

CUFFING SEASON

(excerpt)

Written by

Jon Bershad

EXT. OLD SUBURBAN PLAYGROUND - NIGHT

A full moon reflects off the few non-rusty bits of an old playground slide. All of the families who use the playground have long since gone to bed.

Instead, two teens (JACOB and HAILEY) sit on the swings, listening to music, and drunkenly making out.

Every bit of horror movie knowledge we have tells us that these two are absolutely dead as hell.

HAILEY

I love you so much.

JACOB

I love you too.

Worried about something, Hailey pulls away.

HAILEY

Wait.

Jacob awkwardly removes his hand from under her shirt.

JACOB

What's up?

HAILEY

We'll stay together, right? I can visit you at college?

JACOB

Totally.

HAILEY

For real? Because I don't want to-

He holds her shoulders reassuringly.

JACOB

Hey. I am never gonna leave you.

She smiles. Beat.

JACOB (CONT'D)

I do have to piss now though.

Jacob stands and walks towards some nearby, very dark bushes.

HAILEY

Where's the vodka?

JACOB
I think the bottle's over-

SUDDENLY, someone bursts out of the bushes in front of him!

Jacob jumps a foot, settling down once he sees that the intruder is just FRAN, a frazzled woman in her late thirties.

FRAN
Sorry! Sorry! I live next door and you guys are being really loud. Now, I don't care if y'all are smoking or drinking or-

JACOB
(quickly)
We're not doing that.

Fran looks down. The missing vodka bottle is right by Jacob's foot. He quickly steps in front of it.

FRAN
Right. Well, it's late and a school night, so...

JACOB
Actually we have off tomorrow!

HAILEY
Jewish holiday, bitches! Woo!

FRAN
(trying a different tact)
Look, I get it. I'm not *that* much older than you guys. I like to party with my friends too.

JACOB
Really? I work at the Applebee's and you're always there eating by yourself.

FRAN
(quickly without thinking)
Yeah, well, your dad's an alcoholic.

Fran instantly regrets that and feels terrible.

FRAN (CONT'D)
You know what? I take it all back. Have fun! Happy... Jewish holiday.

Fran heads back to her house. The kids are unfazed.

HAILEY
Your dad *is* an alcoholic.

JACOB
He's drunk right now.

SOMEONE'S POV

Across the playground, someone watches the teens.

However, even as they return to making out like the classic horror victims they are, the gaze looks away.

Instead, it turns to...

INT. FRAN'S KITCHEN

Fran enters her house and pours herself a glass of water. The décor screams "lonely and single."

FRAN
Way to go, Fran. You're intimidated
by literal children.

Fran drinks from the glass. She can still hear the teens' music outside. She sighs and pulls ear plugs out of her pocket, putting them in and muffling the sound.

That's better. At least now she can-

THUD!

There's a loud clattering noise. Even with the plugs in, Fran can hear it. That's because it's not coming from outside. It's coming from downstairs.

Confused, she takes out the plugs.

THUD! The sound happens again but LOUDER this time. This genuinely concerns Fran. She's home alone.

INT. HALLWAY

Hesitantly, Fran opens the basement door.

FRAN
Hello? Is someone down there?

She flips the light switch but nothing happens. She tries a few times. The bulb must be dead.

She looks back. The stairs lead down into impenetrable darkness. Anything could be down there. Watching. Waiting.

FRAN (CONT'D)
Yeah, fuck that.

Fran turns away.

Suddenly, a VOICE arises from the darkness below. There's something... *off* about it.

VOICE (O.C.)
Hey.

Fran gasps. She composes herself, peering back into the dark.

FRAN
Is that one of you kids? Look, I'm sorry about the alcoholic thing and-

VOICE (O.C.)
Come down.

A weird look comes over Fran's face. She responds as if not entirely in control.

FRAN
Okay.

With that, she walks down the steps. The door slowly closes shut behind her.

It's now officially *this* character who's dead as hell.

INT. BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Fran hesitantly enters her dark, unfinished basement. She tries to see anything amidst the various boxes of junk.

