

CUTS

Written by

Len Archibald

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2063 Magnolia Avenue,
Windsor, Ontario, N8P 0A2
548-389-2988
lenwortharchibald@outlook.com

BLACK

The SNIP SNIP of barber scissors. The LAUGHTER of children.

MEAN BOY 1 (V.O.)

(amused)

...nah, he ain't it. This nigga's been adopted...

MEAN BOY 2 (V.O.)

Wha'chu mean? He ain't no nigga!

The laughter intensifies, a relentless assault.

INT. ASH'S APARTMENT - DAY

ASH (late-30s, Black, sunken eyes), stands before a full-length mirror, perfectly pressed slacks and a crisp bow tie. His hair, unkempt, is overdue for a cut.

Ash's breath is slow, deliberate. He adjusts his bow tie with obsessive precision. His hands tremble slightly, betraying his calm exterior. The apartment is immaculate, sterile. Beige walls, no pictures. Silence hangs heavy.

INT. OFFICE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A pair of lips belonging to a CAUCASIAN MANAGER. His smile, dismissive of his tone-deaf words.

CAUCASIAN MANAGER

...I can vouch for him, Ash is one of the good ones...

BACK TO ASH'S APARTMENT

Ash twitches, readjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. He moves toward the kitchenette, where a cup of coffee sits on the counter, just drained from the Keurig. He grabs it, eyes moving mechanically.

At the window, Ash stares at the plaza across the street: a convenience store, a mom-and-pop Chinese restaurant, and a barbershop... "CUTS".

Ash sips his coffee, his gaze intense, fixed. He pulls his phone from his pocket and stares at an image, never revealed.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP & SALON - DAY

The thrum of aggressive hip-hop fills the room. Clippers buzz. The air is alive with heated debates, gossip, and the occasional joke that punctuates the chaos.

Ash sits stiffly at the edge of the waiting area, posture rigid. A white baseball cap sits low, eyes glued to his phone - disconnected from the energy around him.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL LOCKER ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A PALE HAND, a police officer's, clamps down on YOUNG ASH's arm, bending his wrist painfully. The SOUND of metal scraping against the locker.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

Walk-in!

BACK TO CUTS BARBERSHOP

Ash blinks, lost in his thoughts, then tucks his phone away. He walks toward a chair where JOHNSON (early 40s, Black, tattooed and confident) waves him over.

Johnson's barber station is adorned with Black Power paraphernalia: Photos of MLK, Malcolm X, the 1968 Olympic Black Power salute, a "One Love" Bob Marley flag, and a custom headline about the Tulsa Massacre: "WE REBUILD. WE NEVER FORGET."

DESHAUN, A CLIENT (30s, Black, "Alpha Male"), finishing his cut, drops a \$5 bill into the half-full "TIPS JAR" on the counter. Johnson smirks.

JOHNSON

My nigga!

Ash watches DeShaun and Johnson share a casual fist bump. DeShaun gives Ash a suspicious side-eye as he exits.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)

What's good?

Ash and Johnson exchange a hesitant pound-hug. Johnson's is enthusiastic; Ash's, stiff. Ash sits, awkwardly shifting in the chair, noticing Johnson's "BLACK LIVES MATTER" bracelet.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)

New here? Have I seen you around?

A barber cape flows around Ash as Johnson snaps it around his neck.

ASH
Just moved to town.

REESE (mid-60s, the "old head") works beside Johnson, his voice rasping with years of cigarettes.

REESE
(grinning, to Ash)
Watch out, now! Big Johnson might
split'cho eyebrows like the Red
Sea.

Laughter erupts. Ash chuckles uncertainly, trying to fit in.

JOHNSON
What you feelin', bruh?

Ash pulls up a photo of a high-low fade on his phone. Johnson nods confidently and flicks on the clippers. BUZZ.

ASH
Ash, by the way.

JOHNSON
Aight, aight. What you do, Arthur
Ashe?

ASH
HR Manager. It's...boring.

JOHNSON
Yeah, you look like you read books.

Ash squints, unsure...was that a compliment? An insult?

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
No shade. Nice to have a brotha in
here who ain't talkin' like he
failed English twice and got baby
mama drama.

ASH
(quickly, trying to
impress)
I've been listening to Illmatic
lately.

