

ON THE NINE

TEASER

INT./EXT. VARIOUS - MONTAGE

MUSIC UP: The Violent Femmes' "Add It Up" or similar.

EXT. CHINATOWN - MORNING

- WORKERS lower a side of beef through a sidewalk cellar door.

SUPER: 1996

- Above them, laundry hangs on lines between buildings, the tip of the Transamerica pyramid poking into the sky beyond.

INT. YUPPIE BEDROOM - MORNING

- A YUPPIE (30s) in a business suit looks in a mirror as he knots a red tie around his neck. In the reflection, we see his WIFE (30s) brushing her teeth behind him.

EXT. FOOT OF TRANSAMERICA PYRAMID - MORNING

From above, the Wall Street of the West Coast buzzing to life:

- BIKE MESSENGERS careen past double-parked delivery trucks, through a tangle of COMMUTERS.

- Revolving glass doors glint in the slanty morning light as they spin with SUITS and SKIRTS.

EXT. BROADWAY - MORNING

- WORKERS pulling up roll-down gates on shops that line the street.

- Others rolling bins of wares out onto the sidewalk.

- Past Columbus, strip clubs and peepshows, all of them closed, lobbies dark but their neon flashing.

- Among the signs: a red neon girl who blinks through three poses, forever dancing inside a wall-mounted case beside the Lusty Lady's entrance.

- Below the marquees, Chinatown residents hurry past homeless encampments as they walk their children to the school on the next block.

- Among the pedestrians, bright sprite, ARIEL (5), in a Little Mermaid Halloween costume wig (but it's not Halloween), walking hand-in-hand beside...

...her grandpa, ED (50s), in a dollar store Mao jacket buttoned all the way to the top. Deep lines rut his brow and crosshatch the skin around his tight-lipped eyes.

EXT. PORTSMOUTH SQUARE PARK - MORNING

- CHINESE SENIORS do tai chi as HOMELESS PEOPLE sleep on benches that border the square.

INT. LUSTY LADY STAGE - MORNING

- CARL (20s, punker), shoes off (ratty Chucks), kneels on the red carpet of this empty room made of mirrors, spraying Windex at one of the windows that ring the space then wiping it down with a cloth.

EXT/INT. LUSTY LADY LOBBY - DAY

- TABITHA (20s) pushes a beater bike through the door, her spokes laced with *Lotería* cards, her beauty, the brittle, pissed off kind. Think Nancy Spungen.

- Beside Tabitha, her girlfriend, VENUS (20s), the sort of person who often feels like the only grown-up in the room.

- A *La Mano* card falls out of Tabitha's spokes onto the decades-old paisley print carpet. Venus picks it up, wiggles it back into place.

EXT. CHERRY'S GRANDMA'S HOUSE - DAY

- On the porch, we meet cocky maverick and big-picture visionary, CHERRY (20s). An SF Mission native, the chola life wasn't for her, but its dark impressions still line her eyes and lips.

- Her ex's parting gift, ERIC (18 months), straddles her hip.

- Cherry's GRANDMA (60s) opens the door in a bathrobe, a wheeled oxygen tank at her feet. Cherry hands Grandma the baby bag, sets Eric down. He kisses her then scampers inside.

INT. LUSTY LADY BACKSTAGE HALLWAY - DAY

- A manicured hand PUNCHES in on a time-clock that reads, 8:59 then slides the card into a wall-mounted rack beside a sign that reads:

PUNCH IN ON THE 9. PUNCH-INS ON THE ZERO ARE CONSIDERED LATE.

- The hand belongs to SAPPHO (20s). All limbs and grace, she floats over the hallway's shabby rug, along black walls posted with signs that list rules like...

...BREASTS AND GENITALS MUST BE EXPOSED AT ALL TIMES and YOUR JOB IS TO HAVE FUN. SMILE!!!

- Another hand punches in.

- Then another.

EXT. BUS STOP, FOLSOM & 20TH - DAY

- As Cherry waits, she takes a drag on her cigarette, waves at Eric who is sobbing at the window, sucking on the plastic tits of a headless Barbie.

- Fighting tears herself, Cherry tosses her cigarette as the 12-Folsom approaches, exhales smoke over her shoulder as she boards and drops some quarters into the fare machine.

INT. LUSTY LADY CUSTOMER BOOTH - DAY

- A hand pushes a few quarters into the slot.

- The shade rises to reveal a pair of bare legs growing out of stiletto-shod feet (Sappho's).

- O.S., quarters CLINK into the machines of nearby booths, the WHIR of other window shades rising and falling.

INT. LUSTY LADY BACKSTAGE HALLWAY - DAY

- Another hand punches in.

- Another time card says, 8:59.

INT. ANOTHER LUSTY LADY CUSTOMER BOOTH - DAY

- The last inch of a shade disappears to reveal the rest of the stage: Venus, Sappho, and, approaching the window...

...SULA (20s), soft butch, grinding her way through college - her ticket out of the projects. Her armor: a stack of master's program applications. Her anger: the loud-quiet kind.

INT. LUSTY LADY BACKSTAGE HALLWAY - DAY

- Tabitha hurries to the time-clock. Shoes in hand, she punches in.

- A split second later the clock jumps to 9:00.

INT. LUSTY LADY BACKSTAGE HALLWAY/STAGE - DAY

- In the hallway, Tabitha wiggles her feet into her pumps then steps half-way through the gap in the mirrored wall that serves as doorway to the stage.

- With her naked heart and bare crotch pressed up against the jamb, she hides her left arm and leg behind the wall...

...and hovers the limbs of her right side in front of the mirror backing the stage. The trick makes her look suspended mid-air as if held aloft by marionette strings.

- The other girls chuckle, their hips locked into robotic grinds.

INT. LUSTY LADY HALLWAY/BOOTHS - DAY

In quick succession, we see the customer booths from each dancer's POV intercut with what LL janitors, Carl and JANK (20s), a dread-headed lug of a punker, see:

- A window opening to reveal the YUPPIE, his red tie now flung over his shoulder as he jerks away. Arrogantly.

- O.S., the sound of quarters CLINKING.

- The half-assed swish of a mop over the dark floor.

- A window opening to reveal A CHOLO (20s) in a hairnet and Dickies, jerking off with clinical efficiency.

- O.S., the sound of quarters CLINKING.

- Jank's hand dragging a rag over a dark window.

EXT. "The Wall" (Sansome & Sutter) - DAY

- Between swigs from paper-bagged forties and drags on joints, bike messengers mumble into CBs at their shoulders.

- SUITS on lunch break swarm the sidewalk.

INT. LUSTY LADY STAGE/HALLWAY/CUSTOMER BOOTHS - DAY

- A window opens to reveal A CAB DRIVER (40s), his taxi badge pinned to his shirt, rushing through the business at hand. He's on his last quarter.

- O.S., the sound of quarters CLINKING.

- A nasty gray mop dunks into a wheeled, yellow *Piso Mojado*-labeled bucket of nastier looking gray water.

- A window opens to reveal ANOTHER YUPPIE in a suit (30s), tie flung over his shoulder.

- On his knees beneath Another Yuppie: a CRUISER sucking him off.
- O.S., the sound of quarters CLINKING.
- A window opens to reveal A CHINESE GRANDPA (60s), a plastic bag of groceries on the sticky floor at his feet, his approach to this self-imposed, corporeal challenge: patient and wizened.
- a lobby change machine spitting out quarters.
- Cherry's fingers feeding a quarter into the dressing room payphone then yelling soundlessly into the receiver, barefoot, the wig in her hand shaking as she gesticulates.

EXT. CHINATOWN - NIGHT

- WORKERS push bins back inside shops, pull gang-tagged roll-down doors shut along empty sidewalks.

EXT. BROADWAY, WEST OF COLUMBUS - NIGHT

- Streets fill with hustle, scantily clad BARKERS stand outside peepshows and strip clubs, DRUNK PASSERS-BY stumble in and out of entrances.

EXT. BROADWAY, EAST OF COLUMBUS - NIGHT

- A CHINATOWN BUTCHER (40s) in rubber boots and a blood-smearred apron hoses scale, entrails, and bone from his shop floor into the gutter. Gulls squawk and flap around the offal.
- WALTER (40s), a legless man on a skateboard, rolls by.

INT. LUSTY LADY/RANDOM GAMBLING HOUSE - NIGHT

The following actions intercut with one another until the song ends:

CUSTOMERS

Hand and after hand...

- collecting quarters from change machines,
- feeding them into the peep booth slots,
- jerking away as window shades rise and fall.

DANCERS

Hand after hand...

- punching in and out,

- grabbing the bars that frame the peep booth windows,
- swiping different shades of lipstick onto different mouths,
- brushing mascara wands onto different sets of eyelashes,
- pulling different wigs off and onto different scalps.

