

DEFAULT

by

Mark Tenn

ECU: A BROWN PAISLEY SHIRT POCKET - DAY

White stitching around the rim looks like a hand-repair job -- and a botched one at that.

EXT. MIDDLE SCHOOL YARD - DAY

In the shirt is NELSON MORENO, a chubby ten-year-old black boy leaning against the yard fence. Beneath the open shirt is a t-shirt of E.T. and "Be Good". Nelson's watching the recess fun from behind glasses and a frayed baseball cap worn low.

TWO GIRLS (10) approach. Nelson peers over at TWO TEACHERS chatting amongst themselves across the yard. They're oblivious to us over here.

Nelson dips into his backpack, pulls out two small kitchen paper parcels and hands them over. The girls give Nelson some change and leave. Nelson drops the money into his shirt pocket.

Two boys, TREY (13) and REZA (11) step up, laughing at some joke. Nelson grips his backpack tighter. Trey grins at Nelson.

TREY

Well?

Nelson peers past Trey at the teachers -- hoping for attention this time -- but Trey pokes his belly and leers in.

TREY

Well?!

Nelson refocuses. He dips into his backpack and gives them each a parcel.

Trey reaches into his pocket and pulls out "the finger". Reza guffaws. Trey shoves the finger into Nelson's shirt pocket. Nelson pulls away, but the pocket rips spilling loose change everywhere. Cackling, Trey shoves Nelson against the fence. Re his t-shirt--

TREY

"Be good" asshole.

Nelson watches them saunter off. School bell rings -- later:

EXT. SCHOOL GATES - DAY

Kids drain out onto the street, Nelson among them. As he shuffles along he watches a BLACK DAD (late 30s) warmly greet his DAUGHTER (10) across the road. The dad takes her backpack. Hugs, conversation about her day.

It's something Nelson doesn't have walking here on his own, and it's clear he feels that.

The dad and daughter get in a car and drive off -- past Trey and Reza walking up ahead. Nelson halts. He turns and heads in the opposite direction.

CUT TO:

A SIGN: "DO NOT ENTER - SWIFT CURRENT AT TIDAL CHANGE" ON A CHAINLINK GATE

PULL OUT as we hear Nelson toss his backpack over the gate. The gate jostles and rattles. Nelson appears on the other side having squeezed through the loosely padlock-chained gate which comes into view. He gathers his backpack and ambles away from us down a marshland trail.

EXT. MARSHLAND TRAIL - DAY

Nelson scuttles past reed grass as tall as he is. He skips stones across the still water. It's peaceful but for the low rush of highway traffic somewhere not too far. Nelson skips a stone, steps into the reed grass and disappears.

Swaying reeds.
Rushing traffic.
Rippling water.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Traffic thunders by. Across the road, thick bushes line the verge. Nelson emerges from within. He picks his moment then dashes across the road.

EXT. CHINESE TAKEOUT - DAY

Nelson heads inside.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING FOYER - DAY

CLOSE ON A MAILBOX. We hear Nelson enter from the street. He opens the mailbox, grabs the mail, shuts the box. We stay on the box as we hear Nelson lug his backpack and a plastic takeout bag up the stairs.

INT. REFRIGERATOR DOOR - DAY

We're looking at items magnetized to the fridge door: coupons, pictures, menu. It's quiet in here, but the ceiling THUMPS from kids running up and down upstairs to the faint din of the street outside. We may notice a photo of Nelson and a black woman in Halloween costumes. It's a fun pose.

We hear the front door open, Nelson shuffle in, and the door close.

Nelson shuffles through the frame as we CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN COUNTER - DAY

--and the mail lands. "Past due" bills. Fortune cookies land on top as we hear Nelson open two Chinese takeout boxes.

NELSON (O.S.)
Oh come on....

CUT TO:

Nelson using a fork to pick out CELERY PIECES from noodles in one of the boxes and drop them into a trash can. Satisfied, he closes the box and puts it in the fridge. He grabs the other box and exits.

INT. NELSON'S BEDROOM - DAY

Nelson removes a shoe, reaches in and pulls out some dollar bills. He stuffs them into a tin and shoves it under his bed.
CUT TO--

LATER

Nelson on his bed slurping noodles from a takeout box. The ceiling THUMPS as he watches the street out his window. Sound of the front door opening.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Stack of business 101 textbooks and binders on the counter. UMA MORENO (black, 30s) is texting on her phone with one hand. In the other she holds up a takeout box up and bites down on the brimming noodles. Nelson enters unnoticed and watches.

Beat. The ceiling THUMPS.

Uma looks up and -- startled by the sight of Nelson -- she screams and drops the box.

UMA
Shit!

NELSON
Sorry.

UMA
Nelson, honey....

Nelson looks at the noodles splayed on the floor. Uma exhales relieved.

NELSON
You're home early.

