

# ARMADILLO

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A FILM BY RACHEL CYLIE GROSS & STANLEY SWINDLING

VISUAL DECK



Log Line: Central Texas, 2003: Easton, a stoic line cook still grieving the loss of his younger brother, befriends a close-knit trio of eccentric locals. Unearthing the group's deadly secret offers Easton the chance to move on... if he can use his wits to survive.



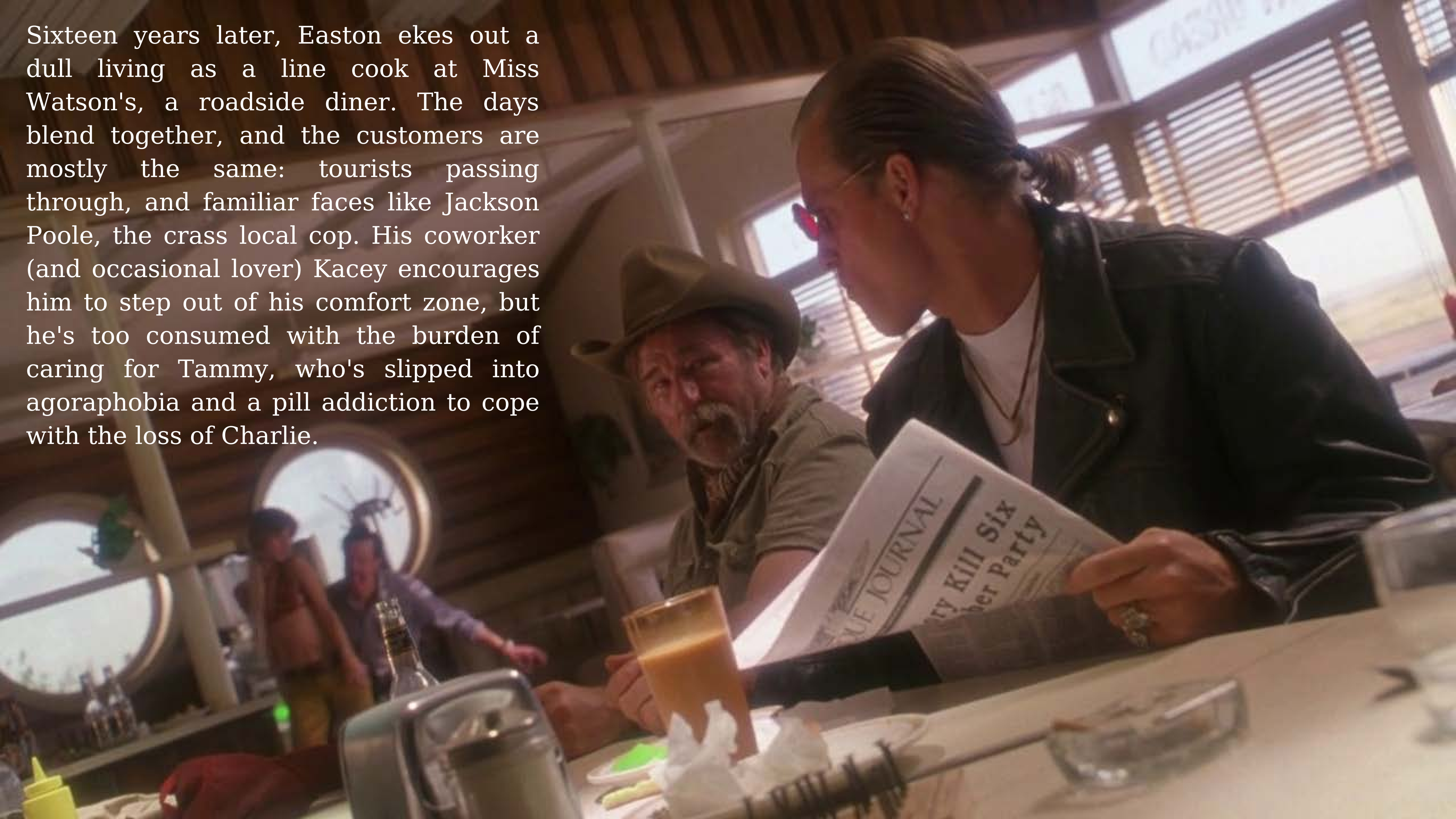
*Armadillo* is a serial killer thriller with elements of psychological horror, modern western, family drama, and dark comedy.