JOHNSON
Classic. You heard of X9? If you
like Nas...

Ash doesn't respond. He's lost in the rhythm of Johnson's work, quietly observing.

INT. POLICE INTERROGATION OFFICE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Ash stands paralyzed, boxed in by the confines of the office. A FEMALE OFFICER points accusingly. Young Ash's mouth is open, but no sound comes out.

BACK TO CUTS BARBERSHOP

Ash stares at his reflection in the mirrors: the larger wall mirror and the smaller one Johnson uses. He watches Johnson's precise work—a fresh low fade, the developing waves.

JOHNSON

We good?

ASH

It's perfect.

Ash admires the fresh haircut, his appearance transformed.

INT. ASH'S HR OFFICE - DAY

Ash's office is a sea of beige, his desk immaculate.

On the other side of Ash's desk sits MARCO (mid-20s, Black), sharply dressed in a business suit, dreadlocks framing his face. He sits across from a window, revealing a row of cubicles, mostly occupied by Caucasians.

ASH

I appreciate you taking the time to see if we're a good fit. I feel good about this.

MARCO

Yeah, bruh. It's nice to have a real one up in here. The code-switching for you must be crazy.

As Marco speaks, ASH'S BOSS walks past the window, glancing in. He curls his lip and shakes his head. "No."

Ash catches the look, but Marco doesn't notice.

ASH

Uh, yeah, brother. We've gotta look out for each other.

The two stand and shake hands.

A LOUD, METALLIC CLANG.

INT. POLICE SQUAD CAR - DAY (FLASHBACK)

The SLAM of a squad car door shutting on Young Ash. Red and blue lights ripple across his tear-streaked face. The dialogue is MUFFLED.

EXT. PARK - MORNING

Sunlight filters through trees. Joggers pass by, laughter, dogs, kids playing.

Ash, dressed in athletic gear, sits on a bench, absorbed in his phone. He discreetly records Johnson (in biking gear) through the camera, his laughter with an OLDER MAN captured on screen.

As Johnson rides away, Ash quickly pockets his phone and starts jogging with labored, artificial breaths. He approaches a tree, blending with other joggers, head "bobbing" to his earbuds.

JOHNSON (O.S.)

Arthur Ashe! Never forget a fade.

Ash shifts from surveillance to social ease as Johnson slows his bicycle and approaches.

ASH

Hey, uh... "Big Ass Johnson"...

JOHNSON

(amused)

Say less. Didn't know you lived here.

ASH

Yeah, new apartments on Lauzon.

Johnson raises an eyebrow.

ASH (CONT'D)

Don't look at me like that.

JOHNSON

(impressed)

Aye, those apartments are no joke.

ASH
Neither is this economy.

Johnson gestures to his earbuds.

ASH (CONT'D)
Oh!

Ash shares an earbud. Johnson's face lights up.

JOHNSON
Ah, that X9 shit.

ASH
"Open Spies" is crazy.

JOHNSON
(happily recognizing)
That second verse!

Ash nods, almost like he expected this.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
You run a lot?

ASH
(shrugs, too casual)
Try to get 45 minutes every day.

JOHNSON
Shiiiiit, bruh. You don't even look
like you broke a sweat.

Ash smiles, calculated.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP - DAY

A barber's cape billows. Its back snaps. Johnson's razor hums over Ash's head—precise, steady. The energy beats, full of regulars.

Ash sits silently as Johnson, animated, is mid-story.

JOHNSON
...and I'm telling Christy, it's
cheaper to bring in a professional.
She's always on some Bob the
Builder shit.

ASH
(muttering, clinical)
I mean, home improvement increases
appraisal value 4.5% around here.

Johnson laughs, now used to Ash's manner.

JOHNSON

Yeah, it's time we get'chu on a date.

(to Reese)

Wha'chu say, Reese?

Reese, working with DeShaun, juggles multiple conversations effortlessly.

REESE

(grinning, to Ash)

Aye, youngblood - you got a brain, a good job, a car that works...

(gawks at Johnson)

...you ain't got no baby mama.

JOHNSON

She ain't my baby mama.

BARBER 2

Big man, you Beyoncé her?

Barber 2 mimics Beyoncé's "Put A Ring On It" dance. The barbers and clients join in the fun. Ash sits, amused.

