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This is Why I'm Here

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Author

Alvarez, Rogelio

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THIS IS WHY I'M HERE

By

Rogelio Alvarez

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Rickerby Hinds
Department of Theatre, Film and Digital Production

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair
University Honors

ABSTRACT

Homelessness is one of the biggest social issues in the United States. The root cause is generally attributed to the individuals themselves when it should be traced to the systemic problems of mental health, dysfunctional families, or the precariousness of the neoliberal capitalist system. My goal for this project is to alter the preconceived notions of homelessness through a screenplay. I will write a short story in order to provide people with a different perspective and give them the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the struggles and obstacles that a homeless person goes through on a daily basis. There are statistics and data that provide insight on this issue. However, the data doesn't explain the individual causes of homelessness. I will visit homeless shelters to volunteer and build relationships with people who are struggling with the hopes that someone will give me the opportunity to share their story. I hope that this short story will help remove the general tendencies of victim-blaming and make the reader understand that systemic issues devoid the individuals of agency to change their behavior.

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I would like to thank my girlfriend Cherry Gissell Cruz. Thank you for your endless support and love, and for bringing me peace during the creation of this project. I love you so much.

To my family: Natasha, Nadia, Sophia, Andrew, Genesis, Anthony, and Nancy. I would like to thank all of you for helping me overcome my doubts and believing in me.

To my parents Honorio and Lucia Alvarez. I was able to reach this milestone because of you. I love you both very much.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

There is no doubt that homelessness has been one of the most significant social issues that has affected a number of lives over the past few years. We are constantly exposed to it. We see homeless individuals in the park, on the streets, in front of grocery stores, gas stations, bus stops, and even at the exits of the freeway. There are several articles, data, research, and statistics that shed light on this subject. They provide us with a better understanding of the population, age group, and demographics affected by homelessness. As well as some insight into the causes of homelessness. In addition, we may learn about some possible solutions and, in the end, become more knowledgeable about the subject and then go about our daily lives.

As a side note, I should emphasize that I am not implying that research and data are not useful, because they are. However, there is a limit to the amount of information one can draw from statistics and data. As a matter of fact, they provide only a limited representation of a bigger story. This essentially became the driving force behind this capstone project.

Having said that, homelessness was not a topic I initially cared about. Every time I saw a homeless person, it was either from a distance or while driving. If I encountered them, I would not acknowledge their humanity, but would simply go about my day without giving much thought to their circumstances. As far as I was concerned, they were just strangers. All of this changed when I began working at Rite Aid.

I worked in a city with a very high homeless population. A few individuals would enter the store and steal liquor, food, water, and anything else they could find. The situation was initially upsetting as it negatively impacted on the store's inventory and caused disruptions. However, I eventually realized that they were just trying to survive. In time, I began to interact

with them and treat them as the individuals they were. I started buying them water and food and sometimes giving them the sweater I had. Despite not knowing their names, I was able to identify them. I referred to one of them as "the guy with the beanie", another as "the lady who lives in her car", and a third as "the young looking one". I did not know the story of their lives. I did not know their names. As far as I was concerned, that didn't matter. They were homeless and that was it. All of this changed, however, when my older sister became homeless.

My older sister consistently struggled with drug addiction and was in and out of rehab. This affected several of her relationships, including those with her children, my parents, and her siblings. She ended up on the streets after my parents gained custody of her children. Whenever I walked to the library, to the bank, or even just drove down the street, I would see her pushing her shopping cart. Others probably saw her as "the lady with the shopping cart." To me she was more than that. She was someone with an identity, someone with whom I had a relationship. My eyes were filled with the image of a sister, a daughter, a mother of three, an aunt, and a wife. It was no secret that she had a tragic story to tell, a story that only my family and I knew. Eventually, I realized that there were several other untold stories. As a result, I came to the conclusion that conducting a research paper was not the best approach for this capstone project. Rather, I needed to develop a creative project that would enable others to develop empathy and view this issue differently.