It's the dog days of summer in Central Texas, 1987, and Easton and Charlie Hyde are bored out of their minds. Easton knows his younger brother, eight-year-old Charlie, seeks adventure. Unbeknownst to their mother Tammy, they grab their bikes and sneak off to an abandoned strip mall a few miles down the road.

Easton is toying with broken arcade machines when Charlie wanders towards a mysterious, nondescript white van. Before Easton can catch up, Charlie is snatched by a shadowy figure in a cowboy hat. In the span of a few moments, Charlie is stolen away, and the Hyde family is irrevocably damaged.



Sixteen years later, Easton ekes out a dull living as a line cook at Miss Watson's, a roadside diner. The days blend together, and the customers are mostly the same: tourists passing through, and familiar faces like Jackson Poole, the crass local cop. His coworker (and occasional lover) Kacey encourages him to step out of his comfort zone, but he's too consumed with the burden of caring for Tammy, who's slipped into agoraphobia and a pill addiction to cope with the loss of Charlie.





Easton's latent curiosity gets the best of him when he spies the lights on at the school across the street from the diner. When he goes to inspect, he stumbles into an AA-style meeting between three eccentric outsiders. Easton is struck by the new faces. He's lived in this area his entire life. People don't move into town, they escape it. The trio tell Easton that they're working together on "better living," not alcoholism or anger management. What brings them into town, and why do they take such a keen interest in a modest line cook? Easton is drawn to their energy, but he'll soon discover that the group presents a greater danger than they initially let on...

# SETTING

The first thing an outsider would notice about Central Texas is the relentless dry heat that saps all energy from the streets. An hour's drive west of San Antonio, Easton's "hometown" is more like a ghost town. The strip malls have shuttered, the roads are pockmarked and empty, and the only business that can thrive is a place like Miss Watson's, catering to travelers with no intentions of planting roots.

There's something inherently unsettling about the dead space of these surroundings. Inspired by notorious serial killers operating in rural areas like John Wayne Gacy and Ed Gein, *Armadillo's* setting is central to its terror. The film's resilient characters are a product of their environment: the only beings who can inhabit the area are those creatures with the constitution to survive the arid brutality.

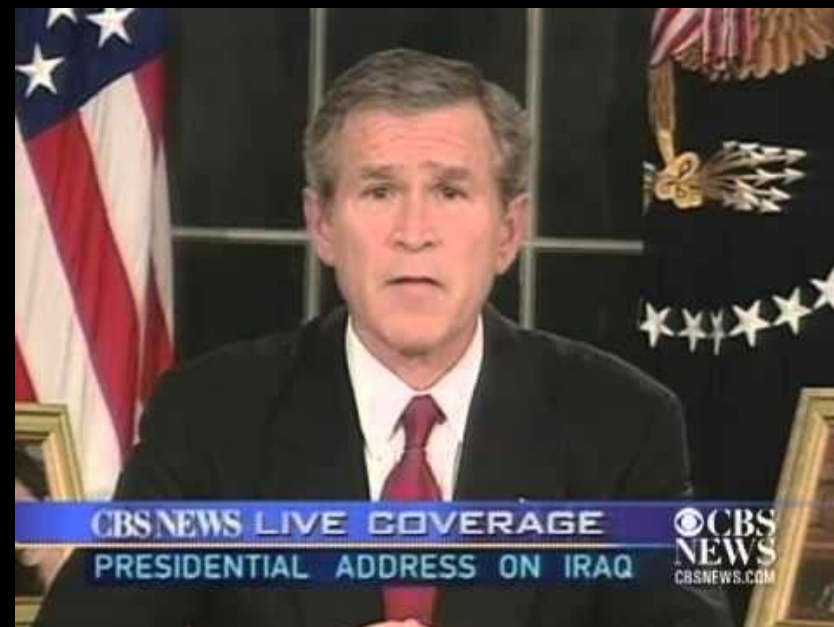


# THE WORLD

In the wake of the September 11th attacks, America is crippled by a fear of the outsider. Every night on TV, President George W. Bush stokes anti-Islamic rhetoric, and espouses a jingoistic, pro-military agenda. In the heart of deep-red Texas, these ideas aren't just abstractions; they're a way of life.