Uma's phone dings. She checks the message.

The ceiling THUMPS continue. Nelson crouches down and starts scooping noodles back into the box.

NELSON
Vegetable Lo Mein. No celery.

Uma taps her phone as she gets down and takes over scooping noodles off the floor.

UMA
And extra Clorox. Watch, I'll eat
this and grow two heads.

She spots the frayed remains of Nelson's shirt pocket. She leans back and cocks her head at Nelson, incredulous. Ashamed, Nelson covers it with both hands.

NELSON
Got caught. Again. Was a fence.
Again.

Uma sighs, knows it's a lie. She rises and grabs a fork.

UMA
You gotta grow up faster than
this, Nelson.

She exits for the--

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

--and drops into the couch.

UMA
Take control. I can't be there all
the time. You gotta carry
yourself.

She shovels noodles. Nelson appears at the doorway.

UMA
I mean, look at me. Do I look like
a man?

NELSON
(of course not)
You're pretty.

UMA
(didn't hear him, shoveling
noodles)
No, I don't look like a man, but
people don't come at me you know
why? Cos I carry myself so folks
know there's a line that says
"stop motherfucker. You cross, you
die."

Her phone dings from the kitchen. Uma waves her fork at the
kitchen.

UMA
Honey, can you...

Nelson exits. Uma keeps eating.

UMA
It's just you and me babe, so it's
up to you.

Nelson returns and hands Uma her phone. Uma holds onto his
hand.

UMA
You're my Nelson. I love you with
all my heart. But showing you how
to be a man isn't a job I'm built
for.

Uma glances at her phone. Smiles at the screen and lets go of
Nelson's hand. She rummages in her purse.

UMA
Look, I switched shifts with
Rashida. Wanna go see a movie?

NELSON
(pleasantly surprised)
Yeah, sure.

ON NELSON as Uma hands up some dollar bills which he takes,
warmed.

UMA
Go on and get yourself some
popcorn, okay.

STAY ON NELSON'S DISAPPOINTMENT as Uma jumps up, kisses him on the forehead and exits. Nelson considers the bills -- five dollars. We hear the shower switch on.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Nelson disappears into his bedroom. Uma cuts through from the bathroom into her bedroom.

UMA (O.S.)
(yelling)
Gary's coming over, so you might
wanna hop around a couple of
movies, okay?

Nelson reappears from his room with a few more bills and wearing his cap. He shuffles out the front door which closes with a quiet CLICK and leaves us there alone in the hallway.

UMA (O.S.)
(still yelling)
I told Gary eight, so you might
wanna get a move on, babe.

CUT TO:

BLACK.

We hear the flow of formidable pissing into a toilet. Continues over--

INT. APARTMENT - MORNING

-- EMPTY WINE BOTTLES AND CAPSIZED GLASSES in the living room
-- The HALLOWEEN FRIDGE PHOTO
-- The BUSINESS 101 TEXTBOOKS
-- FORTUNE COOKIES on the kitchen counter

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

Empty. Still the thunderous pissing. Nelson appears from his bedroom. He's half asleep, wearing nothing but white briefs. He shuffles to the--

INT. BATHROOM - MORNING

--but stops short at the open door.

Inside, a TALL, NUDE, BURLY WHITE MAN -- presumably, GARY -- is pissing a torrent. Arms limp at his side, his handsfree aim is erratic. Urine SPLASHES the rim and SOAKS the floor.

Nelson regards Gary. The BLOND WAVY HAIR. The MUSCULAR CONTOURS OF HIS BACK. His BRAWNY ARMS. His WEDDING RING....

The pissing ceases. (Without flushing) Gary staggers out past Nelson as if he weren't there and disappears into Uma's room.

Nelson stares at the urine puddle on the bathroom floor.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Now dressed for school, Nelson slices a sandwich into quarters. He wraps a wedge in kitchen paper and adds it to a pile of kitchen paper parcels on the counter.

Nelson loads up his backpack with the parcels.

Nelson unwraps a fortune cookie, breaks it and pops a piece in his mouth. He reads the fortune and drops it into the trash can. The trash is brimming with yesterday's mail.

ON NELSON as something in the trash catches his eye. He looks to the doorway, then back down at the trash.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

A SUBSTITUTE TEACHER, kicked back up front, idly scrolling his phone.

Nelson flattens out a creased up letter on his desk. Discover "NELSON MORENO" printed on the page.

Nelson stares at his name. Suddenly, a paper ball hits him in the head. Trey and Reza crack up. Nelson ignores them.

(Throughout the scene, paper balls will hit Nelson. He will ignore them, but they will increasingly exacerbate his growing anxiety)

Nelson turns back to the letter. We catch details like:

"FAMILY COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK" -- "NOTICE TO APPEAR"
-- "WITNESS" -- "UMA MORENO"

Nelson flips a dictionary. Stops. His finger traces the page:

"Default: Failure to perform a task or fulfill an obligation, especially failure to meet a financial obligation."