Early on in the development of the project, the process was quite challenging. Although I knew I wanted to tell a story, I did not know what approach to take. It was difficult for me to decide whether to write a collection of poems or a piece of non-fiction. It was also difficult for me to find a mentor who could help me bring this project to life. I went back and examined

previous creative projects and found that some were screenplays. After reading some of the scripts, I decided that this was the best method to present the project. Afterwards, I referred to Dr. Cardullo's list of professors, but was unable to locate a screenwriting instructor. Further research led me to Rickerby Hinds, a professor in the Department of Theatre, Film, and Digital Production. In reading his biography, I learned that he was a respected playwright who challenged social, cultural, and global issues through his writing. Additionally, I noticed that he taught workshops on screenwriting and playwriting. For me, this was a no-brainer.

In conducting further research, I found a YouTube video published by TEDx Talks entitled "The Justice of Storytelling" with Professor Hinds. In the video he discussed an incident that occurred in Riverside, California, in which Myeisha Mills, a nineteen-year-old girl, was shot and killed by police while sleeping in her car. Following a number of requests from a newspaper publisher, he eventually wrote "Dreamscape", a play that depicts Myeisha Mills' inner life and thoughts as she is shot and killed by police officers. Professor Hinds stated that he wrote the play because he felt it was his duty as an artist. "Dreamscape" became a global success. It was eventually turned into a film with the intention of spreading the story to a wider audience. After the release of the film, he had people ask and wonder whether they would also have the opportunity to tell their stories and share the reasons for why they exist. What struck me the most about this video was when he said that "The interconnectedness that we have as human beings doesn't happen with statistics. It doesn't happen with facts, it actually happens with the stories that we tell each other" (Rickerby Hinds, 7:03). I drew inspiration from that very quote for my capstone project. My goal was to create a story that would help others gain a better understanding of homelessness beyond statistics and facts. Immediately after watching the video,

I emailed Professor Hinds asking if he would consider mentoring me and assisting me with this project. Fortunately for me, he accepted.

As I shared my thoughts and ideas with Professor Hinds, I told him I wanted to write a documentary. Although he liked the idea, he said it would be tricky to make it work because I would need to submit an IRB application. When I expressed my concerns to my academic advisor, she informed me that the application process was complicated, would take several months to review, and would most likely not be approved. She also instructed me not to document anything until it was approved.

Rather than writing a documentary, I decided to write a fictional story based on true events. The first thing I did was to begin talking to homeless individuals and building relationships with them. During our conversations, they made themselves vulnerable and told me about the reasons for their homelessness. In learning about their stories and everyday struggles, I gained a deeper understanding of their lives. Several homeless individuals reported that they were constantly being degraded and insulted as a result of being homeless. In one instance, a homeless man told me how he was beaten up by another homeless man over a mere five dollars. During the course of the incident, he lost two of his front teeth. Most of them said they just wanted to be acknowledged as more than homeless. Their desire was to be treated as human beings.

All of these conversations provided me with several stories to share. The problem then became deciding which one to tell. I developed a character, a story, and a plot based on all the stories. Following this, I created what I believed was a compelling story, but Professor Hinds was not of the same opinion. I presented a narrative that was not credible, and I wrote a script

that was poorly written. I explained to him that what I had written was based on true events, and I was attempting to reflect the same in the script. He assured me that, despite the nice story, I would have to follow a specific screenwriting format in order for it to succeed.

I went back to the drawing board and wrote a new synopsis, beat sheet, and script. I received the same response. Yet another poorly written script with an unconvincing storyline. As a last resort, I wrote about my sister. The story was based on true events, but I tweaked it to make it more interesting. The key was to step away from real life and write something that was more credible for the screen. In order to gain a better understanding of formatting and structure, I also referred to several screenwriting books, such as Syd Field's, "Screenplay", and David Trottier's, "The Screenwriter's Bible". I emailed the first few pages of my new story to Professor Hinds, and he responded positively. In the end, I was able to complete the first act of "THIS is Why I'm Here."

