

GROUP THERAPY

Episode One
"Answering The Call"

written by

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CU: An analogue clock ticks away. Twenty past two.

INT. MIRIAM'S HOUSE - THERAPY ROOM - DAY

MIRIAM WEBBER (70s), slight and bespectacled with a bob haircut as coarse as a pushbroom, holds a cellphone to her ear and frowns at the clock. No answer. She sighs and hangs up.

Across from her, a loveseat sits empty. A mug of cold tea stagnates on the rattan table beside it.

As Miriam opens the COMPOSITION NOTEBOOK on her lap and scrawls a note, we soak in the rest of the cozy space: soft light filters in through sheer curtains, abstract art adorns the lilac walls, tchotchkes from far off lands line the well-stocked wooden bookshelves. Each eccentric item on display is a thread that comprises the rich tapestry of Miriam's life.

A silhouette passes the windows. A moment later... *KNOCK KNOCK*. The door opens. TRISTAN CRUZE (32), store-brand handsome with a swoosh of sandy hair, strides in flashing a sterling smile.

TRISTAN

Sorry, I had an audition across town and the 10 was a mess.

MIRIAM

I tried calling to make sure you were OK. But you didn't answer.

Miriam's stern tone catches Tristan off guard. His smile falters as he sinks into the overstuffed loveseat.

TRISTAN

Oh, well, I was driving, so...

MIRIAM

(sighing)

I'm sure you're sick of Carl Jung quotes, but he once said, "the meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed."

(off his furrowed brow)

My point is, I know these sessions feel one-sided. They're designed to be. But the truth is, they're not. These sessions are about both of us. It's our time together.

(MORE)

MIRIAM (CONT'D)

It's your time to show up for yourself and it's my time to be here for you. One hour. Once a week. It might not seem like much. But it's important.

TRISTAN

I know. But it really was an important audition.

Miriam jots down a note. Tristan clocks it, tenses.

TRISTAN

Did I say something wrong?

She adds another note, letting him squirm.

TRISTAN

Not that I *need* to know what your notes say or anything. I don't want you to think I'm a psychopath. Or is it a sociopath? Which one is the good one?

MIRIAM

They're both bad.
(beat)

Do you think you're a sociopath?

TRISTAN

I mean... no. But do sociopaths know that they're sociopaths? Or does knowing you are cancel it out? Or is being a sociopath knowing that you are and still acting on it?

MIRIAM

Tristan, you're not a sociopath. You're just an actor.

TRISTAN

Ah. Right.

MIRIAM

And that was a fun bit, but you're treating this like an audition. As you do with all of our sessions.

TRISTAN

(it's true)
That's not true...

MIRIAM

Therapy shouldn't be performative.
It's not about my validation. I'm
not going to cast you in the big
Hitchcock movie if you charm me.

There's a charged silence as Tristan digs for the right words.

TRISTAN

I know that... it's just... I
think I'm a good person. But am I?
Or am I just acting like I am? And
does it matter which is which?

MIRIAM

All the world's a stage...
(off Tristan's confusion)
It's Shakespeare. Go on.

TRISTAN

I guess... I want to be good. But
I don't *feel* good. Is that bad?

MIRIAM

Being good means doing good. For
yourself and for others. That's
the work. And it's lifelong work.
(re: cold tea)
Here, let me warm that up for you.

Miriam takes the mug and exits. Tristan lets his eyes wander.
He smiles as he takes in all the room's details. Then his gaze
falls on the composition notebook on Miriam's chair...

He snaps to attention as Miriam enters. She hands him the mug.

MIRIAM

Now. Let's make the most of the
time we have left together.

Off Miriam's wistful smile, we--

CUT TO:

INT. SUIT SLUT - DAY

We're dropped right into a frenetic scene. Stylish, well-groomed SALESEMEN descend on hapless SHOPPERS like wolves. Suits fly off racks. Salesemen push past each other as they scour backroom stock. Booming EDM music assaults the senses. It's the Hunger Games set in a Century City mall.

In the chaos we key in on SAMI FAISAL (29) and his magnificent mane of raven hair. A sheen of sweat threatens to smear his meticulously-applied foundation and eye liner. He's hustling.

In a quick, accelerating MONTAGE we see:

- Sami fights another salesman for a suit on a backroom rack
- Sami furiously empties out a dressing room
- Sami takes a quick sip of orange juice before rushing back out to the showroom floor
- Sami's eye twitches as a COW-FACED CUSTOMER shrugs dumbly at a book of fabric swatches
- Sami pokes a MAN with a pin as he takes his measurements
- Shoppers seem to assault Sami from every angle

As things reach a fever pitch we--

HARD CUT TO:

INT. MALL BATHROOM - LATER

The silence is a sweet relief after the chaos.

