

BLACK

Crickets chirp. Crisp leaves whirl about in the wind.

Creaking; gnarled wood twists and strains...

EXT. BROOKWOOD FOREST - THE TANGLE - NIGHT

A CRICKET scuttles through tumbling leaves across the path. It pauses just at the edge of a mound of gnarled roots that roil and writhe...

A HAND shoots up from the roots, gripping an ornate HAND MIRROR. Then the other hand, grasping the dirt. A young girl in a wooden coyote mask wrestles up from the pit. The COYOTE GIRL frees herself and runs off.

CUT TO:

FOREST THICKET

The COYOTE GIRL fumbles through thick underbrush, clutching the hand mirror, breathing heavily and gulping air.

FOREST TRAIL - BUSH LINE

She fumbles out of the bush line and looks up the hill. She races toward the dim break of dawn at the crest of the path.

THE TANGLE - MEANWHILE

A shadowy figure rises from the pit of roots...

It claws it's way out. It's silhouette is a tattered, child-sized teddy bear, with a billowing tuft on top of its head whipping in the breeze. The BEAR CHILD growls.

FOREST TRAIL

The COYOTE GIRL rushes toward the dawn. She looks back...

FOREST TRAIL - BUSHLINE

The BEAR CHILD bursts from the bushline. He glares at the daylight and races to catch the COYOTE GIRL.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAWN

The COYOTE GIRL breaks out from the tree line at the crest of the terraced graveyard. She bounds through, hurdling headstones. At the bottom, she crosses the street into the Old Town district, through the outdoor Alabaster Market.

EXT. ALABASTER MARKET - CONTINUOUS

Purveyors set up their stalls. The COYOTE GIRL darts through the lanes, searching...

EXT. GRAVEYARD - MEANWHILE

The BEAR CHILD freezes the moment he steps into the daylight. The sun reveals him: a child in a ratty hollowed-out teddy bear carcass, with a mohawk of fluff rapping in the wind. His face is obscured by the shadow of the bear's mouth, like a hood.

He sees his shadow cast over the hill and scrambles back to the shade of the forest. He sees the COYOTE GIRL down in the market. With a huff, he retreats.

ALABASTER MARKET

The COYOTE GIRL fumbles into a crate of vinyl records, spilling them. She quickly replaces them. She turns to leave, but stops, eyeing the crate; this spot will have to do. She drops the HAND MIRROR in front of Janet Jackson's DESIGN OF A DECADE album, and disappears.

MUSIC CUE: Runaway - Janet Jackson

CLOSE IN on album cover as time passes and the ambient daylight grows brighter... On drums--

CUT TO:

INT. BROOKWOOD FOREST - DAY

A bright autumn day. The forest path is clear. MALLORY's feet pound past. Mallory (10) joyfully tears down the trail. She carries a backpack, and under one arm is a framed PHOTO PORTRAIT of her father, PHELMIM.

MONTAGE:

1. She skids to a stop at a line of marching ants. She stands at attention--salutes them. She bends down with a furrowed brow and pushes an ant out of line. It circles around and falls back in line. Mallory huffs.

2. She brandishes two newspaper hats, a small one for the portrait and a large one for her. She steps into the creek and sets the portrait adrift in a hollow log.

The water gets choppy. A wave splashes over the portrait and a pebble cracks the glass. The portrait approaches a tangle of roots. The water rushes over it, capsizes the log, and pulls the portrait under. Mallory is frantic, racing down the creekside searching, until the portrait pops up again downstream. She sighs, relieved, but it snags a tangle of weeds and roots and is stuck.

Mallory mounts a ledge, grips a wrap of willow branches, and soars down after the portrait. She snatches it up with a smile. It cracks and cuts her arm as she clutches it, and she drops to the ground. She washes her cut up arm in the creek and retrieves the portrait.