THIS is Why I'm Here

written by

Rogelio Alvarez

900 University Ave, Riverside, Ca 92521
ralva087@ucr.edu

EXT. SOUTH GATE, CALIFORNIA - DAY

MONTAGE - HOMELESSNESS IN SOUTH GATE

SUPER: "South Gate, California."

The poorest part of a poor city. Dirty streets, faded store signs, and honking cars.

MALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

This is getting outta hand. We have all these homeless people begging for change when they should be applying for jobs.

7-11 - A Homeless Man begs for change in front of a 7-11, though the passerby walk right by him without a glance.

FEMALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

It's not that simple.

Alley - A homeless encampment in an alley. Some try to get some sleep over the sound of others arguing. An older man talks to himself.

MALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

Sure it is! All you gotta do is fill out a job application but they're lazy. They're drug addicts, they're drunks. They don't wanna work, they just wanna feed their addiction.

Gas Station - A homeless woman with a shopping cart digs through the trash bins looking for bottles and cans.

FEMALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

Some of them are veterans too, ya know? Some of them are teenagers. And you also have to remember that drug addiction is an illness.

(beat)

When's the last time you filled out a job application?

MALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

What?

FEMALE RADIO (V.O.)

I don't know if you know this, but nowadays most applications are done online. How are they supposed to fill out a job application if they don't have access to a computer?

Bus Stop - A homeless man sits on a bus bench with his dog.

MALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

They can go to the public library! A library card is free.

FEMALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

True, but you can't get one without having a home address. Same thing with job applications, you can't fill one out without listing a home address. A job won't solve this issue.

MALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

I don't know...

Street Corner - An overfilled car is parked in front of a bank. In the back seat there are pillows, blankets, and bags of clothes. A homeless couple in the same car are in the front seat eating sandwiches, melancholy.

MALE RADIOHOST (V.O.)

But they're everywhere. I can't go to a McDonald's or even take my kids to the park without running into them.

Park - Homeless people sleep on park benches, as housed citizens ride by on their bikes.

END MONTAGE

EXT. TWEEDY ALLEY - DAY

PREP SCHOOL KID (16), wearing a sweater with his school crest, knocks on an unmarked door in the dirty alley.

It slides open on GREG (50s), rugged confidence...and homeless, judging by his appearance.

PREP SCHOOL KID

Hey, are you Greg?

(beat)

My friend Steve said that you can hook me up with...stuff.
You know...

GREG

Depends, how old are you?

A tense beat...Greg laughs.

GREG

I'm just messin' with ya.

Greg slides the door farther open, revealing a shelf full of alcohol. Prep School Kid's eyes widen.

PREP SCHOOL KID

How much for that vodka?

Greg looks back at the bottle of Grey Goose on the shelf. He *tsks* his tongue.

GREG

That's an expensive one, kid. That's gonna cost ya.

Meanwhile, Prep School Kid exchanges a wad of cash for Greg's bottle of Grey Goose. The kid squints at a clearly aftermarket cap on the bottle.

PREP SCHOOL KID

Hey, why is this opened?

GREG

It's not, that's a special edition cap. Who's the alcohol expert here? Now get outta here, have some fun.

(calling after him)

And tell your friends about me!

As Prep School Kid walks away, Greg chuckles to himself and re-enters the unmarked door--

INT. GREG'S DEN - CONTINUOUS

An old dental implant center. There are broken walls, cords hanging, crack cemented floors.

And Greg's home. He's a squatter.

Where the dentist reception area used to be, there's a ripped couch, a creaky table, and even a mini fridge. There are framed pictures lying face down.

Power cords run into the abandoned room, from outside, powering a small generator.

Greg takes off his jacket and sits down on the couch, watching sports on a small, cracked TV. As he watches--

Greg opens a bottle of vodka, pouring some out and then pouring water back into it. He screws a cap (like the one Prep School Kid commented on) onto it. Watering down the booze.