Sami leans against the counter, phone in one hand, vape pen in the other. He's been through it. He takes a drag of the vape but, when he exhales, no smoke comes out. The battery light flashes RED. He takes a few more desperate puffs. No use.

SAMI
Fuck my luck.

He grabs his bottle of orange juice and takes a drink.

Then he lifts his phone. He opens a web browser and types: "is vape pen delivery a thing?" But before he gets his answer--

"INCOMING CALL: 323-555-8545" interrupts the screen.

SAMI
Ew, no, get outta here, rando.

Sami silences the call.

INT. BEATRICE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM/OFFICE - DAY

CANDACE KAIN (42), wearing a hands-free headset over her tightly-woven braids, stares at her dual-monitors, which sit on a desk cluttered with Funko Pops, troll dolls, and empty sweet tea bottles. 'Avatar: The Last Airbender' plays on one monitor while mind-numbing Excel spreadsheets clutter the other.

BEATRICE (O.S.)
Candy! Candy, get in here!

Candace sighs, takes a 'Lord help me' beat, and then gets up. As she crosses the overstuffed living room, we see the undeniable decorative stylings of an elderly woman: flower-patterned sofas, doilies galore, and a domineering display case filled with Precious Moments statues.

INT. BEATRICE'S HOUSE - MASTER BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Candace opens the door. The electric glow of the TV illuminates BEATRICE KAIN (70), who sits upright in her adjustable bed.

BEATRICE
There you are. What took so long?

CANDACE
I came as soon as you called.

BEATRICE
You get my ointment yet?

CANDACE
It's getting delivered. I'm sure
it'll be here soon.

BEATRICE
Delivered. Hmph. You've got two
workin' legs and you're gettin' it
delivered. I swear.

CANDACE
I'm sorry, ma. But you know I'm
working. I can't just leave.

BEATRICE
Yeah I've seen you "working."

Candace's RINGTONE goes off from the living room.

CANDACE
I gotta get that.

BEATRICE
Mhmmm.

INT. CANDACE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM/OFFICE

The RINGING ends. Candace lifts the phone: "MISSED CALL - 323-555-8545". It's the same phone number that called Sami.

INT. LEIGH'S HOUSE - LEIGH'S BEDROOM - DAY

A bed - or, more aptly, a mattress on pallets - nearly fills the pint-sized space. Dirty clothes litter the battered floorboards. The room may have been lovely in 1940, but chipped paint and cracked walls emphasize its current disrepair.

A cellphone VIBRATES. A pale arm emerges from the rat's nest of chunky blankets and reaches blindly for the phone. It finally unearths it from beneath a balled-up Blondie tee.

A head peeks out from the nest. It belongs to LEIGH MITCHELL (23), a stout girl with a bleached-blonde, curly wolf cut mullet and a septum ring. She uses one bleary eye to look at the cracked screen: "INCOMING CALL: 323-555-8545".

LEIGH
(moaning, mumbling)
What the fuck? Who calls a phone?

She silences the phone and drops it back to the floor.

INT. CITYSTAR BANK HQ - IT DEPARTMENT - DAY

A computer screen reflects off the glazed brown eyes of JAY BURKS (34). He slouches his lanky body, conveying a sense of catatonic boredom. He mindlessly pulls on one cord of his tightly-coiled hair and lets it spring back as he releases it.

DING! A new email pops up in his inbox. He clicks it.

EMAIL TEXT: *"My emails won't send. Can you come take a look?"*

Jay closes his eyes, rubs his forehead, and sighs.

INT. CITYSTAR BANK HQ - KIRA'S DESK - MOMENTS LATER

KIRA WALKER (29), perky and pony-tailed, sits up straighter as she sees Jay approaching. She gives him a playful shrug.

KIRA
Hey, Jay. I don't know what I did wrong this time.

JAY
(no nonsense)
You sent an email saying your email wasn't working.

KIRA
Ah, but when did you get it? I tried sending it half an hour ago.

JAY
(re: computer)
You mind?

KIRA
No, no. It's all yours.

She rolls aside as Jay leans over the keyboard. Given the cubicle's small confines, it puts them in an intimate position.

Jay minimizes a window revealing Kira's desktop. It displays an image of her family: mom, dad, brother, dog. All smiles.

As they talk, Jay continues clicking through system windows.

JAY

You know the system wipes any desktop images when you log off.

KIRA

I know. I have to add it back every morning. It's annoying. Like, what's the harm in having a personal background?

JAY

They say it's distracting.

KIRA

God forbid we think about our families every once in a while.

She says it light-heartedly, hoping for a laugh. But Jay breezes past it. He's not picking up any of her signals.

JAY

You're connected to the Starbucks Wi-Fi. That's why your Internet's been spotty.

KIRA

Ope. That's embarrassing.

JAY

It's actually really bad. You need to be on the secure network.

KIRA

(jokingly)

Uh oh, looks like you're gonna have to report me.