FRAN
(calling out)
If it makes you feel any better, my aunt was addicted to pain pills. And my mom does multilevel marketing, which is it's own kind of addiction.

VOICE
Come here.

Fran is startled to see the vague, grey SHAPE OF A HUMAN FIGURE standing in the far corner.

Its movements have an odd, jittery quality and its features are disturbingly nondescript.

Something is not right about this figure. However, in the dark, it's unclear what that something actually is.

VOICE (CONT'D)

Come here.

Seemingly in a trance, Fran walks to the figure.

Closer. Closer.

Once she's reached the point of no return, there's a quick flurry of movement as the figure seems to COMPLETELY SPLIT APART in the middle!

It wasn't a person at all. These were just markings in the shape of a person. Markings on giant, leathery, insect-like wings.

For a second, we almost see a mouth behind the wings. We can't tell though. And neither can Fran. She's already dead.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. BROOKLYN RESTAURANT - NIGHT, A FEW WEEKS LATER

Dark red wine is poured into a glass belonging to RAINA (33, clever, sarcastic, great at self-sabotage).

She's joined by three much younger coworkers (MITRA, MADDIE, COLLEEN) who are all a few drinks in and having a good time. Raina's the only one who doesn't seem to be enjoying herself.

She looks around glumly at the bar's Christmas decorations. Her gaze eventually lands on a LONE, OLDER WOMAN sitting in the corner, drinking by herself. A pathetic sight.

A camera flash from Colleen's phone snaps Raina out of it.

COLLEEN

Okay, now try to look flirty.

RAINA

Stop. I'm not doing dating apps.

MADDIE

You sure? Sometimes it's good to climb right back on the horse.

Colleen shows a profile of a hunky guy on her phone.

COLLEEN
Especially if *he's* the horse.

MITRA
A toast! To Raina and her newfound
freedom!

Everyone raises a glass except for Raina. They look at her expectantly.

RAINA
Have I made a big mistake?

MITRA
Oh my God. Raina, you complained
about Jeff constantly. Your only
mistake was not ending it sooner.

RAINA
Obviously, things weren't perfect
but they weren't bad. They were...
fine. Maybe at my age I should just
be okay with fine.

COLLEEN
Whoa! Listen to me: You are young
and you are hot and you have plenty
of time to find someone perfect!

RAINA
You're right. Thanks.

COLLEEN
Hell, if you can't find someone by
the time you're 30, *I'll* fucking
marry you!

Beat.

RAINA
Colleen, I'm 34.

COLLEEN
(horrified)
Shit, really?
(collecting herself)
You look great.

EXT. BROOKLYN RESTAURANT - LATER

Raina stands outside, putting gloves on while watching two happy COLLEGE-AGE COUPLES loudly run by across the street.

Mitra opens the door and joins her.

MITRA

You okay?

RAINA

Yeah. This was the right decision.

MITRA

Yes, it was.

RAINA

God, I never used to second guess myself like this! It's just, recently, even my right decisions end up... wrong.

MITRA

You need a vacation. After my last break up, I went to Europe, did the whole *Eat, Pray, Love* thing.

RAINA

I can barely afford to eat, pray, love *here*.

MITRA

Isn't there anywhere you can go?

Raina gets a text message. It reads: "Mom wants to know if you're coming home for Xmas"

RAINA

Maybe...

EXT. MILBOROUGH, NEW JERSEY - DAY

Cheery Christmas music plays as a montage introduces us to Milborough, the town from the opening scene. Covered in snow, it looks like wonderful, small town Americana. The kind of place that could trick you into thinking the country still has a middle class.

Children run about excitedly. Townspeople greet each other. And a big sign announces the upcoming "All Inclusive Holiday Festival." To promote the inclusivity, the sign features Santa Claus wearing a Kente cloth and spinning a dreidel.

Everything looks tacky, sleepy, and basic as all hell. But it also looks like it might be a pretty nice place to live.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

A train leaves the station right outside of town. The passengers who just got off are greeted by loved ones picking them up.

