

South of Main Street

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - ROOFTOP -- MORNING

Henry Wolff (50s) climbs out of a bedroom window, balancing his body on the slanted roof. He looks around slyly as if he were sneaking out of the house and didn't want to be noticed.

He walks the slanted roof like a plank. One careless maneuver and he'd fall into the shrubs. He stops, briefly, gazing out at the predawn glow of the horizon. The sun nudges up and the stars vanish with the arrival of the orange glow.

He chants an 'Ohmmm' exercise and continues half-stepping across the roof until he reaches and overhanging branch of a maple tree. He uses it to pull himself along the edge of the roof to a rope which is draped over the gutter.

He takes the rope, yanks vigorously testing whether the knots will hold, then slips his foot into the looped end and jumps into an exhilarating swing. For a brief moment he is Tarzan sweeping past a smaller tree and his objective, the mailbox.

On his way back his foot slips through the loop, and his body slam into the lawn while the rope holds his foot high in the air. He wiggles and jiggles like a fish out of water.

Exhausted Henry remains motionless for a moment, as if he's indulging himself with a few seconds of self-pity. All the while the tree holds him up as if it were posing for the camera with its trophy - the prize catch of the day.

He struggles to free himself. Finally the tree releases its grip. Henry stands, brushes himself off, and casually looks around to see if anyone had been watching. He notices Mrs. Aldrich, (50s) across the street. She has seen everything.

EXT. MRS. ALDRICH'S PORCH - CONTINUOUS

She slouches as she sweeps, appearing older than her years.

MRS. ALDRICH

Can't you stop being a child for
one day?

BACK TO HENRY

HENRY

(Bad DeNiro impression!)
Mizzz Aldrich, you talkin' to me?
(shivers)
The Wicked Witch of West. No. No.
She was much prettier.

Henry opens the mailbox and removes the morning paper then walks over to the dangling rope, picks it up and tosses it into the maple tree until the looped end catches on the branch near where his circus adventure had started.

INT. PSYCHOLOGIST'S OFFICE -- DAY - CONTINUOUS

DR. ZEKE TUCKER, an unassuming man with a beard, stoically sits in a chair while ROBIN WOLFF, (30's), with long dark hair, sits opposite him and appears stressed.

ROBIN

My father gave us nicknames when we were younger. Sharon's was 'Flower'. Mine was 'Trigger'.

DR. TUCKER

Oh! I see.

ROBIN

Yeah. He calls my sister this nice feminine word, and he calls me a name you give a horse, or a dog.

A silent moment passes. Dr. Tucker looks at her as if to suggest he wants to hear what's really on her mind.

ROBIN

You've heard this before. I'd just be repeating myself.

DR. TUCKER

Humor me.

ROBIN

When we were kids, he'd open an imaginary door and describe Narnia as if he were really seeing it. 'I want to go there, Daddy', Sharon would say in her shrieky voice. And he'd say, 'It's in la-la land.' Everything was 'la-la land' to him. Jack climbed the beanstalk and went to 'la-la land.'

(nostalgic pause)

I don't know. Sharon has worked at the Collection Agency for so long, I think she has become her job. She likes squeezing people who have things she doesn't have. She's ...

DR. TUCKER

Self-centered?

ROBIN

Yes! Self-centered. She said she gets caught up in the 'squeeze' frenzy because of this yearly prize they give for the best, what would they call them, agents, I guess. Well, the agent who squeezes the most money from people gets the 'big kahuna' bonus. She's worked on people's misfortunes for so long, she likes to expose the weaknesses. Like a dentist. She drills them until there's no more defense.

DR. TUCKER

Wow! That's a little more than being self-centered, Robin.

ROBIN

Yeah, well. I've had too much coffee today. Or maybe I'm still pissed over the other thing. I mean, he's our father, for crying out loud. He may be slow upstairs, or however you want to classify him, but he can handle his own affairs.

DR. TUCKER

Sharon doesn't think so. Your mother had to take care of him.

ROBIN

Yeah, but for a year he took care of her when she was bedridden? He's done his own food shopping. Big deal, occasionally I've had to pay the bills for him. So What.

