

GHOSTS

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INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

FATHER KELSEY speaks to his congregation - every pew is full.

FATHER KELSEY

Before we say goodbye this evening, and in the wake of the loss our city recently suffered, I'd like to close out on the topic of hope. Too many regard hope as a last resort, or the herald before a final end. They think searching for it is the same as scratching the base of a barrel or feeling yourself on rock bottom.

From a distant pew, politician LAWRENCE GOODROW devoutly beams at the altar; others look at him and glance more so than the altar - he's a recognized figure.

FATHER KELSEY (CONT'D)

Practice hope. Don't let it be foreign, or something you keep aside for times of distress. When you don't call on hope for yourself, then keep hope for others; do it regularly. Generous, outward hope lends itself to faith; Faith in each other and a bigger picture.

(smiles)

That's when it's more than the cold bottom of a barrel and tighter than any rope's frayed end; it becomes a driving force, and your neutral, walk of life. I look around this evening and have my hope turned right into faith seeing our strong community still finding time to come together.

Watching from the entrance of the church is MAUDE (35).

After a moment, DALE (25) enters and joins her, looking haggard and annoyed.

He looks around and splashes his fingers in the mounted bowl of holy water. He massages the holy water between his hands.

DALE

(hushed)

This is like an ancient form of doorway hand sanitizer. Do I have to stay?

MAUDE
No, you can wait outside.

DALE
(staying)
I hate churches.

MAUDE
Then you can wait outside.

DALE
Designed to make you feel small and insignificant. Huge architecture towering over; house of God and all that.

Beat.

DALE (CONT'D)
(leaving)
I'll wait outside.

We tune back to the sermon, it's now at the tail end.

FATHER KELSEY
..."And no one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame...."
Psalm 25...Let us pray.

ALL
Amen.

EXT. CHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

DALE is finishing his cigarette and watching the church from a distance. The doors open and people spill out.

They shake hands with Father Kelsey at the top of the steps in passing.

INT. CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Near the altar, GOODROW is shaking hands and giving a final farewell to two or three people who lingered at his pew. Once he's alone, MAUDE steps in.

GOODROW
(Extending a hand to shake)
This is a pleasant surprise. You've made my wife a very happy woman, you know.

MAUDE

Glad I could be of help. Has she pestered you to read it yet?

GOODROW

(laughs)

She gave me a signed copy the first day. Is that weird?

MAUDE

What?

GOODROW

Her autographing it. You wrote it.

MAUDE

But it was her story; I didn't do a lick of that charity work over seas.

GOODROW

No, I suppose you didn't. Still felt...odd.

MAUDE smiles.

GOODROW (CONT'D)

It's silly.

MAUDE

There's nothing silly, Senator. Her name is on the book because it's her story. I'd have had nothing to type if she hadn't put herself out there and had something to say when she got back.

GOODROW

Well I look forward to reading how lively you tied it all together; I'm sure it's more clear than how she tells it, she can get excited and scattered; but then you know that already.

MAUDE

I suppose you're too busy with the campaign right now for any extra reading.

GOODROW

It's a non-stop, full work load. Is it your first time with this parish?

MAUDE

It is.

GOODROW

Where do you normally attend?

MAUDE

To be honest, I don't.

GOODROW

I had a feeling. I'm always slow to notice when I've been cornered.

(smiles)

You asked about my campaign too soon. Are you looking for something?

MAUDE

I'm sorry if it seems sneaky.

GOODROW

Not at all; it's the same as how I felt when Debbie signed the book: just a bit of a gray area.

MAUDE

Then I trust you don't look down on either of us?

GOODROW

Well Debbie and I are married, so she'll get a pass.

MAUDE

Well,

An ASSISTANT in a suit catches GOODROW's gaze, he politely nods but makes it clear he's now being waited on.

GOODROW

I am afraid I don't have time, though, I'm sorry-

MAUDE

-I just wonder: Your speeches...

GOODROW

-Are all my own, as I've made clear before. My values are framed by transparency and unity.

(MORE)

GOODROW (CONT'D)

I intend to always be my own man, Maude - that means I'll have to insist on penning those speeches myself - I just can't shake feeling like a puppet otherwise. I do appreciate all you've done for Deb - but, recounting a story, and sending a curated message are two very different things.

MAUDE

That's what I hope to offer. I want to be true to what you stand for and make sure it's done with clarity - perfectly honored.

GOODROW

It's only my message to tell - I'm the one campaigning. Ghost writing hollows out the meaning for me, no matter how poetic. I've proudly made note that my words are always my own in this rat race - hell, the press always tag me as a man of my word.