(off his stony face)

Wait, you're not actually gonna have to report me, are you?

INT. CITYSTAR BANK HQ - IT DEPARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Jay plunks back into his chair. He lifts his cell phone off his desk. The screen lights up: "MISSED CALL: 323-555-8545".

INT. ELBIA'S MERCEDES - DAY

ANGLE ON: a set of pearly white teeth in the rear-view mirror.

They belong to ELBIA CASTILLO (38). Once she confirms her teeth are clear of any detritus she examines her nude lipstick (flawless), her foundation (solid), and her lashes (plump).

EXT. SILVER LAKE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Satisfied, Elbia steps out of her black, S-Class Mercedes. We see now that everything about her is sharp, from her threaded brows to her Louboutin pumps. She holds a stack of papers like they're nuclear codes.

A "FOR SALE" sign in the small front yard features a large glamour shot of Elbia... wearing the exact same outfit she's currently in. Elbia straightens the sign.

Her phone RINGS: "INCOMING CALL: 323-555-8545". She answers without hesitation.

ELBIA
Elbia Castillo, Silversun Realty.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - DAY

Tristan sits at his kitchen counter holding a set of script sides and a homemade smoothie. A protein powder tub the size of a propane tank rests beside his smoothie-smearred blender.

As he reads the script, he softly recites some lines.

TRISTAN
You're not *my* daughter. You're not
my daughter. You. Are. Not. My.
Daughter. You're not my daughter?

He sips the protein shake. His face says it all - *yuck*. His phone RINGS. "INCOMING CALL: 323-555-8545".

He stares at the phone. Anxiety radiates off of him. Sounds muffle until all that's left is the shrill RING of the phone.

TRISTAN
(sotto)
Just answer the call. It could be
casting. Just pick up the phone.

As the final RING comes to an end, Tristan answers.

TRISTAN
This is Tristan Cruze.

Instead of cutting away - as we have until now - we stay with the call. We don't hear the other end - we only see Tristan's reactions. First anxious, then confused, then dejected.

HARD CUT TO:

INT. FUNERAL HOME - LOBBY - DAY

ANGLE ON: a large portrait of Miriam Webber on an easel. A wreath of flowers rests against its wooden legs.

REVERSE: Tristan stares at the portrait. Conflicting emotions crash like waves across his face: sadness, reverence, frustration. Finally, he sighs and enters the chapel.

EXT. FUNERAL HOME - DAY

Sami leans on a tree and vapes. FUNERAL GUESTS eye him as they pass... because he's wearing a loud and flashy Suit Slut suit.

Through his plumes, Sami clocks a strange series of events in the parking lot. A WOMAN with her eyes closed sits in her Prius clutching the steering wheel. We recognize her as Candace.

After a beat she starts the engine, backs out of the space, and starts to leave. Then she slams on the brakes, idles for a few moments, reverses, and pulls back into the space.

Without stopping her momentum, Candace leaps out of the car, valiantly shuts the door, and marches toward the funeral home.

Then she freezes.

Sami watches her with a mixture of curiosity and empathy. Then Candace sees him - she's caught! She looks as if she might dart back to her car, but she stays rooted in place.

SAMI

Don't want to go in, either?

CANDACE

No, I do. It's just... a lot of people.

SAMI

Yeah. People are the worst.

(beat)

I'm Sami.

CANDACE

Candace. I like your suit.

SAMI

Oh, this old thing?

Candace STARTLES as a family of mourners pass. The mourners are Elbia, her moon-faced husband, LOU AGUILAR (46), and their precious daughter, MIA AGUILAR-CASTILLO (3).

Candace finally settles down after the family moves on.

SAMI

Shot in the dark, but I'm guessing
Miriam was your therapist?

CANDACE

... yeah.

SAMI

Same.

(beat)

Let's go in together. We can sit
in back for an easy escape.

INT. FUNERAL HOME - CHAPEL - MOMENTS LATER

30 somber GUESTS fill the modest, dimly lit chapel. Most are elderly, which makes it easy to spot Jay in a center row and Elbia and her family nearby. Elbia wrestles a squirming Mia.

MIA

I wanna go home.

ELBIA

We will as soon as this is over.

Tristan sits near the front. He idly folds his pamphlet, which creates a grid of six squares that crease Miriam's portrait.

Sami and Candace take a seat in the back row, as promised.

KATHLEEN WEBBER (71), portly and folksy with a shock of white hair that contrasts her black dress and red-framed glasses, approaches the lectern. She clears her throat. The room quiets.

KATHLEEN

Thank y'all for being here.

(beat)

Many of you have asked me how I'm
managing to hold myself together.
Well, I've already cried so much I
don't think I have any tears left.
And, after this, I don't think
I'll need any ever again.

(then)

Miriam was my partner. My best
friend. My everything. She shot
through this world like a
fireball, lighting up the sky
everywhere she went. And now she's
left a crater no one could ever
hope to fill.