REESE

(to Ash)

Brotha, you got the goods.

DESHAUN

...Yeah, just lose the bow tie and the code switch.

Ash's eye twitches. The words echo.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A gang of YOUNG BLACK FACES crowds Young Ash, intimidating and overpowering. A mocking shriek mixes with adult laughter.

BACK TO CUTS BARBERSHOP

DeShaun's head snaps back.

DESHAUN

(annoyed)

Yo, you payin' attention, old timer?

REESE
 (to Ash, with a wink)
 Sorry, slipped.

A YOUNG GIRL, SHEA (10, biracial, perceptive), bounces into the shop, followed by CHRISTY (40, White), casually dressed but sharp-eyed.

SHEA
 Daddy!

REESE
 Speak of angels and devils.

CHRISTY
 Interested to know who you think is who?

REESE
 You always the angel in this family, baby.

Reese lowers himself to Shea.

REESE (CONT'D)
 This one here is the demon.

Shea playfully makes a devil face with her fingers. Reese returns the gesture, making her giggle.

Shea gives her dad a long, warm hug.

Ash's body goes rigid, thrown off by the sight of the biracial family dynamic.

JOHNSON
 (genuine warmth)
 Hey, Lil' Wave. Y'all early.

Christy offers a polite, friendly smile to Ash, but her eyes don't meet his.

CHRISTY
 (to Johnson)
 Needed to grab some things next door. Didn't know you had a client.

JOHNSON
 (focused on work)
 Last one of the day, then we can bounce.
 (to Christy)
 Christy, Ash. Ash, Christy, my...

SURROUNDING BARBERS

BABY MAMA!

Christy's demeanor shrinks slightly, but her smile remains warm.

CHRISTY

(nods)

Y'all still on that. Okay.

(to Reese)

I know you're...traditional. But you've got to embrace the new world.

SHEA

But, mom, you sort of are---

CHRISTY

Hush.

JOHNSON

And obviously, that's big boss lady, Shea.

Ash manages a small nod. Shea peers curiously around the chair.

SHEA

You look like you're in the army.

Ash forces an uneasy, high-pitched chuckle. It's warm, but strained.

ASH

(awkward, overly formal)

I'm not in the military. These are just the kind of trousers I like. Polyester-cotton twill.

CHRISTY

A man of random facts!

Ash pulls out a small, foil-wrapped chocolate coin and hands it to Shea.

ASH

For the boss.

Shea happily takes it.

CHRISTY

(eyes narrowing slightly)

Shea, what do you say?

SHEA

Thank you...Mr. Trousers!

Christy's smile tightens. She glances at Ash, who quickly redirects his gaze to Johnson's mirror. Her perceptive gaze lingers on Ash, then slides to the chocolate coin he gave Shea. She takes Shea by the hand and leads her away.

CHRISTY

(low, to Shea)

Keep that in your pocket, okay?
Let's wait for Daddy in the car.

They exit. Johnson doesn't notice.

JOHNSON

(finishing up)

Aight, bruh, you're lined up. You
look good, Ash. Real good.

Ash stares at his reflection, at the empty space Christy once occupied in the periphery. He bounces his head in rhythm, mimicking Johnson's energy.

ASH

(whispering to the glass)

Trying to look the part.

INT. ASH'S CAR - AFTERNOON

Ash sits in his impeccably clean car, eyes fixed on his phone. Through the windshield: a school across the street.

BANG! Johnson slams on the window.

JOHNSON

PEDOPHILE!

Ash jerks. Pure reflex.

Johnson laughs, too proud of himself and amused to notice Ash discreetly flipping his phone face-down on the seat.

Outside, kids flood the sidewalk. Ash rolls his window down.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)

You stalkin' me, bro? Runnin' into
you a lot.

The question lands. Ash's eyes narrow just slightly. He processes. Johnson's tone softens into play.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)

Ah...I'm just playin'. Windsor's small.

A nervous chuckle from Ash a half beat late as he sinks back into his seat.

ASH

...if that were true, my sister would have some concerns.

Johnson tilts his head. Files it.

JOHNSON

(suspicious grin)

Thought you said you were new in town?

Ash doesn't answer immediately.

ASH

I am.

(mechanical, lying)

But my sister's been here...twelve years.