MAUDE

The Bible was pretty much ghost written, yet people quote it like it's the direct word of God. That's because there's a message; powerful and in tact. Father Kelsey knows as much, and he keeps you coming back every Sunday for more.

GOODROW

Since I was ten. And he quotes the bible to qualify a thought of his own. I don't mean to be blindly optimistic or sacred, but I want my politics to be as pure as the type of religious services I grew up being with - the ones I was moved by. I don't mean to combine church and state, I mean community and higher thought. Tonight was about people, and those mans words move us.

MAUDE

Were you moved tonight?

GOODROW

I'm always moved by the church; and especially by father Kelsey. It's why I always make time for it, and also why I'm able to be ambushed like this - I'm predictable now.

MAUDE

(smiles)

Sorry. It's just that politics and church both have pageantry you can't avoid. There's an audience, key players, and the people who shape the words we use. The message, however, is shared; it's for everyone. I wouldn't be stealing or diluting yours.

GOODROW

Church is hardly theatre.

MAUDE

In ancient times, priests used to have their backs to the congregation; facing the cross, facing the same direction as everyone else as if leading people to a higher plane of spirituality. The energy was outward and upward towards the heavens and God; shepherds leading. Then they turned around and faced the people. The energy bounced back and forth between man, and God was left out of the equation.

GOODROW

The notion of turning my back on God isn't winning me over.

MAUDE

No matter what, it is pageantry, and I'm just saying that you still have control over how in tact your message remains.

GOODROW

Well the voters' hope is in me, not just my phrasing; it's who I am as a person.

MAUDE

Hope like Father Kelsey speaks of?

GOODROW

Hope to believe in, yes. Hope you can count on and vote on.

MAUDE

I'm glad you feel that way.

GOODROW

Why?

MAUDE

Because I helped him write that sermon.

(beat)

Father Kelsey had a message, and I offered to help him realize it.

GOODROW

...I've listened to his sermons every week since I was boy.

MAUDE

And nobody would know the difference because I honored his unique voice; his message. The way I want to honor yours if you'll let me.

GOODROW

(beat. Smiles.)

And he just let you do that? How do you even know him? That's crazy.

MAUDE

I've taken private conference with him for the past few weeks to potentially convert. I told him I'd like to thank him for such through my craft.

GOODROW

That's a lot of effort to get your foot in a door. What would I owe for that kind of hustle full time?

MAUDE

(shrugs)

Negotiable rates.

EXT. CHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

DALE is about to light a cigarette, but rather tucks it behind his ear as MAUDE approaches.

DALE

That took forever. Was it at least worth it?

DALE pulls out a key and unlocks the car; he goes for the driver's side door.

MAUDE

He took my card and said he'd call with an answer - what are you doing?

DALE

Thought I'd drive.

MAUDE

Why do you have the spare key? How long have you had that?

MAUDE gestures for him to move and she stands by the open driver's side door as DALE rounds for the passenger side.

DALE

Ages ago, you said it was okay.

MAUDE

Not at all, I don't like you using my car; I'll want those back.

DALE

I need it for work.

MAUDE

No. This is why it smells like cigarettes and sex - I knew it.

DALE

You're imagining things. I've never had sex in your car-well only once kind of; I was half in, half out. Of the car.

MAUDE

Yeah, I'll want those now.

DALE throws the keys over the top, and MAUDE catches them.

I/E. MAUDE'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

They drive through the city.

DALE

So you went to church and special spirit meetings and shit for almost a month just to give out your card and go home?

MAUDE

I look at it as "not getting a no". He refuses help from his own team: And I can tell he thinks I'm small time.

DALE

Screw him, he needs the punch up - he's repetitive, elementary and boring.

MAUDE

I didn't tell him that. Not a good way to land a job, telling someone they're not doing it well.

DALE

Only that you can do better?

MAUDE

Hell, the whole world's a collective asshole who doesn't think I'm worth a damn. I probably only sold him on having some other writer do it.

DALE

We just have to keep collecting rejection on the way to success. You know the tale.

MAUDE

I'm unknown. I turned him on to the idea of it being done with nobody noticing. Privacy is something he knows he can get with me - that's all I have going for me. It's why he took the card, think about it: His wife already has my contact info; he doesn't want to ask her for it. If he wants to be private about this, it's because he wants things to remain quiet if and when he says "yes". Hence hush, hush.

DALE

...And you're also good for him.
Damn good. High time we get paid
well for it. God knows we need it.

MAUDE

Amen.

CUT TO:

INT. MAUDE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The apartment is dingy. A leak in the ceiling; piles of newspapers/books; a loft bed over a mattress on the floor, and a kitchenette.

