLE
Until the truck gives up or we hit
the border. Whichever comes first.

The truck hits a pothole.

It sends the travelers upward.

Backpackers grunt as they collide. The monk doesn't open his eyes. Stewart grips the metal railing.

He looks past the tailgate. The valley floor is invisible. Buried under white mist.

He leans back.

His head thumps against the vibrating metal.

EXT. DOI SUTHEP - TEMPLE BASE - MOMENTS LATER

The truck stops.

Stewart steps out. His boots hit the damp pavement.

A massive staircase. Flanked by two giant stone Nagas in green and gold. Stretches into the mist. Their heads loom at the bottom. Mouths agape. Bodies carve a path through the canopy.

Apple starts climbing. Pace light.

Stewart follows. A confident stride.

Step twenty.

The air is thin. Stewart's breath starts to hitch. He looks at the Naga's scales. Thousands of ceramic tiles shimmer with moisture.

He tries to match Apple's rhythm.

Step fifty.

Stewart's chest heaves. He wipes cold sweat from his eyelid. Looks up. The top is gone. The mist has swallowed Apple; she's just moving legs above him.

Step eighty.

His heart is a bass drum.

He missteps.

His toe catches a riser.

He lunges.

Hand slams onto the stone tail to steady himself.

Step one hundred.

He stops. Doubles over. Hands on knees. Stares at the grey stone between his feet.

Apple stops twenty steps above.

Unwinded.

She leans against the Naga's spine and watches his face.

APPLE

Don't look down. Just look at your feet, Texas.

He watches a drop of sweat fall from his nose. Vanishes into the porous stone.

APPLE (CONT'D)

The next step. That's all that matters.

Stewart nods.

He forces his eyes onto the edge of the next riser. Lifts his right boot. Places it down.

EXT. DOI SUTHEP - UPPER TERRACE - LATER

Stewart clears the final step.

He doubles over. Coughs. Hands on knees. A thick, wet rattle vibrates in his chest. He spits phlegm into the drains.

He straightens.

The terrace is a forest of gold. A massive Chedi rises into a bright blue sky. Shimmers. Hundreds of bronze bells hang from the eaves. Chime in a low discord.

Stewart walks toward the spire. Shivers. Rubs his arms.

He reaches the edge.

Below. Chiang Mai is a miniature grid of white and grey.
Buried in a blanket of clouds.

Apple walks up beside him. Looks at the view. At the sweat
drying on his forehead.

APPLE
The air is different up here.

STEWART
It's thin.

APPLE
It's clean.

Stewart looks out past the city. At the dark green ridges
further North. Points.

STEWART
How do you get to those ridges?

APPLE
(smiles)
You don't take a truck.

She points to a row of battered, mud-caked motorbikes parked
near the temple exit.

APPLE (CONT'D)
You ride. Or you walk.

Stewart looks at the bikes. At the horizon. Takes a long,
slow breath.

EXT. CHIANG MAI - STREET CORNER - MORNING

Battered Hondas line the curb. Mud caked into treads.

Stewart stands over a matte-black bike. Grips the bars.

The bike tilts.

He catches it with his thigh. Face turns red.

He pulls a scratched helmet on.

Apple kicks her starter.

Her engine screams.

She looks at Stewart. He stares at the pedals. A blank
expression.

APPLE

Left foot is the gear. Right foot is the brake. Don't touch the front brake or you'll fly over the bars.

STEWART

Umm...Okay.

APPLE

You've ridden a bicycle, Texas?

STEWART

Twenty years ago.

APPLE

It is the same. Just faster.

Stewart stomps the gear lever. The bike lurches. Stalls with a violent jerk.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Less foot. More throttle.

Stewart tries again. The engine whines. He releases the throttle. Bike rolls. Wobbles. He plants both feet. Walks the bike as it moves.

EXT. MOUNTAIN HIGHWAY - LATER

Asphalt gives way to broken concrete. Cracks fill with weeds and orange dust.

Stewart hunches over his tank. Elbows locked. Shoulders pulled to ears.

He takes curves wide.

Tires skim loose gravel at the edge of the drop-offs.

Apple leads. Leans smoothly.

Stewart remains upright. Fights bike's weight.

His eyes glued to her helmet. Terrified to look over at the scenery.

He steals a glance at the journal strapped to his thigh. Follows the handwritten directions.

EXT. JUNGLE TRACK - AFTERNOON

Stewart's bike idles.

He stares at a rusted iron gate. Half-swallowed by vines.

He kills the engine.

Silence. Electric hum of cicadas.

He looks at the journal. At the gate. A faded 42 on a rotting post.

STEWART

The book says to stop at the gate
at mile marker 42.

Apple kicks her kickstand.

She pushes through the elephant grass. Blades swipe at her shoulders. Stewart follows. Boots sink into red mud.

They clear the brush.

A concrete slab sits there. Grey. Moss-covered island in a sea of green. A foundation. Stripped bare. A rectangle of stone.

Stewart walks onto the cement. Looks at the journal. At the empty space. He looks confused.

STEWART (CONT'D)

This is just... a floor. There's
nothing here.

Stewart looks up. Beyond the slab. Jungle breaks.

The vines give way. Orderly rows of trees with waxy leaves. Thousands of small, red, bumpy fruits hang in clusters. Weigh the branches.

Stewart walks to the edge of the orchard.

Grips a cluster.

Looks back at the slab.

At the trees stretching for acres.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I thought it was a house. Why would
he come all the way out here for
this?

APPLE

Maybe he didn't want to be found.

EXT. LYCHEE ORCHARD - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart and Apple move through the trees. Ground a carpet of overripe, burst fruit. Flies swarm the rotting skins.

A FARMER (80s) sits on a low wooden bench. A faded indigo shirt. Skin the color and texture of a walnut. He peels a lychee. Juice stains his calloused thumbs.

He looks up. Not surprised. Gestures to the bench.

Apple steps forward. Bows. Hands pressed together.

APPLE
Sawatdee ka, loong.

The Farmer nods. Squints at Stewart.

Apple speaks low. Points to the concrete foundation. At Stewart.

The Farmer stops peeling. Looks at Stewart's face. Says something. Points to the orchard.

APPLE (CONT'D)
(To Stewart))
He remembers. 1974. An American.
Big, like you.

STEWART
He was here? At this spot?

APPLE
He says they were partners. They
bought this dirt for a project. A
Schoolhouse for the locals.

The Farmer speaks again. His hands trace a large square in the air. Points West.

APPLE (CONT'D)
But the American got a letter from
home. His girlfriend was pregnant.

The Farmer reaches into a woven basket.

He picks out a bruised lychee and holds it out.

Stewart doesn't take it.

APPLE (CONT'D)
He sold his half to this man for
the price of a plane ticket.

Stewart looks at the limbs of the tree above them.

STEWART
A plane ticket.

APPLE
He wanted to be sure he could get
back to Houston.

The Farmer stands. Knees pop. He gestures toward a stilt-house. Weathered teak. Corrugated tin.

Stewart and Apple follow him up the notched ladder.

INT. FARMER'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The room is dim. The Farmer walks to a low altar crowded with incense burners and small brass statues.

He reaches behind a ceramic bowl.

Pulls out a small, silver-plated frame. The glass is cracked.

He hands it to Stewart.

The photo is black and white. Edges curled and yellowed. A heavy crease splits the middle.

