

SPARE THE CHILD

Written by

Landon McDonald

BLACK SCREEN:

The sound of labored BREATHING and rhythmic TICKING.

FADE IN:

EXT. WENDY VANEK'S CAR - DAY

A maroon Chrysler PT Cruiser drives through a suburban neighborhood with manicured lawns and white picket fences.

INT. WENDY VANEK'S CAR - DAY

A solar-powered plastic sunflower sways back and forth on the car's dashboard, clicking away like a merry metronome.

Morning light shines through the car's windshield.

A large, lumpy green duffle bag rests on the passenger seat.

The sunlit passenger window, SMEARED WITH BLOODY HANDPRINTS.

Behind the wheel sits DANE VANEK (16), a raven-haired, rail-thin kid with a thousand-yard stare dressed in a stained white t-shirt, gray hoodie, painters pants and combat boots.

Dane is a sweaty, WHEEZING mess. His lower lip is split wide open, his right cheek is marred by four deep scratch marks and he's bleeding from another large gash on his forehead.

Dane pulls out an asthma inhaler. Takes a long, deep DRAG.

EXT. GORMAN PIKE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - DAY

The sound of CHILDREN PLAYING.

Dane swerves into a parking lot. A message board reads:

GORMAN PIKE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

He pulls into an empty space. Turns off the engine.

The young man mops the blood from his eyes. Stares at his reflection in the rear-view mirror.

After a beat, he grabs the duffle bag and exits the car.

There is a long, dreadful pause before three GUNSHOTS ring out, followed by a cacophony of SCREAMS.

TODD (V.O.)  
 Adam Jacob Dormer died on October  
 11th, 2017. Two years later, I  
 found him living under my bed.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. ST. GERMAIN'S HOME FOR CHILDREN - DAY

An imposing red-brick building surrounded by a high iron fence. Rosebushes line the walkway to the main entrance.

INT. ST. GERMAIN'S HOME FOR CHILDREN - DAY

SISTER JANE MURPHY (late-thirties, kind features) hurries down a long hallway lined with bulletin boards and children's drawings, HEAVY FOOTSTEPS echoing on the linoleum flooring.

She passes a classroom where a choir practices behind closed doors. Music: "Children, Go Where I Send Thee (Traditional)."

The Sister rounds a corner and bursts through a set of double doors into the courtyard beyond.

As the doors open, CRIES and CHANTING rebound off the walls.

INT. ST. GERMAIN'S COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

The music plays on.

An enclosure centered on a marble sculpture of the Virgin.

TODD WHITNEY (11, small but tenacious) and MILES NAVARRO (13) are engaged in a fist fight surrounded by a crowd of cheering onlookers. Both combatants are already bruised and bloody.

Sister Jane pushes her way through the throng of kids.

SISTER JANE  
 Boys, stop that right now!

Todd turns to look at the Sister, his expression verging on apologetic. Miles, seeing an opening, SUCKER-PUNCHES his opponent square in the nose, sending the smaller boy flying.

Todd springs back up, wiping the blood from his nostrils. Flashes Miles a malevolent grin.

He lowers his head and charges the older boy, RAMMING him in the stomach and TACKLING him to the ground. Before the pinned Miles can respond, Todd begins PUMMELING him with both fists.

Sister Jane swoops in and pulls Todd off of the now-WAILING Miles. Todd tries to wriggle out of her grasp, but the Sister holds him fast, forcing the young man to look her in the eye.

SISTER JANE (CONT'D)

That's enough, Todd! Do you hear me? Enough!

TODD

He called me an orphan! I kept telling him to stop, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't stop.

Miles spits several teeth into his hand. SOBS harder.

MILES

Fucking psycho!

Sister Jane silences Miles with a WITHERING GLARE and grabs him by the wrist, pulling both boys toward the courtyard doors. She shakes her head as she drags them along.

INT. ST. GERMAIN'S NURSE'S OFFICE - DAY

The music stops.

Todd sits on a stool, his head elevated, pressing an ice pack to his nose. An adhesive strip covers a cut near his eye.

Sister Jane leans over him, bandaging his scraped knuckles.

Across the room, Miles lies on an exam table, MOANING, as a nurse (mid-fifties) tends to his more serious injuries.