JOHNSON

(cautiously accepts)

Oh. You here for your nephew?

(pauses)

Wonder if Shea knows him.

A flicker in Ash's eye. A twitch he suppresses. Before he can respond, Shea appears behind Johnson - her backpack nearly swallowing her.

SHEA

(to Johnson)

Why aren't you in your car?

JOHNSON

(gestures to Ash)

You got eyes, baby girl.

Ash's smile sharpens. Professional, practiced. Shea lights up.

SHEA

Hey, Mr. Trousers! Who you waiting on?

JOHNSON

Why's that your business?

SHEA
Maybe we can have a play date.

JOHNSON
(blinks)
A play what?

Ash opens his glove box and pulls out another chocolate coin.

ASH
For Miss Boss Lady.

He offers it to Shea, keeping his eyes fixated on her. She plucks it happily.

SHEA
Thank you! Again!

Johnson watches Ash now. Smile frozen. Eyes narrowing. Ash keeps his gaze on Shea.

ASH
Anyway...
(too quick)
...that'd be tricky. For my nephew.
(beat)
He's shy. Autistic.
(then)
Welcome, by the way.

Shea processes this.

SHEA
Ohhh. That must be Nathan. Yeah, he doesn't talk much. But he's smart.

ASH
(too quickly)
He is.

A fraction of a second passes.

ASH (CONT'D)
Doesn't talk to me much either. I'm the scary uncle.

Shea studies the coin, then eyes him before a shrug.

SHEA
...You don't look scary.

Ash smiles. Slow. Controlled. Held a moment too long.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP - DAY

Johnson and a guarded Ash engage in their haircut ritual.

JOHNSON
C'mon, man it's friendly.

ASH
(fearfully)
You've never seen a black man who
can't play?

JOHNSON
Man, you ain't special. I've seen
plenty of airballs. But once we
kick back with a few beers? Bruh.

Ash's jaw tightens. BUZZ.

EXT. BASKETBALL COURT - DAY

A heated 3-on-3. Sneakers screech. Trash talk snaps in the
air.

Johnson, Ash and a THIRD TEAMMATE fight a team of seasoned
players. They move in rhythm, until Ash lags...his white tee
clinging to him, Ash stumbles, breathing hard. Johnson sees
him, zips a pass.

DeShawun, quick, loud, sharp with the taunt plays for the
opposing side and closes in, eyes cutting.

Ash pivots and collides with DeShaun's elbow. Head snaps
back. A trickle of blood from his nose.

JOHNSON
Foul! What's up, man?!

DESHAUN
(condescending, loud)
My bad. You good, my guy?

Ash forces himself up, wobbling.

JOHNSON
(to the other team)
Watch your boy.

DESHAUN
I aint'cho boy. Watch Chad over
there.

JOHNSON
I see you. His name ain't Chad.

EXT. BASKETBALL COURT - LATER

Ash's team on offense. Johnson drives; ball stripped. Fast break.

DeShaun streaks down the court with Ash the only obstacle. He plants his feet, arms up, desperate.

BAM! DeShaun slams it home, Ash flies, landing hard on the concrete.

INT. SCHOOL GYM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Ash lags at a drill. COACH blows a WHISTLE.

COACH
Ash! How are you the only one that
doesn't get it?

MEAN TEEN 1
He gotta be adopted, Coach.

The Coach's disapproval lands.

JOHNSON (V.O.)
Charge!

BACK TO BASKETBALL COURT

Ash lies on the blacktop, chest heaving. DeShaun's shadow looms over him.

DESHAUN
(smirking)
Go back to playing golf, Chad.

A shove. Johnson's. Chaos erupts: pushing, cursing. Hands grab players apart.

Ash stays down, breath ragged. Observing Johnson defending him, a slow smirk creeps across his face.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP - DAY

Awkward silence between Ash and Johnson despite the shop's energy. Ash has gauze stuffing one nostril.

JOHNSON
Nah, that shit was outta pocket.

ASH
It's...aight.

Johnson flicks the razor clean, eyes narrowing.

MARCO (O.C.)
Aye, I know you...

Ash sees Marco in the next chair and attempts a warm smile.

ASH
Marco, right?

MARCO
(disgusted)
Oh, now you gon' act like we cool again? This code-switching snake had me thinking I had a job in the bag...only to be told I ain't a "good cultural fit."