In the picture. Young man—bare-chested. Ribs showing. Hair a wild mane. Stands on the raw concrete. Laughs. Lychee in one hand. Shovel in the other.

Stewart stares. Traces the shape of the man.

His thumb moves over the cracked glass.

APPLE
(leaning in)
Is it him?

Stewart doesn't answer immediately. He looks at the hippie in the photo. His own reflection in the glass.

STEWART
I've never seen him without a tie.

He hands the photo back to the Farmer.

STEWART (CONT'D)
He looks...happy.

The Farmer sets the photo back on the altar.

The farmer says something to Apple. Voice a low vibration. He gestures to the photo. To the window.

APPLE

He says your father was full of many words. Many plans. But when the wind changed, he went where he was needed.

Stewart stands by the altar. Looks one last time at the hippie in the silver-plated frame.

He looks at the leather journal. Edges are frayed. Cover stained with red dust.

He traces the embossed A.M.

He sets it on the altar. Leans it against the cracked glass.

The farmer watches. Gives a single, slow nod.

STEWART

It belongs here.

Apple watches him from the doorway. Orange sunset catches the side of her face.

Stewart turns. Walks to the notched ladder.

EXT. LYCHEE ORCHARD - MOMENTS LATER

The sun dips.

Stewart reaches his bike. Slides his helmet on.

He looks back.

A warm light flickers through the teak slats. The farmer lights an oil lamp.

Stewart kicks the starter. The engine coughs. Plume of blue smoke swirls.

Apple pulls up beside him. Tires caked with red mud.

APPLE

The road back is dark, Texas. No lights. Just the moon.

STEWART

Then we'll use the moon.

EXT. MOUNTAIN OVERLOOK - NIGHT

The bikes sit on a narrow gravel shoulder. Valley below dark. The only light from the villages.

Apple kills her engine.

She pushes her visor up. Watches Stewart.

He sits on his bike. Hands locked on the grips. Stares at the front tire.

APPLE

The bike's off, Texas. You can let go now.

Stewart doesn't move.

STEWART

He sold his land...For a plane ticket.

APPLE

That's what the man said.

STEWART

He didn't even have a kid yet. He just... threw it all away...To be a gym teacher.

He lets go of the handles. Hands curled in mid-air for a second. He drops them.

He climbs off the bike.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I spent my whole life thinking he loved his life...the lawn and the car and the Sunday dinners.

He walks to the edge of the gravel. Kicks a spray of stones into the dark.

STEWART (CONT'D)

But he was just trapped. And I was the trap.

APPLE

He could've stayed. Men stay here all the time and forget they have families.

STEWART

He was too good for that. That's the problem. He did the right thing and it killed him...He spent thirty years pretending he didn't want to be exactly where I'm standing right now.

He turns to her. Eyes wet.

STEWART (CONT'D)

And I wasn't even there at the end. I was too damn busy with my own important divorce...my own important job...I just let him die. In a house he never even wanted to be in.

APPLE

So you're a shitty son. Welcome to the club.

STEWART

It's not a joke.

APPLE

I'm not joking. You want to stay here and cry about a dead man's choices, or you want to get to the station? He's not coming back to tell you it's okay. He's gone.

She pulls her helmet down.

STEWART

Yeah. He's gone.

He kicks the starter.

Pulls out behind her. Head low. Follows her red taillight down the mountain.

EXT. CHIANG MAI - TRAIN STATION - PRE-DAWN

A low mist hangs under corrugated tin. Stewart's breath lingers in the air.

He sits on a concrete bench. Back against a pillar. Pulls his phone from his pocket.

He taps BARBARA.

The line clicks.

BARBARA (V.O.)
Stewart?, I'm in the middle of
dinner. Is everything okay?

STEWART
I found it.

BARBARA (V.O.)
Found What?

STEWART
The address, Barb. I found the
address.

BARBARA
And?

STEWART
It's a lychee orchard. Nothing but
trees.

He watches a stray dog cross the platform. Fur slicked down
by mist.

STEWART (CONT'D)
I saw a picture of him from before
we were born. Long hair. No shirt.
He looked like a goddamn hippie.

BARBARA (V.O.)
(A long beat)
Dad?

STEWART
Yeah. Can you believe that?

Silence. Dishes clank in the background.

Stew coughs—a racking sound.

BARBARA (V.O.)
You sound terrible, Stew.

STEWART
I'm fine. I'm heading to Pai.

BARBARA (V.O.)
Where? When are you coming home,
Stewart?

STEWART
I'll call you from the mountains.

He taps the screen. Ends call. Blue light fades.

EXT. STATION PLATFORM - MOMENTS LATER

Apple stands by her bike. She checks her oil. Waterproof bag strapped tight. Morning light peeks over the horizon.

She looks up at Stewart.

APPLE

The bus for Pai leaves in 30 minutes, Texas. Go up there. Let the mountains swallow you whole.

STEWART

You said the canyons turn red when the sun hits them, huh?

APPLE

They do. And the hot springs... they smell like rotten eggs, but they stop the bones from aching.

STEWART

(grins)
I like eggs.

Apple kicks her starter. Bike roars to life.

She looks at him. Neon of the station sign reflects in her eyes.

APPLE

I'm going East. To the river.

STEWART

I know. Thanks, Apple. For everything.

Apple reaches into her pocket. Tosses a small, green lychee at him. He catches it.

APPLE

Don't go back into the box, Stewart.

Apple gives him a sharp, two-finger salute from her forehead.

APPLE (CONT'D)

Breathe, Texas. Don't forget to breathe.

She twists the throttle. Peels away. Tires leave dark tracks on the wet pavement. Stewart watches the red glow until the fog swallows it.

He stands alone. Looks at the green fruit in his hand.

He takes a breath. Walks toward the loading platform.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - PARKING LOT - DAY

Stewart stands at the edge of the lot.

A mini-van idles. Driver shouts, "Pai! Pai! One seat!" into the crowd. Stewart looks at the fogged-up windows.

He turns his back.

Across the street: TONY'S BIKES. Battered Hondas and Yamahas line the sidewalk. Tires caked in red mud.

A teenage boy. Grease-stained T-shirt. Scrolls phone. Doesn't look up until Stewart shadows the desk.

STEWART

How much for the black 125?

The kid looks up. Startled. He taps a hand-written sign taped to the desk: 250 BAHT / DAY.

BOY

Insurance?

STEWART

No. Just the bike.

Stewart pulls a wad of crumpled Baht from his pocket. Counts it out. Slides his passport across the wood.

The boy takes the cash. Drops a set of keys. Points toward the curb.

BOY

Helmet in box. Check oil.

EXT. HIGHWAY 1095 - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart kicks the starter. It coughs once. Roars.

He kicks the kickstand up. Pulls on a scuffed silver helmet. Clicks the strap.

He twists the throttle.

The bike surges forward. Rear tire bites into asphalt. He leaves the station, the mini-vans, and the city behind in a cloud of blue exhaust.

EXT. HIGHWAY 1095 - DAY

Stewart leans the Honda. Tight switchback. Teak tree shadow flickers across his visor.

The front tire catches loose shale. The bike skips.

Stewart over-corrects.

His boot drags hard. The bike slides into the red dirt.

CRUNCH.

Stewart tumbles.

A tangle of limbs and dust. He slides into the ferns.

Engine stalls. Silence.

Stewart lies on his back. Squints at the sun. Lets out a sharp, jagged huff.