3. She places the portrait atop a high stump and honors it with a presentation. She models supplies from her pack: rope, small shovel, pocket knife, and first aid kit. She smirks as she opens the kit, revealing no first aid--only two packed lunches.

4. She sets up lunch for her and the portrait. She lays near, munching her sandwich and staring up at the broken sunlight through the canopy. An onslaught of ants go after the portrait's sandwich. Mal angrily flicks them away. She grabs the portrait and--OUCH!--cuts her hand badly. She examines it with concern and packs it in, homeward bound.

MUSIC CUE: Fade out "Runaway"...

END MONTAGE

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BASH RESIDENCE - EVENING

A warm, old two-story brick home, with a large porch and a long driveway lined by trees. A 90's woody station wagon sits in the driveway. MALLORY creeps to the back door.

INT. BASH RESIDENCE - KITCHEN

Mallory's grandfather, ODRAN (54), a balding ginger Santa-like man, prepares dinner. While his back is turned, MALLORY creeps in clutching her dirty, bleeding arm. The mud of her shoes squishes loudly against the tile.

ODRAN

(still turned away)

What happened to your arm?

MALLORY

How did you--

Odran turns and approaches Mallory with a wet dish rag.

ODRAN

All right, let me see it.

Mallory reveals her arm.

ODRAN

Good Lord, Mallory, what'd you do?

MALLORY

Nothing!

As she waves her arms defensively, glass rattles in her backpack. Odran shoots her a look. Mallory opens the bag.

MALLORY

Dad needs a new frame.

Odran wipes down Mallory's arm.

ODRAN

Yeah, I'd say so.

He takes the newspaper hat off Mallory.

ODRAN

And there's my missing paper, thank you.

He unfolds it. It's dated March 3rd, 1995. The bold headline reads, "I'm back!" with a grinning Michael Jordan.

MALLORY

Pffft, some comeback. Pacers trounced 'em.

He folds it proper and tosses it on the breakfast table.

ODRAN

Just leave the bag in the office and I'll take care of it tomorrow. Wash up, too, dinner's about ready.

Mallory patters off.

LIVING ROOM

A warm, densely decorated room: old plush sofas, a piano, a floor-model TV cabinet, and a bay window littered with throw pillows that looks out over the driveway. The TV plays the local news as MALLORY passes. The weatherman, BARRY TELEMACHER, finishes his report.

BARRY TELEMACHER (ON TV)

(hokey)

And that's the Wiggy Weather forecast for this week! Now back to Ed Baxter, with an update on the Milk Carton Kids. Ed?

ED BAXTER (ON TV)

(baffoonish)

Thanks, Barry. The ongoing Milk Carton Kids story is ongoing. Police have no new suspects this evening, as the number of missing children broke a hundred this week. It's been three months since the first disappearance, and authorities are drawing heavy criticism for their lack of answers.

OFFICE

A large parlor with walls of bookshelves. The plush leather furniture centers around the fireplace.

MALLORY places the bag on the coffee table. Photos of her father adorn the mantle, and a dust outline marks the missing portrait. She stares up at the photos.

ODRAN (O.S.)

Almost ten years.

MALLORY

How can I miss somebody I never met?

Odran sighs warily.

ODRAN

Where did you go?

MALLORY

What do you mean?

ODRAN

Your shoes are muddy. It hasn't rained in two days. The sun already dried up the yard.

(beat)

Did you go to the forest?

MALLORY

I was just--

ODRAN

(fed up)

Mallory, you promised me. You promised me you'd stay in the yard. Fifty children are missing from all over Moonblush, Mal--nearly a hundred across Nightdrift County!

MALLORY

I didn't even--

ODRAN

I can't believe you'd betray my trust like this! Well, no--I CAN, and that's the problem, isn't it? That's always the problem.

(hands up)

You're grounded, Mal. That's it, that's all there is to it.

MALLORY

Okay, look, I promise--

ODRAN

You promised before. I trusted that you understood the gravity of this situation, but apparently you don't. I told your father I'd keep you safe, no matter--

MALLORY

And you can prove it to him when I find him!