DR. TUCKER

What about the printout your sister showed you? He's taking liberties with the bank account. So, might your sister have a point?

ROBIN

The point is, our mother is lying in the hospital, dying, and our father is doing just fine on his own. What kind of daughter would do this?

A buzzing SOUND interrupts her. She pulls out her cell phone to see who it is, then silences it.

ROBIN

What the hell does he want? It's Pastor McMillan.

DR. TUCKER

Well, maybe that's a sign we should call it a day. Same time next week?

INT. CHURCH -- MOMENTS LATER

PASTOR MCMILLAN struts while sitting down in the front pew next to HENRY WOLFF. It's hard to tell who is older.

PASTOR MCMILLAN

But you already have been baptized, Henry. Several times.

HENRY

He who is baptized will be saved. It says so in the bible. It's for the forgiveness of sins.

PASTOR MCMILLAN

We did it last year, and the year before that. It's an abuse of its intent. Besides, what sins have you recently committed, Henry? Impure thoughts? I have impure thoughts. I'd have to be rebaptized every time I see a girl in a swimsuit. Don't tell anyone I said that.

The church door swings open. Robin enters and Pastor McMillan excuses himself and rushes up to meet her. As they walk to the front, he whispers --

PASTOR MCMILLAN

Henry wants to be baptized again. I'm afraid your father is a little unnerved as your mother gets worse. By the way, how is Mary doing?

ROBIN

Not good. It's nice to know you care.

They arrive at the front pew. Henry smiles and,

HENRY

I don't mind dying. Trouble is you feel so damn stiff the next day.

ROBIN

Very funny, Dad.
(to the Pastor)
Newspaper. Joke of the day.
(to Henry)
Let's go see Mom.

INT. CAR -- MOMENTS LATER

Robin drives while Henry sits in the passenger side. They both remain silent as Robin drives.

INT. HOSPITAL - ONCOLOGY WARD -- MOMENTS LATER

The elevator door opens. Robin and Henry exit and walk down the hall. As they pass by a MAINTENANCE MAN mopping the floor, Henry holds out his hand and they high-five each other.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM 410 - CONTINUOUS

MARY lies in bed, sickly. A nebulae and other tubes invade her body. A nearby EKG machine monitors her heart.

SHARON, a blonde, two years Robin's junior, sits beside.

SHARON

Glad you guys could make it.

Henry goes over and gives Sharon a peck on the cheek then sits down on the opposite side of the bed.

HENRY

I hate hospitals.

Henry looks for a response. Neither daughter give one.

HENRY

You know, old watchmakers never die, they just run out of time.

(no response)

Old yachtsmen never die, they just keel over.

SHARON

That's it. I'm going outside to have a cigarette.

EXT. SMOKING AREA -- MOMENTS LATER

Robin and Sharon enter together. They sit at a nearby bench.

SHARON

I can't take him today.

Sharon retrieves an opened pack of cigarettes from her pocketbook. She lights up and takes a hefty drag. She smokes throughout the conversation. Sharon offers one to Robin.

ROBIN

I don't smoke. You know that.

SHARON

You do when you're stressed.

(pause)

Ever wonder how things would've been different if our grandfather didn't invest in RCA. What's the trust worth now, six million?.

(Responding to the nod)

Mom always lived below her means. She never liked people knowing she was rich even though everyone knew anyway. I mean, what's the point of having money?

ROBIN

And what's your point, Sharon?

SHARON

Point is, although our grandfather set up the trust for Mom, it was supposed to be a family inheritance. Why didn't she change her will to say that? I think she didn't do it because she wanted to encourage Dad to live more independently. Hmmm. He's never been able to take care of himself as long as I've lived. And that's why I filed for guardianship. So, stop giving me an attitude.

ROBIN

We could've worked it out, Sharon. You didn't have to go to court. Now we're under the microscope.

(pause)

Judge Brady has elected me temporary guardian until this thing you've started is settled.

SHARON

I know. I got the notice. And let me tell you something, the hundred and forty dollars a week in spending money you're allowed to give him, that's not going to be enough for Dad. You wait and see.

Sharon puts her cigarette out in the dispenser.