A dry chuckle starts in his chest. It grows into a laugh, then a raspy cough. He shakes his head. Red dust puffs from his hair.

STEWART

Seven hundred and sixty-one to go.

He sits up slowly. Left forearm is a map of stinging road rash.

He reaches under his shirt. Prods his lower ribs.

Winces.

His laugh catching in a sharp hitch. He pulls his hand back. No blood.

He stands.

Brushes dust from his pants with a grin. Hauls the bike upright. A few scratches on the plastic.

He kicks the starter. It sputters. He kicks harder. The engine roars.

Stewart swings a leg over.

Twists the throttle. Pulls off.

EXT. PAI VALLEY - SUNSET

The road levels out. Canopy breaks into a wide, golden bowl of rice paddies.

Stewart rides slow. His shadow stretches twenty feet against bamboo fences.

To his right. A tethered water buffalo tracks him with a slow turn of its head.

He rolls past hostels. Multicolored lights hum to life. Travelers sit on floor cushions. Locked in conversation.

Neon signs flicker. Pinks and greens. He passes a girl fanning a charcoal grill.

He doesn't stop.

He keeps riding until the music fades and the town lights vanish in his rearview. The road ahead is dark. Only sound is the bike.

EXT. PAI - BUNGALOW - NIGHT

Stewart parks under a thatched lean-to. Coated in red dust.

He limps to the porch. Sits on the edge of the bed. Peels back his shirt. Under a single yellow bulb, the bruise is already deep purple.

He lies back. Listens to the rhythmic pulse of the cicadas.

EXT. SAI NGAM HOT SPRINGS - PRE-DAWN

Steam rolls off the tiered stone pools.

Stewart stands at the edge. He moves with a heavy stiffness.

He peels his shirt over his head.

The dawn light catches the damage. Dark plum bruise on his ribs. Tacky scrapes on his shoulder.

He steps in. Water hits his waist.

He pauses. Jaw tight.

Then sinks until the pool swallows the bruise.

His eyes squeeze shut. Head falls back against mossy limestone. Water bubbles.

A leaf drops from the canopy. Hits the surface. Spins in a tight circle. Drifts toward the edge.

His arms float to the surface, weightless. He closes his eyes. The jungle is a wall of sound. Insects chirp. A distant bird. Steady gurgle of the spring.

The sun crests the ridge. Stewart sits in the light. Face upturned. His lungs expand fully.

He rises slowly. Water sheets off his skin. Falls on limestone.

He pulls on his shirt. Winces as the fabric catches his scabs.

He gingerly touches the plum-colored bruise on his ribs.

EXT. PAI - RICE PADDIES - MOMENTS LATER

The road opens into neon-green rice paddies.

Stewart pulls the bike onto a narrow concrete path.

He kills the engine.

A white crane lifts from the tall grass. It's wings beat slow against the blue. Stewart watches it crest the treeline and vanish.

He pulls out his phone. The black screen reflects his face. Dust-streaked. Red scratch across his cheek.

He swipes it on.

Notifications flood in. Emails from the firm. Text from Barbara:

BARBARA (TEXT)
Stewart, please. Just tell me
you're safe.

Stewart returns the phone to his pocket.

EXT. PAI - RENTAL SHOP - DAY

Stewart pulls the Honda onto the gravel. The engine tink-tink-tinks as it cools. He's coated in red dust.

He kills the ignition. The RENTAL CLERK walks over. Eyes on the bike.

The Clerk squats.

Traces a jagged gouge in the plastic with a greasy thumb.

He eyes the bent footpeg.

Looks at the road rash on Stewart's arm.

CLERK

(Pointing at the fairing)

This new. This not here before.

STEWART

Yeah. You shoulda seen the other
guy.

The Clerk pulls out a calculator. Taps in a number: 2500.
Turns the screen toward Stewart.

CLERK

New plastic. 2,500.

Stewart looks at the number.

At his bruised arm.

He pulls a wad of crumpled bills from his pocket. Counts out
twenty-five hundred.

Lays it in the Clerk's palm.

The Clerk blinks. Surprised. Hands Stewart his passport.

CLERK (CONT'D)

You injure? Need doctor?

STEWART

Never better.

Stewart hauls his backpack over his shoulder. Walks toward
the bus station across the street.

INT. CHIANG MAI AIRPORT - SECURITY - NIGHT

Stewart stands in the security line. Dirty backpack. Pulls
off his boots. Drops them into bin. Shoves his belt and phone
into the bin. Walks through the metal detector.

INT. CHIANG MAI AIRPORT - BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart drops his bag. Turns the faucet. Cups his hands under
the stream.

He splashes his face. Looks in the mirror. Thinner. Tanned. The scratch on his cheek is dark. Healing.

He stares at his reflection until a traveler bumps past him to reach the next sink. Stewart turns off the tap.

EXT. PHUKET AIRPORT - DAY

Sliding doors open. Hiss.

A dark patch of sweat immediately blooms on the back of Stewart's shirt.

He finds a shared van. Wedges himself between suitcases and the window. He wipes a layer of condensation off the glass to see the palm trees.

EXT. PHUKET - PATONG BEACH - MOMENTS LATER

The van drops Stewart at the beach road.

Motorbikes weave through traffic. Bass thumps from open bars.

Stewart heaves his bag onto his shoulder.

Winces.

He stops. Clutches his side. Tries for a deep breath. A stabbing pain cuts it short.

He pulls back his shirt. The bruise on his ribs is a sickly greenish-yellow.

INT. PHUKET CLINIC - DAY

The waiting room is small and bright.

A ceiling fan wobbles overhead.

Stewart sits on a plastic chair. Holds a clipboard.

A NURSE leads him into a back room.

NURSE

X-ray?

STEWART

Yeah, i fell off a motorbike and
I've been having a pain in my ribs.

INT. X-RAY ROOM - LATER

Stewart stands against the cold metal plate. He holds his breath.

FLASH. The technician directs him to turn.

FLASH. Another turn.

FLASH.

INT. CLINIC - DOCTOR'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

The DOCTOR. Older man. Silver hair. Gold-rimmed glasses. Slides film onto lightboard. Clicks the switch. X-ray glows.

The Doctor stares at it for a long time.

He looks at the cloudy, white blooms scattered across Stewart's lungs. Dark shadows on the vertebrae.

DOCTOR

Mr. Stir it. You fall on bike, yes?

STEWART

Yeah. A few days ago. I just can't get a full breath without it catching.

The Doctor points at the ribs on X-ray.

DOCTOR

Ribs... ribs okay. No break. Maybe bruise. But...

He moves the pen to the center of the chest. Circles a dense, jagged white mass. Looks at Stewart over his glasses.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

This not from bike. This very old. Very... spread.

STEWART

What is that? Infection?

DOCTOR

No. Not infection. This... this cancer. Lung. And go to bone. Very far. We say Stage Four.

He leans back shocked. Plastic chair creaks.

STEWART

Stage four? That's... that's a mistake. I'm here for my ribs, Doc.

DOCTOR

I am sorry. English... is hard for me to explain detail. But this picture... it not lie. You have pain before? Maybe cough?

STEWART

I... I thought-

DOCTOR

It hide for long time. But now, it everywhere.

The Doctor's voice begins to tunnel.

FLASHBACK-INT. HOUSTON HOSPITAL - DAY (2 YEARS AGO)

The room is white. Sterile. A heart monitor blips.