Before social media and Internet access on cell phones, Easton's world feels a lot smaller. A local girl's disappearance consumes attention for weeks on end, rather than just being a blip in the news cycle. Though not entirely disconnected from the rest of the country, this small town feels a few years behind everywhere else: the radio still plays hair metal, and the clothes are more functional than fashionable.

There's danger in the air across 2003 America, but in a place where everyone knows everyone, the paranoia is even more heightened. Easton is seduced by the arrival of new faces to stimulate his interest, and in his excitement, he forgets just how easy it is for a predator to descend on locals without being detected.



# CHARACTERS

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## EASTON HYDE



Easton Hyde has never been able to escape the fateful day when his brother was kidnapped before his eyes. Easton spent his fourteenth birthday searching in vain for Charlie, and the trauma drained any desire to build a better life for himself.

Though he now plays parent to his own mother, and would never complain about his situation, his coworker Kacey knows Easton needs just as much care as he provides. He bottles so many of his emotions, it should be no surprise when new conflicts (like keeping a deadly secret) cause him to burst.

Easton's body language is tense and closed-off. He's lean, from working long hours at the diner, but his physical appearance is the least of his concerns. He's the kind of Texas man to wear the same stained shirt four days in a row.

Easton isn't a bad guy, but his damage threatens to derail his grip on reality.

# THE GROUP

## DON

The unspoken leader of the mysterious group who meet at the local school after hours. He's polite and paternal from the outset, but the psychological wounds of his dark history suggest an appetite for violence and sadism.



## CAROL

Sweet and submissive, Carol nevertheless struggles to control her antisocial tendencies. Easton immediately entrusts her unassuming disposition... as do all of her victims.



## WHIT

After an adolescence spent in poverty and abuse, Don tracked Whit's movements and became her sponsor. She's reckless and unruly, and anyone who tries to rein her in inevitably suffers her sociopathic wrath.



# THE HYDES

## TAMMY

Tammy hasn't left her rural estate in sixteen years. Ever since her youngest, Charlie, was kidnapped, she's relied on sleeping pills to somnambulate through the day. She's surly and short-tempered, especially when Easton gets on her case about moving on. A trial by fire might be the only thing to mend the mother-son relationship.



## CHARLIE

Charlie is eight years old in the dog days of summer, 1986. His favorite stories are all about zombies and vampires, and when he spies roadkill, he can't resist the impulse to poke it. Charlie is a pretty fearless kid, which is why he needs his older brother Easton to protect him at all times.



# KACEY

A fellow underpaid hand at Miss Watson's diner, Kacey is the kind face serving coffee to desert highway travelers while Easton hides in the kitchen. They're coworkers with benefits, but Kacey grows increasingly weary of Easton's solitary ways.



# JACKSON

Only in a truly rural pocket of Texas could someone like Jackson Poole enforce the law. He's the good old boy the locals watched grow up, and while he lacks professional ambition, his detective work demonstrates a keen eye for details.



# MISS WATSON

The owner of the sleepest roadside restaurant in the tri-county area, Miss Watson is no-nonsense, and no-overtime. Customer service isn't her strong suit... and neither is employee relations.



# THEMES



✘ Grief / Overcoming Grief

✘ Addiction

✘ Human Connection

✘ Revenge

✘ Mania / Loss of Sanity

✘ Injustice

✘ Survival

# TONE

- ✗ Near-constant suspense / tension.
- ✗ Nightmare sequences alluding to Easton's mania. Pure horror content.
- ✗ Deception and paranoia leaving protagonist (and viewers) on edge.
- ✗ Dark comedy in form of Whit's caustic sense of humor.

