

"GRADUATION DAY"

A short film

BLACK SCREEN

Shaky inhalation, rustling sound. Dialogue begins in the background and the inhalations are still audible as the camera flashes to different quick shots.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION - MORNING

CLOSE UP ON BOUQUET OF FLOWERS, VARIEGATED AND LARGE.

PRINCIPAL (O.S.)

...as this class has grown and evolved throughout the course of their education, it has been my personal honor to watch them flourish into...

CLOSE UP ON REFRESHMENT TABLE, CONDENSATION SWEATING OFF OF ABANDONED WATER GLASSES. SEMI-PICKED OVER.

PRINCIPAL

...truly remarkable young people. This is a class which has excelled in athletic endeavors, with many students continuing their athletic careers at the collegiate level beginning in the fall...

CLOSE UP ON PAIRS OF SHOES LINED UP NEXT TO EACH OTHER, PEOPLE CLEARLY SEATED. LONG GRADUATION GOWNS MEET THE SHOES AT THE ANKLE. SOME ARE TAPPING, SOME ARE CROSSED.

PRINCIPAL

...and of that we are extremely proud. Academically, this class chased excellence.

A TRASH CAN, OVERFLOWING, SOME SPILLAGE LITTERED ON THE GROUND NEAR.

PRINCIPAL

We have 13 students from this year's graduating class attending Ivy League schools. One of those 13 is here to speak to you now.

We finally see the stage, from the side angle. Camera is focused on a girl, facing the stage, her back to us. Her gown matches the bottoms of the ones from earlier. We see her shoulders rise and fall, matching the inhalations we've heard.

PRINCIPAL

Ladies and gentlemen, I am more than pleased to introduce your Senior Class President, Grace Myer.

Applause is heard, and the camera stays at the same angle as she walks onto the stage. Once she reaches the podium, she shuffles some papers, and the camera cuts to her. She is looking down, gathering

herself. After a second, she raises her head to look at the audience. We see her face.

GRACE

Good morning. (smile)

We see the audience which she looks upon. Hundreds of students and parents watch her, expectantly.

GRACE

I'm beyond honored to be in a position to speak to you today. Let me begin by saying congratulations. I look out on all of you, and all I can think about is...

The camera focuses on an empty chair in the first row, implying Grace sees it.

GRACE

...how far we've all come...

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - THREE YEARS EARLIER - FALL

Students mingle, walking around a classroom. Young Grace sits at a desk, pretending to fidget with her backpack. She says hi as a crowd of girls walks past. One hand rests on the empty desk next to her as she scans her surroundings. She appears to be searching for someone.

JAMES (O.S.)

Is this seat taken?

Grace smiles. Instantly put at ease. She moves her hand off of the desk as James slides into the seat.

GRACE

God, it's about time you showed up. I got worried your schedule changed, or you forgot, or-

JAMES

Well, I'm here now. Wasn't about to try to do high school without a good vantage of your notes.

GRACE

You're the worst.

JAMES

And yet you're the one saving my seat.

GRACE

That's what friends are for.

JAMES

Yeah. That and notes. And pencils?

Grace digs through her backpack with a shake of her head. She places a pencil and a piece of loose leaf paper on James' desk.

GRACE

Here. Write your own notes.

They smile, friendship apparent between the two of them. The noise from the classroom drains slowly, until-

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION - PRESENT DAY

Grace stands at the podium, remembering. She glances at her papers before resuming.

GRACE

The past four years have not been easy. They've been a lot of things, but easy is not one of them. How much sleep was sacrificed for us to make it here today? How--how many tears?

Silence. The crowd glances at each other.

GRACE

But we can't forget how much joy we've shared. Some of the best memories of my adolescence took place in the four walls of that building. Some of my closest friendships were born there, grew there...

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - TWO YEARS EARLIER

Grace and James sit in the same seats in a different class. It is their sophomore year. Grace writes on a sheet of paper as James sips from a steaming cup. With each sip, he winces slightly. He is more subdued than when we first met him. Eventually, he releases a disgusted cough, catching Grace's attention.

GRACE

Whatcha got in there?

JAMES

Coffee.

GRACE

That's funny. I didn't know you like coffee.

