

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

"The Wrong Planet"

Act One

[Draft 2]

FADE IN:

EXT. BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON - WHATCOM CREEK - DAY

Late-summer light coming down through evergreens in pieces. Water moving over stones. The particular green of the Pacific Northwest -- not bright, not dark. Alive.

MARY, nine, crouched at the water's edge. Mud to the knees. Still -- but there's no waiting in the stillness. No coiled patience. She's just here, all of her, poured into the water she's looking at.

Up the bank, behind her: a birthday party. Streamers through the trees, a folding table, a dozen kids. She came down here ten minutes ago and the party closed over the space where she'd been.

Her hand moves. We don't see her decide. There's no breath before it. The hand is in the water and then it's out, and there's a crayfish in her fist. A mason jar sits in the mud beside her. The crayfish goes in.

She looks at it. Not studying. Just looking -- the way you look when the sun comes out.

IZZY (7) appears at the top of the bank. Shorter, softer, watching her older sister the way you watch someone you're trying to learn from.

IZZY

Mary! They're doing cake!

Mary doesn't turn around.

MARY

Come look.

Izzy picks her way down. Looks in the jar.

IZZY

It's gross.

Mary looks up at her. Not hurt -- Mary doesn't do hurt, not yet. Just a flicker, like a radio caught between two stations. "Gross" doesn't land anywhere. She lifts the jar a little closer, as if Izzy maybe just couldn't see it from where she was.

MARY

Look at it.

EXT. BACKYARD - BIRTHDAY PARTY - CONTINUOUS

At the edge of the lawn, where the yard gives way to the trail down: TED (40s) stands with a paper plate he isn't eating from, looking down through the trees at his daughter in the creek.

Beside him, ANOTHER DAD follows his gaze.

OTHER DAD

She's fearless, that one.

TED

Yeah.

He says it like a man agreeing to the visible part of something much larger.

Behind them, LISA (40s, capable, present) is herding kids toward the cake table. She catches Ted's eye. He tilts his head toward the creek: she's down there. Lisa nods -- of course she is -- and lights the candles.

EXT. BACKYARD - LATER

Cake plates abandoned on the grass. Mary is back among the kids, mud drying on her shins, the mason jar held up at the center of a knot of children.

They crowd in. The crayfish waves its claws.

KID

Whoa. Why's one claw bigger?

MARY

Look how he holds it up.

She's not answering the question. She's pointing at the better thing. The kids look. The crayfish holds its big claw up like a boxer. The kids scream with joy.

SPENCER (12, glasses) looks up from a lawn chair, a book in his lap.

SPENCER

It regenerated. They regrow claws. Takes about a year.

Nobody's listening to Spencer. They're watching Mary, who has tipped the jar so the crayfish rows the air.

MARY

I'm putting him back. Come on.

And she just -- goes. Down the bank. And the whole knot of kids streams after her, cake forgotten, the birthday girl in front. It's not that Mary asked. She was sure, and the sureness came off her like heat, and they wanted to stand in it.

Two GIRLS stay behind on the patio. One says something to the other, low. They look down the bank after Mary and there's a look between them, quick, carrying something.

At the top of the trail, Mary glances back -- at the two who didn't come. She sees them. She sees the look.

She holds it a second, whatever it is. Then the creek takes her back.

Ted watches all of it from the edge of the lawn.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN/DINING - NIGHT

DINNER. And it is LOUD.

Not chaos -- weather. Mary, mid-story, at full volume, standing partway out of her chair to do the crayfish's boxer arms. Izzy laughing so hard she's in danger. Spencer trying to insert a correction --

SPENCER  
Crayfish don't box, they're  
defensive posturing --

MARY  
He was BOXING --

SPENCER  
-- it's called a meral spread --

MARY  
(total outrage)  
You weren't THERE --

-- and the outrage is real, flashes like sheet lightning,  
and is gone the same second, because Izzy has fallen off  
her chair, and Mary's laugh comes up from somewhere below  
the floor. Ted and Lisa ride it like people who have  
lived at this altitude for years.

LISA  
Elbows.

MARY  
(elbows off, not a  
beat missed)  
-- and then he SWAM, backwards,  
they swim BACKWARDS --

TED  
You know why? The tail flex is  
actually faster than --

MARY  
Because it's better.

Beat. Ted closes his mouth around the rest of the  
explanation. Fair enough.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - LATER

Dishes done. Quiet now, the good kind. Mary at the  
cleared table with a paint set and a big sheet of paper.  
Ted at the counter with the last of the coffee.