MAUDE and DALE enter.

DALE

(flops on the mattress)
'this what twenty five thousand
looks like?

MAUDE climbs to the loft bed and lies down, fully clothed.

MAUDE

Unseen blessings. We're officially
debt free. Ish.

DALE

"Thank you Debbie Goodrow". So now
we're just financially neutral, and
traditionally poor? In the black?

MAUDE

(falling asleep)
"Deficient".

DALE

(curled with a pillow)
"Pitiable" - no, "Scant".

MAUDE

"Impecunious".

DALE

Ding, ding, ding...

CUT TO:

EXT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - DAY

Midday, students reading against trees, walking in groups to class, etc.

PRESCOTT (V.O.)
Where is she?

INT. ADMIN OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

PRESCOTT (56) sits across NICK MCAFREY (25), and Nick's father LIONEL MCAFREY (55). LIONEL is staring at a short story (8x11, white, several pages); it seems to be the focus of the room.

NICK
(side glancing his father)
...Sorry again.

LIONEL
(eyes on the paper)
...Where is she?

PRESCOTT
(beat)
Where is she, Nick?

NICK
She doesn't like being on campus,
she's probably lost. Did you use
the email address I gave you?

PRESCOTT reaches for his intercom on the desk - the scene looks like a seance, and the intercom like a Ouija board glass which the men surround.

BUZZ from the intercom

INTERCOM (V.O.)
(male/female assistant)
Mr. Prescott, your two o'clock is
here.

PRESCOTT
Cheers, thanks - send her in,
please.

After a moment, two KNOCKS at the door.

PRESCOTT (CONT'D)
Come.

MAUDE enters and walks to the desk, spotting NICK, and slowing her stride for only a moment.

MAUDE
Mr. Prescott, I'm Maude Benaglia.

PRESCOTT rises to cordially shake hands.

PRESCOTT
I appreciate you coming in. Any trouble finding us?

MAUDE
Not at all.

PRESCOTT
Very good. Please, have a seat and join us. I apologize for any misleadings, but I in fact won't be using your services as requested today - there's no text book manuscript that needs editing, I mean to say.

MAUDE
(side glancing DALE)
And...?

PRESCOTT
I apologize for not introducing these men. I trust you can understand it being out of curiosity more so than rudeness?

MAUDE
You'd like to see if I know them already.

PRESCOTT
Indeed.

NICK
Sorry, Maude-

MAUDE
We don't know each other-
(to PRESCOTT)
I don't know him.

PRESCOTT smiles.

LIONEL
(holding up the papers)
Did you write this?

MAUDE

I don't acknowledge that-

LIONEL

(exhaling angry)
Jesus-fuck...

PRESCOTT

Maude, I don't mean to blind side you-

MAUDE

No, just waste my time. I can't say I was eager to clean up an academic textbook - but not getting paid at all today? That wasn't-

LIONEL

Getting paid is the least of y-

PRESCOTT

Nobody meant to waste your time. I'll pay you for this meet as if it were a consultation; alright?

LIONEL

The fuck you will!

MAUDE

Deal.

LIONEL

Honestly...

PRESCOTT

Maude, I'm helping someone right now - a very old alumnus, and a very important project. It involved seeking out a certain quality of author. It's what actually lead to Nick being outed, I'm afraid - he was initially approached with enthusiastic optimism. We thought we found our man.

MAUDE

Could just be he's experiencing second album syndrome.

LIONEL

Maude, my son is being expelled today.

NICK shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

MAUDE

I wouldn't know anything about that. And I don't go to this school.

LIONEL

Did you write this? Because Nick didn't. This school has a strict zero tolerance policy on plagiarism and now he's out.

MAUDE

So you've all dealt with the problem, then-

LIONEL

"Dealt" with it?

MAUDE

I don't have to follow your school rules - I'm a ghost writer who works for a living, not some kid who can't finish their homework. Any online client can source individual articles and editorials from a freelancer like me. Now, if a student were to contact me posing as an educational website or publication looking to buy my existing work, then...

PRESCOTT

Being clever about side stepping our system is just another way of breaking our rules. These submissions are a testament to higher learning. We have an honor code-

MAUDE

I don't have an honor code anywhere. At all. I'm just a girl who wrote a legally sound document. You expelled someone who broke one of your rules with how they used it. It's dealt with.

NICK

(beat)
Sorry, Maude.

MAUDE

Cool it, Nick, we don't know each other.

PRESCOTT tuts a laugh - LIONEL notes this, stands, and folds the paper.

