

THE PORTRAIT

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. CAFE - DAY

At a window-side table in the bustling cafe, FOUR PEOPLE sit, looking flustered and winded as if they've just stumbled out of a street brawl. Among them, THE ARTIST stands out with his indifferent gaze and strikingly BALD head. The others are WITNESS #1, WITNESS #2, and WITNESS #3.

WITNESS #1
(to Witness #2)
Chill out, man. It had to go down
this way.

Witness #2 sports a burgeoning bruise on his right cheek, red and swelling.

WITNESS #2
(breathing heavily)
If not, I swear, he's dead meat!

WITNESS #1
It was necessary. Trust me.

WITNESS #2
If not...

WITNESS #1
Yeah. You guys have never seen
anything like this. Just trust me
and zip it.

In front of the Artist, a setup appears: a glass of water, a clean sheet of paper, a set of watercolors, and a brush. The Artist and Witness #2 face each other. The Artist looks at Witness #2 for a few seconds, then grabs the brush.

CLOSE-UP:

The Artist's hand gliding over the paper, leaving behind thin, precise strokes. The camera alternates quickly between the witnesses' faces and the Artist's hand.

CLOSE-UP:

The brush dips, rinses in the water glass, and dives back into the paint. Lines on the paper gradually form the oval of a HUMAN HEAD. As the drawing becomes clearer, the witnesses' faces take on expressions of amazement. We see the focused face of the Artist, his eyes darting from the paper to Witness #2 and back.

The Artist paints a portrait of Witness #2. Final strokes are applied, highlighting the bruise on the cheek. The portrait is complete. Witness #3 looks utterly flabbergasted.

He stares nonstop at Witness #2.

WITNESS #3
(in awe)
Well, I'll be...

He mouths words silently, like a fish out of water.

WITNESS #1
Told ya!

WITNESS #2 feels his face. The bruise on his cheek has vanished as if it never existed.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Witness #2 and the Artist walk down the street. The Artist carries a portfolio of art supplies and a shoulder bag with a portable easel. In the background, Witness #1 and Witness #3 finish their cigarettes and head back into the cafe.

ARTIST
Sorry I had to smack you, but you wouldn't have believed otherwise.

WITNESS #2
Yeah, no biggie.

He continues to feel his face.

WITNESS #2
Not even a mark left. How long have you had this... ability?

ARTIST
Since birth.

They approach Witness #2's car parked at the curb. Witness #2 unlocks the doors.

INT. CAR - DAY

The Artist and Witness #2 get into the car. Witness #2 checks his face again in the rear-view mirror, then starts the engine and pulls onto the road.

WITNESS #2
What if it's something like a leg or a finger? Can you grow those back too?

ARTIST
No. Only what the body can heal on its own.

WITNESS #2

Well, I don't know much about that stuff. Anyway, it's about my sister... she has cancer.

ARTIST

Yes, I was informed.

WITNESS #2

Is that fixable?

ARTIST

Absolutely.

WITNESS #2

Breast cancer. The doctors removed both, but it didn't help. It's terminal.

ARTIST

The stage doesn't matter. I'll halt its progression, and she'll recover.

(smiling)

But now I get why you asked about growing new parts.

Witness #2 gives the Artist a sideways glance.

EXT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER PARKING LOT - DAY

The car pulls into the visitor parking. The Artist and Witness #2 exit the vehicle and walk towards the hospital.

INT. HOSPITAL ELEVATOR - DAY

Witness #2 and the Artist are in the elevator.

WITNESS #2

Elevator's acting up again.

ARTIST

A little foot traffic good for health.

WITNESS #2

You a doctor?

ARTIST

I'm an artist.

WITNESS #2

Doctors make more. I heard your fee is the same - quarter of a year's income?

ARTIST
That's right.

WITNESS #2
You could charge a year's, and
people would still pay up.

The Artist smiles.

WITNESS #2
What's so funny?

ARTIST
You're mistaken.

WITNESS #2
Oh really?

ARTIST
The world's full of curable
diseases, yet people die because
they can't foot the bill. I only
charge what folks can afford.

WITNESS #2
If you were a saint, you'd do it
for free.

ARTIST
It's not that simple...

INT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER - CORRIDOR - DAY

Witness #2 and the Artist walk along the corridor. Witness #2
turns into one of the rooms.

INT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER - SISTER'S ROOM - DAY

A bright, large room typical of a terminally ill patient.
Every surface covered with various photographs, small soft
toys, and the like. Next to the bed, there's an IV stand and
a quietly beeping life monitor. On the crumpled sheets under
a blanket lies WITNESS #2'S SISTER, a frail, emaciated
figure. Her eyes are closed. Beside the Sister in a chair, a
GRANDMOTHER reads a newspaper.

WITNESS #2
Hey.

The Grandmother looks up from her reading.

WITNESS #2 (CONT'D)
This is the man I was talking
about.

The Grandmother puts down her newspaper and stares intently at the Artist.

CUT TO BLACK AND BACK AGAIN:

INT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER - SISTER'S ROOM - DAY

Witness #2 and the Grandmother exit the room.

WITNESS #2
(through the nearly closed
door)
You've got thirty minutes.