EXT. KARLA'S MOTHER'S HOUSE - DAY

A lower middle-class neighborhood. Children ride their bikes under shady trees, & teenagers play basketball in the street.

KARLA (30s), homeless, wearing a backpack and heavily worn clothes, approaches a nice house. She approaches the porch tentatively, knocking on the screen door.

KARLA

Mom....mom, open up it's me.

BERNICE (17), mature beyond her years, opens the inner door. She stares at Karla through the screen door.

KARLA

Hi mija, it's nice to see you.

No response from Bernice.

KARLA

Is your grandma home?

BERNICE

No. If that's all--

Bernice goes to close the door again -- Karla steps forward.

KARLA

Come on mija, don't be like that!

(beat)

Bernice--

BERNICE

What do you want?

KARLA

I... I just want something to eat.

BERNICE

So still no job, I see--

KARLA

Don't talk to me like that. I'm still your mother.

Bernice gives her a hard look, as JOVANNY (6), doe-eyed innocence, runs to the door.

JOVANNY

Mommy!

Jovanny opens the screen door and hugs Karla.

Karla holds him tight and kisses him. Bernice watches with utter disdain.

KARLA

Hi baby. How was school?

JOVANNY

Good.

KARLA

Yeah? What did you learn?--

BERNICE

Jovanny, did you finish your homework? Go finish, please.

Jovanny sighs & re-enters the home. Karla blows him a kiss.

KARLA

Bye baby! Is Adrian home--

BERNICE

Baseball practice.

(beat)

I thought Grandma told you to stop coming around.

KARLA

Just because I don't have custody doesn't mean she can tell me to not see my kids--

BERNICE

Well, it won't matter soon.

KARLA

What's that supposed to mean?

Bernice sighs.

BERNICE

I got a scholarship.

KARLA

Mija, that's great--

BERNICE

For a university in Texas. They're going to pay for everything. Tuition, books, housing...including for students with dependents.

Karla's face changes.

BERNICE

I'll be 18. I'm taking the boys with me.

Karla's smile quickly dissipates.

KARLA

What? To Texas? Y-- you can't do that--

BERNICE

Yes I can, I'll be their legal guardian. Grandma's tired. She shouldn't have to raise your kids, even if she's willing to.

KARLA

No...

BERNICE

Bye, Karla.

Bernice closes the door.

KARLA

Bernice...

Karla starts banging on the door.

KARLA

You can't take my kids! You hear me? You can't...

Karla crumbles to the ground, teary. She notices a middle-aged mother staring at her from her yard. Karla snaps:

KARLA

What are you looking at?

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX - DAY

An average looking building on the outskirts of the projects.

Karla trudges up the apartment stairs.

INT. JAVIER'S APARTMENT - DAY

Karla sits on the couch with JAVIER (40s), drinking beers, with a pile of empty's next to them. Bongs on the table.

KARLA

--to Texas! Like they don't have schools here.

JAVIER

Right, I hear ya.

KARLA

I don't know what I'm gonna do.

JAVIER

Maybe you shouldn't do anything. They've made it clear they don't wanna see you. At this point they're just getting in the way.

Javier wraps his arm around Karla, moving in for a kiss. She stands up and paces back in forth in the living room.

KARLA

No, I have to do something.

JAVIER

Babe--

KARLA

Bernice can't do this---

Javier stands up and grabs Karla, perhaps too roughly.

JAVIER

Babe, listen to me. Now we can live our lives. You don't have to worry about those little shits anymore--

Karla pushes him off.

KARLA

Those little shits are my kids!

Javier pushes her back -- Karla lands on the couch, scowling at him. Javier stands over her, menacingly.

JAVIER

I've put up with this shit for a while, Karla. I've put up with your whining, given you a place to crash after you drank your way on the street--

KARLA

Fuck you.

Javier roughly grabs the beer from her hand.

JAVIER

Get the hell out.

Javier forces Karla out the door and throws her backpack.