Stewart stands at the foot of the bed. Hands shoved deep inside his pockets.

A SPECIALIST in a white coat stands by the window. Scrolls through a tablet. Doesn't look up.

SPECIALIST

It's Stage Four, Mr. Miller. It's aggressive. It's in the lymph nodes. We need to discuss palliative options.

Stewart's Father is propped up by pillows. Skin pale.

His shoulders drop. Tension in his jaw vanishes. Head sinks back. Eyes close.

Stewart watches.

His own breathing hitches. He looks away.

BACK TO SCENE

INT. CLINIC - DOCTOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The Thai doctor is leaning forward.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
Mr. Stir it? You have family?
Someone you call?

Stewart stares at the X-ray.

STEWART
No. No one to call.

Stewart stands.

DOCTOR
Wait. You need medicine. For pain.
I write paper. For hospital in
Phuket—

STEWART
No. I'm okay. Thank you, Doctor.

Stewart picks up his bag. Walks out of the office.

EXT. GUESTHOUSE - LATER

Stewart sits on the porch steps. Backpack at his feet.

Motionless.

A BOY (5) walks out.

He stops. Tilts his head. Mimics Stewart's frozen posture.

The Boy sits beside him. Stewart doesn't move.

The Boy reaches up.

Pointer fingers hook the corners of Stewart's mouth. Force his lips into a smile.

Stewart blinks. The trance breaks.

He pulls a crumpled strawberry candy from his pocket. Offers it.

The Boy takes it.

He leans in. Squeezes Stewart's neck. Tight hug. Runs off. Disappears into the office.

Stewart remains on the steps. Light fades.

EXT. GUESTHOUSE - MORNING

The sun is bright.

Stewart sits at a small plastic table in the courtyard. Plate of sliced fruit. Cup of coffee. Untouched.

The Boy emerges from the kitchen. Stops in front of Stewart.

He pulls scratched blue goggles from his pocket. Sets them by Stewart's coffee. Grins. Scurries back toward the clatter of pans.

Stewart eyes the goggles. Puzzled. He pockets them.

Beyond the walls. A roar swells. Collective shouts. Squeal of tires. Rhythmic thud of a plastic drum.

SPLASH.

A wall of water erupts over the fence.

Another wave follows. Higher this time. Dumps a deluge onto the patio.

Stewart peeks around the fence. On the other side, the world screams.

He pulls the goggles from his pocket.

Snaps them on.

EXT. PATONG STREET - DAY

The street is a canyon of water. Trucks with blue barrels. Sidewalks lined with hoses. Music shakes the air. Foam machines blast white clouds into the crowd.

Stewart steps out of the guesthouse gate. Immediately hit by a wall of water. He gasps.

He walks into the chaos. Passes a street vendor with a rack of neon plastic. Pulls a wad of Baht from his pocket.

STEWART

Two. The big ones.

The vendor hands him two pressurized water cannons. One neon green. One bright orange.

EXT. GUESTHOUSE COURTYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart walks back in. Dripping.

The Boy stands by the kitchen door. Watches water fly over the fence.

Stewart whistles.

The Boy looks up.

Stewart tosses the orange water gun. The Boy catches it. Eyes go wide.

STEWART

Pump it.

Stewart demonstrates.

The Boy mimics. Face set in fierce concentration.

He pulls the trigger. Stream hits a potted plant. The Boy shrieks with joy.

Stewart points toward the gate.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Let's go.

EXT. PATONG STREET - CONTINUOUS

They hit the sidewalk. Total war.

A pickup roars past. Bed packed with revelers. They drench the crowd.

Stewart narrows his eyes. Blasts the driver with his green cannon.

Beside him, the Boy screams with laughter as he sprays tourists in Hawaiian shirts.

White foam drifts from a rooftop.

A woman runs down the street. Streaks talcum paste across Stewart's cheeks. He laughs.

A bucket of water from a balcony hits him square on the head.

He stands there. Eyes closed. Water streaming over his shoulders. Sun shines behind him.

EXT. PATONG STREET - LATER

The sun hangs low, a gold ball at the end of the road.

Stewart leans against a lamp pole. Soaked. Skin wrinkled from water. White paste on his face streaks down.

He looks at the boy on the curb. Hugging an orange water gun, smiling. Face glowing in the sunset.

BOY
Happy New Year!

Stewart looks at the crowds.

The foam.

The shimmering, wet pavement.

He reaches into his pocket.

Pulls out the scratched blue goggles.

Slides them over his eyes. World a blurry blue. He smiles.

STEWART
Happy New Year, kid.

EXT. LUXURY HOTEL - ROOFTOP - NIGHT

The elevator doors slide open.

To the east: skyline lit in electric blue and violet.

The terrace glows soft amber. A jazz trio tucked into a corner, framed by oversized monstera leaves. The upright bass thrums a slow rhythm.

Overhead, strings of Edison bulbs sway in the breeze. Filaments flicker. Shadows stretch across the deck.

Stewart sits at a small marble table near the glass railing. Smartly dressed.

He stares at the condensation on his cocktail glass. A single bead of water slides down. Carves a translucent line through the fog.

A YOUNG WOMAN in a sequined dress leans over.

YOUNG WOMAN
The band is too good to sit down.
Would you like to dance?

Stewart glances at her. Then at the empty chair across from him.

FLASHBACK-INT. HOUSTON APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT (8 YEARS AGO)

Fluorescent light hums. Stewart hunched over his laptop. Screen reflects in his glasses.

Priya stands by the sink. Silk dress, heels, gold earrings. Holds a dish towel.

PRIYA

The reservation was for eight,
Stewart.

STEWART

(Without looking up)
I know. I just need to finish this
audit. Five minutes.

PRIYA

It's been five minutes for three
years.

Stewart looks at her dress. At his wrinkled polo shirt.

STEWART

It's Tuesday night, babe. Can we do
this on a Friday.

PRIYA

Friday never comes, Stew. We don't
go on dates anymore. We just
coexist.

STEWART

I'm trying to build our future,
babe.

PRIYA

There is no future if you won't
even stand up and look at me. Just
once. Just one dance in the
kitchen.

Stewart glances at the laptop. Red numbers flash.

STEWART

Babe, just gimme 5 minutes.

Priya drops the dish towel. Walks out. Stewart stays, eyes
locked on the screen.

BACK TO SCENE**EXT. LUXURY HOTEL - ROOFTOP -NIGHT**

Stewart stands. Chair scrapes the deck.

STEWART

Yes. I would.

He takes the young woman's hand. Leads her to the small wooden floor.

One hand on her waist. The other holds hers. They move slowly.

He closes his eyes. Spins her. Smiling. Eyes wet.

Leans back. Opens his eyes. Stars overhead.

She watches. Silent. Lets him lead.

The song ends. Music stops. He holds her hand for a moment, then lets go.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Thank you.

YOUNG WOMAN

(curtsying)

The pleasure was mine.

Stewart walks back to his table. Picks up the blue goggles. Heads for the elevator.

Soft grin. Tears in his eyes.

INT. GUESTHOUSE ROOM - NIGHT (THAILAND) / DAY (HOUSTON)

Stewart sits on the floor at the edge of the bed. Mosquito net hangs above him.

Phone pressed to his ear. Legs stretched on the tile floor.

BARB (V.O.)

Stewart? It's nearly 4:00 AM there.

