

Mars Camp

by

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FADE IN:

INT. TREE FORT - DAY (27 YEARS AGO)

The fort's decorated with pictures of aliens and other planets. An assortment of electronic junk suggests it's supposed to be the bridge of a spaceship.

YOUNG TOM (11, geeky) sits on a beanbag chair, drawing in a binder. He wears thick glasses and has a black eye.

An inhuman voice speaks to him in an "alien" language, which we understand from subtitles. (**NOTE:** All dialogue between Tom and Oollee is in this language.)

OOLLEE (O.S.)

Let me see.

YOUNG TOM

It's not done yet. Hold still.

OOLLEE (O.S.)

You get my good side?

YOUNG TOM

What good side? You're ugly all over.

OOLLEE (O.S.)

(snorting)

You should talk, meat bag. Let me see!

YOUNG TOM

Fine...

He turns around his binder to show his work: a hideous alien.

OOLLEE bares his fangs in something like a smile.

OOLLEE

Not bad...

BULLY (O.S.)

Who you talkin' to, loser?

Tom freezes.

There's the SOUND of someone climbing up a wooden ladder. Tom gets up from the beanbag and gestures to Oollee to hide. He blocks the doorway with his body.

The BULLY (13) appears in the doorway. He sneers at Tom as she shoves him aside and checks out a photo of Princess Leia in her slave bikini.

BULLY 2 (O.S.)
What's he doin'?

BULLY
Jackin' off to pictures of Princess
Leia.

He looks around.

BULLY (CONT'D)
Where's your friend?

BULLY 2 (13) appears in the doorway and sneers at Tom.

BULLY 2
That dweeb doesn't HAVE any
friends.

The first Bully plops down on the beanbag like he owns the place.

Oollee, hiding under the beanbag, grunts -- but only Tom hears it. He winces.

BULLY
Get the fuck out. This our place
now.

YOUNG TOM
No!

The second Bully slams his head against the wall. A piece of metal gashes Tom's forehead.

Tom, bleeding, reaches for his binder, but the Bully grabs it and leafs through it, sneering at Tom's sketches of Oollee.

BULLY
Geez... Is this why you're in the
moron class -- 'cause you spend all
day drawin' stupid pictures?

He throws the binder out the doorway.

BULLY (CONT'D)
Get a life, dude. We're doin' you a
favor, here.

Tom glares at him and leaves.

INT. TOM'S HOUSE - DAY

Tom, his forehead bandaged, stands on a chair to search the top shelf of a bedroom closet. He finds a metal box and opens it with a key. He takes out the handgun inside.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Tom heads for the light from the tree fort, gun in hand, Oollee alongside. They can hear the Bullies talking.

OOLLEE

Maybe this is not a good idea?

YOUNG TOM

So I should just let myself get
beat up every day of my life?

As he arrives at the base of the tree, an empty beer can comes flying out the doorway. Girls laugh.

OOLLEE

There are females with them...

GIRLS' VOICES (O.S.)

Chug! Chug! Chug!

Tom listens, his face changing from angry to wistful. The Bullies and the Girls are obviously having a good time.

Tom raises the gun, thinking. Then he points it at Oollee.

Oollee's eyes widen with terror.

BANG! The girls scream.

BULLY (O.S.)

What the fuck?

He peers out the doorway of the fort to see Tom staring up at him, holding the gun, trembling.

YOUNG TOM

(indicating the gun)

If you... or any of your asshole
friends... every touch me again...

The Bully gulps and nods.

Tom turns and walks away until he disappears in the dark.

EXT. VACANT LOT - NIGHT

A bonfire burns. Tom throws the binder into it. He feeds more books and magazines to the flames: Starlog, Omni, comic books, The Green Hills of Earth...

He looks up at the sparks rising to the starry sky.

EXT. MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRY - NIGHT (THE PRESENT)

Pan down from another starry sky to the sparks of another fire... This one's burning in a metal trash can outside a ruined building decorated with ISIS graffiti. Two armed MILITANTS warn their hands as they guard an SUV marked PRESS.

INT. RUINED BUILDING - NIGHT

TOM ENGEL (late 30s) sits on a bench. He's sun-weathered and tough, with piercing but friendly eyes, and he wears a battered flak jacket labeled PRESS.

Behind him stand two more armed MILITANTS (20s), guarding two other JOURNALISTS and a local DRIVER.

Tom warily observes his captor: a bearded and burly ISIS LEADER (30s), smoking a hookah.

ISIS LEADER
(Syrian accent)
You know what we do to reporters?

He indicates a large curved knife on the table by the hookah.

TOM
Sure. I saw the link. Eighty-eight million views - impressive.

The Leader looks content. He smokes and studies Tom, noticing the beads of sweat on his forehead.

ISIS LEADER
You are nervous?

TOM
Obviously.

He indicates the hookah.

TOM (CONT'D)
And I could really use a hit.

The Leader, amused, considers the request for a moment, then hands Tom the mouthpiece. Tom takes a long drag.

TOM (CONT'D)
Ahhhh... thanks.

He hands back the mouthpiece.

TOM (CONT'D)
(in Arabic, with
subtitles)
All praise belongs to Allah, who
makes such things for us to enjoy.