Knee after knee...

- hooking the pole that grows out of the middle of the stage,
- spinning around its smudgy brass,
- rising to balance stiletto-shod foot after foot on ledges that jut from the sills.

Torso after torso...

- folding over raised thigh after thigh into positions that showcase eyeful after eyeful of their most marketable orifices.

JANITORS

Hand after hand...

- pushing mops across sticky floors,
- dragging rags across sticky windows,
- pulling keys from retractable belt rings,
- shining mag lights into dark booths,
- palm after palm closing around one videotape after another.

GAMBLERS

Hands of multiple players...

- shuffling and stacking mah jong tiles,
- sliding stacks together to form the game's opening square,
- dealing cards,
- rolling dice,
- scooping up winnings.

The song ends as a FRAT BOY (20s) drops a quarter into the slot beneath signs that say *ONE-WAY BOOTH* and *NO CAMERAS*.

END MUSIC

END MONTAGE

INT. LUSTY LADY CUSTOMER BOOTH - NIGHT

The window shade in front of Frat Boy rises. He removes a camcorder from his bag, points it at the stage, and hits *record*.

END OF TEASER

ACT 1

INT. LUSTY LADY STAGE - NIGHT

MUSIC UP: Disco (something string-heavy) over the stage sound system.

Cherry and Sappho dance for open windows across the stage from Venus and Tabitha. Sula's center stage working the pole.

All girls are within ear-shot of one another, involved in multiple conversations.

SAPPHO

(to Cherry)

Oh, I tried that enchilada recipe
but I veganized it with squash.

Both girls turn around, shake their asses at the windows behind them.

SAPPHO (CONT'D)

It was kind of watery, though.

CHERRY

Veganized it? More like *bastardized*
it - with some white hippie chick
bullshit.

Sappho shakes her head and laughs.

TABITHA

My mom used to make it with tofu.

SAPPHO

Tofu's too much like meat.

SULA

It's *nothing* like meat.

END MUSIC/MUSIC UP: As the disco fades, the bass beat of a hip-hop song drowns out the conversations. Voices are harder to hear now.

TABITHA

(to Sula)

Right? It was really hard to
get shit like that in
Nebraska in the 70s and my
mom was all--

CHERRY (O.S.)

Squash? What the fuck kind've
a word is that anyway? It
even *sounds* mushy.

From across the stage, Tabitha spots the tell-tale red record light of Frat Boy's camcorder behind the mirrored glass in front of her. She discreetly gestures to Sula, but Sula's spinning around the pole now and doesn't notice.

SAPPHO (O.S.)
(to Cherry)
Onomatopoeia, almost.

CHERRY (O.S.)
Onomono-what-the-fuck-a?

VENUS (O.S.)	TABITHA
Like when words sound like	(in a discreet whisper)
the things they name. They're	Gordon in 13.
better in Korean.	

Tabitha's not audible over the chatter.

CHERRY (O.S.)
How?

VENUS (O.S.)
Trains go chikchikpokpok.

Tabitha approaches Frat Boy's window then turns, dancing in an awkward squat with her back to the one-way, blocking as much of the show as she can.

CHERRY (O.S.)
What's wrong with choo-choo?

VENUS (O.S.)	TABITHA
That's just the whistle. In	(louder)
Korean you get the tracks.	Ladies! Gordon in 13.

INT. LUSTY LADY LOBBY - SAME

MYLES (20s, horn-rimmed glasses, D&D geek-chic), sits behind the front desk opposite Carl, carpet sweeper at his side. The pair are mid-conversation. The music from the stage is audible but not as loud.

MYLES
...not necessarily. His mom says it could also be some other guy.

CARL
If there was a chance my dad was Charles Manson, I wouldn't be wearing those fucking Jesus sandals.

Foul-mouthed neighborhood fixture, ANI MAH (60s but looks ancient) enters with a BABY (5 months) strapped to her back and waves her tongs. Carl smiles at her.

CARL (CONT'D)
 (to the baby in a pretend
 sleazy baritone)
 Hey baby.

Myles hands Ani Mah a bag of empties from behind the desk.

MYLES
 What- are you saying you'd wear
 Jesus sandals under different
 circumstances?

The front desk phone rings. Myles picks up.

MYLES (CONT'D)
 Front desk.

CHERRY
 (on the phone)
 Camera in 13.

INT. LUSTY LADY HALLWAY/LOBBY - SAME

Myles unlocks booth 13 with a key from a retractable chain on his belt, shines a mag light at Frat Boy.

FRAT BOY
 What the fuck, man? Occupied.

Myles gestures at the guy's camcorder.

MYLES
 You need to give me that tape.

FRAT BOY
 Okay, okay.

Frat Boy opens the camcorder and pops out the tape. Myles puts out his hand for it, but the guy slips past him, into the lobby.

MYLES (O.S.)
 Hey!

Carl slides his carpet sweeper into the guy's path, but he hops over it...

...darting past MUÑECA (20s), smoking in the doorway...

...and Ani Mah, who's organizing her recycling on the sidewalk.

He trips on the bottles, spilling them across the pavement...

...but recovers his balance, dodging a snap of Ani Mah's tongs, and...

...disappears down the street.

NOTE: All italicized lines of dialogue are in subtitled Cantonese.

ANI MAH
 (to the Frat Boy)
*Fuck your ancestors to the
 eighteenth generation!*

As Carl and Myles run by on Frat Boy's tail, Muñeca taps out her cigarette against the wall beside the red neon girl, and tucks the remaining half-smoke back into her pack.

MUÑECA
 (to Ani Mah)
 Fuck. Second time this week.

The Lusty Lady manager, NANCY (30, half-Asian), shows up in the doorway. After recently reaching stripper retirement age, she grabbed onto the only available rung left on this short career ladder. Her grasp is iron-fisted.

NANCY
 (to Muñeca)
 What happened?

EXT. KEARNY STREET - NIGHT

A girl in combat boots and Bette Paige bangs heads on foot toward the peepshow for a shift.

This is OPAL (20s), a brash and funny disappointment to her immigrant father. Think "My Vag"-era Awkwafina.

Frat Boy runs in her direction. Opal sees Carl and Myles chasing him, spots the video tape in the guy's hand then blocks his path, smiling at him flirtatiously.

OPAL
 Hey, baby. Whatcha got there?

Whoa, Frat Boy is intrigued and flustered enough by this hot stranger to stop in front of her...

...where she immediately snatches the tape and stomps on it as Carl and Myles arrive on the scene.

FRAT BOY
You fucking bitch!

Up the block, Nancy stands on the sidewalk in front of the peepshow, watching the scene unfold, oblivious to the recycling spill Ani Mah tries to clean up around her.

INT. LUSTY LADY MANAGER'S OFFICE - LATER

Opal's in a chair opposite Nancy who sits behind her desk, neatly decked out with pens and paperclips in matching organizers, a copy of *The Spectator* ("California's original adult newsmagazine"), and...

...in a small tower in the corner: Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, *The One Minute Manager* by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, and Stephen R. Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

NANCY
...it's just that we take dancer safety here very seriously.

OPAL
I'm fine.

NANCY
My concern is about your emotional well-being, and the well-being of the entire staff for that matter. You don't know what that guy could've done once you escalated things.

OPAL
He took off.

NANCY
What I'm saying is you get more flies with honey than vinegar.

OPAL
But I don't want flies.

Nancy stifles a don't-fuck-with-me-look and tries (unsuccessfully) to cover it with a look of concern.

NANCY
Opal, you're just not the right fit here.

MUSIC UP: L7's "Shitlist" or similar. The song will play through the montage in the next scene

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO TENDERLOIN, MISSION - DAY - MONTAGE

BEGIN MONTAGE

- Tabitha rides her bike down Geary in a vintage babydoll dress, a burning cigarette between the fingers of one hand.

- She pedals past a junk shop called The Love Project. A DRAG QUEEN smoking out front waves as she rides past.

- She rides past Homeboy Liquors on O'Farrell. OLD-TIMERS drinking on milk crates in front whistle.

OLD-TIMER

You go, girl!

- She turns onto Jones Street, rides past Shalimar.

- A RESTAURANT WORKER in a dirty apron smokes out front, beside a "crack mart" a HOMELESS GUY has set up beside the door: dumpstered electronics arranged in rows on the sidewalk.

- She rides down 6th Street, past Tu Lan, another crack mart in front, this one with shoes, a boom box, a typewriter, manned by A HOMELESS GUY IN A WHEELCHAIR.

- She pedals on. A parked motorist opens a car door in her path.

- She swerves around it and kicks it closed as she darts past, flipping the bird over her shoulder.