One of those passengers is Raina but she's by herself, leaving a voicemail message on her phone.

 RAINA
 (into phone)
 Hey Dad, I'm at the train station.
 To be clear, you were picking me up
 this Christmas, right?

As she's talking, a man dropping someone off notices her through his car window. Their eyes meet and he makes a big show of being absolutely *stunned* to see her. This is DODI.

Raina hangs up as Dodi pulls his car around.

 DODI
 Raina motherfucking Gallow!

 RAINA
 Dodi?

 DODI
 The one and only! You need a ride?

 RAINA
 Thanks but my dad's coming.

 DODI
 Oh shit! I remember your dad! He
 still super unreliable?

 RAINA
 Yep.

 DODI
 So you're gonna what? Just walk
 home?

 RAINA
 I guess.

 DODI
 Cool. Cool. How 'bout this? I'm
 gonna drive around in circles until
 you get in the car.

 RAINA
 Sounds good.

Just as he said, he begins driving tiny loops around the parking lot, giving her a different big, goofy expression out the window every time he passes. The third time by, he stops.

DODI
Excuse me, ma'am? Can you help me
with directions?

Despite herself, Raina plays along.

RAINA
Yeah.

DODI
I'm looking to get to this exact
spot I'm already in.

RAINA
Just drive straight.

DODI
Uh huh.

RAINA
Then turn right.

DODI
Yep.

RAINA
Then make two more really quick
rights.

He follows her directions and drives in another tiny circle.

DODI
I made it!
(beat)
Wanna get in the car?

RAINA
Yeah, okay.

INT. DODI'S CAR - LATER

The car crosses a bridge over a river. A big sign sits on the other side and marks the entrance to the town. It reads "Milborough: The perfect place to settle down in!"

A vandal has helpfully spray painted over the word "down."

DODI

And, boom! You are officially back
in Milborough.

RAINA

I'm refreshed already.

DODI

Oh my God! The perfect song played
a minute ago!

Dodi flips back through music on his phone before pressing
play on Michelle Branch's "Everywhere." He looks at Raina
expectantly. She's confused.

RAINA

Yeah?

DODI

Didn't you sing this at that talent
show thing? Freshmen year?

RAINA

Oh. You're thinking of Nelly
Furtado.

DODI

Right! You were "Like a Bird." Duh!
You still singing?

This is a sore subject.

RAINA

Not really.

She looks out the window, hoping he'll change the topic, and
sees that they're passing a house wrapped in police tape.
It's a decidedly ominous image.

Something very bad happened there.

Before Raina can comment on it, Dodi points out the other
window at NICOLE, a beautiful former classmate of theirs,
pushing a stroller.

DODI

Look! Nicole Brannigan. Y'know
she's got like a billion followers
for her mommy vlog thing.

RAINA

Makes sense. Influencers are just
bullies who monetized peer
pressure.

DODI
Ooh, burn! How about you? Pop out
any marketable kids yet?

RAINA
Nope. Still very single.

At this, Dodi suddenly looks strangely concerned.

DODI
Oh.

RAINA
Uh, is that bad?

DODI
(quickly)
No! No! Hey, no judgements here!
Not from the divorcée!

RAINA
Oh, I'm sorry! You and... uh...

DODI
Garrett. He and I officially had
Milborough's first gay marriage AND
gay divorce! It's very for the
best.

RAINA
Understood. Well, this week, I just
wanna relax, eat food my parents
paid for, and not think about
dating or marriage at all.

DODI
(hiding something)
Right. Good luck...

They keep driving. Past another house with police tape.

EXT. THE GALLOW HOUSE

Raina exits the car and looks at the pleasant suburban house
she grew up in.

Christmas lights dot the roof and a big, plastic candy cane
graces the front yard.

Raina lifts a rock by the porch and finds a hidden key for
the front door. She smiles. Everything's just as she left it.

DODI
 (yelling out his window)
 Hey! If you get a chance, come to
 Wildflowers. I friggin' run the
 place now!