The door closes. The Artist and the Sister are left alone. The Artist sets up a portable easel, pulls out paper, paints, and a brush from his bag. Finally, everything is ready. The Artist plugs earphones into his ears and hits play on his player.

CLOSE-UP: Sister's face. Her eyelids are lowered, her disease barely concealed under her thin skin. Her brittle red hair sprawls across her gaunt shoulders.

MONTAGE:

The view alternates between the sick girl and the Artist's eyes, which watch intently.

The Artist begins to paint. His hand flies over the paper, a dance of brush and color. We follow the Artist's diligent work.

CUT TO:

INT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER - SISTER'S ROOM - DAY

On the table, a new painting glistens under the sunlight. It's a striking portrait of the Sister, highlighting her pale face and the dark shadows under her eyes.

The Artist and Witness #2 are by the window. The Artist is counting cash. Witness #2 can't take his eyes off the portrait.

WITNESS #2
It's uncanny.

Ignoring him, the Artist keeps counting the money.

WITNESS #2 (CONT'D)
She's exactly like that. How long
until we see a change?

ARTIST
 (continuing to count)
 It's a serious condition. Takes
 time.

WITNESS #2
 How long?

Silence.

WITNESS #2
 How long?

The Artist stops counting and looks up at Witness #2.

ARTIST
 Relax. The cancer is gone. She's
 going to recover now.

WITNESS #2
 Gone... into the painting?

ARTIST
 (returning to his money
 counting)
 Yep.

WITNESS #2
 What about the painting?

Witness #2 leans over the portrait.

WITNESS #2 (CONT'D)
 Should we keep it safe or hide
 it...

ARTIST
 Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-
 eight. That's all correct.

The Artist tucks a thick stack of bills into his briefcase
 and approaches the table. Just as Witness #2 reaches out to
 take the portrait, the Artist stops him, grabbing his wrist.

ARTIST
 I'll take the drawing. That's the
 rule.

WITNESS #2
 Yeah, but what if something happens
 to it...

ARTIST
 (firmly)
 I'm taking the drawing. No
 discussion.

Witness #2 hesitates, considering whether to resist or comply. Finally he lowers his hand.

WITNESS #2
 Alright. Fine.

CUT TO:

EXT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER - PARKING LOT - DAY

The Artist exits the hospital, quickly crosses the parking lot, and steps onto the boulevard. He walks down the sidewalk as cars rush by. One car pulls over to the curb. Behind the wheel is the ARTIST'S PARTNER, sporting a fresh bruise on his right cheek. The Artist quickly gets in.

INT. PARTNER'S CAR (MOVING) - DAY

The two drive in silence for a while.

PARTNER
 How'd it go?

The Artist doesn't look at his Partner; he gazes at the landscape passing by the window.

ARTIST
 Good.

PARTNER
 Got the girl's portrait with you?

The Artist nods.

PARTNER
 And what about my shiner?

The Artist taps his briefcase.

PARTNER
 Not going to give it back?

ARTIST
 You know I can't.

PARTNER
 I know. Guess I'll have to wear it till it fades. Could've hit him lighter, by the way.
 (a pause)
 Actually, I was asking about the brush.

Now it's the Artist who smiles.

ARTIST
Don't trust me?

PARTNER
Of course not.

The Artist nods. After a brief pause, he pulls a WATERCOLOR BRUSH from his briefcase. The wooden handle is smeared with paint. He hands the brush to his Partner, who examines it closely.

CLOSE-UP: The bristles of the brush.

ARTIST
You could run a DNA test on that.

PARTNER
I know my own work. This is my brush.

The Partner slips the brush into the inner pocket of his jacket.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. "VITALAB" PRIVATE LABORATORY RECEPTION - DAY

The Partner, dressed in medical attire, stands at the reception desk. Behind him, posters advertise various tests, including one that reads: "COMPREHENSIVE HAIR MINERAL ANALYSIS."

At the counter, a CLIENT, a young woman, is filling out a patient form.

PARTNER
Here, fill in your details, address, and phone number. Check the boxes below for the type of analysis: trace elements, heavy metals...

CLIENT
Here?

НАПАРНИК
Yes, that's right. Did you bring the samples?

CLIENT
Yes.

The Client pulls out a paper ENVELOPE from her bag and hands it to the Partner.

CLIENT
I hope this is enough.

The Partner peeks into the envelope and nods approvingly.

PARTNER

The samples need to be uncolored, clean, and dry. No hair care or styling products should be applied before testing...

CLIENT

I've never dyed my hair in my life.

PARTNER

That's good.

The Partner transfers the hair into a PLASTIC BAG, labels it, and stores it under the desk. The camera pulls back from the counter and pans around the reception area as the Partner and Client continue their conversation.

PARTNER (O.S.)

The results will be ready in three days. You can pick them up here or we can email them to you.

CLIENT (O.S.)

I'll come pick them up myself.

PARTNER (O.S.)

Sure thing. Drop by anytime. We're open from nine to five.

CLIENT (O.S.)

Perfect! Thank you!