- She rides down Mission, toward the BART station at 16th where various black marketeers hawk their wares:

- heroin ("chiva"), paraphernalia ("outfits"), fake immigration papers ("micas"), stolen bus transfers ("late-nights").

- HECTOR (30s) spits a tiny balloon-wrapped package into his palm, slips it to a JUNKIE beside him. Junkie walks on and Hector returns to work, advertising his product.

HECTOR

(whispering)

Chiva.

Hector spots Tabitha pedaling his way then zooming past him.

HECTOR CONT'D
 (yelling as she passes)
 Huera! Where you been?

OUTFIT SELLER
 Outfits.

MICA SELLER
 Micas.

LATE-NIGHT SELLER
 Late-nights. Got your late-nights
 here.

- She rides through the intersection at 17th, past Thrift Town, through the shadow of its huge roof-top sign:

- the words *17 REASONS WHY* in Depression-era font, each of its iron letters several feet tall.

- She peddles toward a boarded up Leeds shoe store on Mission. From a distance, she spots...

...Jank in work coveralls, bolt-cutters in hand, toolbox at his feet, talking to a COP, holding a piece of paper.

END MUSIC

END MONTAGE

EXT. MISSION ST. - DAY

Tabitha stops a half-block away from Leeds, watching Jank and the Cop, out of earshot.

Jank hands the Cop a piece of paper.

EXT. LEEDS SHOE STORE - MOMENTS LATER

Tabitha pedals up to where Jank stands, and hops off her bike. The cop's gone now.

TABITHA
 Oh shit. Was he onto us?

JANK
 Not enough to stop me.

Jank cuts the chain with the bolt-cutters and lets it slide to the ground with a clank.

INT. ER WAITING ROOM (SF GENERAL HOSPITAL) - SAME

A clipboard clatters through the slot at the ER check-in window, the NURSE (50s) who put it there now tapping at her keyboard, eyes on her monitor.

NURSE

Fill this out, but first give me
your arm.

Sappho removes the clipboard and sticks her arm through the slot. Nurse wraps a blood pressure cuff around it.

SAPPHO

(into the window's metal
speaking vent)

How long you think the wait's gonna
be?

The Nurse squeezes the air bulb on the gauge with a numb and mechanical efficiency.

NURSE

Six - maybe seven - hours.

Sappho looks resigned. When Nurse sees Sappho's not gonna pick a fight, her demeanor softens.

NURSE (CONT'D)

...but Adult Medicine's still open.
I'll see if I can get you in sooner
up there.

EXT. LEEDS SHOE STORE - DAY

Jank unbolts the last panel of plywood covering the store's external alcove.

At its center, inside a dusty, glass display box: a stiletto-heeled, sluttified version of Dorothy's magical pair of *Wizard of Oz* slippers.

Looking on from the sidewalk, Tabitha returns tools to the toolbox. Jank slides the panel out of the way.

JANK

You're not in Kansas anymore.

Tabitha mock-laughs, feigns indignance.

TABITHA

I'm from *Nebraska*.

JANK

Whatever.

MUSIC UP: Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" or similar. This song plays through the next scene.

INT. LUSTY LADY CUSTOMER BOOTH - DAY

The window rises to reveal a pair of feet in sparkly red heels like the ones in the Leeds display case...

...and then the body attached to the feet: SMURFETTE's (20s), dancing alongside bestie, JINX (20s). Think My Little Pony and Strawberry Shortcake, but with issues and methamphetamines.

In the booth, a GUY CHEWING GUM removes a camcorder from his bag, covers the red record light with his gum, and points it at the approaching girls.

They unwittingly mock-grind against one another for the camera. Behind them, DALLAS (who we'll meet later) spins around the pole, a blond-topped blur in the background.

The Guy Chewing Gum feeds another quarter into the slot.

END MUSIC

INT. ER WAITING ROOM - DAY

Sappho sets a bottle of cranberry juice on the shelf beneath the payphone against the wall and drops a quarter in the slot, glances at the list of numbers in her hand and dials.

SAPPHO

(into the phone)

Hey, it's Sappho...Any chance you
want my shift tonight?

EXT. LEEDS SHOE STORE - DUSK

The band sets up in the alcove. The DRUMMER's (20s) kit sits behind the display case with the sparkly pumps. Tabitha's in front on vocals and lead guitar. Jank's beside her on bass.

Random sounds of instruments coming to life.

A group of fans and onlookers is gathered around the shoe store, some straddling bikes, most with paper-bagged 40s in hand.

Among the crowd of mostly punks, a few homeless people, a few Latino families with plastic shopping bags strung over stroller handles, and the RED MAN (50s, every inch of his exposed skin covered in red grease paint).

DRUMMER
 (banging his drumstick
 together)
 1, 2, 3, 4.

MUSIC UP: The band starts playing something like Hickey's "El Farolito." The music continues into the next scene.

EXT. CORNER OF COLUMBUS & BROADWAY - DUSK

The traffic sign flashes *Don't Walk*. Venus runs into the intersection, shoveling plastic forkfuls of lo mein into her mouth from a takeout carton. Another container dangles from her wrist.

A car horn blares at her. She steps onto the curb where Walter rolls to a stop in her path, eyes wild, hair matted and dusty.

END MUSIC

He points at her open takeout carton, slits his eyes.

WALTER
 You done with that?

Venus studies his skateboard. It sags in the middle, and there's a splintery mangle crusting its nose and tail. Threads of grime ring each of its wheels.

She coughs. Heaving spasms that make her face leak. She steadies herself on a metal newspaper box. Still coughing a little, she hands Walter the open carton.

VENUS
 I guess, yeah.

With her sleeve, she wipes tears and snot from her cheeks.

WALTER
 You best get that shit checked out.

He nestles the carton of lo mein at the crotch of his cut-offs, the hem of skin over each of his stumps forming a crooked frown.

With a shake of his head, he slaps the concrete, propelling his board through the sidewalk's toothy-grinned hustle...

...past Ani Mah in latex gloves who - beneath the vacant stare of a porn star on the marquee above - removes empty cans from a municipal trash bin with a pair of tongs.

The baby strapped to her back watches Walter glide away.

INT./EXT. SIDEWALK IN FRONT OF THE LUSTY LADY/LOBBY - NIGHT

On the exterior wall of the building, the red neon girl blinks through her poses.

A low- and lower-rung pair of Wo Hop To thugs, JOE (30s) and YONG (20s), walk past the flashing image. Both look more shlumpy middle school teacher than gangbanger. Yong is naturally friendly-faced. Joe is all business.

They enter the lobby, stop in front of the Plexiglas case on the wall that displays Polaroids of the girls on staff, each one sharpied with a stage name and tucked into a stiff paper pocket like the ones inside old library books.

Tabitha and Venus appear in the same shot, entwined around one another.

Joe points out Opal's picture.

JOE

That's her.

YONG

She's hot.

Joe gives Yong a hard look.

JOE

Don't fuck this up.

Tabitha wheels her bike through the lobby, past Joe and Yong, waving at Myles behind the front desk, who's playing on a Nintendo Game Boy.

As Joe and Yong turn to go, Carl and a GUY IN A WINDBREAKER (30s) approach the desk.

Carl hands a camcorder to Myles who puts it behind the desk.

Yong takes an interest in what's going down, listening as he wanders into the dark hall toward the peep booths, ignoring Joe's gesture to leave.

CARL

(to Guy in a Windbreaker)

It'll be here for you when you leave but we keep the tape.

Nancy emerges from the hallway, unlocks the display case and snatches Opal's picture from its pocket.

GUY IN A WINDBREAKER (O.S.)
Those things aren't cheap.

MYLES (O.S.)
Then don't fucking waste 'em here.

Nancy shoots Myles a "cool it" look.

NANCY
(to Guy in a Windbreaker)
If you want, you can give it back
after we erase it.

GUY IN A WINDBREAKER
But my wedding's on it.

An ELECTRONIC CHIRP indicates Myles' character just died.

MYLES
Shit.

INT. LUSTY LADY PRIVATE PLEASURES BOOTH - MOMENTS LATER

On her back, Venus, naked, writhes and moans on the red-carpeted floor of this closet-sized room, pretending to masturbate.

She's got the soles of her stilettos pressed against the pane of glass that separates her from Yong, now jerking away with boyish glee on the other side.

A coughing fit interrupts her act and finally dissipates when the time's up buzzer sounds.

She waves and pulls the drape shut.

Behind it, Yong grunts -- then the WHISK of a paper towel from a dispenser on his side of the booth.

YONG (O.S.)
Um, thanks.

Venus flops back onto a floor pillow, looks at the mirrored ceiling, and rolls her eyes at her reflection.

From this angle, the ceiling and wall mirrors reflect one another, creating a series of eye-rolling Venuses that recede into the infinity of this tiny space.