ROBIN

Fine Sharon. We'll wait and see. By the way, Judge Brady called me yesterday and asked us to see him on Wednesday. I told him we would.

SHARON

The hearing's in a couple of weeks.
Why does he want to see us now?

ROBIN

He's known us all our lives. He just
wants to understand why you think
Dad's incapacitated. Off the record.

SHARON

Tell him to read the petition.

Sharon lights up another cigarette. Robin takes it from her,
puffs on it one time, and hands it back.

ROBIN

I know. we can put Dad in an
institution. This way we can get
the whole enchilada, And he won't
be in our face every day.

SHARON

You know I don't want that.

ROBIN

Then, if you just want a piece of
the pie, take ten thousand a year.
A gift from the estate. No tax.

The door bursts open and the nurse's face conveys an urgency.

INT. HOSPITAL - ROOM 410 -- CONTINUOUS

Henry fluffs up Mary's pillow and strokes her hair. He looks
at her for a moment and surveys the various wires connected
to her body. The machines indicate she is lifeless, so Henry
starts to remove the wires from her body.

SHARON

Dad! What are you doing?

Robin and Sharon rush to the bedside, edging Henry away.

As they pay attention to their mother, Henry slides over to
the door. He takes a couple of deep breaths, as if he's
having an anxiety attack, and disappears down the hall. Robin
runs to the doorway. He is halfway down the hall already.

ROBIN

Dad. Where are you going?

HENRY

I'm gonna get a banana split. Your
mom always got a banana split when
things got too ... crazy.

INT. HENRY'S KITCHEN -- LATER

Henry walks in, slaps the Coalsville Gazette down on the kitchen table, snatches a journal from the top of the refrigerator and sits down at the table and begins writing.

He scribbles a few words, then stops and looks at the pictures of Mary stuck on the refrigerator door with magnets.

HENRY

Why did you leave me, Mary? I'm alone and I don't know how to do a darn thing except to swing from a tree and fall on my butt. Who's gonna complain about my rotten Henry Fonda impressions now?

He lets out a hefty sigh, gets up from the table, leans over the sink and looks out the window.

EXT. HENRY'S BACKYARD GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

Rocks jut out of the ground. Patches of weeds dominate the terrain. The garden needs tilling.

BACK TO THE KITCHEN

Tears stream down Henry's face, dripping into the sink. He quickly wipes his face and sits back down. He looks up and--

HENRY

You're the only woman I ever loved.
How dare you die on me.
(pounds the table. Sighs!)

You said you didn't want me to be angry or sad. Well, okay then. This is the last time you'll see me sad. From now on, I'll only think about the good things. I'll be brave. You wait and see. I'll be brave.

Henry writes again, one sentence after another, then pounds a bold dot onto the page, and raises the pen into the air, like a maestro finishing a symphony.

HENRY

Good-bye, my love.

He closes the journal, throws it in the garbage and goes to the sink. While he washes the dishes he hears a man YELLING. A boy's voice counters but is no match for the elder.

BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)

If Mom was here ...

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
 Well, she's not here, is she? And
 those damn letters she wrote does
 not mean she's coming back, either.
 So, don't get your hopes up.

EXT. NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

The neck of an empty whisky bottle is imbedded in the ground,
 as if it had been chucked there from the porch.

We hear SOUNDS of a skirmish then a SLAM-BAM of the patio
 door has DANNY, 12, coming out of the house dragging his
 school books in a backpack with him.

He stops by the fence that separates the two properties and
 buries his head in his arms on top of the fence.

HENRY (O.S.)
 Ohmm ... ohmm!

Danny looks up and wipes the tears away.

HENRY
 Warm front arrived last night.
 It'll be sixty degrees today.
 Hey, you know what the average life
 span of a major league baseball is?

DANNY
 Not now, Mr. Wolff. Okay?

Henry rakes his way over to the fence.

HENRY
 Would you believe seven pitches?

Danny shrugs, and looks the other way.

DANNY
 My father wasn't this way when my
 mom lived with us.

Henry sees CHARLES OSWALD, Danny's dad, peering out of the
 kitchen window of his neighbor's house, like a sentinel.

DANNY
 He blames me for Mom leaving.

There is a sad quiet for a brief moment.