# RELEVANT COMPS



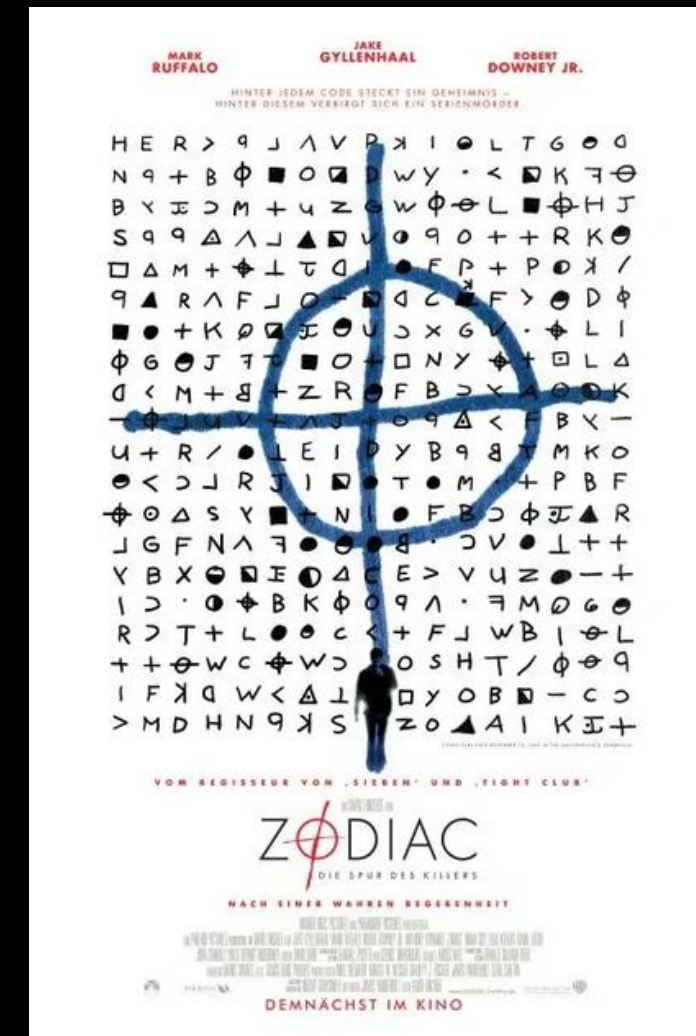
**THE LAST PICTURE SHOW (1971) DIR. PETER BOGDANOVICH**

Small-town America depicted in the style of a modern western. The setting is "another character."



**THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (1974) DIR. TOBE HOOPER**

Horror in Texas. The audience feels deep empathy for the victims, and hopes desperately for an escape.



**ZODIAC (2007) DIR. DAVID FINCHER**

Unsettling stillness in a story of killers, and the hunt to catch the culprits. Excruciating scenes of our protagonist in peril.

# SIGNIFICANCE OF SEVEN WONDERS



The sound finally settles. The chorus to '**Seven Wonders**' by **Fleetwood Mac** plays fuzzy. Easton taps his foot.

The music is interrupted by a blaring HONK. He peers up--

At the time of Charlie's disappearance, Fleetwood Mac's "Seven Wonders" is the song of the summer. It's the piece of music Easton comes to associate with his grief, and it haunts him like a specter throughout the film.

Written by Sandy Stewart and Stevie Nicks, "Seven Wonders" was inspired by Stewart's friend Aaron, who had recently passed away. It is about cherishing close relationships once they've been lost.

Though he wouldn't be able to articulate it, "Seven Wonders" resonates with Easton on an almost subconscious psychological level.

But if our paths never cross  
Well you know I'm sorry but

If I live to see the seven wonders  
I'll make a path to the rainbow's end  
I'll never live to match the beauty again



*Song subject to change pending music clearances. The writers hope that a comparable song may be used.*

# CREATIVE INTENT

*Armadillo* stems from the morbid yet fascinating idea of connecting and forming a close bond with individuals who harbor twisted histories. Attending a meeting like Alcoholics Anonymous, one is expected to share intimate, often painful self-truths. But how would you respond if others started sharing stories of murder, violence, and unthinkable grotesquery? How do you escape?

The theme that resonated most powerfully with us is the element of trauma recurrent throughout the script. Though the group poses an immediate, visceral threat to Easton, they also provide the catharsis and closure he craves, but doesn't expect after learning of their violent pasts. Easton is a zombie, going through the motions of daily life because he can't conceive of a world outside of his small town, outside of his pain.