LIONEL

I thought we were exacting some justice here. You call her in and then fucking pay her to be here? She's being smug. How do we get Nick back into classes? How are we gonna repair? What are we gonna do to make sure she doesn't go around and ruin any other kids'-

MAUDE

I'm right here-

LIONEL holds a hand up to block her from his eye line.

LIONEL

Where's our justice? This is Nick's third school-

PRESCOTT

Mr. Mcafrey - Nick remains expelled. It's a zero tolerance policy, I'm sorry.

LIONEL is dumbfounded.

LIONEL

(beat)

Then why all the...What is this? He co-operated. He was helpful-

PRESCOTT

And I appreciate him giving me the contact info leading to-

MAUDE

Yeah, Nick, thanks for helping these guys find me.

PRESCOTT

Mr. Mcafrey, I can speak further with you ab-

LIONEL

To hell with this. I'm gonna make sure this gets known loud, Prescott.

PRESCOTT

Lionel, I-

LIONEL
Enough - Nick, come.

LIONEL storms out with NICK.

MAUDE
(beat)
Why have him here at all? I
believed you were a legit client
today.

PRESCOTT
Because I think it's important you
see the impact of your actions...

MAUDE
Thanks Mr. Miyagi, but I do a lot
of work outside this.

PRESCOTT
And still a surprising amount on my
campus. There are a lot of students
sourcing from you, I've since
learned.

MAUDE
Sounds like an internal problem I'm
on the outside of.

PRESCOTT
It doesn't bother you that we could
spend time discovering and
expelling students en masse?

MAUDE
They broke rules. I begin and end
at writing things down for other
people - where and how they submit
it, with or without my name, is on
them.

PRESCOTT
I remember you nicer than this
abrasive energy - is it the
circumstances, or the school itself
that are upsetting you?

MAUDE
Just this waste of time.

She motions to leave.

PRESCOTT

Time that I'm paying for - stay, please. This paper caught my attention because excellent, though it may be, I recognized it - rehashed, albeit, but I recognized it.

MAUDE

I don't plagiarize.

PRESCOTT

I'm not saying you do. I'm saying I recognize your work, your written voice - despite being well masked in Nick's.

(beat)

It's been a decade and a half since I was primarily teaching, but I don't forget easily.

MAUDE

Yeah, I went here. Not a secret.

PRESCOTT

You were astounding. What happened? I had thought there was at least one book in you.

MAUDE

It was published by someone else. You're gonna pretend you didn't hear about my five minutes?

PRESCOTT

I'm sorry, I don't follow.

MAUDE

I don't do a lot of writing for myself these days, okay?

PRESCOTT

So now you make money off vapid, less capable freshmen, and regurgitate your own work; chasing your own tail?

MAUDE

(getting up)

That's me, then. Regurgitating bullshit.

PRESCOTT

I'd like to offer you something new, is what I mean. I wanted to meet you today, not judge, I'm sorry.

MAUDE

I don't need anything from you - just pay me. Does the girl outside your office have a petty cash box? Or is that just old Hollywood?

PRESCOTT

It pays well enough; the job I have in mind.

MAUDE

I can make money just fine without doing it off your students. I can even give you today for free - bye.

She starts for the door.

PRESCOTT

You've already displayed a lack of moral fibre, you can't be bought?

MAUDE

(stops, turns, shrugs)
Happily so. I just don't like you.

PRESCOTT

Well, I like you well enough. Your writing brought you here today.

MAUDE

Glad you enjoyed.

PRESCOTT

I liked your story the first time you submitted it, too.

MAUDE

I'm ever-derivative of myself, it would seem.

PRESCOTT

I could use your help, Maude.

MAUDE

Why?

PRESCOTT

Because you captured Nick's voice and didn't lose any talent or style along the way. And because your stagnation and current path just cost a young man his scholastic career.

MAUDE

His dad seemed pretty capable of setting Nick up with a fallback.

PRESCOTT

Someone's privilege excuses what you did?

MAUDE

No, I just don't want to rub any more salt on this than I have to.

PRESCOTT

Do something new with me.

MAUDE

I'm working on something new already.

PRESCOTT

(sincere)
Oh, you're unavailable?

MAUDE

Hopefully, yeah, soon.

PRESCOTT

(beat)
Until you are, can you at least audit it? I promise the job is worth your time. This family has until now been mostly private - this is a great opportunity - and you can help them realize their hopes.

MAUDE

Cool, yeah. Upper class families are having a real tough go of it lately, I'll do what I can.

PRESCOTT

You won't be writing lukewarm vacation stories for WASPS - that's what I think you'll enjoy most of all: Who the job is