

THE ROUTINE QUESTION

A Short Film

Written by Mandy

INT. UNION Station - UP EXPRESS ARRIVALS HALL - EARLY EVENING

MEDIUM TRACKING SHOT, from behind. We follow the back of a young woman, framed waist-up, as she walks through the arrivals hall toward the exit. AMBER (21) moves with purpose, oversized AirPods Max clamped over her ears. The world rushes past her in soft focus. She does not look at any of it.

We never see her face. Only the back of her head, the set of her shoulders, the steady rhythm of her walk. Muffled VIA rail announcements bleed under the music as she walks towards Front Street.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNION STATION - CAR PICK-UP AREA - CONTINUOUS

LOW ANGLE, STATIC WIDE. The camera sits low and still, holding Amber's full body for the first time. Behind her, an orange-pink sunset bruises the sky. The automatic doors part.

And we see her FACE for the first time. Tired. Guarded. She scans the lane of idling cars, finds the one she is looking for, and exhales a long sigh.

A sedan is double-parked at the curb. Cars stack up behind it. HORNS blare. The car isn't parked at the pick-up section, but instead, on the road.

The driver's door swings open and KEVIN (50s) climbs out, clumsy, half-tangled in his seatbelt. He hurries around the car toward her, arms already reaching for her luggage.

KEVIN

Amber, look at you. You've grown so much.

MEDIUM TWO-SHOT. Amber barely shifts. Another horn behind them.

AMBER

Why didn't you just park in the lot or something, Dad?

She sighs again, clearly bothered.

KEVIN

(opening his arms)
You wanna give me a hug?

AMBER

Dad, cars are coming. Just get in.

She moves past him toward the BACK seat. Kevin's arms drop. He hides the small disappointment and turns to load her suitcase into the trunk.

KEVIN

You don't wanna sit up front?

AMBER

I'm a bit tired, ngl. I just wanna sit back and relax.

KEVIN

(quietly)

Oh. Okay.

CUT TO:

INT. KEVIN'S CAR - MOVING - EARLY EVENING

The car pulls away from Pearson. Streetlights begin to flick on. AMBER, in the back seat, slides her AirPods Max fully over her ears. Music swells, warm and insulating.

OVER-THE-SHOULDER from the back seat: we see the back of Kevin's head, his eyes occasionally flicking to the rearview mirror. His voice reaches us the way it reaches Amber, half-drowned under the music, distant and soft.

KEVIN

(muffled, under the music)

How's school, Amber?

AMBER

(not looking up)

Not bad. Finals for Accounting next Monday.

KEVIN

I'm sure you'll do great. Anything you wanna do while you're here?

AMBER

Not really.

KEVIN

Why don't you reach out to... Savanna? Is that her name? I heard she's here for the summer.

AMBER

Sure.

KEVIN

You excited to see the new place?

AMBER

Not really. I'm not gonna live there anyway.

PROFILE SHOT, Amber against the window. The car crosses into OAKVILLE. Familiar streets begin to blur and merge past the glass.

Slowly, the LIGHT changes. The image grows brighter, hazier, grainier (POST: dreamlike bloom, lifted shadows, soft grain), as if the town itself is exhaling a memory.

The car eases to a STOP at a red light.

AMBER'S POV through the window: a small COFFEE SHOP on the corner, glowing. Her eyes catch on it and hold.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

INT./EXT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY (MEMORY) - YEARS EARLIER

The same corner, but now flooded with daylight. The grain stays, like an old home video.

The door opens and ELENA (30s, warm, alive) steps in holding the hand of YOUNG AMBER (12). They are laughing about something we did not hear the start of.

HANDHELD, soft and close. Elena steers Amber to a window seat. She orders two hot chocolates, slides one across, and steals the marshmallow off the top. Amber gasps in mock betrayal.

No dialogue, we can make out. Just the SHAPE of an ordinary, happy afternoon. Elena tucks a strand of hair behind Amber's ear. Amber leans into her mother's shoulder.

Elena looks up, almost at the camera, and smiles.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. KEVIN'S CAR - PARKED - DUSK

LOUD CAR DOOR opening sound rips the dream away.

EXTREME CLOSE-UP on Amber's face as she STARTLES, blinking. Outside, it is almost dark. The car is parked in a driveway. Kevin is already out, lifting her suitcase.

KEVIN

Well, what do you think, Amber?

CUT TO:

EXT. KEVIN'S NEW HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DUSK

WIDE. A large suburban house, lit windows, far too much of it for one man. Amber steps out and tilts her head up at it.

AMBER

Not bad. Isn't it too big for one person?

KEVIN

Well, you never know. Maybe when you start your family, you might wanna live here.

AMBER

Dad. I told you. I'm gonna be living in New York.

KEVIN

You're right, you're right. But you never know. People always change, Amber. I was like that too. I was a lawyer in Washington, remember?

AMBER

(flat)

Yeah, yeah. You tell me every time.

KEVIN

And then I met your mom.

AMBER

(a beat)

...I know.

CUT TO:

INT. KEVIN'S NEW HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

They step inside. Silence settles between them. Amber drifts through the half-unpacked rooms, running a hand along a bare wall. Boxes everywhere. Kevin watches her from the doorway.

KEVIN

So, I put your childhood stuff upstairs, in the small room. You can sleep there tonight. I put

your mom's things up in the
attic.

AMBER
(stiffening)
I told you to get rid of that
stuff.

KEVIN
You never know. Could be useful
one day.

CLOSE on Amber. She turns to look at her father. For the first time tonight, her guarded expression cracks, just slightly. The annoyance softens into something closer to pity. He is one man, in a too-big house, keeping a dead woman's things in an attic.

KEVIN
(lightly, covering)
I've got all this space to myself
anyway. Your grandma's stuff is
up there too.

AMBER
(rolling her eyes, but gentler now)
Okay, okay. I'm gonna go take a
shower.

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL ROOM (AMBER'S ROOM) - NIGHT

Amber enters in a towel, hair damp, steam still on her shoulders. The room is small, crowded with sealed CARDBOARD BOXES labeled in faded marker: AMBER, in Elena's handwriting.

She hesitates, then kneels and peels one open.

INSERT SHOTS, intercut: childhood TOYS. A scuffed handheld console. A stack of teen MAGAZINES. A PHOTO ALBUM, its plastic sleeves yellowed. She smiles despite herself.

Then her hand stops.

LOW ANGLE, on her face. She lifts out a worn DIARY, its cover soft from handling. Elena's diary. Her breath catches.

She sits down on the floor against the bed and opens it.

INTERCUT as she reads: EXTREME CLOSE-UP on the looping handwriting. CLOSE-UP on the page. CLOSE-UP on Amber's face, lit by the bedside lamp. The diary, we come to

understand, is a record of one recurring ritual, a question Elena asked her daughter every birthday: what do you want to be?

She turns to an early entry. The handwriting fills the frame. The lamp light warms and bleeds.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CHILDHOOD HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (MEMORY)

Birthday streamers. A small cake with NINE candles, just blown out, smoke curling. The film grain returns. We are inside Elena's memory now, her point of view soft at the edges.

YOUNG AMBER (9) sits cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by torn wrapping paper. ELENA kneels beside her. Cousins' coats are piled on a chair. The mood is warm, loud, just winding down.

ELENA

Okay. Routine question. What do you want to be when you grow up?

Young Amber thinks hard, very serious for nine.

YOUNG AMBER (9)

I want to be a queen. So Tanya can come visit us whenever she wants. Without a visa.

ELENA

(gently amused)

But Amber, a queen doesn't decide that stuff for Canada.

YOUNG AMBER (9)

Then who does, Mom? Who makes the big decisions for Canada?

ELENA

Hmm. I'd say the prime minister. But even he doesn't do it alone. There are so many people working with him, deciding together.

Young Amber nods slowly, absorbing this like state secrets.

YOUNG AMBER (9)

Well then. I want to become prime minister.

Elena laughs, full and bright, and pulls her in.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CHILDHOOD HOME - KITCHEN - DAY (MEMORY)

Daylight now. A FIFTEENTH birthday. Older YOUNG AMBER (15) slides a small HANDMADE BOOK across the table, shy. Elena opens it: a short story, bound by hand, clearly a gift.

CLOSE on Elena's eyes filling with tears as she reads.

YOUNG AMBER (15)
(quiet)
Your birthday's kind of my
celebration too. So. I made you
something.

Elena presses the back of her hand to her mouth,
overwhelmed.

ELENA
(recovering, smiling)
Okay. Routine question.

YOUNG AMBER (15)
I want to be a writer. So I can
write a book about us. Our
family. Where we came from.

Elena reaches across the table and holds her daughter's
hand. She does not say anything. She does not need to.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY (MEMORY)

The warmth drains. Cooler light. Steady hum of machines.
ELENA, thinner now, a scarf over her head, sits propped up
in a hospital bed. A small calendar on the tray table. It
is a birthday, but there is no cake here.

CLOSE on Elena's face, watching the door. There is a quiet
ache in her. We hear, faint, the memory of a promise: a
go-kart track, the two of them, that did not happen.

The door opens. YOUNG AMBER (17) comes in, cheeks flushed
from cold, trying to look casual. Kevin trails behind,
phone out, showing Elena a shaky VIDEO on the screen: Amber
laughing on a go-kart track. For one second Elena beams.

Then Young Amber takes the seat by the bed and goes
carefully blank, the way a kid does when they have decided
not to enjoy things in front of a sick parent.

ELENA
(softly)
Routine question.

Young Amber looks at her hands.

YOUNG AMBER (17)

I want to become a doctor. So I
can take proper care of you. For
the rest of your life.

CLOSE on Elena. The answer breaks her heart instead of
lifting it. She keeps her voice light.

ELENA

But sweetheart. You don't even
like science.

YOUNG AMBER (17)

(stubborn, fierce)

I'll catch up. If that's what I
have to learn to take care of
you, then I'll learn it. You said
it yourself, Mom. Anything is
possible.

Elena reaches for her hand and holds it tight, smiling so
her daughter will not see the rest. CLOSE on their two
hands together on the white blanket.

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SMALL ROOM (AMBER'S CHILDHOOD ROOM) - NIGHT - PRESENT

BACK on present-day AMBER, on the floor, the diary open in
her lap. Her face is wet. She did not notice she was
crying.

She turns to the last written entry, then the blank pages
after it, all that was never filled. She runs her thumb
along the empty paper.

A long beat. Something settles in her. She reaches into the
open box, finds a PEN among the old supplies, and a loose
NOTEBOOK. She opens to a clean page.

CLOSE on the blank page. Her pen hovers. Then, slowly, she
begins to write. We do not read the words. We only watch
her hand move, hesitant at first, then steadier, the way it
must have moved at fifteen.

She stops. Reads it back. For the first time in the film,
the smallest real smile.

She closes the notebook, wipes her eyes with the back of
her hand, and stands.

CUT TO:

INT. KEVIN'S NEW HOUSE - STAIRS / LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Amber comes DOWN the stairs, notebook held loose against her chest. KEVIN is on the couch in the half-dark, a single lamp on, a mug going cold beside him, not really watching the TV.

She stops at the bottom of the stairs. He notices her. Senses something is different. Mutes the TV.

MEDIUM TWO-SHOT, the two of them in the warm lamplight. Amber sits down on the arm of the couch, near him. A pause. Then, softly, the question she has never asked him:

AMBER

Do you miss Mom sometimes?

CLOSE on Kevin. The question lands. His eyes shine. He looks at his daughter, really looks at her, and for once she does not look away.

KEVIN

(quiet, honest)

Every day, Amber. Every single day.

Amber nods. She slides down off the arm and sits properly beside him, close. After a moment, she opens the notebook on her knee and turns it so he can see the page.

AMBER

I started writing something. Like mom did, remember this notebook?

Kevin looks down at the page, then up at his daughter. He puts an arm around her.

KEVIN

(voice thick)

She'd love that. You're such a great writer, just like your mom.

TWO-SHOT, holding. They sit together under the lamp, the diary upstairs, the notebook open between them, the too-big house a little less empty.

SLOW PUSH IN on the open notebook page in Amber's lap. The handwriting, we now see, has the same loop as her mother's.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END