RAINA
 Oh my god, that was such a shithole
 when we were younger!

DODI
 (happily)
 I know! I didn't change a thing!

He drives off. Raina heads into the house.

INT. GALLOW HOUSE LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Inside, the whole family is sitting around the living room,
 laughing and having a good time.

There's Raina's father (the pleasant if spacey, DARREN), her
 younger sister (the brilliant and accomplished TAMRA),
 Tamra's husband (JEREMY, wealthy but dull, like a good
 looking mannequin), her two-month-old nephew, ASHER, and,
 finally, CATHERINE, Raina's doting mother.

Catherine screams with delight when she sees Raina, running
 over to smother her daughter in a big hug.

CATHERINE
 Ah, look who it is!

RAINA
 It's me.

CATHERINE
 Is Jeff here? Where's the handsome
 doctor?

DARREN
 Yeah! I want to show him a weird
 spot on my back.

TAMRA
 Dad, he's an *animal* doctor.

DARREN
 Well, I'm a bit of an animal. Isn't
 that right, Jeremy?

JEREMY
 (dutifully)
 Yes, sir.

Everyone has a good laugh.

RAINA
 Jeff and I broke up.

Her parents suddenly go silent. It's AWKWARD.

RAINA (CONT'D)
 ...I'll go put my stuff away.

INT. GALLOW HOUSE DINING ROOM - LATER

The family's almost done dinner. Tamra is taking a picture of Raina holding the baby while Jeremy talks to Darren.

Catherine watches Raina intently, figuring out how to broach a delicate subject.

TAMRA
 (to Raina)
 Hold him higher.

Raina tries to adjust the baby.

JEREMY
 (to Darren)
 ...fortunately, the firm allows paternity leave. And, of course, Tamra can write from anywhere.

TAMRA
 Uh, not anywhere. The first place we saw was almost as cramped as... as... Oh God! Raina, do you remember that terrible apartment you had in Astoria?

RAINA
 The one I lived in until last year?

TAMRA
 Yes!
 (looking at her photos)
 Okay. Y'know, Asher can't control his face yet, so he has an excuse not to smile.

RAINA
 I'm smiling!

TAMRA

Bigger!

Raina gives a big, fake smile.

CATHERINE

So, Raina... what happened between you and Jeff?

Raina's smile vanishes right as Tamra takes the picture.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

It's surprising, is all. Did something happen between you two?

Raina passes the baby to Jeremy and collects herself for *this* bullshit.

RAINA

No. It just wasn't working.

CATHERINE

Well, maybe there's a chance you'll get back together.

RAINA

I don't want to get back together.

CATHERINE

You say that now...

RAINA

Yes I do.

(to Darren, changing the subject)

Hey, Dad, what happened at that house by the river? There was police tape up.

Darren shoots Catherine a quick look. They're both very uncomfortable with this topic.

DARREN

Uh, this architect who lived there died. Some kind of animal attack.

RAINA

An animal attack?

TAMRA

There've been a few in town. Right, dad?

DARREN

A couple...

RAINA

Why didn't you tell me?

DARREN

Honey, you're always coming up with excuses not to visit. I'm not gonna give you a new one by blathering on about a few random killings.

Darren chuckles unconvincingly.

CATHERINE

Back to Jeff...

RAINA

Seriously?

CATHERINE

The reason I'm harping is that we really liked him.

RAINA

No, you didn't!

CATHERINE

We didn't *not* like him.

TAMRA

I liked Jeff.

RAINA

Thanks, Tam.

TAMRA

I did!

RAINA

You met Jeff twice and the only thing you said was that he was "surprisingly short."

CATHERINE

Short isn't bad! Tom Cruise is short and look how successful he is.

JEREMY

A lot of movie stars are short. It looks better on camera.

CATHERINE
There you go.

RAINA
(loudly)
Drop it!

They all go quiet. Raina's a little embarrassed about raising her voice.

RAINA (CONT'D)
Jeff and I are done. The end.

CATHERINE
Fine.

The family goes back to eating. Beat.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
Dustin Hoffman's short too.