The Sister adjusts the strip on Todd's forehead.

SISTER JANE

I don't get it. You've known about today for weeks, and you go and pick a fight three hours before they get here? I honestly don't know how I'm going to explain this.

TODD

I know, Sister. I'm sorry.

SISTER JANE

This might be your last chance, Todd. Do you understand?

Todd swallows hard, trying his best to appear unaffected.

TODD

Yes.

The Sister finishes applying the bandages. She looks at Todd, a small smile playing on the corners of her lips.

SISTER JANE

It's okay. We'll tell them you fell on the playground or something. Just promise me you'll actually try this time. These are good people. If you give them a shot, they might just surprise you.

INT. FATHER BRECHT'S OFFICE - DAY

A room with a vaulted ceiling and dark wood paneling. Paintings of Biblical figures glower from every wall.

FATHER JOSEPH BRECHT (61, Peter Cushing type) sits behind his desk, bony fingers steepled across his chest. He is tall, thin and bespectacled, with a lined face and a hawkish nose.

Across from him sits a most attractive young couple: JACOB (mid-thirties) and JESSICA DORMER (mid-thirties). They look like models stepped from the pages of a clothing catalogue.

Brecht takes out Todd's file. Begins thumbing through it.

FATHER BRECHT

Todd Robert Whitney. Ward of the state from the age of six. Five foster families in the space of four years. According to our records and the testimony of the boy himself, two of these homes were abusive. The others were simply ill-equipped to handle his unique medical and behavioral problems. About a year ago, a distant uncle was granted legal guardianship, but his fiance nixed the idea, so the boy was left here.

JESSICA

Father Brecht...

Brecht puts down the file, eying the couple conspiratorially.

FATHER BRECHT

During his time at St. Germain's, Todd has routinely engaged in acts of theft, vandalism and physical violence, both against his peers and our staff. He was even caught defacing a statue of the Blessed Virgin last Halloween.

JACOB

With all due respect, Father Brecht, we've heard this all before.

JESSICA

(Under her breath)  
Chapter and verse.

FATHER BRECHT

I know. And if I weren't a man of God, I'd keep my mouth shut and let him win you over with his meek-and-mild routine. But I can't in good conscience, not after what you've been through. You deserve to know what you're dealing with --

Jessica leans forward, cutting him off.

JESSICA

How old is he, Father?

FATHER BRECHT

Eleven. Very nearly twelve.

JESSICA

And can you imagine what it's like to be labeled a lost cause at eleven? What that does to a child?

FATHER BRECHT

He's a tragic case, Mrs. Dormer, it's no good saying he isn't. But we have a surplus of tragedy here. I've tried to convince you to look at younger, more stable candidates. In fact, I can think of several --

Jacob throws up his hands.

JACOB

All right, you've said your piece, and we've listened. When do we get to meet Todd?

As if on cue, Brecht's office door opens. Sister Jane enters. Todd trails behind her massive frame, steadying his nerves.

Brecht, hoping to save face, breaks into an officious grin.

FATHER BRECHT  
Ah, speak of the devil!

Sister Jane rolls her eyes.

FATHER BRECHT (CONT'D)  
Todd, say hello to Mr. and Mrs.  
Dormer.

The Dormers turn around in their seats, seeing Todd for the first time. Jacob smiles. Jessica's face instantly brightens.

Todd peers at them from behind Sister Jane, his expression unreadable. Jane nudges him forward as gently as she can.

SISTER JANE  
Go on, Todd.

Todd walks forward, extending his hand to Jessica. He speaks quickly, without emphasis, avoiding eye contact at all costs.

TODD  
Hello, my name's Todd. It's a  
pleasure to make your acquaintance.

Jessica, taken aback by the formality, shakes Todd's hand.

JESSICA  
Oh my, such a gentleman! Well, I'm  
Jessica, and this is my husband  
Jacob. I can't believe we're  
finally meeting you.

Jacob foregoes the handshake, offering a fist bump instead.

JACOB  
Hey Todd! How's it going, my man?

Todd gives a shy smile. Awkwardly returns the fist bump.

TODD  
Fine, I guess.