On the paper: a shape. Gray, wet, off-center. It is not  
anything. She works at one small corner of it with total  
attention.

TED

What's it going to be?

MARY

(not looking up)

It's not going to be anything.

She keeps painting. Ted drinks his coffee. Izzy's bath is running somewhere above. The gray shape gets a long low curve under it. Still nothing.

Ted watches. There is no sketch. There was never a sketch. Her brush goes where it goes, one true mark and then the next one, and he watches like a man following a sentence in a language he doesn't --

-- and then it has legs. And the low curve is water. And the gray was always, obviously, a heron -- standing in the shallows, exactly the way herons actually stand, that hunch like a folded umbrella. Of course. It's exactly that.

Mary drops her brush in the jar, done, and is gone -- thumping up the stairs -- before the water settles.

Ted stands alone with the heron. He looks at it a long time.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ted at the piano, a song half-figured-out under his hands. He tries a chord. It's wrong. He tries it another way. Wrong -- close, but the top of it is wrong, and he knows it's wrong, and he stares at the keys like they're withholding.

Mary crosses behind him, ten years old, an apple in one hand. Without stopping -- barely -- she reaches past his shoulder and puts her hand down on the keys.

The chord. THE chord -- the whole thing, the color of it, the note he'd never have found on top like a window opening.

She's already leaving.

TED

Where'd you get that?

MARY (O.S.)  
(from the hall, mouth  
full of apple)  
Get what?

Ted looks at his own hand on the keys. He plays her chord again, slowly, one note at a time, like a man taking apart a watch.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Izzy, eight now, arms up, tongue out, concentrating.

Mary demonstrates a cartwheel. It is perfect. Textbook. Wheel-spokes.

Izzy runs, flings herself sideways, and crumples into the grass like dropped laundry.

Mary looks at her. Demonstrates again. The SAME cartwheel, exactly, to the inch -- as if the first one is still hanging in the air and she's tracing it.

MARY  
Like that.

IZZY  
But what do I DO?

MARY  
What I did.

They stare at each other across a gap neither of them can see the bottom of. Izzy runs. Crumples.

Mary frowns -- not at Izzy. At the air the cartwheel should have happened in.

EXT. SOCCER FIELD - DAY - DRIZZLE

Girls' soccer, age ten, the Pacific Northwest version: everyone soaked, parents under umbrellas.

The ball moves and Mary is already there. Not fast -- that's not what it looks like. It looks like everyone else is reacting to the ball and Mary isn't reacting to anything. She and the ball just keep being in the same

place, the way the hand was in the creek before the decision was.

She scores. Her teammates mob her, shrieking. She's laughing, buried in the pile, alive --

-- and then she's jogging back upfield alone, done with the moment before the moment is done, eyes already on the ball.

On the sideline, Ted claps, rain running off his hood.

INT. DANCE STUDIO - NIGHT

Hard shoes on hardwood -- an IRISH DANCE class, eight girls in a line, a TEACHER counting.

Mary in the middle. Her feet are unbelievable. Precise, fast, joyful -- the drum of it -- and here, for once, the whole social world is simple: there are steps, the steps are right or wrong, everyone's eyes are forward, and Mary is EXACTLY what this room wants.

The girls finish, gasping, laughing. A girl, RUBY, grabs Mary's arm to keep from falling over. Mary lets her. This works. All of it. This room works.

TITLE CARD: Three years later.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

The sound arrives before the picture: slamming lockers, three hundred voices in a tiled canyon.

Mary, 13 now, taller, walks the hallway. Around her, kids move in pods -- twos and threes, forming and re-forming, a flock behavior with rules written nowhere.

She's not shy. That's the thing to see: she walks like she owns the place, eyes up, full volume in a school where every other girl has learned to walk small. It's armor on everyone else. It never was on her.

A knot of GIRLS she knows -- Ruby among them -- waves her over, phone out.

GIRL 1

Mary. Did you see what Alyssa posted?

Mary looks at the phone. A photo: a girl, posed, a sunset behind her.

GIRL 1 (CONT'D)  
She's literally copying Megan's whole thing now.

MARY  
What did she copy?

GIRL 2  
The pose? It's literally the same pose.

Mary looks at the photo again. Really looks -- the way she'd look into a creek.

MARY  
Everyone does that pose.

It's not a defense of Alyssa. It's a fact she found in the photo. The girls exchange a look -- quick, carrying something -- and Mary sees the look. She reads it the way she reads everything: perfectly, and only from the outside. Something happened just now. What happened is locked.

GIRL 1  
Okaaay.