The CLICK of the door opening, the porn SOUNDTRACK flooding the now-empty cubicle, along with...

MUSIC UP: Dolly Parton's "Nine to Five" or Ram Jam's "Black Betty" (or some other song with ruminant-related lyrics). The music bleeds into the next scene.

A moment later, a worn, dog-eared business card appears under the door to Venus's side of the booth.

She picks it up. All the print is in Chinese except for the line, *All cures known*, and an address on Broadway.

INT. LUSTY LADY DRESSING ROOM/HALLWAY- NIGHT

A windowless, low-ceilinged basement room. Fluorescent light. Lockers line two of the walls. A couch sits against another.

A large digital clock keeps guard over several piles of girl-clutter that dot the makeup counter, its surface snowy with eye shadow fall-out and pocked with curling iron burns.

Sula, AMBROSIA (20s), and Muñeca - all in various states of undress - occupy stools at the makeup counter, applying makeup and chatting.

Tabitha, naked except for some platform thigh-highs, crouches over a pair of sparkly tights laid out on the floor.

With a pair of scissors, she's cutting out the crotch.

AMBROSIA

...but why'd they name it after
Dolly Parton?

SULA

The cell they used to clone it came
from the mammary gland of another
sheep.

TABITHA

(deadpanning, still busy
with the scissors)
Oh, so their lab is actually a frat
house in like 1975?

AMBROSIA

(deadpanning)
Yeah, and their breakthrough is
really all about time travel.

MUÑECA

There are so many more people
famous for their big tits now.

TABITHA
 (mock-serious)
 But it was Dolly's pioneering work
 that paved the way.

Tabitha finishes the crotch and moves on to snipping off the toes.

MUÑECA
 And are we talking fucking double-D
 udders or something?
 (scoffs)
 Hella stupid name - unless maybe
 this like step 1 to Frankenhooker.

TABITHA
 (eyes still on the
 scissors)
 Mutherfuckers gonna put us outta
 work.

Ambrosia takes a look at Tabitha's handiwork.

AMBROSIA
 (to Tabitha)
 Those are cute, but the
 thermostat's finally fixed.

TABITHA
 I'm always cold.

Tabitha looks up at the digital clock. It reads 6:59.

TABITHA CONT'D
 Shit.

She grabs the garment she's made - a pair of topless sleeves (the opposite of a sleeveless top) - and exits the room, pulling the crotch hole over her head, and the legs over her arms as she hurries through the doorway.

END MUSIC

INT. ER WAITING ROOM - SAME

Sappho's on the payphone, her folded list of numbers in hand, her bottle of cranberry juice almost empty now.

A BLEEDING GANGSTER (early 20s) in a 49ers jersey rushes through the waiting room, clutching his side.

Blood spurting through his fingers, he bangs on the door to the ER exam rooms.

BLEEDING GANGSTER
Gunshot wound. Lemme in.

SAPPHO
(into the phone)
...the ER...

Someone BUZZES the door and the man pushes through.

SAPPHO (CONT'D)
(into the phone)
...Uh-huh...or else spend the shift
pissing fire.

INT./EXT. 30 STOCKTON BUS - NIGHT

Sula sits beside DALLAS (20s), a ditzzy looking blonde rifling through a bag stuffed with law school textbooks and stripper gear. In the seats across from them, a shell game hustle is underway.

DALLAS
...You know- the one with the flak
jacket who's always got that huge
stack of Polaroids?

SULA
Uh-uh, never seen him.

DALLAS
Really? He's there all the time.

INT. LUSTY LADY PRIVATE PLEASURES BOOTH - DAY - FLASHBACK

GRANNY PANTIES (50s) stands in front of the glass, removing a stack of Polaroids from the pocket of his jacket.

DALLAS (V.O.)
The pictures are all of him -
wearing granny panties, stuffed
with like these huge, medical-grade
sanitary napkins.

BACK TO SCENE

INT./EXT. 30 STOCKTON BUS - SAME

A SHELL GAME HUSTLER (50s) slides plastic bottle tops around on a piece of cardboard resting on his lap. When he stops, he spots a pair of DUDE-BROS watching him work.

SHELL GAME HUSTLER (O.S.)
Which one? Which one?

SULA
(to Dallas, shaking her
head)
Are you talking about the
stage show or Private
Pleasures?

DUDE-BRO 1 (O.S.)
The middle.
SHELL GAME HUSTLER (O.S.)
You got it, man. You good.

DALLAS
Booth.
SULA
Oh, I'm never scheduled for
that.

O.S., The sound of the cap sliding over the cardboard.

DALLAS
I get that. I take breaks too.
Being alone in that cage with them
gets draining, but the money's way
better.

SULA
Oh, I want booth shifts. Nancy just
won't schedule any for me. Or Baby-
girl, or Indica, or Sativa, or-

SHELL GAME HUSTLER (O.S.)
Which one?

DALLAS
(looking shocked)
Are you fucking serious?
Black girls don't get booth
shifts?

DUDE-BRO 2 (O.S.)
That one.

Sula nods, eyebrows raised. She reaches behind her shoulder
and pulls the stop request cord.

SHELL GAME HUSTLER (O.S.)
You got it. Ok, this time, put your
money where your mouth at.

INT. LUSTY LADY DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha enters from the stage. The room's empty except for
Venus, who sits naked in front of the mirror, and gestures at
the takeout on the counter.

A throbbing sort of warmth locks their eyes in the mirror.

TABITHA
Thanks.

VENUS
Sorry, it's probably cold now...How
was "Live at Leeds"?

Tabitha sits down on a stool next to Venus and picks up a crimping iron.

TABITHA
Fucking awesome!

As they chat, Tabitha presses zig-zags into her hair.

VENUS
Wish I'd been there.

TABITHA
We'll do it again.

VENUS
(half-sarcastic, half-
serious)
I know, but it sucks to miss your
debut at such a hot, new club.

Tabitha smiles.

TABITHA
Is the phone back on yet?

VENUS
Yeah...Your mom called after you
left.

TABITHA
She ask for money again?

VENUS
She said she got into Delancey
street.

Tabitha sticks the plastic fork into the carton and presses another lock of hair between the jaws of the iron.

TABITHA
I doubt it. What'd you tell her?

VENUS
That you quit too.

Tabitha sets the iron down. A busyness threads through her fingers as she uncaps a tube of lipstick.

TABITHA

I wish you wouldn't tell her my
business.

O.S., the RIP of the velcro on Venus's shoe. Then Venus
repositioning the ankle strap.

VENUS

She's your mother.

Tabitha recaps the lipstick and scoops a forkful of pork-
fried rice from the carton on the counter into her mouth,
watching herself eat in the mirror.

She chews and wiggles her hair: a blur of lines and points.

TABITHA

What do you think?

Venus picks up Tabitha's uncapped lipstick and starts to
apply it but stops to look at Tabitha's hair.

VENUS

It gives you a shocked, damaged
sort of look.

TABITHA

Good. That's what I'm going for.

Another coughing fit takes hold of Venus. In the mirror,
still wheezing, she watches herself breathe, red-faced and
seep-eyed, slips of mascara knifing her cheeks.

TABITHA (CONT'D)

(looking at Venus in the
mirror)

You should get the waterproof kind.

INT. LIVING QUARTERS BEHIND ED'S HERB SHOP - NIGHT

Ed, Ariel and Opal sit around a small kitchen table in the
cramped space.

A fresh bruise mottles the skin around Ed's left eye.

Ariel's slippery black hair is partially obscured by the
Little Mermaid wig.

The family eats in tense silence. With chopsticks, they lift
noodles, veggies, and shrimp from cartons at the center of
the table into their individual bowls.

Syrupy light pours onto the meal from a dusty brass
chandelier.

ED
*Any more thoughts about
 college?...Harold's daughter just
 got into Stanford.*

OPAL
 (sarcastically)
Good for her.

A RUSTLING off-screen freezes Ariel, mid-bite. She looks toward the sound.

It's coming from behind a shower curtain that hangs from a clothesline strung across the room.

ARIEL
 What's that?

ED
Just the bats.

Smiling, Ariel stands and walks to the curtain then pulls it aside, revealing a toilet, and behind it, the only window in the space.

She climbs on top of the toilet seat, cups her hands around her eyes, and peers into the airshaft outside.

A colony of bats awakens in tentative spasms.

Some flap in place. Others spatter the square of blue night above the airshaft an inky black.

OPAL
How long have they been there?

ED
*A few days. They usually leave at
 sundown then return in the morning.*

OPAL
Creepy.

ED
Not creepy. Good luck.

Opal gives him a look. Ed rises from the table and joins Ariel at the window.

ED (CONT'D)
What?... My luck is turning.

Opal gets up too, walks over to the pair at the window, but looks at her father.