The door CREAKS open at the back of the room. Kathleen pauses and the crowd turns. Leigh quietly tiptoes in, raises a hand in apology, and slips into an open chair in the back row.

KATHLEEN

We all know that Miriam was an absolute pistol, a rebel, an adventurer, a shoulder to cry on, a champion of the arts, and a believer in the impossible.

(beat)

But to truly know Miriam was to know that she was astonishingly selfish. Yes, selfish. She wanted everything that life could offer. And I'll be damned if she didn't manage to get a hell of a lot of it. Sorry, hope I'm allowed to say 'hell' in here... and 'damned.'

(off the polite laughter)

Being selfish is, in fact, why she became a therapist. I know that sounds strange, but it feeds into a truth Miriam knew about the world - a truth that's summarized best by a quote from her favorite TV show, the animated series 'Avatar: The Last Airbender.'

Candace perks up at the mention of 'Avatar.'

KATHLEEN

"Sometimes the best way to solve your own problems is to help someone else."

Tristan absorbs the words like a sponge.

KATHLEEN

So I implore you to be as selfish as Miriam. Because you might just make the world a better place in the process. I know she did.

CUT TO:

INT. FUNERAL HOME - CHAPEL - LATER

Kathleen shakes hands with an ELDERLY COUPLE. As the couple departs, Tristan steps in.

TRISTAN

It's Kathleen, right? It was a beautiful eulogy.

KATHLEEN

Thanks. You must be... Tristan.

(MORE)

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

(off his surprise)

Don't worry, Miriam never dished any of the good stuff about her patients. I recognize your voice. From the call. Y'know, you're one of the only people I called who actually answered.

TRISTAN

I'm sorry, it must have been awful making all those calls.

KATHLEEN

That was the least of it. Miriam promised she'd outlive me so I wouldn't have to deal with all this nonsense, but here we are. Like I said - selfish.

TRISTAN

Well, she couldn't have been that selfish. You said on the phone that she left a gift for me?

KATHLEEN

She sure did. It's back at the house. You're still coming to the wake, right?

TRISTAN

Wouldn't miss it.
(re: an approaching guest)
I'll leave you to it.

INT. FUNERAL HOME - WOMEN'S BATHROOM - SAME TIME

Dark, wood-paneled walls make the small bathroom feel even smaller. From one of the two stalls we hear a RETCH, then HACKING, and finally some SPITTING. After a beat...

LEIGH (O.S.)

You OK in there?

There's a SCUFFLING as the unseen retcher panics. Then the toilet FLUSHES.

ELBIA (O.S.)

Yes, I'm fine. I didn't know anyone else was in here.

Within the stalls, each woman is fully-clothed sitting on their respective toilets. Leigh scrolls on her cell. Elbia settles.

LEIGH

You sure? I've got, like, a million pills in my fanny pack if you need anything.

ELBIA

(half joking)
Got any Valium?

LEIGH

Ooooh, Valium. Oldschool choice, I like it. But no. I left those at home with my Quaaluds. Would you settle for Xanax?

ELBIA

No. I wasn't being serious. I don't take any drugs.

LEIGH

I was joking, too. Not about having a million pills, cuz you never know, but it's all, like, Tums and shit.

The conversation fizzles into silence. It could end here, but Elbia hesitates. She stares at the stall door, considering.

ELBIA

How did you know her?

LEIGH

She was my therapist. You?

ELBIA

(lying)
She was a... family friend.

We now see the women side-by-side, the thin wall separating them like a church confessional booth.

LEIGH

It's kinda crazy. No one ever tells you that your therapist might die. I know she was old, but, like, it's pretty messed up.

ELBIA

Was she a good therapist for you?

As Leigh answers, we occasionally focus on Elbia's face. Everything Leigh says resonates with her.

LEIGH

She was the best.

(letting it hang)

But it feels weird now. Like, she knew everything about me. *Everything*. And it's like I didn't know anything about her. I guess that's part of the gig - gotta keep it separated - but I didn't even know she was married. To a woman! Not that that's super surprising or anything, it's just, I thought of us as friends. Or like she was my grandma. Or at least an overly-concerned aunt. Or *something*. But maybe she was more like my dentist. Reminding me to floss between my brain grooves and not brush too hard. I dunno.

(beat)

Goddammit.

ELBIA

What?

LEIGH

That's the third Uber that's straight up canceled on me. I'm probably just gonna have to bail on this wake.

Elbia closes her eyes, trying to stop herself from saying...

ELBIA

Do you want a ride?

LEIGH

Oh, are you going?

ELBIA

Yes, I suppose I am.

LEIGH

Wow, thanks. I wasn't, like, fishing or anything, but I'll definitely take you up on that.

ELBIA

Well I'm ready to get out of here if you are. I've seen enough dark wood, busy floral carpets, and brass fixtures for one afternoon.