The pod re-forms, a half-step, and Mary is somehow on the outside of it. The bell rings.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - DAY

Lunch. Mary at a table of girls. The conversation moves like water -- who said what, who's with who, alliances forming and dissolving mid-sentence.

Mary eats. Present. Not small -- never small -- just on the outside of a game that has no ball, no field, no steps, nothing to be exactly right at.

GIRL 1  
Mary. Jake or Ethan?

MARY

What?

GIRL 2

Who's cuter. Jake or Ethan.

MARY

(genuinely working  
on it)

For what?

The table LAUGHS. All of it -- some of the laughter is warm and some of it isn't, and Mary looks from face to face, sorting the two kinds exactly. That part she gets in one pass. It's everything else that's sealed.

GIRL 1

Oh my god. You're so random.

Mary smiles, a beat late. Under the table, her thumb finds the skin at the edge of her fingernail.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - ANOTHER DAY

Same table, same girls. A lull in the talk. Mary sits up.

MARY

There's a heron nest up the creek behind Sussex. The babies fledge this week. I'm going after school.

Silence. The kind with a shape to it.

RUBY

(kindly, which is  
worse)

Like -- why, though?

Mary looks at Ruby. The question doesn't land anywhere. Why. There is no why. The herons are THERE.

MARY

To see them.

GIRL 2

Have fun?

A ripple around the table, the look passing girl to girl like a note being handed under a desk, and Mary watches it pass, all the way around, in high resolution.

MARY

Okay.

She goes back to her sandwich. Full volume, undiminished, visibly fine. Whatever it costs is happening somewhere we can't see. Yet.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - A WEEK LATER

Mary arrives at the table carrying her backpack in front of her. Something in it is heavy.

She sets it down, unzips it, and lifts out a MASON JAR. Water. Weeds. And a salamander the color of wet rust, its ridiculous orange belly against the glass.

She sets it in the middle of the lunch table like a centerpiece. Like it's obvious. Like it's nine years ago and this always works.

MARY

Look at it.

Silence.

GIRL 2

Oh my GOD.

Not delight. A hand goes over a mouth. Somebody's milk almost comes up. And the phones -- three of them, up and out, that fast.

GIRL 1

(filming)

Mary. What. Is. That.

MARY

(to the good part)

It's a rough-skinned newt. The belly's a warning. He's the most poisonous animal in the whole state and he's in our CREEK --

She's radiant. She is completely certain, the sureness

coming off her like heat, and no one wants to stand in it, and around her the table is performing horror for each other's phones.

Mary sees it. Sees all of it -- every face, every phone, the warm laughter nowhere in the room. Her sentence just... runs out.

She looks at the newt. The newt looks back. The only two creatures at the table with no idea what just happened.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Phone light on her face.

The video. Her own face on the little screen, radiant, saying "look at it" -- and the caption, and the laughing emojis stacked up like a hand over a mouth. She scrolls. Comments. She reads all of them. She doesn't put the phone down until she has read all of them.

Then she's at her mirror.

She looks at her own face the way she looked at the photo of Alyssa. Really looks. Turns it. Pulls the skin of her cheek tight, lets it go. Looks at her nose from the left. From the right. Lifts her shirt hem: looks at the stomach, grabs the skin of it, hard, harder than examination needs --

-- and lets go, and pulls the shirt down, and stands there breathing at herself.

On the desk behind her: the mason jar, empty now, holding paintbrushes. The water long gone.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner. Four places set -- Spencer's chair has become the mail chair, stacked with catalogs. He's seventeen, mostly gone already, college brochures in the stack.

It is LOUD. But listen: the register has changed.

MARY

-- because it's DISGUSTING,  
I'm not eating something's LEG,

why does everyone act like  
that's normal --

LISA  
It's the same chicken as last  
week, you loved it last week --

MARY  
Last week I didn't THINK about  
it. God. Why would you say  
that? Now I'm thinking about it.

She shoves the plate. Not at anyone -- away. It stops  
against the water glass, chicken untouched, and now  
watch: Lisa's eyes go to the plate. Weigh it. Say  
nothing. There's a whole scale in that glance.

IZZY  
(small, testing the  
weather)  
Can I have it?

MARY  
(whipping around, full  
volume, all of it  
real)  
WHY does everyone CARE what I  
EAT?

Silence. Izzy looks down.

And then Mary's face does something complicated --  
lightning that can't find ground -- and she's up, chair  
scraping, gone. Feet hard on the stairs. A door.

Ted looks at Lisa. Lisa is still looking at the plate.