Meeting Don, Carol, and Wit is the worst mistake of his life. Meeting them is also the key to his salvation.

- Rachel Cylie Gross & Stanley Swindling



# AESTHETIC IDEAS



Capturing the deadening emptiness of rural Texas.



Tension built in off-kilter framing and suggestion.



The dark of night mixed with stark fluorescents.



Blur / out of focus during dissociative episodes.

# AESTHETIC INFLUENCES

The "David Fincher look" (*Zodiac*, *The Social Network*)

Cinematographers: Harris Savides, Jeff Cronenweth



Precise construction of shots. Embrace of dark color palettes. Cinematic digital photography.

# KEY MOMENTS



**1987. MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, TEXAS.**

In the dog days of summer, eight-year-old Charlie Hyde plays with roadkill to pass the time.



To entertain his brother, 13-year old Easton suggests a bike ride into town.




It's the fateful decision that changes the Hyde family forever.

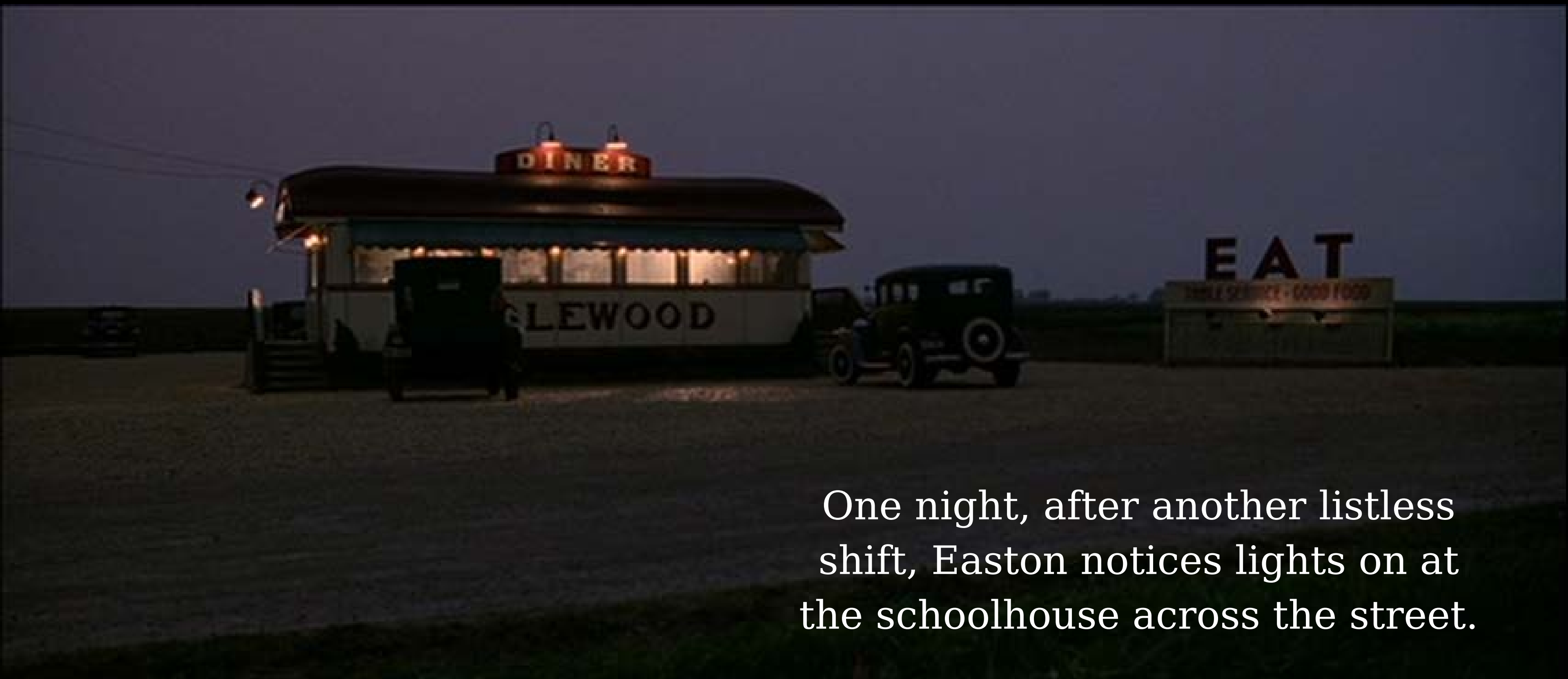
**SIXTEEN YEARS LATER: 2003.**

Easton works a menial food service job, catering to travelers and what few locals remain.