ASH
(defensive)
That wasn't my call---

MARCO
What that mean anyway? Gotta wear a bow tie and be the token like you, Urkel?

JOHNSON
(to Barber 2)
You gon' handle your client?

MARCO
Not worth my energy.

Marco, shaking his head and Barber 2 slide back. Johnson notices Ash's jaw clenched; a single tear falls.

JOHNSON
You good?

ASH
(instant composure)
Yeah. Yeah!

JOHNSON
Aye, come out with me and Christy tonight. Maybe we find you a dime.

ASH
(confused)
A—?

JOHNSON
Bruh. For real?

ASH
(squints, searches)
Yeah, man. I'll... pick up a dime.

Johnson side-eyes him and returns to work as the clippers buzz.

INT. THE VELVET VINE - NIGHT

A dim, swanky wine bar. Johnson and Christy share a corner booth; their chemistry shining with ease. A BARTENDER sets down drinks.

JOHNSON
I didn't order this.

Across the room Ash raises his glass with a forced smile. Christy watches him, suspicious.

CHRISTY
Your new BFF has arrived.

JOHNSON
(sips)
And he knows what I like.

CHRISTY
(sips)
He knows what I like too. We shared the same space five minutes.

JOHNSON
That's about to change.

Ash pushes through the crowd with a stretched smile. He freezes when observing DeShaun stumble into the bar with friends. Johnson and Christy exchange a look.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
(calling)
Arthur Ashe!

Ash snaps back, approaches the table, too eager, lingering, oblivious to the flow of bodies. The pause stretches.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
(breaking awkwardness)
...You gotta G&T, too, I notice.

ASH
(casual)
It's a classic.

Ash's eyes flick to DeShaun flirting loudly at the bar. He grips his glass so tight it trembles.

ASH (CONT'D)
(to the couple)
So...didn't expect this.

Johnson and Christy exchange a puzzled glance.

ASH (CONT'D)
(awkward, to Christy)
You're so...down?

CHRISTY
(half-joking)
So Johnson can only date within his
race because of cultural pride?

JOHNSON
(teasing)
Oh? Is this a date?

ASH
I didn't mean...

CHRISTY
Don't worry.
(raises glass)
Salut.

Christy drinks. Ash's gaze shifts; the smile returns, but his grip is white-knuckled.

ASH
So. We still meeting to pick up a
dime?

CHRISTY
Weed or a call girl?

ASH
(stiff)
Still figuring that out.

At the bar DeShaun, drunk and belligerent, stumbles away from an argument. Ash's hand trembles. Suddenly Ash's glass SHATTERS in his palm - shards and liquor spray. People duck.

ASH (CONT'D)

Oh my god! Oh my god!

A SERVER rushes over.

JOHNSON

You good, bro?

Ash, trance-like, glances down at his palm, and calmly pulls a shard out without flinching. He presses his hand and wraps it with a napkin from the server's tray, binding it tightly, mechanically.

ASH

(robotic)

I...have to take care of this.

Without another word he darts into the crowd. Christy glares.

CHRISTY

Seems like there's lots he gotta take care of.

Johnson shrugs, unsettled.

EXT. LONELY STREET - NIGHT

A dead, flickering streetlight. DeShaun stumbles, phone held high: no signal.

FOOTSTEPS approach. He turns. A FIGURE appears from the dark.

DESHAUN

(slurring)

Bruh, I can't get a signal for an Uber...

CRACK! A bandaged hand BRANDISHING A TIRE IRON connects with DeShaun's skull. He crumples. The impact is metallic, efficient.

Ash, bandaged, emerges from the shadows.

ASH

Do you know what it feels like to try and be something you already are and have everybody tell you you're doing it wrong?

He raises the tire iron again.

FLASH CUTS – with each swing:

- Mean Teen 1's cold smirk.
- Young Ash's parents talking over his head; muffled shame.
- Young Ash reflected in a police car mirror; static radio.

BACK TO STREET

Ash swings again and again. Blood spatters his face. His eyes flicker: rage, regret, relief, odd joy.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP & SALON – DAY

Johnson's razor hums. Ash sits stoic, disconnected, eyes drifting.

JOHNSON
Missed you last night.