TED  
(calling upstairs,  
reasonable, so  
reasonable)  
Mary, come on back. We're just  
having dinner. Nobody's --

A sound from upstairs. Something hitting a wall.

Izzy eats her cereal-sized bites, eyes down, a kid  
making herself smaller at the table where her sister  
used to do the crayfish's boxing arms.

INT. IZZY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Izzy in bed, lamp off. Through the wall: Mary's voice -- not words, just the shape of rage, rising, cracking. Something falls or is thrown. Then crying, the kind that sounds like it hurts the throat.

Izzy pulls the covers up to her nose. She's eleven. She is learning to read weather through a wall.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - ANOTHER NIGHT

A knock. Ted's head around the door: Mary is on her bed, back against the headboard, knees up, phone face-down beside her. Contained. For now.

TED

Hey, kid. Got a minute?

Nothing. He comes in anyway, sits on the end of the bed. He's rehearsed this on the drive home; you can tell because it comes out so smooth.

TED (CONT'D)

Mom told me what happened with the -- at lunch. The video.

(beat)

Kids are idiots. You know that, right? Thirteen-year-olds are literally insane, their brains aren't done, it's not about you --

On "it's not about you": Mary's shoulder tightens. A small thing. He doesn't see it -- he's looking at his hands, building the next reasonable sentence.

TED (CONT'D)

-- everybody goes through this. I promise. I know it doesn't feel like it, but when I was your age --

Her thumb finds the skin at the edge of her nail. Digs.

TED (CONT'D)

-- and you know what, in five years none of these kids will even --

(he stops himself;  
new approach; gentler)  
Just -- help me out here. Talk  
to me. What's going on with  
you? Because this isn't you.  
Where's the kid who --

MARY  
(very quiet)  
Stop.

TED  
-- who'd walk into a room full  
of strangers holding a snake --

MARY  
Stop. Stop --

TED  
I'm trying to HELP you, I just  
want to understand what --

MARY  
(a scream, hands over  
her ears, total)  
STOP!

Silence. Ted, frozen, half off the bed. He was being  
gentle. Every word of that was love. He looks at his  
daughter -- knees up, hands over her ears, face turned  
away like someone shielding from heat --

-- and he does the only thing left. He goes.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Ted stands outside her closed door. Inside: breathing,  
trying to slow itself.

He raises his hand to knock again. Doesn't. Stands  
there, a man holding a toolbox in front of a fire.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Lisa at the counter, tea going cold. Ted comes down,  
sits. A long moment.

TED

I don't know what I said.

LISA

I know.

The way she says it. He looks at her. She holds his look, and there's no blame in it -- just two people reading the same page of a manual for a machine neither of them was issued.

INT./EXT. - VARIOUS - THE NARROWING

No music. Or almost none. Days doing what days do:

-- The bathroom, morning. Mary on the scale. We don't see the number. We see her step off, step on again, as if the scale might have gotten it wrong. Step off. Take off her hoodie. Step on again.

-- Breakfast. A plate with half a piece of toast, engineered to look eaten -- torn, redistributed, the crumbs arranged. Lisa clears it without a word. Weighs it in her hand on the way to the sink. That scale again, the one in her eyes.

-- School drop-off. Mary in the passenger seat, hood up, July outside. Lisa's eyes flick to the sleeves pulled down over Mary's hands. Back to the road.

-- The dance studio, through the window: the line of girls drumming the floor. Mary's spot in the middle: someone else in it.

-- Mary's bedroom, glimpsed through the door: the drawings coming off the walls. Not torn down -- removed, neatly, one at a time, leaving pale rectangles like the outlines at a crime scene.

-- Night. The kitchen. Lisa on the phone, low, one hand flat on the counter like she's holding it down.

LISA

(into phone)

...twice. She went twice and said it was pointless... no, I know. I know that's what they do, but she won't --

(listening)

...yeah. No. We can't MAKE her

go, she's --  
    (listening; then,  
    barely)  
I don't know. That's the thing.  
I don't know.

-- The upstairs bathroom, day, empty. Lisa with a plastic grocery bag, moving through it quietly: razors. The scissors from the drawer. A prescription bottle. She's fast and thorough, someone doing a task she has read about doing, hating every second --

-- and in the mirror over the sink: MARY, in the doorway, watching her mother do it.

Lisa stops. Neither of them says anything. There is nothing to say that wouldn't be a question or an answer, and neither exists. Lisa ties the bag. Mary watches her carry it past, out, gone.

Hold on Mary in the empty bathroom. In the mirror where her mother just was: her own face.