Jacob notices Todd's bandages.

JACOB  
You're looking a little banged up.  
You okay? What happened?

SISTER JANE

He tripped on the --

Todd looks at her, green eyes widening. A switch goes off.

TODD

An older kid named Miles made fun of me and hit me when I wasn't looking, so I punched him so hard his teeth fell out.

Father Brecht clears his throat loudly.

TODD (CONT'D)

They told me to say I got hurt on the playground, but I decided to tell the truth. You only get one chance to make a first impression, you know? So why start by lying?

Sister Jane sighs, anticipating the worst.

Jacob and Jessica, however, are completely unfazed. In fact, both work hard to stifle their laughter.

JESSICA

Well... I'd imagine Miles looks pretty foolish right now.

JACOB

I'll bet he sounds pretty foolish too. And you say he's older than you?

TODD

Thirteen.

Jacob grins broadly.

JACOB

No way those were baby teeth. Good for you, Todd.

Father Brecht and Sister Jane exchange incredulous looks.

Todd tries to hide his own amazement.

FATHER BRECHT

Mr. and Mrs. Dormer!

JACOB

Don't get us wrong, Father, we don't condone violence of any kind in our house.

(MORE)

JACOB (CONT'D)

But this sounds like a clear-cut case of self-defense. Todd here was clearly in the right.

JESSICA

I agree. And thank you for being honest with us.

TODD

You're welcome.

Jacob stands up. Jessica follows his lead.

JACOB

Now I don't know about you Todd, but I think I've spent quite enough time in this office. Jessica and I would much rather see where you live. Would that be all right?

TODD

Sure.

Jacob claps the boy on the shoulder. Todd, unaccustomed to this kind of gesture, jumps, smiling in spite of himself.

JACOB

Outstanding! You lead the way.

The three of them set off together. Sister Jane follows.

Father Brecht stays seated, shaking his head as they leave.

INT. TODD'S DORMITORY - DAY

A threadbare room dominated by a military-style bunk bed, an old wooden writing desk and a grotesque, life-size crucifix.

Todd opens the door, holding it for Jacob and Jessica as they enter the room. Sister Jane waits outside, looking expectant.

SISTER JANE

I'll be right here if you need anything...

JESSICA

Thank you, Sister.

Jacob nods and shuts the door on her.

Todd watches nervously as Jacob and Jessica take in their surroundings. Jessica picks up a teddy bear from the top bunk. Turns it over gently. It has one eye and patchy fur.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Wow, this guy looks like someone really loves him. Is he yours?

Todd eyes the bear warily.

TODD

No, he belonged to my roommate Owen. He was a lot younger than me. Couldn't get to sleep without it.

JACOB

Where's Owen now?

TODD

He got adopted a few weeks ago. Since then it's just been me. It's okay, though. I like my space.

JESSICA

Are you an only child, Todd?

Todd shrugs.

TODD

Far as I know.

JESSICA

Well, so am I. So is Jacob, actually. It can get lonesome sometimes, I know, but I think it makes you appreciate life differently. You hold on to things a little tighter, but you also learn to enjoy solitude. Do you know that word, solitude?

Todd furrows his brow, thinking.

TODD

It's like being lonely, but a peaceful kind of lonely. The kind that doesn't hurt.

JESSICA

Yes, exactly.

JACOB

Smart boy.

(Beat)

Now wait just a minute...

Jacob kneels down, retrieving something from under the bunk.

JACOB (CONT'D)  
Can't be, no way in the world...

He surfaces, clutching an old LP record in a plastic sleeve: "Junkyard" by The Birthday Party. He sits on the lower bunk, his giddiness approaching Christmas morning levels.

JACOB (CONT'D)  
This is incredible. How would a kid your age know about The Birthday Party? I think their average fan has about three decades on you.

TODD  
My Uncle Ed gave me that after Amber said I couldn't live with them anymore. They're his favorite band. He said he saw them live once. In Melbourne, I think.

JACOB  
And they let you play this in here?

Todd sits down next to Jacob. Scoots closer cautiously.

TODD  
No. I don't have anything to play it on. And if I did, Father Brecht would confiscate it.

JACOB  
Probably a safe bet.