His mother, Tammy, is still grief-stricken. She never leaves their home and medicates to numb the pain.



One night, after another listless shift, Easton notices lights on at the schoolhouse across the street.


He finds a trio of odd strangers sharing their pasts. Easton suspects they're with AA, but the energy is... different.



The group encourages him to open up, and Easton finds himself growing more comfortable, even revealing his painful history.

A man in a plaid shirt stands in a doorway, looking towards the camera. The room is dimly lit with a warm, reddish glow. A bright light fixture is visible on the wall behind him. The scene is from the movie 'It' (2017).

Getting to know the group has an adverse effect on Easton's psyche. He suffers horrific nightmares that point to underlying mental unwell.

A still from the movie Fight Club. Brad Pitt is in the foreground, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark jacket over a dark t-shirt. In the background, another man is visible, standing with his hands on his hips, looking towards the camera. The setting appears to be a dimly lit room with wooden paneling.

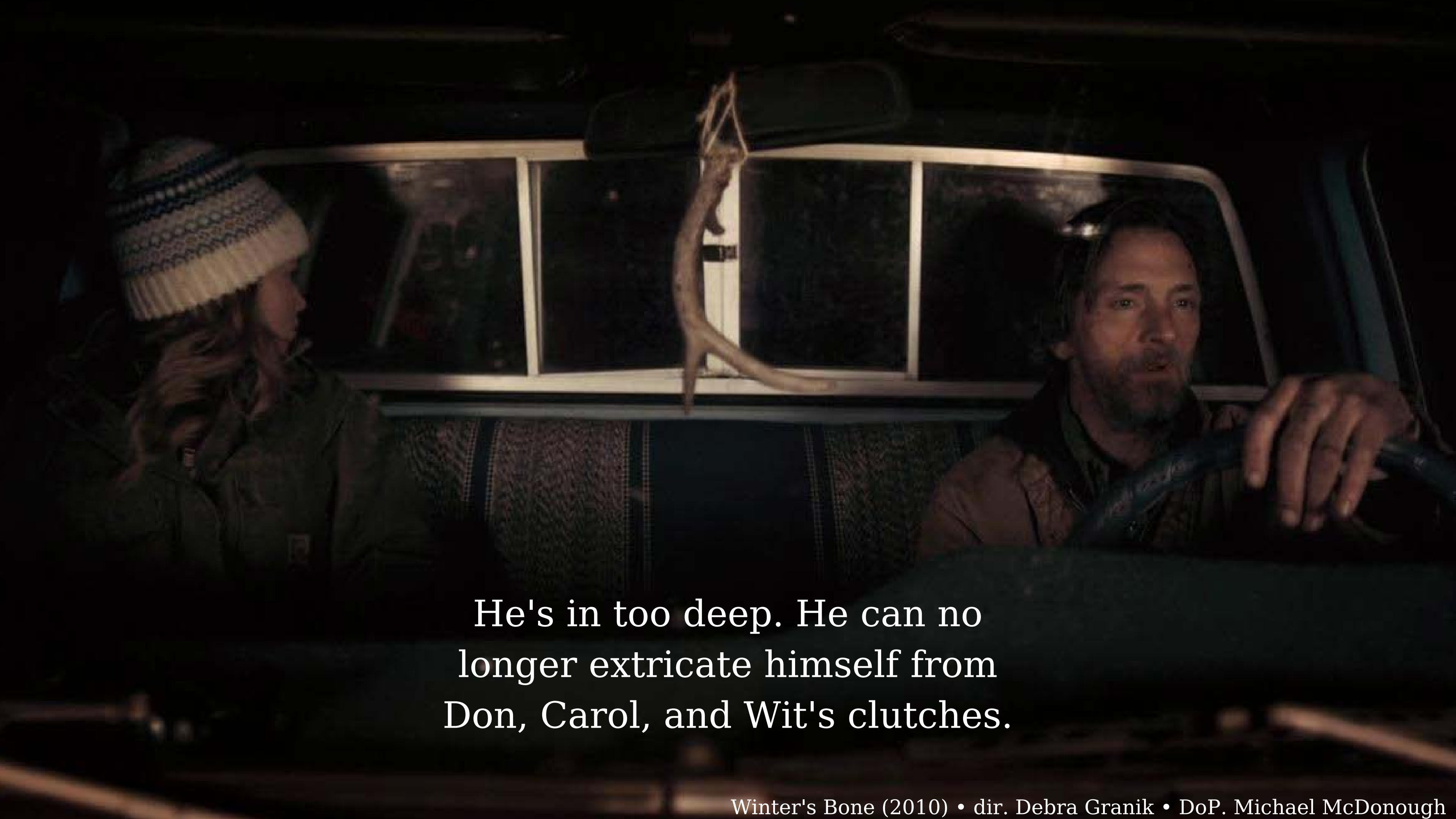
The danger of his proximity to the group takes its toll. Easton loses his job and lashes out at his loved ones.