EXT. FAMILY HOME - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Spencer's little Honda, packed to the ceiling. College. The family on the driveway -- Ted, Lisa, Izzy hugging Spencer around the neck.

Spencer looks up. Second-floor window: a curtain, not moving. Whether she's behind it, we can't tell. Neither can he.

                  SPENCER  
                  (to Lisa, quiet)  
Tell her I said --

He doesn't finish it, because there's no end to that sentence that does anything. Lisa nods anyway. The Honda backs out. Izzy waves until it's gone, then keeps standing there, the family shrinking by one on a lawn that used to hold a whole birthday party.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DAY - IZZY'S 12TH BIRTHDAY

Streamers. A folding table. A cake. The same backyard through the windows, but the party's inside this year -- October, rain. A dozen of Izzy's friends, a couple of

AUNTS AND UNCLES, noise.

And MARY. Downstairs. Present. Hood down, sleeves down, at the edge of the kitchen. Standing very still --

-- and this stillness we haven't seen before. Not the creek stillness. This is the stillness of a held thing. Of will. She is doing something enormously difficult that looks like standing in a kitchen doing nothing, and only Izzy -- who keeps glancing over, hopeful -- seems to know it's a gift.

AUNT KAREN  
(arriving, delighted,  
loud)  
THERE she is! Miss Instagram!  
We never see you anymore!

Mary's jaw sets. Holding.

AUNT KAREN (CONT'D)  
(holding Mary at  
arm's length, the  
once-over, fond)  
Look how GROWN UP -- god,  
you're all cheekbones now,  
are you eating enough? What  
are they feeding you --

The room's noise pushes in. Karen's hands on her arms. The once-over, the cheekbones, the eating --

AUNT KAREN (CONT'D)  
-- and I want to hear  
EVERYTHING, how's school, do  
you have a boyfriend, what --

MARY  
Don't TOUCH me --

It comes out at a volume that stops the room. Karen's hands fly back. And it's already too late, the held thing is out --

MARY (CONT'D)  
(to Karen, to the  
room, to everything,  
shaking)  
-- and stop LOOKING at me,  
all of you, stop --

She's backing up. Her hip catches the counter, and the sheet cake -- Izzy's, candles not yet lit, HAPPY BIRTHDAY IZZY in blue -- slides, tips --

-- and hits the floor, face down.

Total silence. A dozen twelve-year-olds staring. Karen's hands over her mouth. Frosting on the tile.

Izzy, by the table. Looking at the cake. Then at her sister. And Izzy's face isn't angry -- it's worse, it's frightened, and Mary reads that face in one pass, in high resolution, the way she reads everything --

She bolts. Feet on the stairs. A door.

Nobody moves. Then Lisa is on her knees with paper towels, and the room restarts around her in that awful bright way rooms do.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - THAT EVENING

Party over. Paper plates in a trash bag by the stairs. The house quiet and bruised.

Ted comes up the stairs. Stops at Mary's door. Knocks, soft.

TED

Mary.

Nothing.

TED (CONT'D)

I'm not -- I just want to talk.

The door opens. A crack. Mary in the gap, eyes swollen, face gray. She got there before he knocked -- apologizing is a thing with steps and she has already done the steps:

MARY

I said sorry to her. I wrote it. I put it under her door.

TED

Okay. That's -- good, that's a start. But --

And he shouldn't say the next thing. Watch him not be able to stop the next thing:

TED (CONT'D)

-- what HAPPENED down there?  
Karen was just being Karen.  
She was happy to see you. She  
loves you, and you --  
    (softer, leaning in,  
    the gentlest  
    interrogation ever  
    conducted)  
-- help me. What's going ON  
with you? Just tell me what's  
going on.

MARY

I don't know.

TED

You don't know.

MARY

I DON'T KNOW.

TED

Okay. Okay.  
    (a breath; he  
    regroups; he comes  
    back with love and  
    a scalpel)  
It's her BIRTHDAY, Mary. You  
saw her face. I'm not asking  
you to be perfect, I'm asking --

MARY

    (and here it is,  
    the plainest  
    sentence in the  
    world, hands open)  
I just don't know what you  
want me to do.

TED

I don't want you to DO  
anything. I just want you to  
understand what you did.

Hold.

Two sentences, hanging in a hallway, four feet and no distance at all and an unbridgeable distance apart.

Mary looks at him. And what crosses her face isn't defiance -- it's the thing from the cafeteria, the sentence running out, the burn arriving whole. She takes it the way you take heat: a flinch that starts at the eyes.

The door closes. Soft. The softness is worse than a slam.