Is everything okay?

Stewart leans his head back against the wall.

STEWART

Everything's fine, Barb. I just... I was sitting here thinking about that summer at the city pool. The high dive. You remember that?

BARB (V.O.)

Oh, brother. You stood on that board so long the lifeguard had to climb up and get you.

STEWART

I was shaking so hard the board was rattling...I've always been that way. Just paralyzed by heights.

BARB (V.O.)

I remember. Dad had to come out of the stands to calm you down.

STEWART

Yeah. He told me it was okay to be scared. He said that one day, I'd look back at that ladder and just laugh. Wonder why I let a piece of fiberglass and some water mess with my head so much.

Stewart reaches out. Touches the goggles on the nightstand.

STEWART (CONT'D)

He was right ya know. It's all kind of funny when you think about it. All the things we get worked up over.

BARB (V.O.)

You sound... different, Stew. You sound good.

STEWART

I am. I'm really good. I'm actually looking forward to getting back. I'll be home next week.

BARB (V.O.)

A week? Good. That's really good, Stewart. I was worried you'd just disappear.

STEWART

Yeah. It'll be good to be home. I'll see you soon, Barb.

BARB (V.O.)
See you soon. Love you, Stew.

Stewart taps the screen. Room goes silent.

He picks up the blue goggles. Looks at them. Pulls them over his eyes. Everything blurry and blue.

Stewart lets out a genuine laugh. Breaks into a violent, hacking cough.

EXT. PATONG BEACH - MORNING

The morning sun is white. Glints off the sea.

Stewart sits at a weathered wooden table in the sand.

A cup of black coffee. A plate of sliced mango.

He watches the horizon.

A speedboat roars in the distance. Pulls a neon-yellow parachute into the sky. A tiny silhouette dangles from the harness.

Stewart sips coffee slowly. Eyes locked on the flyer.

The parachute climbs. Higher. Higher. Just a speck.

He sets the cup down. Stands. Walks toward the water

EXT. BEACH - MOMENTS LATER

A Thai CREWMAN in a tank top approaches. Heavy nylon harness in hand.

CREWMAN
You go up? Very high. Best view.

Stewart looks at the harness. The sky. Hands tremble.

STEWART
Yeah. I go up.

The crewman threads the webbing through a heavy friction buckle. Cinches straps tight around Stewart's thighs. His waist. Fabric bites.

Stewart stands. Arms out—fledgling bird.

The crewman clicks two heavy metal carabiners. Tugs. Locks them with his full weight.

CREWMAN

Keep legs straight for takeoff.
When you come down, bend knees.
Like a spring. Understand?

Stewart nods.

The crewman points to the overhead bar attached to the neon-yellow parachute billowing on the sand.

CREWMAN (CONT'D)

Hold the bar. Don't pull. Just
hold.

The speedboat engine revs. Boat lurches forward. Rooster tail of white spray hits Stewart's legs.

CREWMAN (CONT'D)

Run! Run! Run!

Stewart lunges. Sudden, violent upward jerk. Parachute snaps open.

Feet leave the ground.

EXT. ABOVE THE ANDAMAN SEA - CONTINUOUS

The roar of the beach is gone. Only the whistling wind.

Stewart rises. Boots dangle over turquoise void.

Knuckles white, he grips the risers. Shoulders hunched.

Long beat.

One by one, his fingers uncurl. Grip loosens.

He settles fully into the nylon seat. Leans back.

Arms spread. Palms open to the air.

The view opens: Phuket coastline, green and vibrant. Ocean stretching forever. Deep blue where reef drops off.

Silent. Only the wind rushing by.

He is suspended in the sky.

A wide smile breaks. Eyes clear. Bright.

He drifts.

STEWART
You were right, Dad.

He swings gently in the harness. Small speck against infinite blue.

EXT. PATONG BEACH - NIGHT

The beach is dark. A dozen kerosene torches flicker orange.

In the center of a wide circle: two THAI FIRE DANCERS spin long chains of flame. Woomph... woomph...

Stewart stands at the edge. Drenched in sweat.

DANCER
Who jump? Who jump?

Stewart watches the rope of fire hitting the sand.

FLASHBACK-EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

A small fire burns in a rusted metal pit.

Stewart (15) drags a heavy limb across the grass, breath sharp.

STEWART
Dad, if we don't get this on now,
it's gonna go out.

FATHER
Sit down, Stew.

STEWART
I just need to find the chainsaw.
There's a pile of cedar behind the
shed. If we really stack it, this
thing'll be huge.

FATHER
The fire's fine, kid. Sit down.

STEWART
I'll sit in a second. I don't want
it to go out.

FATHER
Stew. Look at the damn thing.

Stewart stops. Clutches kindling.

FATHER (CONT'D)

You've been running around this yard for an hour like you're on a clock. You're so worried about the fire going out that you haven't even seen it yet.

The father takes a slow sip of his beer.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Just sit and look at it for five minutes. The wood isn't going anywhere, Stew. Neither are you.

EXT. PATONG BEACH - NIGHT

Flaming rope whips sand.

The Dancer scans the crowd. Stops on Stewart. Beckons. Rope never slows.

DANCER

Hey! Big man! You! Come on!

Stewart freezes. Looks at the wall of fire. Bottle in hand. Shakes his head.

DANCER (CONT'D)

Don't think! Just jump! Life is short. Come on!

Crowd starts a low, rhythmic clap.

Dancer chants: Hey! Hey! Hey!

Stewart exhales. Sets drink on crate. Steps into the circle.

The Dancer shrieks with joy.

DANCER (CONT'D)

Yeah! That's it! That's the spirit!
Okay, here we go! Ready? One...
two...

He jumps. Flame passes under his feet. Thwack-woomph. Lands.

DANCER (CONT'D)

Yes! Again! Keep the rhythm! Don't look at the fire, look at me!

Stewart jumps again. Laughs. Clears by inches. Shadow dances long and wild across white sand.

He spins. Stumbles into sand. Gasps.

Lungs hitch. Violent, hacking cough.

Clutches ribs.

He sits. Soot-streaked. Watches the dancers. Still smiling.

EXT. ANDAMAN SEA - MORNING

Morning sun low.

A longtail boat cuts through the water. Engine a steady thrum.

Stewart sits at the bow. Bottle of water in hand.

Watches limestone cliffs emerge from morning mist.

CHAI (30s), boat driver, stands at the stern. Maneuvers the long wooden tiller.

He kills the engine. Boat glides into a secluded, emerald lagoon. Silence.

CHAI

Early best. No big tour.

Stewart looks at the white sand. Green water.

STEWART

It's beautiful. I've never seen water like this before.

Chai ties off a rope. Sits on the edge of the boat. Looks at Stewart's boots. At the horizon.

CHAI

You come from America, yeah? Big houses. Big money.

STEWART

Yeah. Big everything.

CHAI

I wish I go there. Work hard, make money. My cousin in America, he have two car.

Chai shakes his head. Looks at the water.

CHAI (CONT'D)

America is dream, man. You be anyone. I drive same water every day.

Stewart looks at Chai's calloused hands. At the lagoon. He leans back against the wooden ribs of the boat.

STEWART

You've got it all backwards, Chai.

Chai looks up. Small sharp kink between his brows.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Back home, I spent twenty years staring at a screen in a room with no windows so I could pay for a house I was never in. I worked sixty hours a week just so I could afford to come here for a few weeks and finally breathe.