OPAL
*Is this new "luck" what brought you
 that?*

She gestures at his black eye. He stares out the window.

ED
*Their guano is potent...used in
 treatments for night blindness.*

OPAL
Now even Aunt Lai won't talk to me.

ED
...helps harmonize the liver too.

OPAL
*She cut **me** off like everyone else
 because I won't cut **you** off.*

ED
...an excellent fertilizer.

Opal sighs, palms her face in frustration. Ed turns to face her.

ED (CONT'D)
*You can use it to make explosives
 too.*

ARIEL
 (still looking out the
 window)
Like fireworks?

Ed smiles, staring at the light fixture above.

The metal plate that once covered the spot where its now-exposed wires slither into the ceiling has come loose and rests midway down the chain.

ED
Sure.

Opal tracks her father's gaze.

Behind them, Ariel is spellbound by the bats. She wiggles the window open.

A bat swoops into the room and...

...Ariel SQUEALS.

ARIEL

Mom, look!

Opal shakes her head, lips parted as if to speak but she says nothing, only gestures at the bat...

...now flapping above an altar on a table in the corner.

On its surface, unlit incense sticks poke out of a jar beside a bowl of oranges that seem to beckon the animal.

Behind the bowl, leaning against the wall: a framed black and white, unposed photo of a woman whose features resemble Opal's.

In a Mao coat, the woman stands grim-faced in front of a wall wheat-pasted with several hand-painted Chinese signs.

The one whose text is most visible says *Smash the Four Olds* in Chinese.

OPAL

(to Ariel)

Baby, I need to get outta here.
Let's go.

ARIEL

Is it gonna bite us?

OPAL

No. Your grandpa's giving me a
fucking headache.

ARIEL

I wanna stay here with the bats.

OPAL

No. Come on. We're going.

ED

Let her stay the night.

Opal sighs. The bat is still now, hanging from the broken chandelier. All three stare at it.

OPAL

It looks like it's gonna fall.

ED

Their claws are plenty strong.

OPAL

I'm talking about the light.

ARIEL

(to Ed)

*Grandpa, Mom said you're giving her
a fucking headache.*

INT. ER WAITING ROOM - SAME

The TV bolted to the wall is tuned to a *Sabado Gigante* rerun. Sappho is on the payphone.

NANCY

(on the phone)

Hey Sappho, what's up?

SAPPHO

Can Chakra cover my shift tonight?

NANCY

(on the phone)

Um, Chakra?...Chakra's not a busty.

EXT. ED'S BUILDING - SAME

Joe and Yong sit in a parked car across the street from the nondescript commercial basement space, a concrete stairwell leading to its door.

They watch Opal climb the stairs and head down the sidewalk.

EXT. PRODUCE MARKET ON BROADWAY - NIGHT

Opal leaves a produce market with a bag of persimmons. A PRODUCE WORKER lowers a Wo Hop To tag-covered metal roll-down door behind her.

Yong and Joe slow the car to a roll, following Opal down the sidewalk. The windows are down.

JOE

(from the car)

Kai Ling.

Opal turns, but doesn't stop.

JOE (CONT'D)

You're Ed's daughter, right?

Opal looks at the men like who the fuck are you?

JOE (CONT'D)

We're friends of his. You need a ride?

OPAL

No.

Joe taps a gun on the seat beside him.

JOE

We're gonna have to insist.

Opal's annoyed expression melts into one of terror.

EXT. THE GOLDEN EAGLE HOTEL - NIGHT

The place is a run-down SRO on a block where Chinatown spills into North Beach.

INT. TABITHA & VENUS'S ROOM AT THE GOLDEN EAGLE - SAME

The darkened room is dingy and scattered with clothes, stripper gear, cassette tapes, a 4-track recorder, an electric guitar, zines, and comics - *Murder Can Be Fun, Hate, Dirty Plotte*.

Venus is reading in bed. Her wrist twitches as a string tied around it jerks taut. It leads out the window that faces the street.

She gets up and grabs her keys from the dresser then pokes her head out the street-facing window.

Tabitha's on the sidewalk below, waving, the end of the string in her other hand.

Venus smiles at her and drops her keys down.

Inside, Venus hears RUSTLING outside the room's other window, the one facing the airshaft, beside the bed. She moves toward the sound.

Goggling her hands around her eyes, she presses them up to the glass and looks into the dark airshaft outside.

The same colony of bats that transfixed Ariel flaps against the brick of the building next door, which we now understand to be the one where Ed's shop and apartment are.

Tabitha enters the room, shuts the door, and turns the deadbolt, drops the keys on the dresser.

VENUS

(still looking at the
bats)

They're really freaking out
tonight.

Tabitha crawls across the bed, cups her hands around her eyes, and looks into the airshaft beside Venus.

TABITHA

Whoa.

VENUS

I know.

The girls stare into the airshaft, watching the bats.

INT./EXT. JOE'S CAR/SOMEWHERE IN THE AVENUES - SAME

Joe's behind the wheel and Yong's in the passenger seat. Opal sits as stoically as she can in the back seat, fighting tears.

Yong turns to face her.

YONG

Look, it won't be that bad. We just got a new TV there.

OPAL

Fuck you.

Joe smacks Yong on the head.

INT. TABITHA & VENUS'S ROOM AT THE GOLDEN EAGLE - NIGHT

The girls are laying on the bed, still watching the bats in the airshaft.

TABITHA

They're mammals but they can fly.

VENUS

It's not real flying.

TABITHA

It's pretty convincing.

Venus turns to face Tabitha then kisses her neck as she (Tabitha) stares out the window.

Venus stops kissing and returns her gaze to the airshaft.

She hits play on a battered boom box nestled between the wall and the mattress as her head disappears between Venus's legs.

MUSIC UP: Portishead's "Glory Box" or similar. The song will continue through the rest of the act.

Venus - eyes still on the air shaft - moans at the shadowy presence behind the glass. We follow the bats to...

INT. LIVING QUARTERS BEHIND ED'S HERB SHOP - SAME

Through the window above the toilet, we see the same colony of bats, hear the tape playing in Venus and Tabitha's room.

EXT. ED'S BUILDING - SAME

The song plays on, very faintly now.

Yong descends the concrete staircase to the herb shop's door. He BANGS on it repeatedly.

INT. LIVING QUARTERS BEHIND ED'S HERB SHOP - SAME

The BANGING continues over the music.

From the couch beside a sleeping Ariel, Ed plays a game of xiangqi against himself, the board set up on a kitchen chair in front of him.

He makes a move then spins the board around to make the next one and looks toward the door.

END MUSIC

END OF ACT 2

ACT 3

INT. LUSTY LADY DRESSING ROOM - MORNING

Sula ties a string around a pen and duct-tapes the other end to the wall beside a dot-matrix print-out.

Its heading reads, *END RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AT THE LL!*

MUSIC UP: Cypress Hill's "I Ain't Goin' Out Like That" or similar.

INT. VARIOUS - DAY - MONTAGE

- Dressing room: Sappho signs the petition with one hand, holds a bottle of cranberry juice in the other.

- Dressing room: Dallas spots the petition and reads it but heads to the stage without signing.

- Triad Safe House: Opal sits on a couch watching a *Jerry Springer* episode about strippers. Joe's menacing presence clouds the background.

- Broadway: Ani Mah pesters Walter for his almost-empty Cisco bottle. Annoyed, he downs the last of it, hands her the bottle.

- Dressing room: Amnesia signs the petition.

- Ed's living quarters: Ed makes another move on the xiangqui board he set up on a kitchen chair the night before. Ariel stands on the toilet, looking out the window at the bats.

- Dressing room: Muñeca signs.

- Dressing room: Ambrosia signs.

- Venus & Tabitha's room: Tabitha flips through a stack of envelopes, all addressed to the same name (her mom's), in little girl handwriting, all stamped *Return to sender*.

- Dressing room: Indica and Sativa stand in front of the petition. Sativa picks up the pen to sign but Indica stops her.

INDICA

You sign that, you're signing up
for a permanently shitty schedule.

SATIVA

It can't get any shitier.

Indica considers this.

END MUSIC

INT. LUSTY LADY MANAGER'S OFFICE - LATER

Nancy, standing, holds the petition Sula taped to the wall earlier. Sula stands facing her, naked except for some pumps and a boa.

NANCY

Sula, if you have issues with your schedule, you need to come directly to me. This-

(gesturing at the petition)

-is not appropriate.

SULA

I have come to you.

NANCY

And I've told you to open up your availability.

SULA

I'm available every day.

EXT./INT. COCODRIE BAR - DAY

Through the windows of the Cocodrie, we see Tabitha exit the LL across the street, coffee in hand, then walk toward the bar, and enter.

About fifty LL dancers and staff sit at tables and barstools around the room, drinking coffee and chatting.