JAVIER

And take your shit with you!

Javier slams the door.

KARLA

Asshole!

Karla grabs her backpack and leaves.

EXT. TWEEDY BLVD - NIGHT

Karla trudges off the late-night bus, heading for Larry's Liquor Store, on the corner. Just as she gets close--

EDDY (30) store owner, flips the 'closed' sign. She growls.

KARLA

Seriously, Eddy?

EDDY

Sorry, Karla. It's late.

Karla sighs and sits on a bench. She watches two TEENAGERS exit an alley, drinking from a brown paper bag.

TEENAGER

--what a steal.

GREG (O.S.)

Tell your friends about ol' Greg!

The teenagers walk away. Karla hesitates, then steps into the poorly lit alley, keeping a watchful eye on her surroundings.

EXT. TWEEDY ALLEY - NIGHT

Karla walks further into the alley and sees Greg smoking.

GREG

You lost?

KARLA

Sorry, I was just trying to buy some liquor. Saw those kids--

(beat)

You know what, never mind--

GREG

You've come to the right place.

Greg opens a duffle bag, showing a few bottles of liquor. Karla's eyes glisten.

GREG

Pick your poison.

KARLA

How much for that Cîroc?

GREG

15 bucks.

KARLA

(grinning)

Damn. That's a steal.

Karla takes off her backpack and retrieves her wallet. As she's flipping through for cash--

A picture falls out. It's an old family picture of Karla with Bernice, Adrian and Jovanny around Christmas. Greg picks it up, studying it.

GREG

Nice family...

Karla snatches it back, annoyed. She hands him cash.

KARLA

Here.

Greg counts the money...his eyes flick up.

GREG

This is only \$12--

KARLA

Come on man, give me a break.

A beat. Greg holds the bottle, not giving it up yet.

GREG

You're on the streets, aren't you?

He gestures to her backpack, which is stuffed with clothing. She zips it up, annoyed.

GREG

Hold old are you--

KARLA

Are we done playing 20 questions? Just give me the bottle, old man.

Another beat...Greg hands it to her. Karla stuffs it in her backpack.

KARLA

I'd say pleasure doing business, but you talk too much.

She zips up her backpack and leaves. Greg watches her go.

EXT. PARK - BENCH - NIGHT

Karla sits feet up on the bench, blanket under her. She digs the Cîroc from Greg out of her backpack and sips--

She spits it out, disgusted.

KARLA

What the fuck is this?

She throws the bottle, yelling in annoyance.

KARLA

FUCKING scammer.

Karla sighs. She hugs her knees, head down.

FADE TO:

EXT. PARK - BENCH - MORNING

Karla wakes up to someone PRODDING HER back. She turns--

A POLICEMAN stands over her.

POLICEMAN

Sorry, lady. Can't stay here.

INT. LARRY'S LIQUOR STORE - MORNING

An extensive liquor store. Greg stands in the checkout line with a big selection of bottles.

EDDY (30s), the cashier is helping another CUSTOMER (20s).

CUSTOMER

--I'm looking for a Tequila, something more smooth.

EDDY

Umm...let's see here--

GREG

Try Casamigos.

The customer turns around.

GREG

It's pricy but it's smooth. You look like you can afford it.

Eddy picks it out the bottle and shows the Customer.

CUSTOMER

Thanks, man.

The customer pays then leaves. Greg's turn in line.

EDDY

Thanks, Greg.

GREG

Of course.

EDDY

I say it every time, but we got a spot for you. You just let me know.

GREG

Don't hold your breath, Eddy.

Greg places the liquor in a duffle and walks out.

EXT. LARRY'S LIQUOR STORE - DAY

As Greg heads toward his locked bike--

Karla jumps in front of him, eyes with rage.

KARLA

Hey, asshole. Remember me? You sold me some watery shit last night!

GREG

Ehm, I don't recall--

KARLA

I want my money back.

GREG

Sorry sweetheart. All sales are final.

