

WARTIME

FADE IN:

EXT. MR. AND MRS. B'S HOUSE - DAY

A white house with blue shutters stands on a hill on a particularly balmy, cloudless day. A clean silver sedan is parked on the drive and a tree planted in front of the parlor windows blossoms pink.

PAPERBOY (68) stops his gleaming red bike at the end of the Bs' driveway. He wears a striped polo, cargo shorts, and a Little League baseball cap. A messenger bag at his side bulges with a dozen newspapers titled THE RIVERSIDE POST. He looks at us.

PAPERBOY

I would like you to know that the Bs are good people. They always say hello, and keep their garden looking tidy.

INT. MR. AND MRS. B'S KITCHEN - DAY

It's a reliable old country kitchen, with yellow curtains and floral wallpaper. A mid-century modern clock ticks above the oven. We see MRS. B from behind as she stands at the sink, washing dishes. She has a broad back and muscled arms. Her greying hair is in a tight braid coiled on the back of her neck. A haze of smoke halos her head in front of the window.

PAPERBOY (V.O.)

Mrs. B is a hard worker. She likes good food, bar brawls, and Cuban cigars.

From the front, Mrs. B is a bright-eyed woman at the the back end of middle-aged. Her crooked nose has been broken more than once, and a number of pink-white scars cross parts of her face. She clenches a massive cigar in her teeth, and breathes the smoke out of her nose as would a dragon.

PAPERBOY (V.O., CONT.)

A long time ago, she wanted to be  
a movie star when she grew up.

All of a sudden, Mrs. B is a 10-year-old girl, standing on a step stool at the sink. She's wearing star-shaped sunglasses, a blonde wig, and a white dress, à la Marilyn Monroe. Paparazzi swarm the window, snapping photos with the flash on. Leaning precariously on her tippy toes, tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth, she sets a dish in the drying rack.

We swoop out of the kitchen and into

INT. MR. AND MRS. B'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lacy doilies lay across the back of the chairs and dot the coffee table. MR. B sits with his feet up in a massive leather armchair. He wears a massive handmade sweater with a picture of his house on it. A football game plays on the staticky television. He has two large hearing aids and squinty eyes behind out-of-date prescription glasses. He grasps knitting needles in his hands, and is halfway through a new white doily.

PAPERBOY (V.O.)

Mr. B has an eye for detail. He  
likes football, the smell of cut  
grass, and knitting.

There's a touchdown, and Mr. B gives a shout of excitement, and almost stabs himself in the face with one of his needles.

PAPERBOY (V.O.)

When Mr. B was young, he wanted to  
be an astronaut.

While Mr. B is celebrating the excellent play, he turns into a child with a POP, dressed in a tiny spacesuit. As he knits, metal sheets fold up over the armchair, turning it into a

rocketship that blasts through the ceiling. Bits of insulation and floorboard rain down through the smoke.

EXT. MR. AND MRS. B'S HOUSE - CONT.

There's a gaping hole in the roof. The rocket careens into the sky, out of sight. Paperboy pulls The Riverside Post out of his bag.

PAPERBOY

Remember, they're good people. But sometimes being good people can't help you.

He throws the newspaper onto Mr. and Mrs. B's porch, then speeds away. Mr. B, old again, immediately opens the front door, picks it up, and tucks it under his arm.

We follow him inside. His living room is once again orderly and rubble-less. He enters the kitchen, where Mrs. B is grown again, and pours himself a mug from the teapot on the stove. He takes a seat at the table and unrolls The Post.

Mr. B flips to the obituaries, ignoring the glaring front-page headline that reads "LOSSES ON WESTERN FRONT", with a black-and-white photo underneath of soldiers firing automatic rifles over a concrete barrier, a few bodies slumped beside them.

MRS. B

Anyone we know?

Mr. B adjusts his glasses and squints at the page's tiny portraits and listed names.

MR. B

Not today.

Mrs. B grunts. Mr. B turns the page.

MR. B

Wait, wait. That's Lenny, from  
high school. Hand me the scissors.

Mrs. B comes over to look, passing him scissors and brushing off the ashes she sprinkles onto the text. With an expert hand, Mr. B cuts out one of the faces and the blurb beside it. Mrs. B takes it from him and tapes it to the freezer door. There's already six dozen other clippings there, each one smiling cheerily.

MRS. B

At this rate we're gonna be the  
last ones standing.

MR. B

Damn right.

He takes a sip of tea from the mug.