The business is closed to the public, repurposed here as a conference room for an LL staff meeting.

We follow Tabitha through the crowd as she smiles and waves at familiar faces, overhears snippets of chit-chat.

BANSHEE (20s) and ISADORA (20s) sit next to each other at the bar. Isadora's got a grandma-style vibe going: cat-eye glasses, plaid polyester pants. She crochets something as she chats.

BANSHEE (O.S.)

...anyway, I thought it was the vinegar and sprayed it on my snatch.

ISADORA (O.S.)
They should color-code the bottles.

A few stools down, Sula is engrossed in a paperback copy of bell hooks' *Talking Back*.

BLUE (20s) and Dallas sit at a nearby table. Blue slouches in the chair, leaning against the battered Zo bag slung across her chest.

BLUE
...the guy with the ruler?

DALLAS
No, no, not him. The one who licks
jizz off the windows.

Tabitha walks past them to a table where Carl, Myles, SOMA (20s), and LEXI (20s) sit.

BLUE (O.S.)
Oh, I haven't seen dude in a while.

DALLAS (O.S.)
He's in my Civil Procedure class.

BLUE (O.S.)
No way. Does he recognize you?

Tabitha takes a seat beside Myles who closes the binder he's looking at. Sharpied on the cover: *The Karen and Ellen Letters*.

LEXI
...the only place I've seen that
happen was in Bangkok when I was
pregnant with Greta and fucking
puking around the clock, so the
details are fuzzy.

At the back of the room, Nancy steps onto the small stage there, clipboard in hand. All business.

NANCY
(loudly addressing the
crowd)
Ok guys, let's get started.

CARL (O.S.)
I guess it's an occupational
hazard for fire eaters.

The din quiets.

NANCY (CONT'D)
I hope everyone remembered to punch
in across the street.
(MORE)

NANCY (CONT'D)

As you know, these meetings are
paid and mandatory.

EXT. CHERRY'S GRANDMA'S HOUSE - SAME

Eric sits on the floor babbling, a telenovela flickering on the TV in front of him. Passing SIRENS blare from the street below. Grandma sits on the couch wheezing.

She grabs her inhaler off a side table beneath a framed Mission Dance Brigade promotional poster featuring a shot of Cherry mid-leap.

O.S., the sound of Grandma's feeble suck on the inhaler.

INT. COCODRIE BAR - DAY - SAME

Roll call. Nancy calls names off her clipboard.

NANCY (PRE-LAP)

Octopussy.

OCTOPUSSY

Here.

NANCY

Opal-

She cuts herself off and makes a note on her clipboard.

NANCY (CONT'D)

-I mean Ophelia.

OPHELIA

Here.

NANCY

Persimmon.

INT. TRIAD HOUSE - DAY - SAME

A plastic bag of persimmons between them, Opal and Joe sit on a couch in a mostly empty room, both looking bored and annoyed.

A few items are scattered on the carpet, among them, a rotary phone plugged into a wall jack and a Sorry board game.

Joe takes a bite of a persimmon then --

JOE

Fuck. Why didn't you tell me these
things have seeds?

OPAL
You didn't ask.

INT. COCODRIE BAR - DAY - SAME

Nancy is still on the small stage, addressing the staff.

NANCY
...just a reminder of how important it is to be in touch with your body. At the first sign you think you'll be too sick to work, you need to start calling around for someone to cover for you. Lately, a lot of you have been paging me about last-minute requests for shift replacements that *don't meet our criteria*. Remember, if you're a *busty*, your replacement must be a *busty*. If you're *blonde*, your replacement must be *blonde*. I put a lot of thought into making the schedule and when a key part of the cast is missing, it destroys the integrity of the entire show.

Dallas, sits at a table with INDICA (20s), who's Black, Sula perched between them on a bar stool. The three exchange looks. Indica raises her hand.

NANCY (CONT'D)
Indica?

INDICA
I guess I'm a little confused about the policy. You okay it when Dallas covers my shifts, so why not vice versa?

NANCY
Look, I don't make the rules. We supply what the market demands. And the market says, one Black girl on stage is exotic. Two's a ghetto.

SATIVA (O.S.)
She did *not* just say that.

Some what-the-fucks? and scoffs from the crowd. Over the cries of outrage, Nancy yells...

NANCY

Hey, I'm *not* saying I think that.
When it comes to the schedule, I
have to answer to Mary.

CHERRY

So Mary's behind this?

NANCY

(flustered)
No...I'm not saying that.

VENUS

Then what are you saying?

The room crackles with anticipation.

NANCY

(choosing each word
carefully)
I'm saying if you'd like to discuss
your schedule with me privately, my
door is always open. Right now,
we've got a lot more on the agenda
to cover. Next item: stage
lighting...

INT. LIVING QUARTERS BEHIND ED'S HERB SHOP - SAME

Ed stands on a ladder beneath his broken chandelier, screwing
the loose plate back into place over the exposed wires. Ariel
is standing on the toilet, looking out the window at the
sleeping bats.

ARIEL

What are they doing?

ED

(still turning screws)
Sleeping.

ARIEL

(still looking out the
window)
In the daytime?

ED

(climbing down the ladder)
Yes.

ARIEL

Upside-down.

ED
Right, again.

ARIEL
Why do they do things backwards?

Ed joins Ariel at the window, screwdriver in hand.

ED
*How do you know we're not the ones
 doing things backwards?*

Ariel, hops off the toilet, grabs her wig from the table, and puts it on her head.

ARIEL
Where's my mom?

INT./EXT. TRIAD HOUSE/PORCH - DAY - SAME

Opal is still on the couch beside the persimmons. Joe is on the phone, Yellow Pages flipped open on his lap, receiver to one ear, palm cradling the opposite jaw.

RECORDED VOICE
 (on the phone)
*...You have reached the offices of
 the Cheung Dental Group. If you're
 calling from a rotary phone, please
 stay on the line.*

Yong enters, carrying bags of takeout. He hands one to Opal.

YONG
 I got you a cheeseburger.

OPAL
 (sarcastically)
 Thanks.

Yong offers Joe one of the bags but he waves it away, still waiting on hold.

JOE
 I can't fucking chew. I gotta get
 to a dentist.

YONG
 Now?

JOE
 Yeah.

YONG
So I'm in charge?

Joe hangs up the phone and gestures for Yong to follow him outside then storms through the door, still palming his jaw. When they are both on the porch, he shuts the door.

JOE
You are definitely not in charge.
But you need to stay here with her.

Yong looks excited. Joe is not reassured.

JOE (CONT'D)
I vouched for you with Vincent. If things don't go according to plan, we both pay.

YONG
Okay, okay.

Yong gives Joe a look, shakes his head, and hurries down the stairs.

INT. COCODRIE BAR - SAME

Nancy is still addressing the meeting from the small stage.

NANCY
...Okay, last item: Camera calls. Remember the code word is "Gordon," as in "Flash Gordon." Don't say "camera" - we don't want customers to know you're onto them. Your safety and privacy is our number one concern here-

CHERRY
(interrupting)
Then how about getting rid of the one-ways?

NANCY
(thinks a beat)
The one-ways bring in a lot of revenue. And we have protocol in place to control the shutterbugs.

CHERRY
But it's not working anymore.

TABITHA
Those cameras are getting easier to hide.

A few MURMURS of support from the crowd.

VENUS

Soon they're gonna be small enough
to fit in your back pocket.

NANCY

(dropping her phony touchy-
feely composure)
I seriously doubt it, but that's
beside the point: Look, if you
don't wanna get filmed, then maybe
you need to find another job.

END OF ACT 3

ACT 4

INT. MR. BING'S BAR, KEARNY & COLUMBUS - DAY

Cherry, Sula, Sappho, Tabitha, and Venus sit at a table in the near-empty bar, drinking beer. Cherry and Tabitha are smoking.

Ed and Ariel walk past the window behind them.

A TV bolted to the wall above the bar is tuned to Chinese news.

TABITHA

...the cops were all like, "What are these sandwich bags for," and my mom was like, "Sandwiches?"

SAPPHO

(deadpanning)
Fuck tha police.

VENUS

(deadpanning and coughing as Tabitha exhales smoke beside her)
Comin' straight from the underground.

SAPPHO

(also deadpanning)
Word.

Everyone laughs, except for Sappho who's looking at the TV, where footage from a Justice for Janitors picket is on-screen. She points at the TV.

SAPPHO CONT'D

That's what we need.

They all look at the screen. Janitors walk a picket line in front of a hotel waving signs calling for change: JUSTICIA, JUSTICE FOR JANITORS, LISTOS PARA LUCHAR. The TV pulls all eyes its way.

CHERRY

It would never work.

VENUS

Why not?