The camera continues moving through the reception and finally stops, framing a couch where three more CLIENTS wait for their turn.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

We're in a large room that doubles as the Artist's studio. The space is a riot of creative chaos, teetering on the edge of disorder. The air is thick with the smell of paint, blurring the lines between living and working areas. The kitchen table and couch are cluttered with dirty brushes and crumpled sheets of paper, easels bear traces of food and empty soda cans. Colorful splatters dot the floor and walls.

In the center of the room, the Artist mixes colors on a palette, shirtless, his bare torso glistening with sweat and speckled with paint.

The door opens, and the Partner enters, dropping his bag on the floor and making himself at home on the couch.

PARTNER

I'm beat...

ARTIST

(continuing his work)

Busy day?

The Artist sniffs; he's clearly got a cold.

PARTNER

Yeah.

ARTIST

That's good. Good.

PARTNER

What are you working on? Personal stuff or a gig?

ARTIST

Personal.

The Partner leans forward, trying to get a look at what the Artist is painting.

PARTNER

Looks like you.

ARTIST

That's the idea.

PARTNER

The world's dumbest selfie. What's up this time?

ARTIST

Last client's wife kept sneezing. Think I caught something.

PARTNER

Ever try healing the old-fashioned way?

ARTIST

This is quicker.

PARTNER

And who's the lucky one catching the flu?

ARTIST

Our doorman. I cured his rheumatoid arthritis, so a little cold won't hurt him.

CUT TO:

EXT. ARTIST'S BUILDING - SAME TIME

A car pulls up to the condominium and stops abruptly. Witness #2 hops out, checks the building against a note, and dashes inside.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

PARTNER

Did you use his brush again?

ARTIST

Well, you took yours back... and I don't make them.

PARTNER

That's why I took it.

The Artist finishes an autoportrait and steps back from the easel, admiring his work.

ARTIST

That'll do. Should feel better in half an hour.

ON THE ARTIST'S CANVAS: We see the portrait he has painted of himself: a RED NOSE and UNHEALTHY FLUSH suggest he is ill.

CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT LOBBY - SAME TIME

Witness #2 rushes past the CONCIERGE, who reaches out a hand.

CONCIERGE

Hey, buddy!

Witness #2 bounds up the stairs.

CONCIERGE

Stop! Where do you think you're going?

The Concierge sneezes.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The Artist carefully rinses the brush in a glass of water.

CLOSE-UP: The brush swirling in the water, creating a small whirlpool.

The Artist dries the brush thoroughly with a rag. He's still holding it when Witness #2 BURSTS into the room.

WITNESS #2
We need to talk!

Witness #2 strides toward the Artist, visibly agitated.

ARTIST
(to Partner)
You forgot to close the door.

WITNESS #2
Where's the portrait?!

The Partner rises from the couch.

PARTNER
Hey, cool it!

Witness #2 ignores him.

ARTIST
How did you find me?

WITNESS #2
Friends tipped me off. Look, I need that portrait. I'm here to take it back.

The Artist glances at the Partner.

PARTNER
Not me. He figured it out on his own.

Witness #2 menacingly advances towards the Artist, who backs away.

WITNESS #2
You're gonna hand it over now, got it?!

ARTIST
(smirking)
Why do you even want it?

Witness #2 angrily flares his nostrils and falls silent.

ARTIST
Is she feeling any better?

Witness #2 nods.

WITNESS #2
Yes.

FLASHBACK:

INT. PRINCESS MARGARET CANCER CENTER - SISTER'S ROOM -
MORNING

The Sister sits on the bed, sipping soup from a mug that
Grandmother hands to her. She looks much better.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

WITNESS #2

Deep down, I was skeptical. Thought
it was a trick. But this morning
she started eating, and by evening
she was able to walk to the
bathroom on her own. I know her
illness is in that portrait, it's
too important... Name your price.

ARTIST

It's not for sale.

Witness #2 grabs the Artist by the shoulder.

WITNESS #2

Listen up! I'm not walking out
without it!

The Partner rushes to intervene, trying to loosen Witness
#2's grip.

PARTNER

Hey, chill out! Take it easy, man!

They start pushing each other.

WITNESS #2

Give it back! Think you can
blackmail me? I see your game - you
play hero then you twist the knife.
Not with me. You got that? You
picked the wrong guy to mess with!
Give it back, you jerk! Hand it
over!

Witness #2 shakes the Artist, who tries to break free.

ARTIST

You're missing the point...

WITNESS #2

Give it here! You hear me? Give it
here!

PARTNER

(yelling)

Back off! Get your hands off him!

WITNESS #2

I'll turn this place upside down if
I have to!

ARTIST

The portrait won't do what you
think!

As tensions rise, shouting escalates into physical conflict.
The Partner shoves Witness #2, who retaliates, sparking a
full-blown fight.

ARTIST

Hold on! Hold on! I'll show you the
portrait!

Witness #2 and the Partner stop fighting.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER

The Artist, Witness #2, and the Partner stand by the door to
the next room. After a pause, the Artist opens the door and
enters.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - EVENING

The room is empty except for a small folding ladder in the
corner. The bare walls are covered with dozens of portraits
arranged in columns, each lower portrait in a column has a
watercolor brush taped to it, except for the topmost one.

Witness #2 steps into the middle of the room, stunned,
looking around at the walls. The Artist points upwards.