LEIGH

Amen.

They both exit their stalls and finally see one another. Elbia's taken aback - *this* is who she was talking to?! But she quickly masks her surprise with a politician's smile.

LEIGH
I'm Leigh. Nice to meet you.

ELBIA
Elbia. I'd shake hands, but...

She eyes the toilet in her stall.

LEIGH
Right. All that vom. Got it.

INT. FUNERAL HOME - LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

Jay crosses the lobby. As he passes a floor-length mirror, he FREEZES when he sees his reflection. He takes a sharp inhale of breath. He stares, transfixed. Then, as recognition floods in, he relaxes. He shakes his mop of curly hair and continues on.

He walks right past Leigh and Elbia. We stay with the two women as they approach a waiting Lou and Mia. Mia spins in circles around Lou. She finally collapses in a heap, giggling.

MIA
How many was that?

LOU
Oh, was I supposed to be counting?
Guess you'll have to do it again.

ELBIA
She's gonna scramble up her brain.

LOU
Does your brain feel scrambled?

Mia, from the floor, gives an exaggerated, wide-armed shrug.

LOU
(re: Leigh)
And who's this?

ELBIA
This is Leigh.
(with a "play along" look)
We're giving her a ride to the wake.

LOU
I thought you said we weren't--

ELBIA
 (cutting him off)
 And Leigh, this is my husband,
 Lou, and my daughter, Mia.

LEIGH
 Hi there. Thanks for the ride.

MIA
 (re: septum piercing)
 What's wrong with your nose?

LEIGH
 Oh, my piercing? It keeps my face
 from splitting in half.

Off Elbia's unamused expression we...

CUT TO:

EXT. MIRIAM'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Miriam's is a modest, Spanish revival home on a quiet mid-city side street. Whimsical animal statuary provides pops of character to the otherwise tame landscaping. MOURNERS approach the front door and head inside.

The sound of POP MUSIC draws us across the street to--

INT. SAMI'S JEEP - CONTINUOUS

Charli XCX blasts from the speakers of Sami's parked Jeep Renegade. Clothes and empty orange juice bottles litter the seats and floor.

He dumps a scoop of green powder into a fresh bottle of orange juice. He shakes it up and takes a sip. Then he chugs it.

INT./EXT. CANDACE'S PRIUS - MOMENTS LATER

Candace, once again, clutches her steering wheel with her eyes closed. She takes a deep breath in. Holds. And slowly exhales.

TAP TAP. Candace leaps out of her skin. She looks out her window. Sami waves at her. She rolls down the window.

CANDACE
 What's wrong with you? You can't
 be tappin' on people's windows.

SAMI
 I wanted to catch you before you
 could drive off.
 (beat)
 Were you meditating?

CANDACE

That something you need to know?

SAMI

Sorry, I'm being extra. I just thought we had a thing going, y'know. A lil' repartée.

CANDACE

You surprised me. I don't like surprises.

SAMI

Really?! Surprises are the best.

CANDACE

No. They're not.

(off his reaction)

You know what was a surprise? Finding out that my therapist - the only person in the world I could trust - was dead. *That* was a surprise.

Sami gets the message. He drops the pep squad facade.

SAMI

You're right. I'm sorry.

(turning to leave)

I'll let you get back to it. Hopefully I see you in there.

Candace watches him walk toward the house. She frowns.

CANDACE

(sotto)

Goddammit, Candace. This is why no one likes you. Why are you even here? No one wants you here.

She rolls her window back up. She starts the car.

INT. MIRIAM'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATER

ANGLE ON: The TV plays a photo album slideshow highlighting Miriam's life: Miriam on top of a mountain, Miriam and Kathleen at the Great Wall of China, Miriam writing in her journal.

REVERSE: Leigh watches the slideshow with reverence.

The slideshow continues. We see a young Miriam at a Vietnam War protest. Leigh nods in approval. But that's not all. The next photo from the protest shows a topless Miriam fighting against a policeman as he drags her toward a cop car.

LEIGH
Oh, fuck yeah, Miriam.

Behind Leigh, Tristan walks past mingling mourners. He administers solemn nods when appropriate. He enters the--

DINING ROOM

-- Where Elbia, Lou, and Mia stand near the food spread. Lou picks up a finger sandwich.

ELBIA
Really? Another sandwich? This isn't Golden Corral.

Lou, dejected, puts the sandwich back on the tray.

ELBIA
Well don't put it back now that you've touched it!

LOU
So I *should* eat it?

Elbia sighs. Tristan continues beyond them into the--

HALLWAY

-- Where he walks toward a door. He tries the knob. Locked.

INT. BATHROOM - SAME TIME

QUICK POPS: Sami stands on the closed toilet lid. He blows vape smoke into the ceiling vent fan. He sniffs a seashell-shaped soap. He reads prescription bottle labels with great interest.