Ted stands in the hallway. He replays it -- you can see him replay it -- and find nothing wrong in it. He said the loving thing. He asked her to understand. That's all he asked.

He stands there a long time.

INT. FAMILY HOME - VARIOUS - THE SILENCE

And now the house goes quiet, and the quiet is the loudest thing in the movie so far.

-- The dinner table, four plates once, then three, and now: Ted, Lisa, Izzy, eating. The clink of forks. Mary's chair, empty. Nobody does bits. Izzy doesn't test the weather because there is no weather. That's the horror.

-- Izzy in bed, lamp off, listening at the wall.

Nothing.

She presses her ear against it. Nothing.

-- Mary's door, from the hallway, closed, the light off under it at 4 PM.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY

The room, what's left of it. Walls bare except the pale rectangles. The sewing machine gone into the closet. The terrarium empty and dry on the shelf, a clean glass box with nothing in it.

Mary sits on the floor, back against the bed. Hoodie, sleeves over her hands. Very still.

And here is the terrible thing, the thing the whole first act has taught us to see: it's the creek stillness. That total, poured-out presence, all of her attention on one thing --

-- except the thing is nothing. There's nothing in front of her. All that perception, the whole roaring apparatus of her, aimed at a patch of carpet.

The light from the window crosses the floor. The furnace comes on, and off. Downstairs a phone rings and is answered and the house murmurs and goes quiet again.

We stay here. Too long. Long enough that we understand: this is what the end looks like. Not a gesture. A girl who has stopped.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - 2 A.M.

One light on. Ted and Lisa at the table. This is not the first 2 a.m. and the table knows it.

LISA

Dr. Foss says there's an adolescent program at Children's. In Seattle.

TED

Inpatient?

LISA

Partial. Days.

TED

So we find -- okay. Okay. We get her assessed, we get on the list, I can drive her down Mondays if you take --

LISA

Ted.

TED

-- we make it work, people make it --

LISA

Ted. She won't get in the car.

Beat.

TED  
Then I'll carry her.

He means it. And he knows it's absurd, and his voice cracks on it, and Lisa reaches across the table and takes his hand.

TED (CONT'D)  
I keep thinking if I could  
just get her to TALK to me.  
If she'd just tell me what's  
wrong, I could --

LISA  
I know you do.

Something in the way she says it. Not an accusation. An observation, worn smooth from handling. Ted looks at her --

TED  
What does that mean?

LISA  
(too tired to build  
the sentence that  
would explain it;  
and anyway she  
doesn't have it  
either)  
Nothing. I don't know.

Silence. The refrigerator hums. Upstairs, a floorboard: or nothing.

TED  
(to the table, quiet,  
a man laying down  
the toolbox)  
We're at the end here.

Lisa doesn't correct him.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark. Mary on her bed, on her side, phone up, the glow

on her face. Scrolling with a dead thumb. Not reading. Just the motion, like a body rocking itself.

A video goes by. Then another. Then --

-- a dog.

A BORDER COLLIE, mid-air, threading a line of weave poles. Mary's thumb stops.

ON THE PHONE: the dog blows through the poles, misses the fourth, skids out. And the TRAINER -- a woman in a muddy yard somewhere -- doesn't correct it. Doesn't say no. Just resets, easy, cheerful, and the dog comes around and tries again, and misses again --

-- and nothing happens. Nothing bad happens. The dog gets it wrong and nothing bad happens --

-- and the third time it THREADS them, all six, and the whole video is the trainer and the dog losing their minds together in a muddy yard.

Mary watches it again.

The autoplay takes her: another trainer. A down-stay. A dog failing, failing, failing, getting a treat ANYWAY -- "we reward the try," the tiny voice says from the phone -- and Mary's face in the glow is doing something we haven't seen it do in half a movie.

We don't get a name for it. We just get: she watches another. And another.

The window behind her goes from black to blue. Birds start up. She's still watching -- sitting up now, knees under her, the phone in both hands like a bowl of water.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

Lisa comes down in her robe, half-asleep, on autopilot toward the coffee maker --

-- and stops.

Mary is at the kitchen table.

Downstairs. At the table. At 7 A.M. The shock of it

crosses Lisa's face and she smothers it fast, the way you don't startle a bird that's landed on you.

Mary turns the phone around. Holds it out. On the screen: the border collie, the poles.

MARY

Look at this.

Lisa comes and looks. It's a dog video. She watches it with the caution of someone being handed something that might be load-bearing.

LISA

(carefully)

That's a smart dog.