ARTIST

Your sister's up here.

We see a very short column of just two portraits. The top one
is of the Sister, and right below it is a blank portrait - a
plain white sheet.

CLOSE-UP on the sheet: Personal details are written in the
top corner, and a watercolor brush is taped below.

WITNESS #2

What the hell...

ARTIST

Your sister's cancer isn't in her
portrait anymore. It's here.

(points to the brush)

I painted it with this woman's
brush. The cancer transferred to
her.

WITNESS #2

What... what do you mean, 'with another woman's brush'?

The Artist and the Partner exchange glances.

Witness #2 steps closer to the blank sheet and peers at it intently.

WITNESS #2

(points to the taped brush)
This brush?

PARTNER

The bristles are made from human hair.

WITNESS #2

Whose?

ARTIST

Does it matter?

WITNESS #2

(points to the wall)
My sister's cancer moved on to someone else?

ARTIST

Yes.

Witness #2 shoves the Artist in the shoulder.

WITNESS #2

And you're asking if that matters?
Hell yes, it does!
(shoves again)
It matters!
(shoves again)
It matters!

The Partner steps between the Artist and Witness #2.

PARTNER

Hey! Hey! Look over here!
(points to the blank sheet)
That's where you'll see the face of this brush's owner soon. We've got all her info; we know her name, where she lives.

CLOSE-UP on the sheet: personal details of a woman.

PARTNER (CONT'D)

Take a good look around. What we do is pass the illness along, one to another, down the line.
(MORE)

PARTNER (CONT'D)
 These people are what we call
 'carriers.' Get it?
 (gestures around the room)
 We don't let them die.

Witness #2 surveys the room anew.

PARTNER (CONT'D)
 See, the disease isn't locked in
 the portrait - it's in the person.
 But destroy that portrait, and
 poof! The magic's gone. The disease
 never leaves; that's why we need to
 keep these chains unbroken. They
 have to go on.

WITNESS #2
 You're transferring diseases to
 healthy people and charging them?

ARTIST
 We only charge those who were
 already sick. Carriers are treated
 on the house.

WITNESS #2
 So, my sister... did you pass it on
 to her, too?

PARTNER
 No, no, no! Look up there. She's at
 the top, she started this chain.

WITNESS #2
 And you've already picked out the
 next link in this chain. Who is
 she?

The Partner glances at the Artist, who nods. Then, the
 Partner retrieves a plastic bag from his jacket's inner
 pocket.

ARTIST
 Like I said, it's complicated.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER

The Artist walks Witness #2 to the exit.

WITNESS #2
 Sorry for flying off the handle.

ARTIST
 No worries.

WITNESS #2

You're doing something huge here.

The Artist offers a subdued smile.

WITNESS #2

This stays between us. I promise.

ARTIST

No one would believe you anyway.

He shuts the door and returns to the bedroom.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - EVENING

The Artist finds the Partner looking closely at the paintings.

ARTIST

I need more brushes. Got three lined up already.

PARTNER

(walking along the walls)
How quick does breast cancer usually progress?

ARTIST

I'm not a doctor.

PARTNER

Come on, you've been at this long enough. Give me a ballpark.

ARTIST

Months. Years.

PARTNER

Normally, sure. But you're dealing them a last-stage handoff, when it's past the point of no return. How much does that speed things up?

ARTIST

Hard to say. A lot.

PARTNER

Months? Weeks?

ARTIST

Possibly.

PARTNER

Days?

ARTIST

What are you getting at?

PARTNER
We do let them die.

The Partner stops at one of the long columns and taps on a lower, empty portrait, which only shows personal details and a taped brush.

PARTNER
This guy? Died last week. Pulmonary hypertension.

ARTIST
Can't keep an eye on everyone.

The Partner moves to another column.

PARTNER
And her? Died two days ago. Glioblastoma.

ARTIST
Look...

The Partner hurries to the next column.

PARTNER
Acute leukemia.

ARTIST
That was a month ago. I've still got time.

PARTNER
He flew out for treatment in Germany today. You planning to chase him down in Germany to paint his portrait?

ARTIST
Maybe they can actually help him over there...

PARTNER
(yelling)
He's gonna die there! You know it!

The Artist stays quiet.

PARTNER
We're biting off more than we can chew.

ARTIST
We take enough.

PARTNER

We're taking too much! For you, these are just blank sheets, not even real art... but behind these sheets, there are people.

ARTIST

I know. I'm saving them.

PARTNER

We save no one! You haven't cured anything but your damn cold...

ARTIST

We're buying them time.

PARTNER

Sure, and cashing in nicely while we're at it.

ARTIST

We don't charge the 'carriers'.

PARTNER

Really? 'Cause I can hardly tell anymore who's paying and who isn't.

ARTIST

Oh, that's what this is about...

The Artist pulls a wad of cash bound by a rubber band from his pocket and hands it to the Partner.

ARTIST

Your cut.

The Partner looks at the money. They both stand still for a moment. Then the Artist lets go of the bundle, and it falls to the floor.

ARTIST

Remember who extended your life. Your chain is still here.

(points to the wall)

Tell me when you're sick of it and we'll rip down these portraits one by one till your sickness catches up with you again.