ASH
Got tired.

BUZZ. For a moment they're separated from the room.

ASH (CONT'D)
You know what "being Black" means?

JOHNSON
Wha'chu mean?

ASH
Like...what am I missing? My voice too light? Clothes too white?

JOHNSON
(soft, direct)
You got melanin same as me. Ain't about dribbling or blasting Public Enemy. Folks would rather see us erased than whole.

Buzz of clippers.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
You're Black. But you're also you. Culture's too big to pin on one thing. Where this comin' from?

Johnson's phone buzzes. He glances down. Text from Christy:

"CHRISTY: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS?"

(Local news post about DeShaun)
 "CHRISTY: HE'S WITH YOU, ISN'T HE????"

Johnson looks up, eyes locking on Ash.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
 You...hear about DeShaun?

ASH
 (unblinking, cold)
 Nah.

Johnson shaves, notices Ash's bandaged hand outside the cape, splotted with dried blood.

JOHNSON
 Critical condition. Fractured skull. Internal injuries.

ASH
 (cold)
 Sucks for him.

JOHNSON
 (testing)
 Crazy coincidence. Almost poetic justice.

ASH
 (in mirror)
 Poetry's relative.

A long beat.

JOHNSON
 I still owe you that drink. Lemme break you out, get your mind right.

Ash nods, expression unreadable.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
 The only one who needs to care, inside or out, is you.

ASH
 You're right...bro. You're a good friend.

JOHNSON
 (measured)
 I hope you understand that.

Johnson returns to work. The razor hums. Ash keeps smiling: flat, practiced.

INT. JOHNSON'S CAR - NIGHT

Johnson drives. Ash scrolls, light from the screen plays across his face.

JOHNSON
...Never would've taken you for
someone who's sat in the back of a
squad.

ASH
Yeah. Traumatizing.

JOHNSON
Always is. No matter the age.

Ash keeps scrolling.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
What you so occupied with?

ASH
Work stuff. Mind if I use your
charger?

JOHNSON
Naw, bro.

Ash plugs in.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
Was thinkin' bout earlier. My mama
would keep remindin' me of
Jamaica's national motto---

ASH
"Out of Many One People".

JOHNSON
(amused, patois)
Rassclot!

ASH
(patois)
Aye, a wha'u chat 'bout?

The two share a chuckle.

JOHNSON
See? Don't let no one - not even me
- define where you fit in the
culture. You get in where you fit
in. Ya feel me?

Ash's demeanor softens as Johnson's car slows.

ASH
Yeah. I feel you.

JOHNSON
And you don't have to do that.
Don't try to sound like me or
anyone else. Forreal. Talk like
Ash.

Ash exhales, gaze fixed straight ahead.

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX - NIGHT

Johnson parks. Ash steps out.

ASH
Be back in five. Ev'ting irie!

JOHNSON
You and your public toilet phobia.
See you.

Ash heads in. Johnson watches, then pockets Ash's charging phone from the passenger seat. He swipes the photo gallery.

ON PHONE: dozens of barbershop smiles, hairstyles, candid street photos, then: Christy walking to her car; a video of Johnson at the park; a high-angle shot of Johnson entering Cuts taken from across the street...and a photo of Shea entering school.

Johnson's breath catches, rage coiling in his flickering eyes.

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX - NIGHT

Ash returns, smiling, open collar.

ASH
Okay, I'm ready to---

SLAM. Johnson grabs Ash by the collar, shoving him against the car.

JOHNSON
(low, furious)
What kind of sick fuck are you?

ASH
(confused)
What are---?

Johnson holds up Ash's phone, the image of Shea on screen.

JOHNSON
You like taking pictures of little girls?!

Ash's eyes dart at the phone.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
You play this "nobody accepts me" bullshit like you're the victim? Was that whole thing about your nephew a lie? Do you even have a sister?

Ash scrambles for explanation.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
(desperate, hurt)
Bruh...did you attack DeShaun?

ASH
No...!

JOHNSON
DON'T LIE TO ME!

Johnson paces, enraged.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
Nobody accepts you because you're sick. Get help.

Ash gasps as Johnson shoves Ash to the ground.

JOHNSON (CONT'D)
(towers)
If I see you near my daughter again...I will put you in the ground.