MRS. B

We're out of coffee. And oranges.

Mr. B sighs, and drains the rest of his tea in three colossal gulps. He gets to his feet with a grunt, then grabs his wallet and keys from the counter.

MR. B

Bread, too. I'll go.

Surprised, Mrs. B opens the breadbox, and sure enough, there's nothing inside but a dirty butter knife and a few crumbs. She takes the knife and drops it into the soapy water. Mr. B kisses her cheek, and she smiles. He exits into the living room, keys jangling in hand.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

This afternoon, the supermarket is nearly empty. The bright florescents buzz loudly, shining on row after row of half-empty shelves, the wartime strain showing through:

First the pasta aisle, where a young couple passionately kiss over a red splash of spaghetti sauce and broken glass on the floor. Paperboy walks by them, his back to us.

Then we glide next door to the hygiene aisle, where a harried mother of three stuffs her tote bag with fistfuls of toothbrushes and tells her sons not to say anything on the way out.

In the third aisle, Mr. B compares the prices on two different coffee tins. His plastic basket sits on the floor beside him, with a netted bag of oranges and a loaf of bread already inside. He chooses a tin and nestles it between them. He whistles a tune to himself as he picks up his basket and leaves the aisle, headed for the checkout line.

There, he leafs through a crocheting magazine while he waits for the man in front of him to finish up. The man is a young SOLDIER, still in uniform, home on leave. He's trying to chat up MISS E, the cashier, while she bags his beer, cigarettes, and cheap DVDs. She isn't interested. No eye contact, no smiles.

SOLDIER

You're a real tough girl, aren't you?

MISS E

Yep.

SOLDIER

I like tough girls.

MISS E

So do I.

Mr. B is watching the soldier closely. Something about the soldier's easy smile and looming posture strikes him wrong. Miss E tries to hand the soldier his bag.

MISS E

Have a nice day, sir.

The soldier isn't having it. He leaves her holding the bag out between them.

SOLDIER

When's your shift over? You look like you could use a break. A drink, maybe? I hear tough girls are softer on the inside.

Mr. B sets down his magazine and steps up toward the register. His face is cold. The soldier almost doesn't notice him.

MR. B

Excuse me, you're holding up the line.

The soldier looks him up and down.

SOLDIER

I'm not finished yet.

Mr. B takes the grocery bag from Miss E's hand and pushes it into the soldier's chest none too softly.

MR. B

I think you are.

There's a moment when it looks like the soldier isn't going to leave. He throws Miss E a look, then glances behind him to see a

few of his other uniformed soldier buddies kicking around some trash outside. He finally goes, and Miss E is visibly relieved. She releases the breath she was holding.

MISS E

Find everything okay?

She's already scanning Mr. B's items.

EXT. SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT — DAY

Mr. B approaches his silver sedan parked some ways from the door. The rest of the parking lot is just as empty as the supermarket. The soldiers are nowhere to be seen. Mr. B is whistling again, but he stops abruptly.

The driver's side door has been keyed in scraggly writing with the words "SUPPORT YOUR TROOPS".

Mr. B gives a little nod, resigned but not unsatisfied, and climbs into his car. He puts his groceries in the passenger seat, starts up the engine, and drives off.

INT. MR. AND MRS. B'S LIVING ROOM — NIGHT

Mr. B peels an orange in his leather armchair. He sets the peel on the side table, next to a post-it note which reads "OUT WITH THE GIRLS, BACK LATER" and signed with a heart.

The house phone trills on the wall in the kitchen. Next to it, there's a calendar tacked up. For July, it has a photo of a biker gang posed menacingly around a motorcycle in striped one-piece bathing suits. The days are crossed off up to JULY 18TH.

Mr. B gets up out of his chair with a grunt to answer the ringing house phone. He crosses the room and puts it to his ear.

MR. B

Hello?

MRS. B (V.O.)

Hello, dearest. I'm at the corner  
of Haverford and Webster, could  
you pick me up? Mrs. A's been  
arrested, so I don't—

There's a great deal of crashing in the the background, and what  
sounds like glass shattering. Someone is yelling angrily. Mr. B  
appears totally unconcerned, tapping the wallpaper rhythmically  
with a knuckle and pausing to examine his fingernails.

MRS. B (V.O., CONT.)

—don't have a ride home.

MR. B

Quick as I can, then?

There's another loud crash, and Mrs. B pauses to shout  
obscenities at somebody close by.