The Artist climbs a ladder and reattaches the Concierge's brush to a portrait, which he's been holding all along, then steps down and faces the Partner.

ARTIST

I need fresh brushes by tomorrow.

(gives the Partner a firm pat on the shoulder)

You get that?

The Artist leaves, leaving the Partner alone to stare at the row of portraits.

CUT TO the wall: We see a long column of portraits, crowned by the Partner's own visage, twisted by disease.

FADE OUT AND FADE IN:

INT. PARTNER'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

A cramped, dark room. We find the Partner busy at work.

CLOSE-UP on the Partner's head. The desk lamp casts shimmering lights on his sweaty face. His eyes intensely focused downward.

CLOSE-UP on the Partner's hands. Expert fingers twist hair into bundles.

CLOSE-UP on the Partner's desk. It's neatly arranged with essentials: wooden handles, stainless steel bands, glue tubes, hair strands.

CLOSE-UP: Scissors trim the bristle bundles. A pocket knife sharpens the brush handles.

WIDE SHOT: The Partner, bent over, works by lamp light in the shadowy room.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY - EARLY MORNING

Dawn is just breaking - the city starts to wake. Rare cars traverse the vacant streets.

The Artist moves through an empty neighborhood, hood up, hands in his hoodie pockets. Townhouses flank the street, some windows lit. On driveways, early risers rev their car engines, gearing up for the day.

The Artist turns into a driveway of a small, seemingly asleep house. He walks up to the porch. The door is covered with a Navajo-style fabric drape. Above it, a bright sign reads: "MADAME AHIJA FALLSON: SHAMAN, WITCH, AND KEEPER OF NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN HEALING WISDOM."

The Artist rings the bell. Seconds later, the door swings open to reveal Witness #1, plastic folder under his arm. He quickly closes the door, but not before we catch a glimpse of the eclectic hallway decor.

WITNESS #1

(handing over a folder to
the Artist)

Here you go. Two of them.

ARTIST

Are you sure about these?

WITNESS #1

Listen, only the desperate or the dumb come her way. I can tell them apart.

ARTIST

Last time you slipped me a hypochondriac who thought he had a 'bizarreire' disease.

WITNESS #1

(chuckling)

'Bizarreire'... Jeez, where do they come up with that stuff? You could've cured his hypochondria.

The Artist gives him a scathing look.

WITNESS #1

Okay, okay, I screwed up. They don't give us medical charts, and he did look pretty rough. No mix-ups this time.

The Artist flips through the folder.

ARTIST

When will you contact them?

WITNESS #1

This guy is expecting you tomorrow... and this lady, well... I haven't quite convinced her yet. She's a bit tight-fisted, but I think I'll have her by Friday.

ARTIST

The bruise trick again?

WITNESS #1

Just don't hit her in the face, please. She's 60 with late-stage Alzheimer's. If she puts up a fight, we'll come up with something else.

The Artist snaps the folder shut and smirks at Witness #1, who appears slightly nervous. They shake hands.

DISSOLVE TO:

A SERIES OF CUTS DEPICT THE ARTIST'S DAILY GRIND:

TIME-LAPSE: The city buzzes with life by day: a teeming hive of people on the move and jam-packed roads.

Messy, stale rooms; worried relatives; ill people in beds. Sketches are drawn, cash is exchanged. New portraits are added to the walls of the Artist's bedroom.

A few shots show the Partner grimly handing over three brushes to the Artist.

The Artist reluctantly takes them.

TIME-LAPSE: Night envelopes the cityscape; highways thread through the dark like LED-lit veins.

The routine resumes, more portraits, more money.

This time, the Partner hands over only two brushes. The Artist shakes his head in disapproval.

Again: apartments, relatives, wall paintings.

The Partner hands over just one brush. The Artist accepts it emotionlessly.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. PARTNER'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MORNING

The Partner is asleep in bed. In the center of the room, a table is set up for making watercolor brushes. The phone on the nightstand RINGS. The Partner picks up the receiver.

PARTNER

Hello?

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

It's me.

(pause)

We need to talk.

PARTNER

I'm all ears.

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

So, here's the thing. Remember that heavyset lady with diabetes we treated last spring?

PARTNER

Yeah.

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

The one with the red Mercedes. Loud one.

PARTNER

I remember.

There's a pause on the line.

PARTNER

Go on.

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

Well, she came back today.

PARTNER

To Madame Ahija's?

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

Yes.

PARTNER

No way.

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

Are you telling me that?

PARTNER

That's never happened before. Are you sure? Maybe she's got a different type of diabetes now?

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

Who said anything about diabetes?

The Partner clenches the phone tighter, going silent with tension.

WITNESS #1 (V.O.)

(continues)

That's just it - there's no diabetes. She's got cancer. That's why I called. You hear me? Hello? Hello?

CLOSE-UP: Partner's shocked face.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

The Artist is pulled away from his work by a sudden and insistent knocking at the door.

PARTNER (O.S.)

Open up! Let me in!

The Artist opens the door, and the Partner BURSTS into the room, furious.

PARTNER

You lowlife!

ARTIST

Calm down, now.