KARLA

Fine. Then I can just march in there and tell Eddy that you're flipping his alcohol, watering it down and selling it to the kids on the street. Sounds illegal--

GREG

Woah woah, let's not jump to any crazy ideas.

(beat)

Look, I'm sorry. You caught me. Let me make it up to you. You hungry?

KARLA

Back off, dude. You're old as hell and not my type. Just give me my money back...and a new bottle.

As Karla folds her arms, her stomach grumbles. Greg smirks.

INT. DINER - MORNING

Karla stuffs down a few plates of breakfast food, starving. Greg eats a stack of pancakes.

GREG

You should slow down...

Karla takes a sip of her orange juice.

KARLA

(mouth full of food)

You should shut up.

A beat...Greg smirks.

GREG

When's the last time you had a real meal?

KARLA

When's the last time you didn't drown someone with questions?

GREG

I'm just trying to make conversation--

KARLA
And I'm just trying to eat.

GREG
Can--

KARLA
I swear to God if you ask me another question, I'm gonna lose my shit.

GREG
...I was just gonna ask if you can pass the syrup.

Karla hands Greg the syrup.

GREG
Why are you so angry?--

Karla SLAMS her fork down on the table, fed up.

KARLA
You wanna know why I'm angry? In the last 24 hours I've been turned away by my own kid, kicked out of my boyfriend's place, got ripped off on alcohol by some old guy, and then when I finally get a chance at a full meal? He ruins it, by asking me all these annoying questions.

Greg sighs.

KARLA
Not to mention I haven't showered in days, and as you pointed out yesterday, I'm on the streets. Is that enough reasons?

A beat. Greg nods.

GREG
Yeah, that's enough.

Karla continues eating.

GREG
I'm homeless too ya know.

KARLA
Yeah right.

GREG

I'm serious.

Karla looks at him, then gestures to Greg's duffle.

KARLA

You gotta bag full of liquor, and you're here...treating me to some breakfast. You're not homeless.

GREG

Apples and oranges, Karla--

KARLA

Whatever man...you still owe me a bottle of Ciroc.

Karla gestures to the duffle. Greg thinks about it, then nods.

GREG

Sure. They're back at my place.

KARLA

Your place? Two seconds ago you said were homeless.

INT. GREG'S DEN - DAY

Greg slides open his door from Tweedy Alley, revealing his squatter's den in the dental office. Karla watches in awe.

GREG

Here we are...Casa de Greg.

KARLA

Huh. You pay rent?

GREG

What do you think?

Karla chuckles.

KARLA

Cops don't give you a hard time, squatting like this?

GREG

They would, if they knew. It's all about picking the right spot.

KARLA

Damn...I gotta get me a spot like this. I was a on a park bench last night.

Karla crashes on the couch.

GREG

Are your kids on the street too?

Karla gives a look...then shrugs.

KARLA

No, they're with my mom...for now.

GREG

For now?

Karla reaches for a bottle on the table, helping herself.

KARLA

My oldest, Bernice...she got a scholarship...wants to take my boys to Texas with her.

GREG

Guessing you're not invited.

(beat)

How'd you end up on the street?--

KARLA

How about that bottle?

She gestures to the wall of liquor. Greg grabs a bottle of Cîroc, un-watered down. As he offers it...he pulls it back.

GREG

How'd you end up on the street?

KARLA

(annoyed)

Same shit as anyone, man. Lost my job, bad luck, credit bill that wouldn't go away. Just give me the bottle--

GREG

What's your plan to get back on your feet? To get your kids back?

KARLA

If you must know, my boyfriend Javier said he could hook me up with a great gig soon--

GREG

The one who just kicked you out? Seems like things are going well--

Karla reaches for the bottle, but Greg holds it away.

KARLA

Asshole.

GREG

What kind of job is Javier saying he can get you?

KARLA

What else, but selling--
(stops herself)

You know what, I don't even know why I'm telling you this. Just give me the fucking bottle, dude.

Greg looks at her.

GREG

I can give you something better than this bottle, if you want?