DANNY
 Dad thinks I'm stupid. I'm failing
 in school. And my mom hates me.

HENRY

All moms love their children. Your Mom's no different.

DANNY

If she loves me then why did she leave with that ... whoever he was? Why did she stop writing me?

HENRY

Don't know. Maybe your Dad's lost and maybe she's lost, too.

DANNY

Adults should not get lost. If they do, they shouldn't be allowed to have children.

Henry offers no rebuttal mainly because he doesn't have one.

DANNY

And I'm mad at Brian. He makes fun of his mom cause she doesn't know who LL Cool J is. She nags him about math and wearing his pants too low. He doesn't know how lucky he's got it just for having a mom.

HENRY

Hmm. I see.

DANNY

You see squat.

HENRY

What a beautiful day. I feel it.

The bus pulls up and honks. Danny picks up his books and--

DANNY

The last thing I wanna hear you say is what a wonderful day it is when it's a perfectly horrible, stinkin' day. Life sucks, Mr. Wolff, and it's gonna take more than a weather report to make it any better.

Henry offers a smile, but there's no one there to notice, except for Mr. Oswald who is still peering out the window.

INT. HENRY'S KITCHEN -- NEXT DAY -- LATE MORNING

The dishes done, Henry dries his hands and walks over to the calendar and sees words 'Duffy's Funeral Home - 11 AM' boldly written on the December 2nd box.

HENRY

My God. How could I have forgotten?
The kids are going to kill me.

A doorbell rings and Henry rushes into --

DINING ROOM/FOYER - CONTINUOUS

A mahogany table crowds the room and three bronze booties sit on the mantle. The clock on the wall says the time is 11:10. A coffee table and a couch with puffy cushions finishes the room design except for a coin collection that sits on the coffee table. It is conspicuously missing a 1913 coin.

Henry walks to the edge of the dining room - the foyer - and finally reaches the door just as the bell rings again. He peeks out the window and sees Mrs. Aldrich from scene one.

Henry opens the door and looks down on Mrs. Aldrich's slumped back. She talks slowly, as if talking to a child.

MRS. ALDRICH

Henry. It's time to go to the wake.
I promised your daughter, Robin, I
would look after you.

HENRY

Oh, my. I'm late. I'm late, for a
very important date.

MRS. ALDRICH

You dear man. What will happen to
you now, hmmm? I can take you to
Duffy's, but you can't go looking
like that. Go change into something
more proper, right now. You look
like you're going out for a jog.

Henry slams the door in her face.

EXT. HENRY'S PORCH - CONTINUOUS

Mrs. Aldrich looks heavenward.

MRS. ALDRICH

Mary, I Hope you made arrangements
for him.

As Mrs. Aldrich knocks, she doesn't see Henry sneak out from the side of the house and skipping down to the street.

EXT. STREET BY HENRY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Henry swings his arms in exaggerated motions as he walks.

HENRY

Nothing like a brisk, morning walk.

EXT. MAIN STREET - LATE MORNING - CONTINUOUS

DIXIE SWANSON, thirty-ish, grabs her CD player and rises from a bench. A headset drapes around her neck.

A sign post at an intersection reads MAIN STREET and HARPER ROAD. She walks down Harper and approaches an old stone bridge. She looks down the street.

She glances under the bridge in the dried-up riverbed and sees WHEEZY and JOE, 60s, perhaps. Dixie slides down to them.

BY THE RIVERBED

Joe, shoeless, wears socks with holes, and a tattered, dirty overcoat. Wheezy sports a dressy hat with a worn overcoat and long johns covering her legs. By appearances, they are homeless people who have taken root under the bridge.

Joe tries to get comfortable on a weather-beaten mattress while Wheezy arranges aluminum cans in bags. She wheezes as she breathes. The deeper the breath, the louder she wheezes.

Dixie sits on a long cushion and makes herself comfortable while Flies buzz around a half-eaten fruit core.

Wheezy gives Dixie 'the eye', then finds a spray can and sprays the area. The flies vanish.

DIXIE

Don't give me that 'you don't belong here' look.

WHEEZY

This is my home. You're not welcome.

Joe rolls over, moans. Nods off.