PARTNER

You're recycling their brushes!

ARTIST

That's not true.

PARTNER

Don't play dumb! I know you're doing it! Just admit it, say "yes" and we can part ways like ships in the night!

ARTIST

I can't say "yes" to something that isn't true.

PARTNER

The heavysset lady with diabetes. She showed up at Madame's today! With cervical cancer! You treated someone with her brush!

ARTIST

Oh, that. That was a one-off.

PARTNER

Oh, really?

ARTIST

It was a last resort.

PARTNER

(laughs mockingly)
Sure, sure.

ARTIST

This is on you, too.

PARTNER

(repeating scornfully)
Scum! Pure scum.

ARTIST

If you'd give me more brushes...

The Partner keeps muttering "scum, scum."

ARTIST

It happened just that once!

PARTNER

And what about the concierge?

ARTIST

The cold? Well, fine. Next time I'll stick to Advil, promise. It was only that one time! Trust me!

The Partner looks at the Artist with skepticism.

ARTIST
Swear to God.

PARTNER
Show me the exhibit.

The Artist hesitates.

PARTNER (CONT'D)
Come on, show me the portraits.

ARTIST
Alright.
(gestures invitingly with
his hand)
Let's roll.

The Partner and the Artist enter the bedroom.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The Partner surveys the room. At first glance, nothing has changed except for a blank sheet of paper taped next to the portrait of a heavy-set woman.

ARTIST
Soon there will be someone here who will save her. Again. I just need a name... and a brush.

PARTNER
(shaking his head)
That's not right. You can't link people's chains together.

ARTIST
I know.

PARTNER
They shouldn't have to suffer all over again.

ARTIST
Exactly. And that's why I need brushes!

The Partner silently walks around the room, eyeing hundreds of portraits.

ARTIST (CONT'D)
You were right, we've bitten off more than we can chew.

The Partner stops and looks at the Artist with distrust.

ARTIST (CONT'D)

I need you.

PARTNER

Why? You're already set for life,
twice over.

ARTIST

Money? You think this is all about
the cash?

He laughs.

PARTNER

Isn't it?

ARTIST

Sure, money's a drug. But this
gig... it's the ultimate high. It's
about the feels.

Now the Artist is the one pacing along the walls, examining
the portraits.

ARTIST (CONT'D)

Oscar Wilde once said: "all art is
quite useless". But what I do?
Saving someone's life... it's
ineffable. They look upon you as if
you're the Messiah. Like Martha
beheld Jesus after he resurrected
Lazarus. That is the essence of
true art. When you see their eyes,
brimming with gratitude and
adoration, pure, undiluted ecstasy,
it makes you feel like--

PARTNER

God?

ARTIST

A creator.

The Partner and the Artist, walking along the walls, stop
facing each other.

PARTNER

This was the first and last time.

ARTIST

This was the first and last time.

PARTNER

We don't start new chains anymore.

ARTIST

(a pause)

No more new starts. We only manage the old ones. But for that, I need brushes.

PARTNER

Okay.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TAXI - NIGHT

The Partner sits in the backseat. The engine is off, headlights dimmed. The only light is the faint glow from a street lamp. The DRIVER yawns wearily at the wheel.

The Partner gazes out the side window.

Driver's POV: The car is parked near the entrance to a pay parking lot.

DRIVER

Mind if I catch some Z's?

The Partner continues staring out the window.

DRIVER (CONT'D)

Give me a nudge...

PARTNER

No. I'm not paying you to sleep.

DRIVER

(frustrated)

We've been at this for three days now. What's even the point?

The Partner leans closer to the glass.

Partner's POV: Movement at the entrance of the lot.

PARTNER

(whispering)

That's him. Start the car as soon as he pulls out.

Partner's POV: A dark figure enters the lot and gets into a car.

INT. TAXI (MOVING) - NIGHT

Driver's POV: The road ahead is illuminated by the headlights. The red tail lights of the target car glow in the darkness.

PARTNER (O.S.)

Don't tailgate. Keep your distance.

The target car flicks on its turn signal and veers off the main street, turning onto a quiet residential road.

DRIVER

Oh, this is new! Where's he going?

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The target car pulls into a driveway and parks in front of a townhouse.

INT. TAXI (MOVING) - NIGHT

Driver's POV: The taxi approaches the target car.

PARTNER (O.S.)

Keep driving.

As they pass the parked car, the Partner turns away from the window.

PARTNER

Got the address?

DRIVER

Yes.

PARTNER

Let's get out of here.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

A figure exits the car and disappears into the house. Lights flick on in the windows.

Time-lapse: Night transitions smoothly into morning.

A person exits the house, gets into a car, and drives away.

Time-lapse: Morning flows into day.

A taxi pulls up, and the Partner gets out.

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - ENTRYWAY - DAY

Shot through the entryway window. We see the Partner ascending the porch steps.

Wide shot of the entryway. The Partner manipulates the lock - several LOUD BANGS... and the door swings open.

The Partner enters, follows the hallway, and reaches the kitchen.

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

The kitchen table is cluttered with brush-making supplies. The Partner picks up and examines various items, one by one.