JAMES

I don't. I'm just sick of feeling tired all the time.

Grace returns to her paper, continuing the conversation absent-mindedly.

GRACE

Oh, I know. Exhausted. At least sophomore year has more fun stuff, too. I stayed out way too late last Saturday after

the dance--still feeling the effects a week later. It was fun, though, didn't you think?

James looks at her. He is lethargic and speaks softly.

JAMES

Grace, I didn't go.

Grace pauses, taken aback.

GRACE

Really? I swear I saw you--why didn't you go?

James turns his head away, mumbles.

JAMES

Tired. I've been feeling tired for so long.

Grace shifts closer to him. Concern is apparent on her face.

GRACE

Hey. You know I'm here if you need, right? Like, for anything. I can probably make you better coffee than whatever the cafeteria puts in that.

James smiles, and seems to return to his normal, upbeat behavior.

JAMES

Yeah, thanks. I might take you up on that later. For now, did you do last night's notes?

GRACE

When have I not?

The teacher is walking around, returning tests. He stops between Grace and James' desks. Grace is rummaging through her bag for the notes when the teacher places James' test on his desk. We see he scored a 72%. James looks at the teacher helplessly, mouth open as if to speak. The teacher shakes his head, places Grace's test on her desk, and walks away. James stares at his test in clear despair.

Grace pops up, notes in hand, and sees the test on her desk. She picks it up, looking at it the entire time she is speaking.

GRACE

There's no way. There's just no way. 88? That's gonna bring my grade down, like, four points. I knew I missed one or two, but an 88? This will ruin me.

James quickly wipes his eyes, folds his test and shoves it into his backpack.

JAMES

You'll be fine, I promise. It's okay. Let's just work through today's assignment and we can worry about the grade later. Hey--

He pauses, looking at Grace.

JAMES

You're doing great.

He turns away, reaching into his backpack. We see that his hand is shaking. He emerges with a pencil, breathes, and composes himself before returning to his work.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - AFTER CLASS

The bell rings as the camera cuts. James and Grace walk out of class together when a football coach stops James, gripping his shoulder. James tenses.

COACH

Hey, son. Sorry to stop you. Coach and I were talking about puttin' in a new lifting schedule for our receivers. Every morning, 5:30 to the bell. Really important you're there, understood?

JAMES

Yes sir. I understand.

The coach pats James, begins walking past. From over his shoulder, he calls:

COACH

High school's s'posed to be hard, James! Remember that!

They resume walking.

GRACE

So, you're not doing that.

JAMES

What?

GRACE

You were falling asleep all class. There's no way you're gonna be able to wake up early and work out, too.

JAMES

I have to. I literally don't have a choice.

GRACE

Yes, you do. Choose yourself.

JAMES

Not an option at this point.

Pause.

GRACE

I'll send you tonight's notes.

She walks away. The camera is focused from behind James; we watch him watch her walk away. The camera slowly moves down. James' hand begins to shake again.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION - PRESENT DAY

Grace continues her speech.

GRACE

As our principal stated, we have excelled. We have accomplished and achieved and succeeded---or, at least, attained what is deemed to be success. All of us here today have futures ahead of us that we can't even imagine. I've been so lucky to spend my formative years growing alongside such truly remarkable people. Together, we have shared the burden of expectations, carried the weight of legacy, and risen to every challenge that was asked of us. We're here today, victorious. But I have to wonder, at what cost?

A quick shot of the same flowers from the same bouquet shown in the opening scene.

INT. BEDROOM - ONE YEAR EARLIER - NIGHT

Grace sits in bed, wearing pajamas. Her laptop is open in front of her, papers surround her. She is on a phone call with James; her phone is on the speaker setting.

JAMES (ON PHONE)

...so Japan left the League of Nations after they took over Manchuria. Make sense?

GRACE

Yeah, it's starting to stick, it's just so much information. I need to review migratory patterns and the Treaty of Versailles but other than that I think I've got it. Want me to quiz you some?

Long pause.

JAMES

No, thank you. I'm not gonna need it.

GRACE

Oh, really, you're that confident about it? I mean, I guess you've always been better at memorization than me.

JAMES

Don't act like you're not better at everything else.