Johnson hurls the phone; the case shatters. He peels away in his car.

Ash collapses on the grass, shaking. He sobs, slaps himself, crawls for the phone.

ON PHONE: a bruised, bloodied image of a barber, posed like a grotesque portrait.

Ash flips the phone over, seeing only his cracked reflection.

INT. ASH'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ash sits on the couch, statuesque, expressionless in his beige prison. A high-frequency SQUEAL builds inside his skull, an internal scream that syncs with a muffled outer sound.

INT. ASH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (DREAM)

ASH lies rigid, eyes squeezed shut, drenched in sweat. Darkness presses in.

A dry RUSTLING comes from the walls. Ash's eyes SNAP OPEN. He cannot move.

SHADOWS peel from the walls and coalesce into gaunt, human figures. All Black. Their faces are blank; their eyes burning WHITE-HOT. One figure resolves into a chilling likeness of Johnson.

They glide to the bed in silence. Hands claw the sheets, tearing them away.

A dozen hands rip at Ash's clothes, exposing him. Under the glare of white-hot eyes they begin to tear into his flesh: skin peeling like wallpaper, revealing Caucasian skin beneath.

A voiceless, maddening SHRIEK lives only in Ash's head.

INT. ASH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ash SNAPS upright, strangled gasp. Sweat soaks him; heart hammering. The room is normal. Shadows inert.

He feels his chest with shaking hands. Skin warm, whole.

A drawer slides open. He plucks a pistol and holds it.

Sitting on the floor, barrel to his temple, Ash SOBS, low and desolate.

INT. ASH'S CAR - DAY

Ash sits dead-eye in front of Shea's school as the bell rings and children pour out.

He slowly twirls a single chocolate gold coin between his fingers. Something off-frame prompts a small, private smile.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP - NIGHT

The shop is quiet. Johnson wipes his chair. Reese sweeps.

The door swings open.

REESE
(without looking up)
We closed.

He glances up - freezes.

REESE (CONT'D)
Big man...

Johnson turns.

Ash stands in the doorway. Johnson straightens. Jaw clenches.

JOHNSON
Get the fuck out.

Ash lifts both hands, calm. One holds his phone.

ASH
I just want a haircut.

JOHNSON
I gave you one shot. You're
trespassing. We're calling the
cops.

ASH
I'm leaving town. Just want one
last cut. One final cut before I
say goodbye to Shea.

A loaded silence. Johnson stiffens. His breath shortens.

JOHNSON
(slow, dangerous)
What did you just say?

Ash raises his phone.

ON PHONE: Shea smiles in the passenger seat of Ash's car, backpack on, eating a half-unwrapped gold chocolate coin.

Johnson's eyes widen - shock, fear, rage colliding.

ASH
(unbothered)
She's safe. Once I get---

Johnson explodes, lunges, grips Ash by the throat.

JOHNSON
WHAT DID YOU DO?!

Ash smiles – slow, unsettling. He reveals the pistol tucked at his waist. Johnson freezes. Reese backs away.

ASH
(soft)
...I just want a haircut.

CUTS BARBERSHOP – LATER

Compressed air HISSES. A cape unfurls. The SNAP of clippers.

Johnson sits rigid in the chair, eyes wide, pulse pounding.

Ash stands behind him, pistol in hand. Reese stands across the shop, paralyzed.

ASH
Slide your phone to me. Then leave.

Reese complies, no hesitation. Ash leans close to Johnson's ear.

ASH (CONT'D)
Now you know...if you try anything stupid, you probably won't see Shea again.

Johnson trembles.

JOHNSON
Please. Don't hurt my baby girl.
Ash, please. I trusted you.

The clippers BUZZ to life.

ASH
(thoughtful, distant)
Every few weeks my dad took me for a cut. Smelled like Newports. Aftershave. Motown. Stax. Run-DMC. So many men who claim to either march with MLK or sang with Bob Marley.

Hair falls.

ASH (CONT'D)

A haven. Men together. Speaking a language no one else knew.

More hair falls. Johnson winces.

ASH (CONT'D)

But nothing lasts. You grow up. You search. And sometimes...

(voice hardens)

...your self makes you an outcast.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Ash sits as a PRINCIPAL and his PARENTS whisper nearby.

Mean Teen 1 passes, smirking.