Jessica looks at the bulletin board above the writing desk. It's covered in superhero sketches and detailed storyboards.

JESSICA  
Are all these yours, Todd?

Todd nods sheepishly.

TODD  
Yeah. I like to draw. They're not that great, but I'm getting better.

JESSICA  
Well, I think they're amazing.

JACOB  
Jessica has a good eye for talent. She's a web designer.

TODD  
What's that?

Jessica joins the others on the bed, sitting to the other side of Todd. She takes out her phone and shows it to him.

JESSICA

I build websites for people.  
Actors, musicians, artists. Maybe  
someday I'll make one for you.

TODD

Those are actually from a while  
ago. I have a sketchbook if you  
want to see my newer stuff.

JESSICA

Sure!

Todd reaches across the bed to grab the book off the nightstand, where it rests next to a large bottle of pills. While he does this, the Dormers exchange eerily identical smiles.

Todd opens the book in his lap. Starts flipping through it so the Dormers can see, his legs SWINGING anxiously off the edge of the bed.

TODD

So where do you guys live?

JACOB

North of Brookhaven. Gellhorn  
Estates. It's a gated community, so  
get used to old men in golf shorts.

JESSICA

It's safe. That's what matters.

Todd glances at Jacob's expensive wristwatch.

TODD

How many kids do you have?

JACOB

Just one. He's big and hairy and  
tries to convince us he's human.

JESSICA

He's talking about Mogie. You're  
not afraid of big dogs, are you?

TODD

Uh, no, not really.

JESSICA

Don't worry. He's super-friendly.

JACOB  
Especially if you have a slice of  
cheese in your pocket. Now Todd,  
tell us about this gentleman here.

He points to a character in the sketchbook.

JACOB (CONT'D)  
Why is he wearing the mask?

TODD  
That's not a mask. That's his face.

JESSICA  
Oh my, I bet there's a story there.

As Todd explains the origins of his creation, SOUND FADES.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. TODD'S DORMITORY - DAY

The same room as before, but the walls and shelves are bare.

Todd, now dressed in khakis and a collared shirt, stands atop  
an overstuffed suitcase, using his weight to force it shut.

Sister Jane enters the room. Helps him close the suitcase.

SISTER JANE  
You're sure that's everything?

TODD  
Yeah, I think so.

SISTER JANE  
What about your medication?

TODD  
In the side pouch.

SISTER JANE  
And you know I'm just a phone call  
away, right? Day or night.

TODD  
Right, just like always.

SISTER JANE  
No, not just like always. Listen to  
me.

(MORE)

SISTER JANE (CONT'D)

I've been watching the three of you together. The way you talk, the way you laugh, the way your eyes light up the second one of them says your name. You're going to make this work. I know you.

TODD

I guess I'm just afraid.

SISTER JANE

What are you afraid of?

TODD

It's just that I really like them. They're pretty much perfect. So why would they want someone like me? Why not someone younger? Someone normal?

SISTER JANE

They chose you for a reason, Todd. You have to believe that. Even beautiful things have missing pieces. You might be theirs.

Todd lifts up his suitcase, struggling with its bulk.

TODD

I hope you're right.

He drops the bag and hugs Sister Jane tightly. The nun tries to maintain her composure and fails, returning the embrace.

She lets go first, looking him straight in the eye.

SISTER JANE

I'm going to miss you like crazy, Todd Whitney, but I know it's for the best.

(Beat)

Okay, let's not keep them waiting.

She grabs Todd's suitcase with one hand and makes for the exit, drying her eyes.

Todd follows, bidding a silent farewell to his old lodgings as he turns off the light and closes the door behind him.

EXT. ST. GERMAIN'S HOME FOR CHILDREN - DAY

The Dormers wait by their car, a black Mercedes G-Class SUV, as Todd says his good-byes to Father Brecht and Sister Jane.

He shakes Brecht's hand. There's no love lost between them.

FATHER BRECHT

Goodbye, Mr. Whitney. Try to behave yourself.

Todd turns his attention to Sister Jane. They shake hands this time, constrained by formality. Before he can pull away, however, she leans down and whispers in his ear.

SISTER JANE

Remember, you deserve this.