CHERRY

For one, even if the fools who run things at these buildings don't give a fuck about their shit-workers, they *will* care when their trash cans overflow.

SULA

You don't think we have that kinda leverage?

TABITHA

- If we shut down all the lunch-hour monkey-spankin'?

SAPPHO

(mock-serious)

The Dow would plummet.

CHERRY

Yeah, maybe - but only if we're all in. Every dancer would hafta be down.

SULA

You think they won't be?

SAPPHO

How many signed your petition before Nancy yanked it?

SULA

Like ten.

VENUS

In what? A half-hour? Sounds like the numbers are there.

CHERRY

Sure, we've got enough willing to call out bullshit maybe. But for doing something about it?

(shakes her head)

Girls here are all over the fuckin' place, doing their own thing, making up their own rules.

VENUS

What? We all live by the same shitty rules.

SULA

Or shittier ones.

CHERRY

Word.

(says it like "duh")

Another strike against us. Divide and conquer.

SULA

Only if we let them.

CHERRY

And look what happened to Opal. She's got a little girl. I can't lose this job. I gotta think about Eric.

SAPPHO

Opal was all lone wolf about it. They can't fire *all* of us.

Cherry inhales on her cigarette and thinks.

SULA (O.S.)

Has anyone talked to her since that shit went down?

Cherry's pager beeps. She pulls it from her bag.

The number on the screen ends in 911.

CHERRY

Shit. It's my grandma. She's got Eric. I gotta call her.

Cherry hurries out of the bar.

INT. TRIAD HOUSE - DAY - SAME

Opal and Yong sit on the floor, the Sorry board game open between them. Opal rolls the dice and moves her game piece.

OPAL

You should just go ahead and kill me now. There's no way my dad's gonna have your money anytime soon. Or like ever.

YONG

Well...actually killing people in situations like these is a big hassle. Not just the body and mess but then the pressure'd be off your dad to find the cash. Kinda defeats the purpose.

Yong rolls the dice and moves his game piece.

YONG (CONT'D)
Plus, you're fucking hot.

Opal rolls her eyes and then the dice.

OPAL
So why bother?

She moves her game piece.

YONG
(rolling the dice)
I'm kinda new here, but from what I
can tell, it's just protocol.

He moves his piece and lands in the "Sorry" circle.

OPAL
(in a sarcastic, sing-
songy voice)
Sorry.

YONG
Shit.

Yong removes one of the persimmons from the bag on the couch.

OPAL
They have seeds.

INT. ED'S HERB SHOP - COUNTER AREA - LATER

Boxes piled in front block most of the natural light. Behind a messy counter, wooden drawers full of leaves and roots line the wall, some gaping, others shut.

No cash register. Just an abacus, a yellow legal pad, a tiny black and white TV tuned to Chinese news, a tone of cautionary boredom in anchor's voice.

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)
*This morning, an unidentified man
leaped to his death from the Golden
Gate Bridge, the 900th person to
commit suicide from the San
Francisco icon. Cindy Chen has the
story...*

Venus enters, the card Yong gave her in hand.

Ed acknowledges her with a nod, picks up the pad, and leads her into a curtained-off room.

INT. ED'S HERB SHOP - EXAM ROOM - SAME

The closet-sized space is empty except for a porcelain sink, an examining table draped in a floral-print sheet, and Ariel, hunched on the floor, in her ever-present frizzy copper wig.

ARIEL

I'm the Little Mermaid.

Ariel crawls behind the table. The herbalist gestures for Venus to sit.

ED

(to Ariel)

I need to see her tongue.

ARIEL

(to Venus)

Show my grandpa your tongue.

Venus sticks out her tongue and the man makes some notes on the legal pad. He takes her pulse and taps on her acrylic nails with a pencil.

ED

(to Ariel)

What do her nails look like? I can't see through the fake stuff on top.

Ariel stands up and points at Venus's acrylic nails.

ARIEL

How it look like under the fake one?

VENUS

I don't know, I haven't seen them in months.

ARIEL

(to the herbalist)

She says they are so sparkly they will make you blind.

The herbalist shakes his head.

ED

A tiger does not mother a dog.

Ed feels Venus's neck, checks her lymph nodes. Scribbling a final note on the pad, he leaves the room. Venus hops off the exam table and squats down to Ariel's level.

VENUS
What's your name?

ARIEL
Ariel.

INT. ED'S HERB SHOP - COUNTER AREA - SAME

Ed opens and closes a few herb drawers, scooping powders and twigs into a small paper bag.

The voice of the news anchor drones behind him. He turns to pay attention when she says...

NEWS ANCHOR
To federal prosecutors, Raymond "Shrimp Boy" Chow is a criminal mastermind plotting to take over organized crime in Chinese communities across the United States...

INT. ED'S HERB SHOP - EXAM ROOM - SAME

Venus and Ariel size each other up, the news droning on from the TV in the counter area.

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)
To his defense attorney, Chow is a misunderstood Buddhist and Kung Fu master known in San Francisco's Chinatown as a philanthropist, who has been accused by the government solely because of the color of his skin. The two sharply contrasting views emerged from opening arguments in a federal racketeering trial against Chow that began today. Reporting from the U.S. District Court in Oakland, Vivienne Zhu has the story...

Venus coughs, steadying herself on the exam table. The fit thins away and she gulps air.

When she presses the lever on a paper towel dispenser above the sink, the housing falls off and the empty cardboard tube drops to the floor.

Ariel picks it up and looks through it then hands it to Venus, who brings it to her and eye points it at the girl's t-shirt.

Through the tube's circular frame, we see what Venus sees:

Beneath a pink canopy of text, an orgy of copyright infringement: Barbie, Big Bird, and a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. The words say *It is a terrible luxurious time.*

EXT. IN FRONT OF ED'S HERB SHOP - MOMENTS LATER

Venus climbs the stairs from the shop as Joe approaches. He steps out of her way, making an "after you" gesture then heads down the stairs once she passes, rubbing his jaw.

INT. ED'S HERB SHOP - MOMENTS LATER

Joe and Ed stand on opposite sides of the counter, peering at bins of herbs that line a shelf beneath its glass surface. Ed points at one of them as Joe rubs his jaw.

ED

Red thyme. An anti-inflammatory.

And-

(points at another bin)

-gotu kola, an antimicrobial.

Ed scoops some red thyme into a paper sack.

JOE

(still rubbing his jaw)

A week, old man. You have a week to get me the money.

ED

Of course, no problem. Let me make you a tea for that tooth.

Ariel appears in the doorway between the shop and Ed's living quarters.

ARIEL

(to Joe)

What happened to your face?

JOE

I bit into something hard.

INT. CHERRY'S GRANDMA'S APARTMENT - DAY

Through the window, Cherry watches paramedics load her Grandma into an ambulance. She holds a phone to her ear. Eric is on her hip, whimpering.

She pins the receiver to her ear with her shoulder and dances around, patting the baby, tangling herself in the cord.

CHERRY

Shh. You're okay.

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE AT THE LUSTY LADY - SAME

Nancy is at her desk, on the phone, monitoring the surveillance cameras pointed at the stage show.

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

Eric SOBS on Cherry's end of the line.

NANCY
 (eyeing the surveillance
 screen above her desk)
 ...that's the no-show policy.

CHERRY
 My pay gets cut in half because my
 grandma can't breathe?

O.S. An Ambulance siren WAILS to life. The sound disappears beneath the JINGLE of a paletero cart rolling down the sidewalk.

Eric squirms, still fussing. Cherry dances him around, trying to untangle the cord.

Nancy hangs up. Above her, the stage show surveillance camera shows a customer's fist pounding on a window. The sudden movement startles her. An open hand smacks the glass once more as the shade closes.

END INTERCUT

INT. CHERRY'S GRANDMA'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

With Eric still fussing on her hip, Cherry reaches for the phone book, flips it to the Yellow Pages listings for LABOR UNIONS.

Eric grabs at the pages, crumpling them.

Cherry rips out the listings she needs and gives the book to Eric but he reaches for the pages in Cherry's hand.

CHERRY
 Uh-uh. Mama needs these.

END OF ACT 4

ACT 5

EXT. PORTSMOUTH SQUARE PARK GAMBLING AREA - DAY

Several clusters of Chinese gamblers dot the park's benches and tables, playing low-stakes pai gow, xiang qi, mah jong, and various card games.

Ed and Ariel (still holding the paper towel tube) approach a group of men who greet them warmly.

One of the men, HAROLD (60s), slips a rice candy from his pocket and gives it to Ariel, who smiles then pops it into her mouth.

Ed puts a couple bucks down on the scrap of cardboard laid across the men's laps as a makeshift table and they deal him in.

He shoos Ariel off to the nearby playground.