Stewart gestures to the cliffs. Water. Sky.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Look at this. Wake up. World already perfect. No one asks for an audit. No one cares about your credit score. If I could trade my big house, my cars, for this boat and this view... I'd do it in a heartbeat.

CHAI

You say this because you have money, America.

STEWART

No. I say this because I ran out of time.

Stewart reaches over the side. Lets his hand drag in the water.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Don't hurry to get to where I was. There's nothing there but a calendar full of things you don't want to do. Stay here. Look at the water. You're already at the finish line, my man.

Chai stays quiet for a long moment. Looks at the lagoon. Nods slowly.

CHAI

Maybe. Maybe the morning is enough
for today.

Stewart smiles. Closes eyes. Tilts head back into the sun.

Boat drifts in empty lagoon.

EXT. WAT CHALONG - LATER

Sky ink-blue.

The temple, a silhouette of golden spires. White marble.

Small white lights flicker along the roofline.

Stewart crosses the wide courtyard.

A row of massive bronze bells.

He reaches out.

Trails his hand over the metal. Doesn't ring them. Just feels.

From deep inside the grounds, a low, rhythmic chant begins.

Guttural. Hum.

Stewart stops at the base of the main steps.

Kicks off his boots.

Climbs the marble stairs toward the massive teak doors.

INT. TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

Interior dark.

Candles flicker.

Stewart sits cross-legged.

Across him, an elderly MONK.

Saffron robes. Eyes closed. Hands resting perfectly still.

Stewart waits.

Looks at the Monk.

At the floor.

Shifts his weight. Joints pop – sharp sound in heavy silence.

Rubs palms against thighs. Opens mouth. Closes it.

Then speaks.

STEWART

I spent forty-four years waiting to
start living.

The Monk doesn't move.

Stewart rubs his face. Whispers.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I thought I was being responsible.
Building the foundation, you know?
But the foundation just turned into
a wall. I couldn't... I couldn't
see over it.

Hands shake. Breath hitches. Pauses.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I finally started living 7 days
ago. I ate grasshoppers. Danced
with fire. Flew without a plane. I
actually looked at the sky without
checking my watch. And now...

He swallows hard. Chin trembles. Looks at the ceiling.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Now they tell me the clock is
stopping. It's not fair.

Pauses.

Wipes a tear away with his hand. Voice breaks.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I just got here. I'm not ready to
die. I'm not... I'm not ready to
die.

Stewart leans forward. Eyes wet.

STEWART (CONT'D)

How am I supposed to accept this?

The Monk remains a statue.

Stewart wipes his eyes. Bitter laugh. Small, painful cough. Clutches side.

STEWART (CONT'D)
Right. Great talk.

Slowly pushes up. Movements slow and heavy.

MONK
You think I am a priest who washes
away sins.

Stewart freezes. Half-standing.

He looks at the Monk.

The old man's eyes are open now.

MONK (CONT'D)
This is not a confessional. You are
not a criminal because you lived
for tomorrow. You were simply a man
who was asleep.

The Monk shifts his gaze to Stewart.

MONK (CONT'D)
You ask how to leave now that you
have found life. But you are still
making the same mistake. You are
worrying about the end of the song
while the music is still playing.

Shifts gaze. Small knowing smile.

MONK (CONT'D)
A man who lives one day with his
eyes open has lived longer than a
man who survives a century in a
dream. You are not losing time. You
finally have it. Don't waste the
time you have left grieving for the
time you don't.

The Monk closes his eyes.

Returns to his stillness.

Stewart stands there. Takes a long, slow breath. Bows—deeply.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY - LATER

The lobby is a tiled oasis.

A fountain gurgles in the corner. Water spills over smooth river stones.

Overhead, a slow-moving teak fan stirs the air.

Near the entrance. Clay pot overflows with lotus flowers.

Stewart reaches the front desk.

The CLERK, a young man. Crisp white shirt. White smile. Eyes on the screen.

CLERK

Good afternoon, Mr. Stewart.
Checking out today?

STEWART

Yessir, headed to the airport.

A sudden, sharp cough shakes Stewart.

He leans against the marble counter. Flushes. Breath slows.

The clerk pauses. Hand hovers over the keyboard. Eyes flick up. Clinical mask hides everything but his eyes.

CLERK

You have a cold, sir? The mountain
air can be very damp this time of
year.

Stewart wipes his mouth. Looks at the clerk.

STEWART

No. It's not a cold.

CLERK

I see, sir. I will prepare your
final bill. Did you enjoy the
mountains?

Stewart studies his reflection in the glass of the counter.

STEWART

They were exactly what I needed.

CLERK

The taxi is five minutes away.
Would you like to wait in the
lounge? There is coffee.

STEWART

No, thanks. I'll just wait here.

Stewart sits on his duffel bag in the middle of the lobby.

The clerk taps at the keyboard. Sharp clicks echo in the quiet room.

CLERK

You are early, sir. Most guests wait until the last second to leave.

STEWART

I'm in no hurry anymore.

The clerk hands him a small slip of paper.

Stewart signs it.

Picks up his bag.

Walks toward the sliding glass doors.

INT. PHUKET AIRPORT - LATER

Harsh fluorescent light hits everything.

Stewart stands in a long, slow-moving line at the gate.

Travelers hunch over phones.

Stewart is still.

He watches.

A small child at the next gate.

Tries to share a cracker with a security guard.

Stewart smiles.

Behind him, a woman juggles a carry-on and a coffee.

Sighs.

Checks her watch. Again. And again.

She looks at Stewart.

WOMAN

Unbelievable. We've been in this line for twenty minutes. They're gonna miss the window.

Stewart turns slightly.

STEWART

The plane's still there.

WOMAN

Yeah, but the connection in Tokyo is tight. If we don't push back in ten minutes, I'm stuck in an airport hotel for twelve hours.

Stewart glances at the child. The guard finally takes the cracker.

The kid leaps silently. Triumphant.

STEWART

Guess there could be worse places to be stuck.

WOMAN

Not when you have a Monday morning meeting. Don't you have somewhere you need to be?

Stewart looks down at his boarding pass: PHUKET to HOUSTON.

STEWART

I'm already there.

The woman stares.

Stewart just smiles.

Steps forward. Three inches.

He reaches the gate agent. A young man. Bloodshot eyes. Fingers tapping frantically on a glowing screen.

GATE AGENT

Boarding pass and passport, please.

Stewart hands them over. The Agent scans the pass. It beeps.

GATE AGENT (CONT'D)

(Without looking up)

Have a safe flight, Mr. Miller.

STEWART

Hey.

The Agent looks up. Startled by the directness.

STEWART (CONT'D)

You look like you've had a long shift. You almost done?

GATE AGENT

Two more hours.

STEWART

You'll make it. Go get some of those spicy noodles when you're off. They're worth the walk.

The Agent blinks.

A small, genuine smile cracks his professional mask.

GATE AGENT

I might do that. Thank you.

Stewart takes his passport back. Nods and walks down the jet bridge toward the plane.

INT. AIRPLANE - NIGHT

The cabin is a tomb of low-frequency engine hum and dim blue lights.

Stewart sits by the window. The small reading light over his shoulder cuts a sharp circle of yellow onto the tray table.

He looks at the blank sheet of airline stationery.

He clicks his pen.

He waits.

Then. Begins to write.

STEWART (V.O.)