He gives her one last grateful nod. Climbs into the SUV.

EXT. JACOB DORMER'S CAR - DAY

The Mercedes cruises through an idyllic suburban neighborhood, the same one from the opening scene.

INT. JACOB DORMER'S CAR - DAY

Jacob eyes the houses disdainfully while Jessica watches Todd through the rearview mirror. Todd sits quietly in the middle of the backseat, processing.

JACOB

Welcome to suburgatory!

JESSICA

Oh boy, here we go...

TODD

Seems okay to me.

JACOB

Maybe from a distance, Todd, but look closer. Every one of those houses is exactly the same, from the floor plan to the landscaping. Cookie cutter neighborhoods like this give architects a bad name.

JESSICA

I swear, we have this conversation every time we drive through here.

TODD

Why do they build them that way?

JACOB

Because we live in a society that prizes fitting in over standing out. Imitation over innovation. Mandated mediocrity. It's enough to make you sick.

JESSICA

Eyes on the road, please.

JACOB

Right, right... Little boxes. Like that Pete Seeger song.

TODD

You mean Malvina Reynolds?

Jacob laughs, shaking his head in disbelief.

JACOB

Jess, I freakin' love this kid. He's an old soul.

Todd smiles to himself, zoning out of the conversation.

TODD'S P.O.V. - THE VIEW THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

The spectral figure of Dane Vanek appears in the road, standing in the path of the SUV.

He's dressed the same as before, but his eyes are glistening tar pits and his skin is deathly pale.

BACK TO SCENE

Todd's eyes go wide with terror.

He panics, YELLS AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS.

TODD

Watch out!

Jacob slams on the breaks.

EXT. JACOB DORMER'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

The Mercedes SCREECHES to a halt.

INT. JACOB DORMER'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Jacob catches Jessica with one arm as she jerks forward, restrained by her seat belt.

All three of them catch their breath for a moment before Jacob turns around to check on Todd.

JACOB  
Everybody okay?

TODD  
There was a boy. A boy in the road.

JESSICA  
Did we hit something? It felt like we hit something.

TODD  
He looked like he needed help.

JACOB  
Well, I didn't see anything.

TODD  
He was right in front of you. You were gonna hit him.

JACOB  
I'm telling you, Todd, there's nobody out there.

TODD  
I really thought there was. I'm sorry. Are you guys all right?

JESSICA  
Oh honey, don't even worry about it. You have to be so careful driving around here, especially now that school's out. They all think they're invincible.

JACOB  
Come on Todd, let's get you home.

The Mercedes takes off. Todd, unnerved, peers out the rear backseat window.

TODD'S P.O.V. - THE VIEW THROUGH THE REAR BACKSEAT WINDOW

The thing that was Dane Vanek stands directly behind the car, his arms outstretched and waiting, locking eyes with Todd.

As the car leaves, Dane's arms fall to his side. The fingers of his right hand form the shape of a gun. He points the mock firearm to his bloody temple and fires, pantomiming suicide.

BACK TO SCENE

INT. JACOB DORMER'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Todd rubs his own temples, trying to clear his head. He notices Jessica looking at him through the rearview mirror again and manages a weak smile, desperate to appear normal.

EXT. GELLHORN ESTATES MAIN GATE - DAY

The Mercedes drives up to a tall iron gate. A guard (mid-forties, beefy) waves them in.

EXT. GELLHORN ESTATES - DAY

The Mercedes cruises past a golf course, a park with play equipment and walking paths, a man-made lake with built-in fountains and row after row of distinctively beautiful homes.

Todd gazes out the window, taking in the sights.

EXT. JACOB DORMER'S CAR - DAY

The Mercedes pulls into a circle drive.

The Dormer family home is reflected in its windshield.

TODD

Wow. You designed that?

EXT. DORMER HOUSE - DAY

A two-story Victorian-style house with a stone exterior, nestled away from its neighbors in a sprawling lot.

The nearest homes are still under construction. Beyond them, over the gate, a vast field of sunflowers waves in the wind.

JACOB (O.S.)

Yep. Jess could never find her dream home, so I built it for her.

The garage door opens. The Mercedes glides inside.