NELSON
 "Obligation".

His finger traces: "A social, legal, or moral requirement."

He scans the letter. Then searches the dictionary. Stops at:

"Filiation: The state or fact of being a son or daughter of a certain parent."

ON NELSON:

NELSON
 ..."Judicial determination of
 paternity."

He frowns confused. Flips dictionary to find:

"Paternity: The state of being a father. Fatherhood."

He sits back, stunned. He leans back over the letter and reads

NELSON (CONT'D)
 "Mr. Kofi Suleiman."

It's clear this information is new to him. His finger runs back and forth over Kofi's printed name as if testing durability.

Suddenly, another paper ball SMACKS Nelson in the face. He reels. Trey and Reza guffaw.

Nelson closes the dictionary and picks it up. He walks over to Trey and SMASHES the book flat into Trey's face.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - LATER

We're at one end of a long, empty hallway. At the far end is the principal's office. Long beat.

Nelson exits the office alone. He walks down the long hallway towards us.

Then as he passes a doorway, an arm suddenly reaches out and yanks him into--

INT. BOY'S RESTROOM - DAY

--where a punch to Nelson's face puts him down sprawling. His glasses skitter to the wall. Before he knows what's happening, a foot swings into his gut. Nelson coils tight, winded.

Trey leers over him. There's a bandaid across his swollen nose. Reza hangs by the door, afraid.

Trey empties Nelson's backpack onto the floor -- books, pens, sandwich parcels splay everywhere.

TREY
Check his pockets.

Reza is frozen. Trey turns to him.

TREY
Reza come on, check his pockets!

Reza eases over to Nelson. He rifles through his pockets but only finds the court letter. Trey snatches it.

TREY
This it? Where's the money?

He crumples the letter into a ball and dumps it into a toilet. He looks down at Nelson. Then it dawns on him.

He pulls off Nelson's right shoe, looks inside -- nothing. Then the left -- bingo. He pulls out dollar bills.

TREY
Asshole.

He tosses Nelson's shoe aside and exits. Reza, contrite, follows Trey.

Alone, Nelson uncoils and manages to stand. He collects his shoes and picks up his glasses from the floor. One of the temple stems is missing. He bends down and picks it up from the floor.

INT. TOILET STALL - MORNING

Nelson, holding the broken glasses on his face, winces as he peers into the toilet bowl. The letter ball is half-submerged in a putrid quagmire of shit and piss. Nelson visibly deflates.

EXT. COURTHOUSE - DAY

Nelson arrives alone. He enters the building.

INT. ELEVATOR ANNEX - DAY

Nelson exits the elevator and stops, unsure where to go. His cheek is bruised and a wad of tape holds his glasses together.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Excuse me young man. Can I help you?

Nelson looks up at a BLACK FEMALE COURT OFFICER.

COURT OFFICER #1 (CONT'D)
May I see that?

Nelson hands her his court letter. The officer grimaces. The letter's now dry but crumpled and stained brown.

COURT OFFICER #1 (CONT'D)
Uma Moreno. That your mom?

Nelson nods.

COURT OFFICER #1
Where is she?

NELSON
Sorry?

COURT OFFICER #1
Your mom. Where she at?

NELSON
(thinks, then)
Bathroom. She went to the
bathroom.

The officer considers the ladies room nearby. Then Nelson's bruised face. She hands the letter back and checks a schedule posted on the wall. She points to the waiting hall.

COURT OFFICER #1
Sit right there, wait for
your mom. She'll be called through
that door. Number five.

INT. WAITING HALL - DAY

Nelson sits on a bench across from the black screen of TV on a shelf unit opposite. He looks up at a wall clock. Another FEMALE COURT OFFICER (#2) emerges from door five.

COURT OFFICER #2
F-8-5-9-9-3-0-2. Guzman. Andrade.

An HISPANIC MAN rises and heads over. Nelson lowers his cap visor and observes the room. It's half full, and it's mostly men.

LATER:

TIME CUT TO:

Nelson in the same spot. He checks the clock. He gets up and tries the TV, but nothing happens. He traces a finger across the dusty black screen. Sits back down. Gazes at the blackness of his reflection in the TV screen.

Officer #2 exits door number five.

COURT OFFICER #2
F-8-3-6-4-7-0-8. Suleiman. Moreno.

Nelson freezes. Beat. The Court Officer looks around impatient.

COURT OFFICER #2
Suleiman. Moreno. F-8-3-6-4-7-0-8.

Then in the TV screen, the reflection of a MAN rising some rows behind Nelson. Nelson dare not move as the man heads his way for door number five.

Nelson closes his eyes, too scared to look. The man passes directly past him.

Nelson opens his eyes. A nervous smile. Then he stands up out of frame and we

SMASH TO BLACK