FLASHBACK:

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

The artist sits at the table, assembling a watercolor brush from scattered pieces.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

The Partner leaves the kitchen and moves into the living room.

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

The Partner walks to the center of the room and stops. The camera circles him, panning around the room. The room is empty, the bare walls are covered with HUNDREDS of portraits.

Unlike the Artist's bedroom, the rows of paintings here resemble trees. Some portraits branch off where the brush was used two or even three times. It's clear that many of these offshoots have been abandoned, the people in the empty portraits long dead. The camera continues to spin, now through the Partner's eyes.

Partner's POV: A kaleidoscope of images whirls in a vortex of colors. Faces flash through this swirl.

FLASHBACK:

INT. CAFE - MORNING

In line at the counter, a SISTER stands with the Artist right behind her. He leans towards the girl's long hair and discreetly snips off a tip of her red strand.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

The Partner slowly walks around the room. Everywhere are portraits he's never seen and brushes he's never made.

Columns of drawings reach all the way to the floor, suggesting that the "head" paintings in the Artist's bedroom are just continuations of chains from this room. The Partner kneels and reads a blank sheet on the floor...

Sheet's CLOSE-UP: his own personal details. A brush is taped next to it with scotch tape.

The Partner tears it off the sheet. The brush is crudely made, but the hairs in the bristle are the same color as his own.

FLASHBACK:

INT. BARBERSHOP - DAY

The Partner, in a cape, sits before a mirror; the barber finishes up, the last hair snippets fluttering down.

INTERCUT:

The Partner pays the barber.

He exits the barbershop.

The floor, sprinkled with cut strands.

The barber tucks several strands into a ziploc bag, sweeps the rest from the floor with a brush.

The barber hands the bag to the Artist, who pays him.

FLASHBACK:

INT. PARTNER'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY

The Partner is in bed, clearly ill. His ash-colored skin looks like parchment, shadows under his eyes. A coughing fit starts. The Partner holds a handkerchief to his mouth. When the fit ends, his lips are bloody. He looks at the handkerchief.

CLOSE-UP: bloodstains on white fabric.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. UNKNOWN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Partner's POV: From the sheet with data, the view moves up the chain and fixes on a portrait of an elderly man ravaged by severe illness. The same ashen face, the same dark circles under the eyes.

The Partner sits on the floor, hands limply hanging over his knees.

CUT TO:

INT. PARTNER'S CAR - EARLY EVENING

The Artist climbs into the car, tossing a bulging briefcase and a bag with an easel onto the back seat. He's clearly in high spirits.

The Partner starts the car.

ARTIST
Let's call it a day.

PARTNER
You've been buzzing like a busy bee these past few days.

ARTIST
Busy, busy. They all deserve their fairy-tale endings, right? Tomorrow, we chill.

EXT. STREET - EARLY EVENING

The car pulls up in front of the Artist's home.

INT. PARTNER'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

The Partner waits for the Artist to exit the car.

ARTIST
Come on in? Got a sweet thank-you today.

PARTNER
Cash?

ARTIST
(grinning)
Courvoisier. Park here, crash at my place tonight.

The Partner considers.

ARTIST
Take up the offer. When's the last time we just hung out, just us?

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

The Artist is crashed out on the couch in his clothes, a mess from the night's drinking.

The sound of running water comes from the bathroom.

CLOSE-UP: The Artist's face slowly comes to life.

He wakes up fully, sits up, rubs his eyes groggily, and looks around.

Artist's POV: The scene is BLURRY, the room's edges swimming. The table is littered with leftovers and an empty bottle of Courvoisier. The couch where the Partner slept is now vacant.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

The Partner is in front of the mirror, fixing his hair. He's dressed and looks sharp.

CLOSE-UP: The comb slices through the Partner's thick locks like a knife through butter.

ARTIST (O.S.)
What's the time?

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Still rubbing his eyes, the Artist searches for his stuff. After a futile attempt, he moves to the table and snatches a soda bottle, taking a big gulp. He instantly spits out half, gagging from nausea.

ARTIST
(struggling)
You still here?

PARTNER (O.S.)
Yep!

ARTIST
What's the time?

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

PARTNER
It's half past ten.

The Partner sets the comb down, grabs a terrycloth towel, dries his hands, and hangs it back up.

CLOSE-UP: The towel swinging gently on the hook.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

ARTIST
Clear out the bathroom! I need to wash up and hurl.

The Partner enters the living room.

ARTIST
How you holding up?

PARTNER
I'm great.

ARTIST
You're kidding? They slipped us
some paint thinner last night. Oh
man...
(moans)
I've got a pounding headache.

The Artist tries to get to the couch to find his pants but trips and almost falls.

ARTIST
Fuck!

He finally reaches the couch, sits down heavily, and starts rubbing his eyes again.

PARTNER
I'm fine, actually.

ARTIST
(sarcastically)
Lucky you. Got any Advil?

PARTNER
Nope.

The Artist rubs his eyes. The camera slowly zooms in on him. He briefly removes his hands from his face, revealing his BLOODSHOT eyes.

ARTIST
There's something up with my
eyes...

Artist's POV: Blurry view of bare feet on the floor.

PARTNER
Advil's not gonna cut it. Your
headache and nausea are from a
spike in intraocular pressure.