INT. HALLWAY - SAME TIME

Tristan releases the knob. He pulls out his phone and opens his text messages. We see a bit of a text message thread: "*hoping to hear from casting this afternoon. Stay by your phone*"

Tristan puts his phone away. As he idly looks around, his eyes land on a door at the end of the hallway. It seems to draw him toward it. He considers, then gives into the temptation.

INT. THERAPY ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

It's still and silent. Afternoon light bathes the room in a golden glow. The door slowly opens. Tristan peeks in. Then, checking behind him, enters. He quietly closes the door.

He beholds the space, memories and admiration drawing out a reluctant smile. Then his gaze falls on Miriam's chair. Empty. The smile fades as reality sets in.

He walks deeper into the room, regarding each tchotchke and book spine with renewed appreciation. Then he clocks a row of COMPOSITION NOTEBOOKS. He stops and looks back at the door. The coast is clear. He cautiously pulls a notebook off the shelf. Written on the cover is: "ELBIA CASTILLO, 01/24 - 04/24".

Tristan replaces the notebook and pulls out another. Bingo. "TRISTAN CRUZE, 01/24 - 04/24". He gapes at it as if it's a holy text. Just as he opens the cover--

The door opens. Tristan whirls. He puts the notebook behind his back, stuffs it into his belt, and covers it with his shirt.

Jay stands in the doorway, hand up in apology.

JAY

Sorry, man. Didn't know anyone was in here.

TRISTAN

No, it's fine. It was just quiet.
(beat)
I'm Tristan.

JAY

Jay.
(eyeing the sofa)
Were you...?

TRISTAN

Yeah. For about 4 years. You?

JAY

Double that.

TRISTAN

Damn. Sorry.

JAY

S'all good. Story of my life...
(quickly changing subject)
You know anything about this gift?

Tristan shakes his head.

JAY

Figures. She could be real cryptic when she wanted to be.
(beat)
Hey, lemme ask you something. Did she ever make you do any drawings?

TRISTAN

Oh man, yeah.
(MORE)

TRISTAN (CONT'D)

My drawings were so bad. Like, truly terrible. You'd think I was in kindergarten.

JAY

Dude, same. How you gonna take trauma seriously when I'm showing you stick figures of my family?

TRISTAN

Right?

(beat)

I kinda liked it, though.

JAY

Yeah, me too.

KNOCK KNOCK. A soft rap on the open door. Tristan and Jay turn to see Leigh surreptitiously peering in.

LEIGH

Hey. Didn't want to intrude. Were you two...?

TRISTAN

Yeah.

JAY

Yeah.

TRISTAN

(pointing to himself)

Four years.

(pointing to Jay)

Eight years.

LEIGH

Wow. Guess I'm the baby here. Only two years for me. I'm Leigh.

TRISTAN

Tristan. Nice to meet you.

JAY

Jay.

LEIGH

Weird seeing it again, huh?

(off their nods)

Did you guys know she was sick?

TRISTAN

No idea.

(to Jay)

You knew her the longest.

Jay shakes his head. Frustration roils beneath his features. Leigh wanders over to the sofa and plops onto it.

LEIGH

I guess this is, like, bargaining or whatever. But why does this happen to the good ones? There are so many people who suck. And they get to just be out there, actively sucking right now.

(off Tristan's look)

I said what I said.

(then, serious again)

Do you guys feel like Miriam was, I dunno, like, a perfect human?

JAY

No. She wasn't perfect. I'm not even sure she was good. A good person would have told us she was sick instead of blindsiding us.

The statement stuns Tristan and Leigh to silence. Then--

SAMI (O.S.)

Wow, looks like I found the party.

Everyone turns to look at Sami walk in. There's an immediate vibe clash. Sami leans into it.

SAMI

What's wrong? You guys look like someone died.

JAY

Really?

SAMI

Too dark? Sorry, humor's a coping mechanism for me.

JAY

Not for me.

SAMI

I sensed that.

(beat)

Let me try that again. I'm Sami. I'm guessing y'all are back here for the same reason I am?

TRISTAN

Yeah. I'm Tristan. That's Leigh. And that's Jay.

JAY

I can introduce myself.

LEIGH

Same. You're serving some real main character energy with that.

TRISTAN

Sorry. Just trying to speed along the introductions. Was starting to feel like *deja vu*.

An awkward silence descends. Before it has a chance to get even more awkward, Kathleen enters with Elbia in tow.

KATHLEEN

There y'all are. Y'know, this door was closed for a reason.

TRISTAN

That's on me. I wanted to see the room one last time. I think that's why we're all back here.

Leigh gently coughs and mouths "*main character energy*" to him.

TRISTAN

But I won't speak for everyone.

KATHLEEN

Anyhow, I'm glad I've got y'all in one place. Makes it easier to hand out Miriam's gifts.