MARY

Watch what she does when he gets it wrong.

Lisa watches. The miss. The cheerful reset.

LISA

She just... starts over.

MARY

Nothing happens.

Lisa looks at her daughter. Mary is looking at the phone, running the moment again, the miss and the nothing, the miss and the nothing.

Lisa doesn't understand what she's being shown. She understands only that her daughter is downstairs, showing it to her. She would watch dog videos for a thousand years.

LISA

Show me another one.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING - DAYS LATER

Both parents at breakfast. Mary comes in -- comes IN, sits, at the table, third morning in a row, and Ted is still not used to it, his coffee stops halfway --

MARY

I need a dog.

Beat.

TED

A dog.

MARY

An Australian Shepherd.

Ted sets the coffee down. And -- watch him, he can't help it, it's how he's built -- he reaches for the toolbox:

TED

Okay. Well -- let's talk about it, because a dog's a big -- they're a working breed, Mare, they need hours a day. And we're not really a -- somebody has to walk it, train it, at some point school's going to --

The reasons come out in their reasonable rows. And Mary just -- lets them. They go past her like weather going past a house.

MARY

I need a dog.

Not louder. Not pleading. The same fact, laid down again, and with it that old heat, the sureness coming off her -- and Ted feels it before he can name it, feels the room change the way it hasn't changed in a year: his daughter is SURE of something.

LISA

(before Ted can  
build another  
paragraph)

We'll talk about it.

Mary nods. Gets up. Takes -- note it -- a piece of toast. Goes.

Ted looks at Lisa: what just happened?

Lisa looks at the toast plate: one piece gone.

INT./EXT. FAMILY HOME - VARIOUS - THE CAMPAIGN

She doesn't ask again. That's not how this works. What happens instead:

-- The living room TV, commandeered: training videos, sound UP, hours of them. Heeling. Recall. Shaping. The house has a voice in it again, even if the voice is a lady from a dog channel saying "yes! good!"

-- Dinner. Mary, absently, practicing a hand signal over her plate -- a flat palm, up. Across the table, IZZY, deadpan, sits up straight.

Mary looks at her. Izzy looks back. Neither smiles.

Mary gives the palm again. Izzy sits taller.

Ted and Lisa, at either end of the table, do not breathe. The girls hold it, hold it -- and break, both at once --

-- and the sound Mary makes is a LAUGH, and it's hers -- the one from below the floor, the crayfish laugh, extinct for a year -- and Ted has to look at his plate because his eyes are suddenly a problem.

-- The backyard, rain. Mary, hood up, hammering something: PVC pipe, six lengths of it, set upright in a line in the wet grass. Weave poles. She's building them from a video, from nothing, for a dog that does not exist.

-- The kitchen window, night. Ted and Lisa, dishes forgotten, looking out at the poles standing crooked in the rain like a fence around nothing.

LISA

It's not about the dog. You know that.

TED

I know. But what else are we doing that's working?

Lisa dries her hands. Looks back out the window.

LISA

(the real fear)

And if she crashes? If it's like the dance, like school,

like everything since -- if  
this goes too, then what?

TED

Then we're where we already  
are.

Beat. That's the whole argument, and they both know  
which way it points. Lisa folds the towel.

LISA

She named a price, at least.  
First thing she's asked for  
in a year.

TED

(looking at the  
poles)  
She didn't ask.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner, all four. Mary's plate is strategic geography,  
mostly untouched, but she's HERE.

TED

We want to talk to you about  
the dog.

Mary goes still. Braced -- and it's awful, how visibly  
she's braced, how much of her is riding on this. Izzy  
looks from face to face.

LISA

We're going to say yes.

Mary doesn't jump up. Doesn't scream. She nods -- once  
-- like someone receiving confirmation that the  
surgery is scheduled.

MARY

There's a breeder in Oregon.  
She has one left from the  
spring litter. A girl.

TED

(a beat)  
We know. We called her  
Tuesday.

Mary looks up.

For a second nobody moves. Something is crossing the table between Mary and her father, and it doesn't have words and doesn't need any: they went ahead of her. They called Tuesday.

MARY

When can we go?

LISA

Saturday.

Mary nods again. Under the table her hands are shaking. Izzy sees it. Izzy's hand slides over, quiet as a note passed under a desk, and lands on Mary's knee.

Mary lets it stay.

EXT. INTERSTATE 5 SOUTH - DAY - RAIN

The minivan in the left lane, wipers going, the green corridor of I-5 sliding past. Two hundred miles of this.