Barb. I'm somewhere over the ocean.
No stars, no land. Just the dark.
I'm coming home, but just to see
you.

He runs his fingers over the rough fabric of the seat back.

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I think about how you used to sit on the porch swing and watch the storms roll in while I stayed inside to finish my homework. You'd yell for me to come look at the lightning, but I told you I didn't have time. I realize now the lightning was the whole point.

His smile softens. He traces a vein on the back of his hand.

STEWART

I spent twenty years telling you I was "buried" at work. Skipping birthdays. Missing the holidays. But I wasn't buried, Barb. I was hiding. I was terrified that if I stopped moving, I'd have to realize I hadn't actually done anything with my life.

His smile fades slightly. He looks at the pen.

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Then the divorce. The mail piling up. Me, sitting in the dark. And there you were—leaving food on my porch so I wouldn't starve in the cave I built for myself. You saved me, Barb. I never said thank you.

He coughs deeply—muffled by his shoulder.

STEWART (V.O.)

I'm so proud of you. The way you raised those girls. You're the best person I know. My only real friend. I looked at my life like it was a math problem, Barb. I thought if I just did everything in order, I'd eventually arrive at the answer. But there is no answer at the end of a straight line. There's just the end.

He looks at his hands. Back at the paper.

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Don't let the routine become the destination. Take the girls. See the world before they think it's just a screen in their pockets.

(MORE)

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Go to the places that scare you.
Eat the food you can't pronounce.

He leans back. Takes a breath.

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I've lived more in the last four
weeks than I did in the last forty
years. If this is all the time I
get... I'm okay with that.

He folds the paper.

He moves to tuck it into an envelope. Stops.

He opens it back up. Adds one last line.

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I love you, Barb. I'll see you at
the gate.

Stewart slides the letter into the envelope.

Clicks off the reading light.

The cabin falls dark.

Stewart leans his head against the window. Watches the moon.

INT. HOUSTON INTERCONTINENTAL AIRPORT - DAY

The jet bridge door creaks open.

Stewart is the first one out.

He wears same wrinkled shirt from Phuket.

He walks past a "WELCOME TO TEXAS" sign.

INT. BAGGAGE CLAIM - CONTINUOUS

Stewart stands by the spinning carousel as he watches
suitcases thump onto the belt.

He snags a salt-streaked duffel. Heads for the exit.

INT. STEWART'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A key turns in a lock. Door swings open.

House is dark. Stewart flicks a switch.

Recessed LEDs flicker on. White leather couches. Glass coffee table. Massive TV.

Stewart drops his duffel on the white rug.

He walks to the kitchen. Runs a finger across the stainless steel stove top.

It leaves a long, bare streak in a thick layer of gray silt.

He opens the fridge. Inside. Three bottles of water. Jar of mustard.

A sudden, violent spasm. Stewart lunges for the sink. Hands grip the marble edge.

He lets out a deep cough. Racking. Long.

He spits. Bloody mucus swirls down the drain. Stewart turns the faucet.

Water washes the red away.

He looks at his reflection in the kitchen window.

Wipes his mouth with a paper towel. Stares at the red smudge.

Tosses it in the bin.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

Stewart stands on the concrete patio. A/C compressor kicks on. Linen shirt translucent. Plastered to his chest with sweat.

The yard: a flat square of St. Augustine. Cedar fence boxes it in. Identical, weathered gray slats.

In the center of the lawn: a single folding chair.

Stewart walks out.

Sits. The plastic webbing groans.

He leans his head back against the rail.

The sky. Thick orange haze. Light pollution. No stars.

Across the fence: a neighbor's motion-sensor light clicks on. Clinical white floodlight hits grass.

A moth batters itself against the bulb.

CLICK.

Darkness. The orange haze returns.

Stewart closes his eyes.

Only the cicadas remain.

EXT. STEWART'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house stands out on the dark street. Every window glows with light.

The camera remains outside. Looks in through the large window.

INT. STEWART'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The living room: big TV. White leather couches. Framed art.

Stewart and Barb sit side-by-side. Stewart is gaunt. Bald. Wears a baggy sweatshirt.

Barb holds a mug. Eyes locked on him. Stewart's mouth moves—something short. He stares at the glass coffee table.

A long silence.

Barb sets the mug on a coaster.

Stewart looks up. Nods, slow.

Barb breaks.

She presses her palm to his cheek.

Stewart closes his eyes. Leans into her hand.

She pulls him into a tight embrace.

Sobs into his shoulder.

Stewart rests his chin on her. Stares through the window.

He pats her back.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

A heavy glass window separates the hallway from the private room.

Camera remains in the corridor. Looks in.
The hospital is a blur of white and chrome.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Stewart sits in a high-backed recliner.

Gaunt. Bald. Pale.

A clear bag of fluid drips into a tube in his arm.

Barb sits beside him. Her hand resting on his chair.

The door opens. Priya stands. Messy hair. Oversized shirt.
Denim cutoffs.

She stops.

Stewart turns his head. A weak smile.

Priya crosses the room in a blur.

Ignores Barb.

She drops to her knees and presses Stewart's hand to her
cheek.

She's shaking. Mascara runs down her face.

She speaks rapidly. Eyes locked on his.

Stewart reaches out with his IV hand. Strokes her hair.

Barb moves to the corner. Stares out the window. Back to the
room.

Priya stands. Wipes her eyes.

Takes Stewart's face in both hands.

Kisses his forehead.

She whispers one last thing. Stewart nods.

Priya turns and leaves—a mess of streaky black makeup.

Stewart watches the door close. He turns to the IV bag.

Watches the drops fall. One. Two. Three.

INT. SYMPHONY HALL - NIGHT

Thousands of white candles cover the stage—a flickering ocean of light.

Stewart sits front-row center.

Dark beanie. Baggy jacket. He looks small in the seat.

On the back wall: giant, distorted shadows of violin bows dance.

Stewart watches.

His eyes track the conductor's shadow. Settle on the amber varnish of a cello.

He breathes deep.

Stewart tilts his chin up.

Closes his eyes.

He leans his head back against the seat. A smile pulls at the corners of his mouth.

CLOSE ON STEWART

Candlelight flickers across his skin.

A single tear tracks down his cheek.

He is motionless. Only the slight rise and fall of his chest.

The crescendo fades.

Stewart remains still—face upturned. Eyes closed.

One by one, the candles flicker out.

EXT. GALVESTON BEACH - EVENING

Muddy lavender sky. Brown Gulf water.

Stewart stands on the wet sand. Dark beanie. Baggy sweatshirt. Boots dangle from his finger by laces.

Further down the shore: a boy runs against the wind. Flies a neon-green kite. It dives and jerks.

Stewart follows the flight.

He turns to the water.

Walks until his bare feet hit dark silt.

He stops where the waves break.

Brown foam rushes over his ankles. As the wave retreats, sand washes out from under his heels.

He sinks. Shifts his weight. Digs in.

He raises the boots. Small, blunt nod to the empty horizon.

He walks. Parallel to the tide. Leaves deep footprints. Gray foam fills the tracks.

INT. ISKCON TEMPLE - DAY

A massive frame of hand-carved teak. Stewart stands on the threshold. Pulls off his beanie. Stuffs it in a pocket.

He's barefoot. Pale feet on white marble.

He looks up: A massive dome. Hand-painted murals. Turquoise clouds. Saffron robes. Golden chariots.