Kathleen shuffles across the room. Tristan turns to let her pass. He puts a hand on his back to keep the notebook in place.

Kathleen continues talking as she opens a desk drawer.

KATHLEEN

Miriam was slowing down these past few years. You might not have known it, but you were the last group of patients she was seeing.

Leigh eyes Elbia. Elbia, busted, avoids her scrutinizing gaze.

Kathleen pulls out a stack of wrapped GIFTS. It doesn't take an eagle-eyed kid on Christmas to guess that the gifts are books. She hands out the gifts as she talks.

KATHLEEN

She truly believed in the progress you were making.

(MORE)

KATHLEEN (CONT'D)

And she wanted to help you for as long as she could.

(handing Sami a gift)

One of her biggest regrets was not sharing her diagnosis with you.

(handing Jay a gift)

She didn't want it to affect her sessions. I hope y'all can forgive her for that.

(handing Elbia and Leigh their gifts)

She was always too ethical to give out presents to patients, but it was one of her dying wishes that I get you these gifts.

(handing Tristan a gift)

No need to open them now if you don't want to.

Kathleen is left holding one gift. She sets it on the desk.

KATHLEEN

Well, I'll leave you all to it. Since you're already back here, feel free to stay as long as you'd like. I'll be up front freeing up space in my fridge for casseroles.

Just as Kathleen moves to exit, Candace walks in.

KATHLEEN

Candace! This is a nice surprise. I thought I was going to have to mail this to you.

Kathleen grabs Candace's book and walks it to her.

CANDACE

Oh. Thank you.

KATHLEEN

(softly to her)

She'd be proud of you for coming.

Kathleen exits. Everyone stands dumbly, holding their gifts.

SAMI

(to Candace)

Hey. I thought you left.

CANDACE

I did.

Leigh cranes her neck to look at Elbia.

LEIGH
Family friend, huh?

ELBIA
Oh, so what? It's embarrassing.

LEIGH
It shouldn't be.

Jay reads the name written on his gift's wrapping paper. He gives a snort of disapproval. Tristan clocks it.

TRISTAN
What's up?

JAY
Nothing. She put my real name on it. She knows I hate my name.

TRISTAN
I get it. What's wrong with yours?

JAY
Nah, I'm good on that.

LEIGH
She used my real name, too. God, my real name sucks dick.
(beat)
Five bucks says mine's worse.

Jay softens. A smile nearly breaks through his grim facade.

JAY
That's an easy five bucks.

He shows her the name on his gift.

LEIGH
J'Mykill? Ha! Get your wallet out.

JAY
I mean, it sounds fine when you say it out loud. But it's spelled like "my kill." Like I'm proud of killing someone. It's messed up.
(beat)
Alright, your turn.

LEIGH
You wanna talk about spelling?

Leigh shows him the name on her gift.

JAY
Pay sleigh?

LEIGH
That is how it's spelled. But it's supposed to be like the pattern. Paisley. Which is a fucking ridiculous name anyway.

SAMI
OK, but wait. Sleigh is legit amazing. Like, it's a bit 2020, but you can slay with that name.

LEIGH
Huh. I hadn't thought of that.

SAMI
I gotchu.
(beat)
And it's not as dramatic as all yours, but Sami's not my full name. It's Samir.

He makes a gagging expression as he says it.

The tone in the room has done a complete 180. There's a palpable positive energy flowing. Tristan keys in on it. He watches as everyone begins opening up, smiling and excitedly sharing. *Connecting*. Wheels start turning in his head...

LEIGH
Well, J'Mykill. Where's my money?

Jay grins and reaches for his wallet.

CANDACE
Hold on.

Everyone, even Candace, seems surprised by her interruption.

CANDACE
I think mine might win.

SAMI
Hmmm. You sure? I don't think anything can top Pay Sleigh.

CANDACE
My name isn't Candace. It's Candy. Just Candy. I made it longer.

SAMI
Aw, Candy. Cute. I like it.

CANDACE
My last name is Kain.

They all recoil, horrified.

LEIGH
Sweet baby Jesus, we *all* owe you
five bucks for that atrocity.

CANDACE
I can't believe I told you guys
that. I haven't told anyone about
my name since, well, ever.

SAMI
I'm glad you did.
(to Tristan)
You must be hiding something, too.

Tristan snaps out of his reverie. He instinctively puts a hand
on the notebook pressed against his back. Then he relaxes.

TRISTAN
Actually, yeah. But I don't want
to one-up everyone.

LEIGH
You sure about that?

TRISTAN
OK, fine. If you insist.
(beat)
My name's not Tristan Cruze. I
changed it when I moved to LA. For
my acting career. It's... uhhh...

SAMI
Well? What is it?

TRISTAN
It's... Timothy Dahmer.

LEIGH
Oh. My. God. Dahmer?! Like the
serial killer?!