INSIDE: Ted driving. Lisa shotgun. Izzy in back with headphones. Mary, middle row, window seat, forehead almost on the glass.

Nobody has spoken since Mount Vernon. The van is heavy with the thing nobody will say: this is a Hail Mary. They are driving two hundred miles to hand their daughter's life to a puppy.

TED

(into the silence,  
gamely)

There's a Burgerville in  
Centralia.

MARY

No.

More miles. Lisa turns around in her seat.

LISA

What are you going to name

her?

MARY

I don't know yet. I have to  
meet her first.

Lisa turns back. She and Ted trade a glance across the console -- and the hope in it is so naked that both of them look away from each other, back at the road, the rain.

EXT. BREEDER'S PROPERTY - RURAL OREGON - DAY

A modest house, a big fenced yard, firs dripping. The BREEDER, CAROL (50s, weathered, kind the way vets and farmers are kind -- no cooing), meets them at the gate.

CAROL

You must be Mary.

Mary nods. From behind the house: barking, high and young.

Carol leads them around back to a pen. FOUR PUPPIES -- Australian Shepherds, nine weeks, merle and tricolor, an avalanche of them, all paws and teeth, wrestling in the dirt.

And ONE, at the back. Black tri, white blaze. Not timid -- separate. Sitting apart, watching everything with two different-colored eyes.

Mary opens the gate and gets on her knees in the dirt. Doesn't reach for anything. Doesn't call. Just kneels there --

-- the creek stillness. All of her, poured out, here.

The avalanche hits her: puppies over her knees, tugging her sleeves, joy in the fur. She receives them with her hands but her face is past them, on the one at the back, and the one at the back is looking at her.

The avalanche gets bored. Tumbles off to fight itself.

The yard goes almost quiet.

The puppy at the back stands. And crosses the pen -- not bouncing, not puppy-shaped movement at all,

something more like the hand going into the water -- straight to Mary. And sits. Directly in front of her. Looking up.

Mary looks down.

Two creatures looking at each other with nothing in between. No pose. No performance. Nothing to decode. It is the first time in three years we have watched Mary be looked at without being read wrong -- because this one isn't reading anything. This one is just looking.

Mary puts her hand out, low, palm up. The puppy pushes her nose into it -- then walks the last step in and LEANS, full weight, into Mary's chest. And stays.

CAROL

Huh.

(beat)

She doesn't do that.

Mary's arms come around the puppy. Her face goes down into the fur and disappears there.

We can't see her expression. We can see her shoulders. They're shaking.

At the fence: Lisa with both hands over her mouth. Ted with his hand on Lisa's back, his jaw working. Izzy crouched at the wire, twelve years old, watching something good happen to her sister for the first time in living memory.

Mary lifts her head. Wet face, dog fur stuck to it.

MARY

(to the puppy)

Okay.

(beat)

Okay. Let's go home.

INT. MINIVAN - I-5 NORTH - DUSK

Rain gone. The sky doing its held-breath silver.

Mary in the middle row. The puppy asleep in her lap, boneless, draped like something poured. Mary's hand rides the little ribs, up and down, up and down.

Izzy leans over the seat back, chin on her hands.

IZZY  
(whispering)  
What's her name?

Mary looks at the puppy a moment.

MARY  
Secret.

IZZY  
Why Secret?

Mary looks out the window. The green going by, the first stars over the trees.

She doesn't answer.

It isn't coy and it isn't a secret. There's just nothing where the answer would be -- the name arrived the way the chord arrives, the way the heron arrives. Izzy waits, then accepts it the way she accepts gravity, and reaches down to touch one ear, gently, with one finger.

FRONT SEAT: Ted's eyes flick up to the rearview mirror. He mouths it at Lisa, silent:

TED  
(mouthed)  
Secret?

Lisa shrugs: don't look at me.

Ted's eyes go back to the road. Around a long curve, Bellingham-bound, the whole family pointed the same direction in the dark, and in the middle of it, in Mary's lap: a small breathing thing that will not leave her side for seven years.

EXT. FAMILY HOME - BELLINGHAM - BLUE HOUR

The minivan in the driveway, doors open, dome light on. Mary carries the puppy onto the lawn and sets her down in the wet grass.

Secret sniffs the whole world. The grass. The air off

the mountains. The crooked PVC poles standing in the yard -- built weeks ago for exactly her, before she existed.

She looks back at Mary.

Mary kneels. Secret crosses the grass and leans into her, and the two of them stay like that in the blue hour, the house glowing warm behind them, Izzy's face at the window, and for the first time since the walls went bare --

-- we can take a breath.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE