

SLEEPLESS

INT. - TALK SHOW - NIGHT

On an unfashionable LATE NIGHT set and covered in rabbit-ear fuzz, MEREDITH (34) smiles in painful anticipation. The sparkles on her dress reflect the stage lights. A bit of pink lipstick stains her teeth.

Meredith sits across a broad desk from a generic Late Night host probably named JIMMY SOMETHING (45). With a face of stony resolve, he ignores both Meredith and the crowd that chatters behind the camera.

The band starts to play and Jimmy springs to life. He smiles and graciously thanks the subdued crowd; he turns to Meredith in practiced congeniality.

JIMMY

Welcome back to Late Night with Jimmy Something. We're here with Meredith Handerson for the 11,343 night in a row.

MEREDITH

Hi, thank you, Jimmy. Thank you for having me.

A halfhearted cheer from the audience.

JIMMY

We're just coming back after talking a bit about your new project--

MEREDITH

The novel, yeah. I'm excited about it.

The audience cheers.

JIMMY

The novel idea, that's right. It sounds very promising. I'm sure this will be the one--

MEREDITH

That puts me on the map. That's what I'm hoping but I'm not being delusional about it--

JIMMY

--the one that you finish.

With the first hint of enthusiasm, the audience laughs.

JIMMY (CONT)

Anyway, in this next segment, we'll explore your deepest, darkest fears!

The audience chatters approvingly.

MEREDITH

Are you sure? I thought it was the musical segment.

Meredith hastily hides a bejeweled microphone behind a decorative pillow. The audience laughs.

JIMMY

I'm sure. Let's talk about the dread-- it sounds like you've opened some of those boxes in the attic, so to speak.

MEREDITH

That's a metaphoric device from the novel--

The audience oohs.

JIMMY

It's not good!

They laugh; Jimmy laughs with them.

JIMMY (CONT)

I mean, seriously, you're telling me there are things in your past, things you've done and felt, that you don't know about?

MEREDITH

It's not that I don't know about them, Jimmy. I know they're there. They're just unexamined--

JIMMY

So you keep unexamined boxes in your attic?

The audience roars.

JIMMY (CONT)

I'm joking, of course. I'm joking. Beautiful imagery.

MEREDITH
Thank you, Jimmy.

The audience offers a contrite round of applause.

JIMMY
OK, we'll skip that one.

Jimmy tosses a notecard out of frame. Meredith's smile grows in mileage but not in warmth.

JIMMY (CONT)
What is your biggest fear?

MEREDITH
Heights.

JIMMY
Oh, come on! We can go deeper than that!

MEREDITH
It's heights, Jimmy. I'm most afraid of heights.

JIMMY
Have you considered: the things that hide in the dark?

MEREDITH
Have you read my novel, Jimmy?

The audience laughs.

JIMMY
What lurks just beyond the shadows of your perception, Meredith?

MEREDITH
You asked for my biggest fear, not a ranked list of all of them. But, yeah, that's scary too.

The audience chuckles.

JIMMY
Oh, we haven't even hit the top three yet!

The audience laughs and a divine countdown begins.

EXT. CLIFF'S EDGE - NIGHT

In a blink, Meredith stands ten feet back from the edge of a cliff with a rapidly dissolving edge. The wind blows heavy, bringing fog to hide what lies below.

MEREDITH
Jimmy, no! Please!

JIMMY (OS)
How about that thing about
catastrophic failure? Oh wait--that
was real life!

The audience cackles. The edge races towards Meredith's feet; she backs up against a wall, half a meter of cliff remains in front of her.

MEREDITH
My fear of the unknown keeps me from
diving fully into anything. I am
afraid that I'll never get the courage
to stray.

With Meredith's toes hanging over the edge, the cliffside stops receding.

INT. - TALK SHOW - NIGHT

The countdown stops and Meredith is back on the couch across from Jimmy. Her hair is windswept; was it like that before?

JIMMY
There's number 3!

MEREDITH
Number 3?

JIMMY
We both know it doesn't end there.
Tell us number 2, Meredith.

Meredith hesitates; she glares hard at Jimmy Something.

INT. FAMILY ROOM, CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT

Meredith's MOM (64) and DAD (65) sit side by side on a couch.

MOM
I don't miss Meredith.

DAD
Who would?

MOM
I don't like her clothes.

DAD
I don't like her face.

They laugh uproariously and clink wine glasses; the audience laughs along until it dies off in a natural taper.

MOM
I hope she dies.

INT. - TALK SHOW - NIGHT

Meredith's face is red, half-hidden, sobbing into her hands.

JIMMY
(to the crowd)
It looks like she's ready--what do you think?

The crowd boos and Jimmy Something chuckles good-naturedly.

JIMMY (CONT)
(to the crowd)
Alright, you asked for it!

INT. FAMILY ROOM, CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT

Dad tops off Mom's wine glass.

DAD
You know, if I cared about her at all I'd worry about her health.

MOM
How does someone so poor get so fat?

DAD
I don't care!

They laugh.

INT. - TALK SHOW - NIGHT

Jimmy straightens his tie, Meredith steadies her labored breathing.

MEREDITH

I'm afraid that every person I love
and respect hates me.

JIMMY

Is that it?

MEREDITH

I'm afraid they're right.

Jimmy swivels in his seat and holds Meredith in interrogative
scrutiny.

JIMMY

That's interesting. Talk more about
that.

MEREDITH

I'm afraid that I'm annoying and
stupid, or a raging narcissist, and
people are going to start noticing
soon.

JIMMY

Here on the set of Narcissism Nightly?
You don't say!

The crowd laughs.

MEREDITH

I'm afraid that I've hidden my true
nature for as long as I can.

JIMMY

Your true nature being...?

MEREDITH

Terrible, Jimmy. Just awful.

The audience laughs.

JIMMY

That's what I thought. I gotta say,
that's not a very original number 2,
Mere.

MEREDITH

Well. That's on the list too.

Jimmy mimes disgust, the audience laughs, Jimmy Something
chuckles.

JIMMY

Right, but not at number 1. Which is what we're here to talk about now, folks!

The audience cheers and whoops. Jimmy tosses a card. The band plays. Meredith sobs.

MEREDITH

Please, Jimmy.

JIMMY

What's number 1, Meredith?

MEREDITH

Jimmy, I can't.

The audience hollers.

INT. - INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

Meredith sits in a chair too large for her, surrounded by impenetrable darkness. The only light comes from above and illuminates her in cold, harsh light. She looks down at her feet, which dangle a foot above the floor.

From the darkness, AN AUTHORITY FIGURE (45) looms large into view. He towers over Meredith and hovers just out of sight. Meredith cowers from this specter.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE

You failed the test, Meredith. Did you study?

MEREDITH

Yes--

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE

Don't lie!

Meredith looks down at her feet again.

MEREDITH

No.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE

And you stole Harold's candy bar in the lunchroom

MEREDITH

No! THAT's not true! We traded.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE
 Don't lie! Who would trade their
 Snickers, Meredith? Who would do
 that?!

MEREDITH
 I had Skittles! We traded! Ask Har--

Mid-sentence, Meredith's voice dilates and stretches. The final syllable of Meredith's unfinished alibi hangs in a low, grotesque din that traverses the lifespan of the universe.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE
 And Harold is dead.

Meredith speaks but no sound comes out. Her movements grow slow and sticky.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE
 And you killed him.

Meredith's mouth hangs open, she fights to pound her fists in slow-mo protest. Time is the consistency of chocolate pudding.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE (CONT)
 Just tell me you didn't do it. Tell me
 you did not murder Harold for his
 Snickers bar in the lunchroom and I'll
 believe you.

Meredith has successfully mouthed the word "NO" but still no sound escapes.

AN AUTHORITY FIGURE
 Just tell me what happened. Your
 silence will be considered an
 admission of guilt.

An Authority Figure stamps a large red GUILTY conclusion onto some papers.

INT. - TALK SHOW - NIGHT

Time returns to its proper consistency, and all the words she couldn't speak come tumbling out of Meredith's mouth.

MEREDITH
 It wasn't me! I was in the bathroom
 when Harold was murdered!

The audience roars in mocking laughter, Jimmy Something grimaces and Meredith reddens.

JIMMY

Too much information, Meredith!

The crowd howls in glee; they hoot and jeer at Meredith and she shrinks into the couch, which is now too big for her. Jimmy looms over her like An Authority Figure.

JIMMY (CONT)

What is it, Mere? Have you figured it out yet?

MEREDITH

I'm afraid of being ignored.

JIMMY

Or worse...?

MEREDITH

I'm afraid I'll never get the chance to speak at all.

JIMMY

Or, worse yet...?

MEREDITH

I'm afraid I will get the chance to speak and the words will be worthless.

JIMMY

You're getting there!

MEREDITH

I'm afraid that the words will be worthless because I am not special.

JIMMY

You are an empty room in a boring house.

MEREDITH

You have read the novel.

JIMMY

I have! Let's just say you have a lot to worry about.

The crowd howls, louder and rowdier than any reaction of the night.

JIMMY (CONT)

That's right, folks! Meredith Handerson is sad because she isn't special. And *that* is all we have time for.

The crowd cheers.

JIMMY (CONT)

Good night, folks, thank you for joining us. And, remember:

Led by Jimmy Something, the crowd chants in practiced taunting:

JIMMY + EVERYONE

You! Can't! Hide! Anything!

JIMMY

That's right. Good night folks. Back to your regularly scheduled nightmares.

The scene fades, a plywood sign lowers from the heavens. "THE END" is painted in an imperfect hand and the edges are bordered by strobing lightbulbs. One of the lightbulbs is out.

THE END