INT. DORMER KITCHEN - DAY

A kitchen filled with balloons and a banner that reads:

"WELCOME HOME, TODD!"

Jessica holds the door open for Todd and Jacob, the latter lugging Todd's overstuffed suitcase in from the garage.

TODD

You sure I can't --

JACOB

No worries, man. I got it.

A volley of ferocious-sounding BARKS erupts from the second floor. Todd tenses defensively at the unexpected noise.

The sound of something GIGANTIC descending the stairs.

JESSICA

Uh-oh, here comes Mogie!

JACOB

Damn, how'd he get loose?

MOGIE, all 200 pounds of him, barrels into the kitchen, his tail wagging. The floor literally shakes whenever he moves.

He's a two-year-old Caucasian Ovcharka, also known as the Russian Bear Dog, a breed prized for its enormous size, natural aggressiveness and fierce loyalty to its masters.

Halfway across the room, Mogie notices Todd and his friendly demeanor instantly evaporates. He starts GROWLING, his black lips curled back over rows and rows of GLEAMING WHITE TEETH.

Todd WHIMPERS as the dog approaches, SNARLING and DROOLING.

Jessica instinctively positions herself between Todd and Mogie, speaking in a CALM BUT AUTHORITATIVE TONE.

JESSICA

Mogie, vedi sebya khorosho.

Mogie sits obediently, pink tongue hanging from his jaws.

After a few beats, Todd attempts to speak.

TODD

Is.. is that a wolf?

JACOB

No, that's just Mogie.

JESSICA

Put out your hand for him to sniff.

TODD

I don't know...

JESSICA

Please, Todd. It's the best way to show him you aren't a threat.

Todd reluctantly extends his hand. Mogie licks it.

JACOB

He was a gift from Jess' mom. She breeds 'em on a farm upstate. Better than any burglar alarm, and much safer than having a gun in the house.

Jessica winces at the mention of firearms.

JESSICA

Caucasian Ovcharka. You'll never find a more devoted watchdog.

She pets Mogie and rubs his belly, motioning for Todd to do the same. The boy does so, albeit hesitantly.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Trust me, once he gets to know you, I'm sure you'll become inseparable.

Todd regards the dog doubtfully.

Mogie stares right back, smacking his chops.

INT. DORMER HOUSE - STAIRCASE - DAY

Todd, Jacob and Jessica climb the stairs together, Jacob still carrying the suitcase. Mogie watches them go.

INT. TODD'S BEDROOM - DAY

A child's bedroom with a conspicuously large bay window and a small writing desk.

As Todd enters, followed by Jacob and Jessica, his jaw drops.

The room is already filled with toys and posters, many of them showing the tell-tale signs of age and constant use.

JACOB

We may have gone a little overboard, but we didn't want you coming home to an empty room.

JESSICA

Anything you don't like, we can take back.

TODD

This is amazing. Thank you, guys. You didn't have to do all this.

JACOB

We wanted to, buddy. Enjoy!

He heaves Todd's suitcase on top of the carefully made bed.

JESSICA

All right, let's give him some time to unpack.

JACOB

Right you are, my dear. Dinner should be ready in about half an hour. Do you like lobster, Todd?

TODD

Honestly, I've never had it.

JACOB

Good, because we ordered pizza. See you soon!

Jacob and Jessica leave the room. Jessica lingers for a moment, watching Todd with a pensive expression.

Todd unlatches his suitcase, trying to manage the overflow of clothing, drawing materials and the Birthday Party LP.

He grabs his dress shirts by their wire hangers and walks to the closet, sliding open the door. The closet is already filled with shirts and jackets, each one roughly his size.

He pushes them to the side, clearing space for his things.

Curious, he checks the large chest of drawers near the door. Every drawer is fully stocked with socks and underwear.

He takes out a pair of ugly woolen socks. SCOFFS to himself.

A loud TAPPING SOUND makes him JUMP. Todd turns, looking for the source of the noise. His gaze settles on the bay window. He pulls back the curtains, squinting into the evening sun.

An old oak tree stands just outside his window. One gnarled branch extends just far enough to rap on the window pane. Todd presses his face to the glass, his eyes widening.

A nearly finished treehouse, resting in the upper branches.