INT. SF GENERAL ER WAITING ROOM - DAY

As Cherry waits for news about her grandma's condition in the waiting room, she makes phone calls from the payphone to the unions listed on her ripped-out phone book pages.

MUSIC UP: Abba's "Take a Chance on Me" or similar.

BEGIN SERIES OF SHOTS

- CALL #1:

TEAMSTERS REP
(on the phone, incredulous
then sarcastic)
A peepshow? Haha. Very funny.

The line clicks dead.

CHERRY
Hello?

- CALL #2:

IBEW REP
(on the phone)
Strippers? Not really our
wheelhouse. Try H.E.R.E.

CHERRY
Yeah, they said to try calling you.

Eric's pulling things out of his baby bag, making a mess
Cherry attempts to pick up, but the phone cord is too short.
She leaves it dangling while she scoops toys back into the
bag.

- CALL #3:

UNION REP 1
(on the phone)

No.

- CALL #4:

UNION REP 2
(on the phone)
Um, I don't think so.

- CALL #5:

UNION REP 3
(on the phone)
No, we don't handle that kind of
thing.

- CALL #6:

UNION REP 4
(on the phone)
Sorry, no.

- CALL #7:

OLIVIA
(on the phone)
Olivia Jackson.

END MUSIC
END SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. PORTSMOUTH SQUARE PARK PLAYGROUND - DAY

Ariel sits with her friend LILY (5) beneath the jungle gym,
chattering and pouring sand through the cardboard tube.

ARIEL
I'll be Ariel and you be the sea
witch.

LILY
You're *always* Ariel.

ARIEL
Well, yeah, I *am* always Ariel.
Ariel's my *name*.
(points at her wig)
Also, I have the right hair.

LILY

Ok, then this is my sea cave. And
now you're my prisoner.
(picks up the cardboard
tube)
And this is my wand.

ARIEL

Sea witches don't have wands. They
use spells.

EXT. PORTSMOUTH SQUARE PARK GAMBLING AREA - DAY

As the game continues, the men chat.

HAROLD

*I saw your sister at the laundromat
the other day.*

ED

How's she doing?

HAROLD

That woman can really fold sheets.

ED

Her corners have always been sharp.

Ed reveals his hand and triumphantly sweeps the pile of ones
on the cardboard into his palm.

ED (CONT'D)

(calling toward the
playground)
Grand-daughter!

He gestures to her that's it's time to go.

HAROLD

*She asked me how her deadbeat
brother was doing.*

ED

How sweet of her to think of me.

ED (CONT'D)

(calling toward the
playground)
Ariel! Let's go.

ARIEL

(yelling from the
playground)
I can't. I'm trapped.

INT. COMMUNAL BATH TUB ROOM AT THE GOLDEN EAGLE - SAME

The tub is filling with water. Venus stands beside Tabitha in a firefighter's coat she's wearing as a bathrobe. Tabitha turns off the taps, takes Venus's coat, and she steps into the tub.

Tabitha sits down on the dirty tile and strums a few chords on her (unplugged) electric guitar. She pauses, writes something in a notebook with a chewed-up pencil.

TABITHA

What rhymes with blameless?

Venus lets her arms go limp, floating her hands.

VENUS

What's this one about?

TABITHA

It's a love song.

Venus cough-laughes, rolling her eyes.

TABITHA (CONT'D)

(in mock seriousness)

I'm branching out.

Venus's stifled coughing escalates into a full-scale fit. She sits up and holds onto the sides of the tub.

VENUS

(coughing as she speaks)

Shit. I left the Robitussin at work.

TABITHA

What about the herbs?

VENUS

Haven't gotten to them yet. It's a big process to make the tea.

TABITHA

Maybe you're fighting this thing too hard.

VENUS

What?

Tabitha scrawls something in her notebook.

Venus stops coughing, leans back, submerging herself in the water up to her chin, her hair fanning out on the surface like seaweed.

She tilts her head back and dunks it underwater then back up.

VENUS (CONT'D)

Aimless.

There's a BANG at the door.

ANI MAH (O.S.)

*Hurry the fuck up, stupid children.
You're not the only dirty people
here.*

VENUS

(looking at Tabitha)
We're still here.

INT. TRIAD HOUSE - DAY

Opal and Yong sit on the floor, leaning against the couch, the Sorry game still between them but ignored.

OPAL

...I don't remember. When I was a kid. Sometime after my mom died.

YONG

Gambling's not for me. I hate risk.

OPAL

(scoffs)
Kidnapping seems kind of risky.

YONG

Oh, yeah. You have a point.

OPAL

(in a boss-interviewing-a-prospective-new-hire voice)
So what brought you to this line of work?

YONG

I got fired from CompUSA?

OPAL

Why?

YONG

Theft. These.

He points to some SCSI cords.

OPAL
Also seems risky.

YONG
Not really. Risk involves planning
and I wasn't thinking that far
ahead. But then Joe got on me about
goals.

OPAL
(back to faux hiring
manager voice)
Goals. Right. So, where do you see
yourself in five years?

YONG
Working on Ice Cube's digital
security team. Heading it up,
ideally.

Opal looks at him like, What?

YONG (CONT'D)
I'm just building up my resume with
this gig.

OPAL
Good plan.

YONG
What about you? Where do you see
yourself in five years?

OPAL
My dad would say in a medical
residency. Or would've.
(her voice cracks)

YONG
I'm asking what *you* see.

Opal thinks, picks up one of the SCSI cords on the floor and
plugs its male end into its female end, making a loop.

YONG (CONT'D)
Hey, it's ok.

Yong pats her shoulder. Now crying, Opal pushes him away and
flips the Sorry game over.

OPAL
 (looking up at Yong)
 Let me talk to my daughter.

INT. LOCAL 790 OFFICE - DAY

Olivia sits at her desk on the phone amid a sea of other empty desks. She appears to be the only person in the office.

OLIVIA
 Ok. Where do you work?

CHERRY
 (on the phone)
 In North Beach.

OLIVIA
 If it's a restaurant, call H.E.R.E.
 You got a pen? Lemme give you the number.

Tom rushes up to Olivia's desk, yanking her attention away from Cherry.

CHERRY
 (on the phone)
 No, not a restaurant-

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 Hold on.

CHERRY (CONT'D)
 We're dealing with racial discrimination in scheduling, there's-

TOM
 (to Olivia)
 Hey, sorry. Super important: LA needs us to fax the sandbagging ULPs on Alta immediately. Now they're doing the same thing down there.

OLIVIA
 (into the phone)
 Sorry. Hold on.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 (to Tom)
 I got a potential new shop here.
 (gestures at the phone)
 Where's Jean?

TOM
 Already left for LA. Help me pull the files. They just flooded the unit with about fifty new hires.

Tom rushes off.

OLIVIA
 (into the phone)
 Sorry, I gotta deal with something
 urgent here. I'll leave you some
 cards with the receptionist. Get 70
 percent of your staff to sign.

TOM (O.S.)
 Olivia!

OLIVIA
 (into the phone)
 We'll talk later.

Olivia hangs up and heads down the hall.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 (to Tom)
 Ok, ok.

INT. S.F. GENERAL E.R. WAITING ROOM - SAME

Cherry looks at the receiver and smiles then hangs it up.
 Eric is asleep in his stroller, a toy train car on the tray.
 Cherry quietly drives it through the cracker crumbs there.

CHERRY
 (whispering)
 Chikchikpokpok.

EXT. PORTSMOUTH SQUARE PARK - PLAYGROUND - SAME

Ed stands at the edge of the sandpit, gesturing to Ariel that
 it's time to go.

She and Lily are still sitting under the jungle gym, Ariel's
 wrists tied up in imaginary rope, the cardboard tube now in
 one of her fists.

LILY
 (to Ed)
She can't leave. She's trapped.

Ed pantomimes opening a pair of imaginary scissors then
 cutting the imaginary ropes around Ariel's wrists.

ARIEL
Where's my mom?

ED
She had to go on a business trip.

ARIEL
What's that?

LILY

A trip for your job. Like on an
airplane.

Ariel brings the tube to her eye and points it at various things. We see each circle-framed image Ariel sees:

- Ed's bruised face, now lined with a new layer of panic.
- The ghost of a Depression-era sign painted on the side of a hotel across the street: *Rooms 25 Cents. Family Rates.*
- A group of pedestrians on Kearny.
- A few paces behind them, Tabitha and Venus, arguing out of earshot.
- Lily's face, then just her mouth as she speaks into the tube.

LILY (CONT'D)

What's her job?

ARIEL (O.S.)

(matter-of-factly)

She's a dream weaver.

Lily covers the end of the tube with her hand and everything goes dark.

LILY (O.S.)

What? That's not a job.

ED (O.S.)

She'll be back soon.

END OF ACT 5