The Artist bursts into hysterical laughter.

ARTIST
What in the world are you on about?

He aggressively rubs his eyes.

PARTNER

Your vision's blurring because your optic nerves are shutting down. Classic signs of fast-acting glaucoma.

The Artist goes still, slowly raises his head, and stares into the camera with his red, swollen, severely inflamed eyes.

ARTIST

(whispers)
What did you do?

PARTNER

It's irreversible and ends in total blindness.

ARTIST

(raising his voice)
What did you do?!

PARTNER

Yesterday, you did your first good deed - gave a kid his sight back, even though you swore off starting new chains. I knew you'd break your promise, so I got in touch with Madame Ahija. I had her tell me the moment a new case popped up.

ARTIST

(screaming)
What did you do?!

PARTNER

Exactly what you asked. Made you a new brush.

Frantic, the Artist rushes to the hallway, overturning furniture. He flings open the wardrobe doors and begins a wild search inside.

PARTNER

If it's the briefcase you're after, it's right here!

He picks up the briefcase from the floor.

ARTIST

(snarls)
Hand it over...

The Partner tosses the briefcase. It flies across the room and lands in the hallway. The Artist feverishly digs through it with shaking hands.

PARTNER

Don't bother searching. I've taken the boy's portrait. It's the only piece of your work I'll keep.

The Artist, in a rage, tears into every piece of paper he can find in the briefcase.

PARTNER (CONT'D)

I know about your secret workshop. That horrific exhibition... I've wiped it out. I know I wasn't the first in my chain. You're no god - you're the devil.

The Artist seethes and foams with rage, his appearance now that of a true fiend.

PARTNER (CONT'D)

I'll destroy every painting, every brush. By tonight, you'll be as blind as a mole. Nothing will remain.

The Artist spews his dinner onto the carpet. He crawls on his hands and knees toward the Partner, his face smeared with vomit, mucus dangling from his chin like slimy reins, his demonic red eyes glaring sightlessly.

ARTIST

How did you get my hair?

PARTNER

I told you, I don't trust you.

FLASHBACK:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - IN THE PAST

The Partner kneels before an empty bathtub. He leans in, picks something up with two fingers from the bottom, and examines it closely.

CLOSE-UP: A single hair pinched between his fingers.

PARTNER (V.O.)

I didn't know why I might need your brush, but better safe than sorry. Just in case it might come in handy. So, I began collecting.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - OTHER DAY IN THE PAST

The Partner stands at the sink. He reaches into the drain with long tweezers and extracts a revolting, wet hairball mixed with dirt. He recoils in disgust.

PARTNER (V.O.)
 It's just you and me here, and only
 you use this bathroom. The human
 body shed up to 150 hairs a day.
 Gathering them was a painstaking
 job.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - OTHER DAY IN THE PAST

The Artist washes his face. Looks in the mirror.

CLOSE-UP: A wet eyelash sticks to his cheek.

The Artist dries off with a towel and exits the bathroom.

The Partner enters the bathroom, delicately removes the
 eyelash from the towel, and places it in a silver cigarette
 case.

PARTNER (V.O.)
 It requires lots of time and
 patience.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - OTHER DAY IN THE PAST

The Partner crawls on the floor, inspecting it through a
 magnifying glass.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - BACK TO THE PRESENT

PARTNER
 It took about three years to gather
 enough hair to make one brush. This
 brush.
 (he shows a brush from his
 pocket)
 You used it yesterday.

ARTIST
 You snake!

The Artist lunges at the Partner, but he easily dodges. The
 Artist sprawls on the floor, utterly helpless.

ARTIST
 Scum! Filth! Judas!

The Partner looks down at the Artist with disdain and pity.

PARTNER
 Time to put an end to this.

He walks into the bedroom.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MORNING

The Partner stops before a wall covered in portraits. Dozens of silent, sad faces stare back at him.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

The Artist writhes on the floor, struggling to stand.

ARTIST

Destroy them and you're done for!

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

ARTIST (O.S.)

Do you hear me? You're digging your own grave!

The Partner starts tearing the portraits off the walls.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

The Artist whimpers from pain and helplessness.

ARTIST

Stop! Cut it out!

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

The Partner tears the portraits to shreds until not one remains on the wall. Then, he pulls out another from his pocket. The last one.

ARTIST (O.S.)

The old guy I passed the disease to you from? He's dead! Died from chemo complications, just a month after full remission. The chain's snapped - the sickness is yours to keep now.

Sounds of furniture being overturned and dishes breaking come from the living room.

The Partner stands before the wall like a swimmer poised to dive. In his hands, the last portrait. His own.

CLOSE-UP: The Partner rips the portrait into tiny pieces.

INT. ARTIST'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

The Artist lies on the floor, covered in blood and vomit, veins bulging at his temples, his eyes red as the devil's.

He breathes heavily.

The Partner enters the living room. As he walks past, he tosses a stack of scraps into the air. They settle on the Artist's head and shoulders like multicolored confetti – the remnants of the last portrait.

The Partner leaves the apartment. The camera focuses on the front door. The last thing we hear is the Partner's cough echoing down the stairwell.

Maxim Marukhin