DIXIE

Just make believe I'm a general, and I'm temporarily taking over this place for strategic reasons.

Dixie inspects Joe and Wheezy, then the surroundings. She takes her time with the audit.

DIXIE

How come I never hear Joe speak? He just grunts or waves his hands.

WHEEZY

Had depression. Was in a half-way house. Treated with electricity.
(with finger to her head)
Zzzzt. Zapped him. Came here ten years ago. Talks to no one but me.

DIXIE

Yeah? I thought he was an escaped mental patient. Schizophrenic, maybe. Thrown into the streets by budget cuts, or something.

JOE

Shhhh!

DIXIE

Poor thing. If he died tomorrow, no one would even miss him. Except you, Wheezy.

(Pause - pointing)

You know, I saw you last week over there. I was up there.

Dixie head nods, then points to a tree with exposed roots running along the shoulder of the road.

DIXIE

I sat there an hour watching you.

WHEEZY

That's an invasion of privacy.

DIXIE

I saw you bring food to Joe. And what was that fancy bottle you were drinking from? Wine?

Wheezy nods, then shrugs, as if she likes the idea Dixie is envious of her late night cuisine with fancy wine.

DIXIE

You helped Joe down the stream. I followed. And I saw you giving him a bath. He howled like a dog.

WHEEZY

The water was cold. It was his time ... of the month ... for his bath.

DIXIE

Sounded like you were beating him.

Wheezy finishes arranging the bags, then tries to settle herself by the support beam.

Dixie scrunches her face, indicating she smells a stench.

DIXIE
I think maybe you need a bath.

WHEEZY
Don't fart in the cushions, sister.
... That's where I sleep.

Dixie looks around and sees a lot of empty wine bottles.

DIXIE
Who's the alcoholic, I wonder?

WHEEZY
You think you're better than us?

As Dixie starts to climb up the embankment--

DIXIE
Damn right I do. I ain't staying.
Don't worry. I'm waiting for Mr.
Wolff. He's on his way. I see him.

Wheezy continues bagging the cans. As Dixie slides back down, she spots a piece of coal and picks it up. Wheezy eyes her while Dixie seems lost in thought, then looks around.

WHEEZY
Coal. It's all over the place.

DIXIE
Duh! The town's name is Coalsville.
How do you think it got it's name?

WHEEZY
I'm just sayin'.

DIXIE
Yeah, well, my grandfather told me a lot of stories about this place. People died from breathing this crap. That's all the town was back in his day. Coal miners. Either you were a manager of the Sakawanna Coal Company, or you were a miner. If you were a manager you lived on the north side, where Henry lives. The miners lived on the south side. In the projects where I live.

Dixie tosses the coal aside.

DIXIE
Maybe that's what you got. Black Lung. The way you wheeze, I mean.

Wheezy wheezes and swats at nothing in particular, and Dixie takes a sweeping look at the squalor and dirt. There's a dozen plastic bags, some partially filled with aluminum cans, some with clothes. And some are folded neatly as bed sheets.

WHEEZY

Don't need your sympathy.
 (looks around)
 Make plenty of money. Nickel a can.

DIXIE

I've seen you down Main Street
 begging. How much you make begging?

WHEEZY

Plenty. I need it. Medicine.
 (pointing to Joe)
 For him. He'll be fine. But you?
 Beware. We are the conscience of
 this town. You're not far ... from
 all this.

DIXIE

What are you talking about?

WHEEZY

I'm a reminder ... of how things
 could be ... for the rest of you.

A reflective moment is interrupted by a distant singing.

HENRY (O.S.)

Zipadee do dah, zipadee yea, my oh
 my, what a wonderful day ...

We hear Henry's voice singing, so we know he's not far away.

Dixie moves real close to Wheezy. Nose-to-nose almost.

DIXIE

Now, listen to me, you patch of
 manure. When Mr. Wolff crosses this
 bridge, you stay put.

Dixie picks up rotting food from the ground and shoves it an
 inch from Wheezy's nose.

DIXIE

I'll stuff this down your throat if
 you cause any trouble.

Joe grunts loudly and flicks his finger.

WHEEZY

Go. Leave. He doesn't like you.