GRACE

You don't even want to go over a little, though? We have the test second period tomorrow, it's not like we have a ton of time to study before class.

JAMES

No...not gonna need it.

GRACE

If you're sure.

Brief pause, she begins to organize her papers.

GRACE

I'll send you a picture of today's notes just in case.

JAMES

Seriously, I'm--it's okay. I think I'm gonna write some notes on my own tonight.

Grace laughs, teasing:

GRACE

Look at you! Took 'till junior year, but you're actually doing your own work! I'm so proud.

James doesn't match her demeanor. He stays quiet, solemn. When he speaks, it sounds tiresome.

He pauses again. His breathing is labored, as if he may be holding back tears.

JAMES

I'm always proud of you. You're gonna do great tomorrow.

GRACE

Well thank ya. We both will. I'll see you then!

JAMES

Goodbye, Grace.

GRACE

Bye!

She hangs up the phone, drops it on the bed. She sits in silence for a second. She picks up the phone, thinking, then places it down on her bedside table. The scene is silent, until she clicks off her bedroom light. Everything goes black. NO AUDIO.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION - PRESENT DAY

NO AUDIO. The bright daylight provides a stark contrast to the black of where we cut from. The camera travels around the scene. Grace is frozen at the podium, not speaking. The audience sits, watching, looking at each other. We take in the bright colors of the celebratory scene. CLOSE UP on the colorful, variegated bouquet of flowers.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - ONE YEAR EARLIER

NO AUDIO. CLOSE UP on another bouquet of flowers. The scene is lit in dark, muted lighting.

The camera pulls away from the flowers, revealing a crowd similar to the one of the graduation. Now, they sit in church pews, dressed in all black. Sharp contrast to the colors and atmosphere of the previous scene. This is a funeral.

Grace stands at a podium, almost identical to the one of graduation. She is dressed in black, numbness on her face. She has been crying.

We see brief shots of her speaking, NO AUDIO. She is crying. The audience is crying. On both sides of her are flowers, and to her left is a blown-up photo of James.

As she walks off of the stage, everyone stands up from their seats and begins wandering around. Some hug her, some pat her on the shoulder, consoling her. After a moment, a woman approaches her. This is JAMES' MOM. AUDIO BEGINS as Grace snaps into consciousness.

JAMES' MOM

That--well, that was beautiful.

She snuffles, a woman coming undone at the seams.

JAMES' MOM

I never showed you--I wanted to wait until you could handle it. But, I don't know if this is the kind of thing we can ever really handle, you know?

Grace nods. James' mom pulls a perfectly folded piece of paper out of her bag.

JAMES' MOM

He, um, left some papers for us that night. They were pretty short, kind of shaky. But, uh, this one had your name on it. So...

She hands the paper to her.

JAMES' MOM

I'm sorry. Thank you for everything.

She walks away. Grace stands, numb, in shock, clutching the paper.
As she opens it, the camera reads over her shoulder.

The paper reads,

GRACE -

I'M SORRY THAT I COULDN'T TELL YOU. I DON'T WANT TO BE TIRED
ANYMORE. THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING.

I'M SORRY THIS ISN'T BETTER, BUT YOU KNOW I'VE NEVER BEEN VERY GOOD
WITH NOTES.

JAMES

A tear drops onto the page.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION - PRESENT DAY

Focused on Grace's notes, sitting on the podium. Writing is generic,
what one would assume to be in a graduation speech.

Grace is emotional now.

GRACE

High school is a time full of opportunity. I've had the
opportunity to speak in front of a lot of you twice, now.
Today, as we enter into this next chapter of our lives, and

one year ago, when I spoke at the funeral of my best friend, James. He was supposed to be with us today. I wasn't supposed to be this good of friends with grief before I turn 18 years old, and he was supposed to be with us today. We were told that high school was meant to be hard, not that it was meant to kill us. Late nights, early mornings, piles of work, high expectations all taught us how to carry a heavy load. Now, as we enter into college, that load only grows. I carry with me the memory of James, as I know many of us do. It is our responsibility to remember. Congratulations on being the ones to make it out. Congratulations.

Grace throws her cap into the air dejectedly. It falls to the ground as she walks off of the stage in silence.

Close up on her graduation cap sitting on the stage.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END