BACK TO CUTS BARBERSHOP

Ash's hand shakes as the clippers scrape unevenly.

Johnson sucks in a breath as blood beads along a raw patch of scalp.

ASH

I was a model student, still blamed for dope dealing. Doesn't matter how smart. They just see a Black kid. A stat.

Ash presses the pistol barrel against Johnson's head, leaning his weight into him.

ASH (CONT'D)

The dude who framed me? Just a wannabe thug. And I wanted to be like him!

Ash digs the clippers too hard again. Johnson yelps, blood trickling down his temple.

ASH (CONT'D)

I don't hate those other barbers. I love them. Each a prophet.

Hair falls.

ASH (CONT'D)
 I thought if I found the right
 style, the right brother, I'd
 finally see myself reflected.

A voice from the past echoes in Ash's mind...

MEAN TEEN 1 (V.O.)
 Nobody gonna miss you, Urkel.

Ash spins the chair. The mirror reveals Johnson – scalp
 uneven, bleeding. Behind him: Ash, smiling – eyes screaming
 pain. The clippers CLICK OFF.

ASH
 Do you see this?

JOHNSON
 YES!

ASH
 DO YOU SEE THIS?! This is what I
 see every day.

Distant SIRENS begin to bleed in – faint, unavoidable.

Ash steps back. Scratches his head with the barrel of the
 gun.

JOHNSON
 Please---

ASH
 (mocking)
 What? You want me to shoot you?
 (gun to his temple)
 Shoot me?

The sirens grow louder. Red and blue light begins to pulse
 faintly through the windows.

ASH (CONT'D)
 (exhales)
 I just want one thing from you.

JOHNSON
 Anything.

ASH
 (beat)
 ...Am I your nigga?

Johnson flinches.

JOHNSON

What...?

ASH

We're supposed to be down, brothas.
But I'm standing here. Black.
Armed. Police outside – ready to
kill me.

Ash cocks the gun. Johnson slides out of the chair, drops to his knees.

ASH (CONT'D)

So...AM. I. YOUR. NIGGA?

Johnson trembles.

JOHNSON

You're...you're my---

ASH

(roars)

SAY IT!

JOHNSON

(breaking)

YOU'RE MY NIGGA!

Instantly, Ash UNCOCKS the gun. SLIDES it hard across the floor – far from his reach. It skids into open view.

Ash drops to his knees, hands laced tightly behind his head.

ASH

(toward the door)

DON'T SHOOT! I AM UNARMED!

POLICE FLOOD IN. Boots. Shouts. Bodies slam. An officer's flashlight clocks the gun on the floor.

Ash and Johnson are forced face-down, cheek to filthy tile, side by side. Their eyes meet.

ASH (CONT'D)

(whispers)

Shea is safe. She's...

Johnson exhales, relief breaking through terror.

Ash is yanked to his feet and dragged into blinding red-and-blue light.

INT. CUTS BARBERSHOP – DAY

Shea sweeps; the shop's laughter folds around her.

REESE (O.S.)

WALK IN!

Johnson, cap low, looks up at a CLIENT waiting – white cap, head down on his phone.

JOHNSON

(mild concern)

Walk in...

The client lifts his head: a near doppelgänger of Ash. Johnson exhales, lowers his chest.

CLIENT

(sitting)

Sorry, bruh. Didn't hear ya.

Johnson begins cutting. He smiles for the shop, but his eyes are hollow; the razor trembles in his grip.

Christy approaches, touches his shoulder. They look at Shea the way parents do. Johnson steadies, breathes, and keeps cutting.

INT. CORRECTIONAL FACILITY BARBERSHOP – DAY

Cinderblock walls. White tile. Institutional light. The SNIP SNAP of shears, the HUM of clippers, low inmate chatter.

At a steel station an INMATE BARBER (50s, old-school) holds a silver hand mirror up.

The reflection: ASH in a correctional jumpsuit. His face: bruised, healing. His eyes: eerily calm. He wears a new, severe high-fade.

INMATE BARBER

Yeah, this definitely helps that war face. Whadd'ya think?

The mirror tilts. Ash studies the architecture of his skull like a student inspecting a sculpture. He meets his distorted gaze.

ASH

(slow, satisfied)

This is perfect.

FADE TO BLACK.