MRS. B

As ever.

Mr. B hangs up and goes to open the freezer, the obituary  
clippings waving about. He takes out an ice pack, picks up his  
keys again, and heads for the door.

INT. MR. B'S SEDAN — NIGHT

He pulls up on a street corner outside of a local dive. It has  
an old-fashioned propaganda poster duct-taped to the door, with  
imposing silhouettes and the same slogan that's carved into Mr.  
B's driver's side. The front window of the place has been  
smashed, and pieces of a bar stool litter the sidewalk. Paperboy  
is having a drink inside.

Mrs. B waits for her husband by the poster, still clutching the neck of a broken beer bottle. He stops the car and she clambers in. He hands her the ice pack.

MRS. B

Thank you.

She puts it up against her eye and cheekbone, where somebody's ring made a bloody gouge and a bruise is already purpling. She sighs, closes her eyes, and leans back against the headrest.

MR. B

Good night out?

She doesn't look at him when she replies, but an almost nostalgic smile tugs at her mouth.

MRS. B

Mmhm. Broken fingers, concussions. Mrs. K lost a chunk out of her ear, couldn't find it. Nobody hospitalized, though.

MR. B

What about the window?

MRS. B

Oh, you know the barman. Always looking for trouble.

Mr. B spots something outside the window. A woman is shouting ahead. A man in a green uniform tumbles out of an alley and into the road, but gets back up and goes in for more. A few other soldiers are moving around in the shadows with him.

MR. B

Speaking of trouble...

He stops the car on the end of the alleyway. Mrs. B sets down her ice pack to get a better look. Between a laundromat and a take-out restaurant, the four men from the supermarket have Miss E up against a dumpster. Her things, fallen out of her backpack, are scattered at her feet.

She looks about ready to tear the soldiers' throats out, but when she notices the sedan, Mr. B can't help but read the plea in her eyes.

Mrs. B moves fast. Her door slams open. She brandishes her broken bottle at the soldiers.

MRS. B

Isn't it past your bedtimes?

The men are distracted from Miss E. The one from the counter smiles that smile of his. He glances at the bottle.

SOLDIER

It's a nice night. We're just walking our friend home.

Miss E goes to step around him and join up with Mrs. B, but one of the others grabs her arm. The moment he touches her, Mrs. B strikes, and takes no prisoners.

She slashes the glass across the lead soldier's face. He reels, caught off guard. She lands a knee in his groin before he can recover, and puts a fist in his ribs for good measure.

Surprised, two of the other soldiers POP, one turning into a pint-size cowboy and the other into a police officer. The police officer can;t decide whether to turn tail or take Mrs. B head-on.

Miss E takes advantage of the moment to pull away from the little cowboy and scoop up her backpack. She doesn't try to pick up her stuff. Mrs. B scoops Miss E behind her, who gets in the

car. Mrs. B wastes no time following, and Mr. B peels out hard and fast.

In the back seat, Miss E is holding the back of her head. There's a little blood in her hair and on the collar of her shirt. Mrs. B passes back the ice pack for her to use. Miss E takes it gratefully.

MR. B

Where to? Hospital? Police station?

MISS E

No, no cops. I'm alright.

Mrs. B turns back around in her seat to examine Miss E more closely.

MRS. B

What's your name, sweetheart?

MISS E

E, ma'am. Miss E.

MR. B

Where's home, then, Miss E? Where am I dropping you off?

Miss E flushes, ashamed, and hesitates before answering.

MISS E

Anywhere, I guess. I've been crashing in my van behind the supermarket, but it got stolen today, and now...

MRS. B

Got nowhere to go? No one to call?

Miss E shakes her head.

MR. B

We'll patch you up for the night,  
then. Got a guest bedroom  
upstairs. I made a new blanket for  
it, you'll have to tell me if it's  
warm enough. Saw the pattern in  
"Hooked On Crochet"...

The sedan rounds the corner into a neighborhood, and the red glare of the tail lights disappear behind a house's tidy hedges.

INT. MR. AND MRS. B'S KITCHEN — NIGHT

Mr. B stitches up the gash on Mrs. B's cheek with a careful hand. Mrs. B is finishing up her cigar from earlier, not wanting to waste a bit. Miss E holds a new ice pack to her head, gripping a glass of water with white knuckles. The latter two both look scuffed up and bruised, but Mrs. B is worse for the wear. All three of them sit at the kitchen table.