KARLA

(eyes wide)

What's that? Grey Goose--

GREG

Your kids, Karla. I wanna help you.

A beat. Karla scoffs.

KARLA

You're homeless, dude. Unless you got a big pile of cash under that couch, you can't help me.

GREG

You need more than money. You need help, To be honest with yourself. It starts by giving up the bottle--

KARLA

Fuck you, damn hypocrite. You're out here selling watered alcohol to kids, a scammer. What do you know?

Karla grabs the Cîroc from his hand -- Greg lets it happen, not pulling it back. She storms out of the den.

KARLA

Thanks for nothing, dick.

EXT. JAVIER'S APARTMENT - DAY

Karla knocks on Javier's door pacing back and forth.

She starts banging on the door.

KARLA
Javier! Open the damn door.

She turns around -- Javier is right behind her. She JUMPS.

KARLA
Jesus Christ, you scared me--

JAVIER
What do you want, Karla?

KARLA
I'm sorry about what happened yesterday, baby. I really am.

Javier looks at her...he brings her in for a hug.

JAVIER
We good.

KARLA
Hey...remember you said you could hook me up with a job?

EXT. OUTSIDE A MUSIC VENUE - NIGHT

Karla stands on a street corner with Javier, as PARTYERS, mostly teenagers, enter and exit a music venue. Javier hands Karla some Ziploc baggies full of pills.

JAVIER
Good shit so far?

KARLA
Yeah.

She shows him a wad of cash in her pocket. He takes it, then hands her back a few bills.

JAVIER

Remember, let them come to you. And pick your people --
the drunker they are, the better.

Karla nods. Javier splits off, around the block. Karla turns her attention to the teenagers entering the venue, offering some head nods. A TEEN GIRL comes up to Karla.

TEEN GIRL
(whispering)
My friend said you hooked her up--

BERNICE (O.S.)
What are you doing here?

Karla turns to Bernice, exiting the venue with friends.

Karla hides the pill Ziplocs in her pocket.

TEEN GIRL
Yeah...so you can hook me up--

KARLA
Get out of here, kid.

Bernice is wide-eyed, a mix of surprise and anger.

FRIEND #1
(to Bernice)
We'll call an Uber...

They walk off, leaving Bernice and Karla alone.

KARLA
Mija...what are you doing out so late--

BERNICE
So this was your big plan, huh?--

KARLA
It's not what it looks like--

BERNICE
You're standing on a corner selling pills to teens.

KARLA
It's just to get back on my feet. No one's hiring these days-

-

BERNICE

No one's hiring drunk ex-felons who lost custody of their kids and live on the street--

KARLA

Bernice, please don't be like that--

BERNICE

Stay away from me. Stay away from Adrian & stay away from Jovanny.

KARLA

Jovanny still needs me--

BERNICE

Jovanny is 6, he doesn't know any better. Stop coming by the house. If you do, I'll call the cops.

Bernice runs off to her friends. Karla collapses against the wall, distraught. She throws the Ziploc baggies, with pills flying across the ground. Javier sees & grabs her.

JAVIER

Woah, what the FUCK Karla--

KARLA

Get your hands off me.

JAVIER

Give me that fucking money back, you just wasted all that product--

Karla struggles, but Javier doesn't let her go-- VENUE BOUNCER sees. He lets go. Karla storms off.

JAVIER

Don't you EVER come by again, you hear me? Piece of shit.

EXT. PARK - BENCH - NIGHT

Karla puts her backpack down on her park bench. She digs into her backpack and finds a few sips left in the Cîroc bottle from Greg. She goes to finish it of...then puts it down.

She curls up on the bench and sniffs back tears.

EXT. PARK - BENCH - LATER

Karla wakes up in the middle of the night to a ZIPPER--

She squints and sees another HOMELESS MAN, with a hoodie, rifling through her bag, fumbling with the wad of drug money.

KARLA
Hey, get the FUCK away--

Karla reaches for him, but the Homeless Man shoves her back, slamming her head HARD against the bench.