Stewart's head tilts back.

He tracks the curve of the ceiling.

Dizzy, he reaches out and steadies himself against the wall.

He moves deeper.

To his left: a wall of woodwork. Thousands of chiseled figures dance in the grain.

Stewart stops.

He holds a trembling hand an inch from a carved lotus. Traces the ridges in the air.

Across the polished floor: people sit cross-legged. Motionless.

He turns to the altar.

Deities behind gold-trimmed arches. Draped in emerald and rose silks. Heavy with jasmine garlands.

Stewart's gaze locks on a single white petal—fallen on the gold-leafed pedestal.

He closes his eyes. Smiles.

EXT. HOUSTON ZOO - DAY

A black wrought iron gate—scrolled into leaping gazelles.

Stewart passes through. Beanie pulled low.

Colored banners snap and flutter. Stewart watches the fabric whip in the breeze.

The main thoroughfare is a river of movement.

Stewart stands in the middle of the current.

A toddler stumbles past. Face smeared with neon-orange snack dust.

The child stops. Looks at Stewart. Grins.

Stewart returns a soft smile. Walks.

The crowd thins.

Stewart approaches a circular fountain. Water shoots up in thin needles. Shatters into mist.

He stops at the edge of the spray. Droplets coat his beanie and shoulders.

Faint rainbow forms in the mist. Stewart runs his hand through the rainbow.

He shields his eyes with a pale hand.

High above the tree line. Long, tan necks. Giraffes emerge.

EXT. GIRAFFE FEEDING PLATFORM - DAY

An elevated wooden deck. Twenty feet up. Stewart stands at the far railing. Away from the crowd.

A giraffe approaches.

A small girl holds out a stalk of romaine.

Giraffe lowers head.

A thick, eighteen-inch purple tongue snakes out. Wraps around the leaf.

Stewart moves to the rail. Empty-handed.

The giraffe's head swings toward him.

Stewart leans over. Less than a foot from the snout.

Wet, dark nostrils flare. Warm breath huffs on Stewart's face.

He doesn't flinch.

The giraffe's eye fills the frame.

In it: sky, platform...Stewart.

The giraffe blinks. Slow. Deliberate.

EXT. GORILLA ENCLOSURE - DAY

A wall of reinforced glass. On the other side sits a silverback gorilla.

The gorilla is hunched over. Thick forearms rest on thighs.

He looks directly at Stewart.

Stewart sits on a weathered bench. Faces the glass.

Leans forward. Elbows on knees. Mirrors the silverback.

They lock eyes.

Deep, slow breaths.

Stewart watches the gorilla's nostrils flare.

The gorilla tilts his head.

Stewart tilts his.

The gorilla shifts his jaw. Bares teeth.

Stewart pulls his own lips back. Mirrored grimace.

A small, huff sound from the gorilla.

Stewart returns a silent puff of air.

The gorilla slowly raises a hand.

Broad. Black skin textured like old leather.

He presses his palm against the glass.

Stewart slides to his knees.

Reaches out.

Places his palm directly over the gorilla's.

Stewart's hand trembles. Taps the glass.

He stares at the overlap.

Pale, shaking hand against the massive, steady dark one.

The gorilla's amber eyes soften.

He doesn't pull away.

Stewart leans his forehead against the glass. Inches from the gorilla's face.

Frozen.

The gorilla drops his hand. Struts off.

Stewart remains on his knees. Looks at the smudge his palm left on the glass.

EXT. BIRD HABITAT - AFTERNOON

Sun hangs low.

A high, nearly invisible mesh dome contains the sky. No cages.

To the right. Scarlet ibises stand in a shallow pool.

Stewart stops.

One ibis lifts a spindly leg. Its curved, needle-like beak probes the mud.

Stewart continues. Foliage crowds in. Forms a tunnel of green and gold.

Thrum-Thrum-Thrum.

A Victoria crowned pigeon explodes into flight from a hidden perch. Inches from Stewart's ear.

He doesn't flinch. He remains upright. Body loose.

Turns his head. Catches the bird mid-ascent.

He follows the beat of the wings. Higher. Higher.

The bird reaches the top of the enclosure. Perches on a sun-drenched branch. Silhouetted against bright mesh.

EXT. ZOO EXIT - LATER

Stewart passes through the turnstiles.

He pulls white AirPods from his pocket. Fits them in.

A tap on the right ear.

MUSIC: "LOVELY DAY" by BILL WITHERS.

The soul-heavy bassline kicks in.

The world inside the frame goes Silent.

Replaced entirely by the upbeat rhythm of the song.

EXT. CAMBRIDGE ST. - CONTINUOUS

The bassline of "Lovely Day" kicks in.

Stewart walks onto the sidewalk. Sweatshirt sways.

He passes the massive glass facade of the Medical Center.

Catches his reflection—a pale grinning ghost. Over a sunset of orange and violet.

He winks.

Keeps moving.

He mouths the lyrics. Head thrashes back as he hits the high notes.

He passes a HOMELESS MAN on a bench. Stewart flashes a grin. A nod.

Stewart weaves through OFFICE WORKERS.

Dark suits.

Hunched over phones. Power-walkers.

Stewart slides between them. Arms wide. A dip. A spin.

Bright orange barrels.

Plastic mesh.

Stewart weaves through the barrels.

A slow lurching zigzag. His breath a wet whistle in his throat.

Hands graze the rough plastic as he pivots.

He looks down at a yellow dandelion that pushes through a crack in the pavement.

EXT. METRORAIL CROSSING - CONTINUOUS

Stewart approaches the Metrorail.

The warning bell chimes—a muffled ding-ding-ding.

Crossing arms descend.

Stewart duck-walks under the barrier.

Eyes locked on the silver tracks.

He hops the rails. Lands soft.

The train horn blares—swallowed by the music.

Stewart passes a group of teenagers doubled over in laughter.

He catches the eye of one boy. Grins.

EXT. INTERSECTION - CONTINUOUS

The intersection is vacant: black asphalt, stark white lines.

The pedestrian signal: A GLOWING RED HAND.

Stewart stops. Hands deep in his pockets.

He tilts his head back.

Skyscrapers reflect a purple sky.

Across the street: his car under a streetlamp.

Stewart pulls a remote from his pocket, aims the remote at the vehicle and presses the button.

Headlights flash—a double pulse of amber.

The red hand glows.

Stewart's eyes are wet.

He turns his head LEFT.

A WHITE MOVING TRUCK—side panel stamped with a dining table and four chairs—barrels toward the intersection.

Stewart looks RIGHT. Empty.

He looks back LEFT.

Stewart's grin is massive. He bobs his head to the long, sustained note in his ears.

The RED HAND burns on the pole.

Stewart takes a deliberate step into the center of the lane.

One.

Two.

He plants his feet. Still smiles. Eyes fixed ahead.

IMPACT.

The screeching tires are drowned out by the music.

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

Stewart lies on the asphalt. On his back.

His beanie is gone.

One Airpod lies on the blacktop. Inches from his ear.

We hear the faint, tinny sound of the music:
"...dayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy."

Stewart's eyes are open. Fixed on the sky.

The smile remains.

He coughs.

A thick, dark stream of blood bubbles over his lip.

Runs down his chin.

The camera PANS DOWN to his hand.

It rests on the asphalt. Pale. Open. Empty. Perfectly still.

The music holds the note.

CUT TO BLACK.