Easton visits the group's leader,  
Don, at his farm outside of town.






A visit to Don's "trophy room" forces Easton to confront the gravity of his situation.



He's in too deep. He can no longer extricate himself from Don, Carol, and Wit's clutches.



Easton and Don return to town  
to discover a spiraling Carol  
has "relapsed" into murder.



Easton can't reckon with the carnage. He dissociates as they dispose of the body.



Easton returns home. But something is amiss.

The group is in the kitchen. A birthday celebration takes a grisly turn.



For the first time in their lives, Easton and Tammy see eye to eye.



A wide-angle, low-angle shot of a long, straight asphalt road stretching into the distance. The road is flanked by a dry, desert landscape with sparse, low-lying vegetation and reddish-brown soil. In the background, there are dark, rugged mountains under a heavy, overcast sky with grey clouds. A small, dark vehicle is visible on the road in the distance, and another structure is visible on the right side of the road. The overall mood is somber and desolate.

After sixteen years, mother and son  
are finally ready to move on.

# ABOUT THE CREATORS

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## RACHEL CYLIE GROSS

Rachel Cylie Gross is an editor, writer, and director based out of Los Angeles, California. She has a BFA in Film from the University of Central Florida.

She is in the process of editing a short film and a pilot, two of the only SAG productions to come out of her home state of Florida in the past year. Recently, her work on the Philip Levine for Governor campaign played on state television and received over 200,000 views across Facebook, YouTube and other virtual platforms.

Her short film *SLAS(HER)* (which she wrote, directed, and co-edited) was an official selection of MeggaXP's Blood Bash '19, Bad Film Fest, and The Lift Off Sessions for Vimeo. Her short *Skin Deep* played the monthly FilmSlam at the historic Enzian Theatre in Orlando, Florida, where she spoke on a panel highlighting women in film.

She is currently working as an Assistant Editor at AV Squad, a top creative agency in the entertainment marketing sector.

Her favorite horror movie is John Carpenter's *Halloween*.



# ABOUT THE CREATORS

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## STANLEY SWINDLING



Stanley Swindling is a writer, director, and actor based in Los Angeles, CA. He holds an MFA in Screenwriting from Loyola Marymount University, and a BFA in Film from the University of Central Florida.

In 2020, his screenplay *Nights on Fire* won the prize for Best Graduate Screenplay at the SFTV Awards. His thriller *Cut* was a Quarterfinalist in the ScreenCraft Horror Contest, and a Second Round pick at the Austin Film Festival. His screenplay for coming of age drama *Dovebird* was a Quarterfinalist in The LAUNCH Million Dollar Screenplay Competition.

His short film *It's Been A Weird Week* screened at a number of historic venues in the Central Florida area, and was a selection of the Queer Hippo LGBTQ+ Film Festival. His nonfiction piece "Joe" was the Editor's Choice of the 2018 Cypress Dome literary magazine. As an actor, he has appeared in the short films *SLAS(HER)*, *Neon Sunrises*, and *My Lonely Heart Calls*, which he also wrote and directed.

His favorite horror movie is George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*.



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