MISS E

I can't thank you enough for this.

Her voice shakes a little.

MR. B

Of course. Least we could do. (to  
Mrs. B) Hold still and put that  
damn cigar away, I don't want to  
poke your eye.

Mrs. B puts out his cigar and leaves the butt in the ash tray.

MRS. B

(to Miss E) We weren't about to  
leave you in the cold. Times like

these, all sorts are out at night.  
Not safe.

He puts down the needle and thread, surveys his handiwork, and grunts.

MR. B

Done. Let's get a look at your  
head, Miss E.

He stands up and gets behind Miss E, who put down her ice pack. She winces as he moves her hair to get a better look at the damage and tips her head forward.

Then, without warning, Miss E POPS. She's a dressed exactly like herself, but in miniature. A tear drips down her nose. Mr. B sets a broad hand on her shoulder.

MRS. B

What's this about?

The young Miss E snuffles for a minute.

MISS E

You... I... I don't know what would've happened.

MRS. B

Nothing happened. And now you've  
got a good story to tell at  
cocktail parties, or whatever it  
is kids do.

Miss E snuffles again, and Mrs. B pats her hand in sympathy.

MRS. B

First fight's either the best or  
the worst. No in-between.

When Miss E looks up again, she's back to her full-grown self. She nods.

MISS E

Yours?

MRS. B

Worst. Without a doubt.

Mr. B chuckles, and sits down to clean some of the grittier scrapes on the palm of Miss E's hand.

MR. B

I remember. We'd *just* eloped, but we had a few friends, and at the reception—

Mr. B is cut off by the distant wail of sirens. All three of them look toward the window. Then they're standing. Hastily, they walk toward a door. Mr. B brings his knitting needles, some yarn, and the first-aid kit.

MRS. B

This way, Miss E.

The door opens, revealing concrete steps that descend underneath the house. Mr. B, at the back of the line, closes the door firmly behind them.

INT. MR. AND MRS. B'S BASEMENT — NIGHT

This is about as close to a bomb shelter as the Bs could afford. There's a good stock of canned foods, a couch, a lawn chair, and a few battery-powered lanterns. A radio warbles in the corner.

Miss E and Mrs. B sit together on the couch. The distant thumps of falling bombs grow louder and louder. One is far too close, and dust rains from the ceiling. Miss E jumps, and Mrs. B touches her leg. Mr. B is knitting away without a care in the world.

The signal on the radio turns to static just as another bomb goes off, deafening. This time, Mr. B jumps too. Mrs. B closes her eyes and takes deep breaths.

MR. B

That was a big one. Wonder who it is.

Miss E curls up on her end of the couch and tries to follow Mrs. B's example. Her whole face squinches up with effort.

INT. MR. AND MRS. B'S BASEMENT — DAY

Light shines through the narrow window level with the ground. It looks like nobody has slept a wink. Many of the cans fell off the shelves in the night.

The lawn chair creaks and groans as Mr. B pushes to his feet. His little knitting project has turned into an entire scarf, long enough to be draped about his wide shoulders. There's still a knitting needle stuck through the end.

MR. B

Well, it's been quiet long enough.  
Someone's got to go and see.

Mrs. B stands up to follow him. Miss E, eager not to be left behind, goes with them back up the stairs.

When the door opens, the light is blinding compared to the dim of the basement. Then the kitchen comes into focus, full of smoke, but otherwise no worse for the wear. Some of the obituary scraps have fallen off the door, now coating the floor like ash. Mr. B steps on one, and it sticks to his shoe.

The living room is a mess. Two walls are open to the outdoors, and parts of the curtains and carpet are still on fire. Everything is covered with the yellow-grey ash of destruction.

EXT. MR. AND MRS. B'S HOUSE — DAY

The three of them step out onto the porch. The Riverside Post is at their feet. On what's left of every doorstep, there's a rolled-up newspaper. From the top of their hill, they can see who whole of the neighborhood, and it's burning. Plumes of dark smoke are rising. Rubble is strewn across the roads. Power lines have fallen over. Trees have crashed through rooftops. Beyond their street, the town looks much the same. Just over there, the supermarket sign is tilted precariously, the building itself an unrecognizable heap.

A tiny astronaut grasps the hand of a young red-lipped superstar. Miss E stands in the doorway behind them, her palms pressed together over her mouth as ashes fall like snow. Far away, emergency vehicles are screaming, flashing red, white, and blue on the horizon.

FADE OUT.