The man runs off with the entire backpack.

KARLA
Get back here, asshole!

Karla stumbles a few feet then stops. She looks down. She has nothing: only the clothes on her back.

EXT. GREG'S DEN - NIGHT

Karla knocks on Greg's door. Greg slides the door and sees Karla in distraught.

GREG
Woah Karla what happened? Are you okay--

Karla collapses in Greg's arms and breaks down.

KARLA
I can't let her take my kids Greg. I can't!
(beat)
There's gotta be something I can do. I need to get them
back...I need to try.

Karla releases herself from the hug.

KARLA
You said you would help.

Greg lets her in and closes the door.

FADE TO BLACK.

Summary of Acts 2 &3

The second act begins with Greg forcing Karla to sober up and detox. She's locked in a room in his squatter Den, something Karla doesn't appreciate at first. Greg uses her children as motivation to keep her in the room, and after a few days he lets her out. To assist her in dealing with withdrawals, he gives her nicotine patches, but tricks her into believing that they are for weed and alcohol. The two then go out to dinner where they learn about each other's pasts. Greg learns that Karla's husband, Adrian, served as a police officer who died in the line of duty. Two weeks after his death she lost her father in a car accident. This ultimately caused her downfall. Unable to properly mourn and grieve the death of both her father and husband, she turned to drugs and alcohol. Karla discovers that Greg had a wife and daughter but lost them because of an affair. Due to his inability to face his shame and family, he ended up on the streets.

Afterwards Greg helps Karla put herself together. He helps her fill out job applications and uses Eddy as a reference. He then takes her thrift shopping so she can get clothes for an interview and helps her retrieve whatever belongings she has at Javier's apartment. Greg meets Javier and instantly sees the threat he poses to Karla. Karla gets hired as a cashier at Target. After a few weeks Karla goes to her mother's house so she can let Bernice know that she is making progress. Bernice is not impressed and turns her away. Karla snaps at Greg, but Greg tells her that a job is only part of the solution. If she wants to get her kids back, she needs to learn how to reconnect with them.

To reconnect with them, Karla buys Jovanny Legos, goes to Adrian's baseball games, and gets Bernice concert tickets. At this point, things are going well. Karla decides to celebrate after work with a drink. Greg rejects the idea and offers dinner instead. Karla agrees, but when she

gets to the restaurant Greg isn't there. He is at his den selling alcohol to minors. Afterwards, Karla goes to Javier's house to end their relationship. She is tricked by Javier into toasting her progress with a drink. Initially, Karla is reluctant, but she eventually agrees.

The following day, Bernice shows up at Target with the intention of surprising Karla. Karla shows up drunk and gets fired. Bernice views the scene and walks away disappointed. Karla returns to Greg seeking his assistance, but Greg refuses. According to him, he wasted his time trying to help an individual who is incapable of making changes and does not take responsibility for their actions. She tells him that at least she tried to change, unlike him who is stubborn and set in his ways. Karla ends up on the streets again.

In Act three, Greg takes a moment to reflect in his den. He reads a letter he wrote to his daughter who he has not spoken to for many years. Eventually, Greg comes to his senses and sets out to find Karla. When he finds her, he tells her that despite giving up on himself, he will not give up on her. He helps Karla get back on her feet and gets her a new job. The two of them face Javier together. Greg threatens Javier by telling him that he will report him to the police for being a drug dealer if he refuses to cosign an apartment for Karla. Javier caves and agrees. Following this, Greg sells his belongings and saves up enough funds to cover Karla's downpayment on a studio apartment.

Karla invites the kids to dinner at her new home. They see she has a new job, and she is sober. Bernice is impressed and suggests that maybe she will apply to a local college, so that Adrian and Jovanny will still be able to see their mother. Karla and Greg say their final goodbyes. He applies for a real job at Larry's liquor store and writes a letter to his family. He decides to live a more honest life and not see his life as too late to change.

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