ODRAN

Mallory, you are a CHILD. Do you understand that? You're not going out there to find a man who's been missing for ten years, and every time you bring it up I get this much closer to locking you in your bedroom until that kidnapper--

MALLORY

There is no kidnapper!

ODRAN

(turning away)

Not this again. I don't want to hear your junior detective theories on this, Mal. It's not negotiable.

Mallory trails him into the LIVING ROOM.

LIVING ROOM**MALLORY**

It doesn't make any sense! How's one guy gonna snatch up a hundred kids from the same town in three months? He'd have to be working every night, with cops waddling around everywhere! SOMEBODY would've seen SOMETHING, and even the garbage cops in THIS town would've caught a guy working the streets that hard.

ODRAN

(turning back, abrupt)

Grounded! Period! Not another word.

MALLORY storms down the hall and up the stairs.

ODRAN

Where are you going? Dinner's ready.

MALLORY (O.S.)

I don't want any!

Odran glares back at the photos on the mantle.

ODRAN

She's just like you. It's like a curse.

MALLORY'S BEDROOM

A pink room with thick white trim. A bit messy. MALLORY slams the door as she enters.

She stomps up a few steps, leading to an antique wooden hatch. Inside is her BEDCLOSET: a closet repurposed as an elevated wall-to-wall bed. It's piled with pillows and blankets--a cozy nest. On one wall is a large round window.

MALLORY

Just because he was too gutless to look for you doesn't mean I have to sit here and do nothing. Dad wouldn't do nothing. He'd go black dog. Batman. Out there day and night until those kids were found. Not like grampa. He wouldn't go out and find his OWN kid, let alone a hundred strangers' kids.

(beat)

I can't just let it go. Dad was better than that. I have to be better than that.

She pulls a notebook from under her pillow. She opens it. At the top in bubble letters it says, "MILK CARTON KIDS: RESCUE OPERATION." Notes on the case fill the page.

MALLORY

Dad's a cold case, but this Milk Carton Kids thing is happening right under the town's nose. What better maiden adventure for your daughter than a hunt for missing kids?

She prepares to write, but hesitates.

MALLORY

What do I even have, here? All I know is that a hundred kids are missing and the cops are trash at their job. I know the news, same as anybody else. I won't find out anything at the bottom of the news luge. I've gotta find a lead. ...Where do I even start?

She looks out the big window.

MALLORY

(sighing)

Dad would've had this adventure locked and logged by now.

She reaches over and hits PLAY on her stereo. The CD winds up and Primus's "Mr. Knowitall" blares.

KITCHEN - MEANWHILE

The muffled music pounds through the ceiling.

ODRAN

Primus. Yeah, she's angry with me.

BEDCLOSET

MALLORY throws her head back against her pillow.

A cricket chirps. Mallory's eyes shoot open... Another chirp. And another. Mal's eyes narrow. She stops the music.

MALLORY

Oh, no. Nope. Nuh-uh.
(searching)
Where are you?

She tosses pillows around. She finds the cricket behind an old Sludgy frozen drink cup and scoops it up. She pushes open the large window. It's dark outside.

MALLORY

Time to go back to the magnificent symphony of nature. I'm sure you're first chair in the legs section or whatever.

As she pours the cricket onto the ledge, a rustling comes from the bushes. Her fear turns to intrigue. She narrowly scans the bush line across the driveway.

MALLORY

I couldn't be that lucky...

She leaps out of the bedcloset into her room.

OFFICE

MALLORY snatches up the portrait.

LIVING ROOM

MALLORY darts for the front door and runs outside.

EXT. DRIVEWAY

MALLORY peeks around. Overhead, a great shadow looms in the sky--a giant STYGIAN OWL. It seems to be observing the scene.

MALLORY

(quietly)
Come and get me...

The bushes rustle--Mallory leaps in!