SAMI
Like the one from Netflix?! Ugh,
that show was so good. I've seen
all the serial killer shows.

LEIGH
Oh man, did you see the Ted Bundy
doc?

(MORE)

LEIGH (CONT'D)

That one was seriously fucked up.
You think he was a cannibal?

SAMI

Had to be. Right?

Tristan finally steps in.

TRISTAN

And *this* is why I changed my name.

SAMI

Yeah that tracks.

TRISTAN

Huh. I'm realizing now that I
never told Miriam my real name...

He looks at the name "Tristan" on his gift. The moment lands
with everyone in the room. Finally Jay breaks the silence.

JAY

So why'd you pick Cruze?

TRISTAN

I spell it C-R-U-Z-E. So it's not
like Tom Cruise. If that's what
you were thinking.

LEIGH

Well now that's what I'm thinking.

TRISTAN

Also 'C' is near the top of the
alphabet, which is always a plus.
And actors with the last name
Cruze seem to do well. So. Yeah.

Everyone considers this.

SAMI

Huh. Tom Cruise. Terry Crews.

ELBIA

Penelope Cruz.

SAMI

Yes! Wait, are there any others?
That's all I can think of.

JAY

Yeah, that's not that many.

TRISTAN

OK, there are three successful actors. That's still pretty good.

Sami turns to Elbia, who's been relatively silent until now.

SAMI

So what crazy name are you hiding?

ELBIA

Me? I've got nothing to hide. I think people should be proud of their names. I know I am. I like my name so much I didn't even change it when I got married.

LEIGH

Interesting.

SAMI

Yeah, that's not nothing.

TRISTAN

What is your name? I think yours is the only one we don't know.

ELBIA

It's Elbia Castillo. And this has been... something.

(beat, re: gift)

Now that I've got this, I guess there's nothing left for me here.

Elbia starts for the door. Tristan's phone BUZZES in his pocket. He pulls it out. "INCOMING CALL: JEREMY MACK (AGENT)". He stares at it, thoughts racing. Finally... he silences it.

TRISTAN

Wait!

It was louder than he intended. Everyone turns to stare at him.

TRISTAN

Before you go. I was, uh, thinking about what Kathleen said. And what Miriam said. About helping others. And, looking around this room, I dunno. Something feels right. I don't want to call it fate, but I feel like there's something here. The way we opened up and shared our real names. It felt good. It felt right. To me, anyway.

Tristan senses he's tapping into something true. The others sense it, too. Even Elbia. Encouraged, Tristan continues.

TRISTAN

When Kathleen called and told me about this gift, I thought it was odd that she was adamant about giving it to me at the wake.

(beat)

But what if this is what Miriam wanted? For us to all meet? Maybe that's the actual gift.

JAY

I dunno man. That's a bit woo-woo.

LEIGH

Dahmer over here might be right. Kathleen could've easily mailed some gifts. Miriam wanted us here.

ELBIA

OK, so we've all met. Gift received. I'm leaving now.

She starts toward the door again.

TRISTAN

I think we should all meet up.
(beat, off Elbia stopping)

We could get together, share stories about Miriam, and maybe talk through our problems.

(quickly defending)

It doesn't have to be group therapy or anything, but we all have this shared loss now. I know I need to process it. And no one knew Miriam the same way we did.

ELBIA

Sorry, but we're not therapists.

LEIGH

I do hair for a living, so I'm basically a therapist.

TRISTAN

Look, we could at least give it a shot. What do you guys say?

Off everyone's hesitation, we--

CUT TO:

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Tristan sits on his sofa. 'Dahmer' plays on the TV in the background. He focuses on his phone. He reads a text:

"Keep your head up. You'll book the next one."

Tristan closes it. Then he starts a new thread and types:

"Hey all! It's Tristan Cruze (aka Timothy Dahmer). I made a group thread so we can figure out if/when we want to meet up."

His thumb hovers over "send". Finally, he presses it. WHOOSH. Almost instantaneously... DING! A new message arrives.

"Samir here. I'm in! Let's get real squishy with this shit"

Tristan smiles. After a quick beat, another text comes in.

"Paysleigh (aka Sleigh aka Slay aka Leigh). I'm game"

Now another.

"J'Mykill. Name a time and place [surf's up emoji]."

And another.

[A GIF of Uncle Iroh from 'Avatar: The Last Airbender' dancing and saying "You've got to feel the flow"]

With an immediate followup text...

"It's Candy. That means I'll do it. But I reserve the right to back out at the last minute."

Tristan beams. He looks up at 'Dahmer' playing on the TV.

TRISTAN

I wish this show wasn't so good.

As we drift away from Tristan, we linger on two items on his kitchen counter: a brand new copy of 'The Little Prince' and the stolen COMPOSITION NOTEBOOK with his name on it.

SMASH TO:

TITLE CARD: GROUP THERAPY