The ISIS Leader responds automatically, looking surprised.

ISIS LEADER
(in Arabic, with
subtitles)
Allah is great.

He leans back, looking friendlier and less threatening.

Tom smiles and indicates the knife.

TOM
You could kill me if you want, but
that's kinda "been there, done
that" -- y'know?

ISIS LEADER
You have better idea?

TOM
Tell people the truth. Give 'em the
facts. Not just scary-ass
propaganda and threats. Tell my
readers what you're fighting for --
and what you're fighting against.
Talk about your battles -- the men
you've killed and the friends
you've lost. How many dead? How
many wounded? That's what gets into
the history books. That's what
people remember.

There's a tense silence as the Leader smokes and considers.

EXT. RUINED BUILDING - NIGHT

Tom shakes hands with the ISIS Leader, then gets into the
SUV, followed by the other Journalists and the Driver.

INT./EXT. SUV - NIGHT

They drive away from the ruined building, past more ruins.

JOURNALIST 1
How do you DO that?

TOM
Always ask for a smoke. It's the
perfect ice-breaker.

JOURNALIST 2
But I don't smoke.

TOM
So start.

JOURNALIST 2
It's bad for your health.

TOM
So's getting your head chopped off.

The headlights illuminate a flash of color beside the road.

TOM (CONT'D)
(to the Driver, in Arabic)
Pull over there...

The SUV stops. Tom gets out with his camera. He stares at the
body of a young girl in a purple dress, clutching a fluffy,
pink, stuffed unicorn. He takes her picture.

The SOUND OF FIGHTER JETS can be heard getting closer.

JOURNALIST 1
TOM! Move your ass already!
The cease-fire's over.

BOOM! Tom gets back in the SUV and it pulls away.

BOOM! Closer this time...

The jets VROOM overhead. Another BOOOOOOM! -- Right in front
of them. The SUV swerves as gravel SPATTERS the windshield.

Tom's phone PINGS with a message. He looks at the screen.

TOM
Fuck!

CUT TO:

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICES, NYC - DAY

Tom glares at the NEWSPAPER EDITOR (50s).

TOM
No. Fucking. Way.

NEWSPAPER EDITOR
You know the pressures we're under.
Print's dead. We're lucky the doors
are still open.

TOM
I've been here for 13 years. I've
won awards for this paper! I'm one
of the most trusted --

NEWSPAPER EDITOR
You're great with the facts and
figures -- no question. But there's
no... imagination, no human
interest. And your articles aren't
exactly... "click bait."

TOM
What do you want from me?
"Listicles"? "Nine ways ISIS is
fucking up Syria"?

He glares at the Editor, who looks sympathetic.

NEWSPAPER EDITOR
I'm sorry, Tom.

INT. JENNY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

A middle class apartment with toys lying around. The door
buzzer BUZZES. Tom lets himself in and dumps his bags.

TOM
Jenny? Mikey?

A large man in his 40s -- CARL -- peddles an exercise bike in
the corner, wearing a sweat suit and over-sized headphones.

TOM (CONT'D)
Hey, Carl.

Carl doesn't notice him, keeps pedaling, breathing hard.

JENNY (30s, former prom queen) enters, wearing a bathrobe.

JENNY
You let yourself in?

TOM
You didn't answer.

JENNY

So how're you going to pay child support now? You're already two months behind.

TOM

Yeah, we don't want Carl to run out of pork rinds...

JENNY

Fuck you. At least he's around.

Tom's about to retort when he's stopped by a scream of joy.

MIKEY (O.S.)

DAAAAA-DDYYYYY!

MIKEY (6, adorable) hurls herself at him. She wears fairy pajamas and rub-on tattoos of fantastical creatures.

Tom sweeps her up into his arms, hugs her and kisses her.

She shows him her gap-toothed grin.

MIKEY (CONT'D)

I lost a tooth! Mommy says if I put it under my pillow the tooth fairy'll bring me money.

Tom looks at Jenny accusingly. She gives him a stone-faced glare; they've had this fight before.

TOM

(to Mikey)

Let's tuck you in and talk about it...

He carries her toward the hallway.

MIKEY'S BEDROOM

Tom tucks Mikey into bed and sits next to her.

TOM

You're a smart girl, so I want you to think hard about this, OK?

Mikey nods.

TOM (CONT'D)

Now what do you think makes more sense?

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)
 That there's a "fairy" that sneaks
 into your room at night, lifts up
 your pillow, takes your tooth, and
 leaves you money?

Mikey scrunches up her face and thinks hard.

TOM (CONT'D)
 Or maybe... and I'm just throwing
 out an idea here, but just maybe
 your mom's the one who does it.

Mikey's face falls.

MIKEY
 So there's no fairy?

Tom shakes his head.

MIKEY (CONT'D)
 Or Santa?

TOM
 Nope.

MIKEY
 Or -- ?

JENNY (O.S.)
 Tom!

He looks up to see her in the doorway.

TOM
 Goodnight, sweetheart.

He kisses Mikey, gets up, and leaves, closing the door.

LIVING ROOM

Jenny glares at Tom but keeps her voice low.

JENNY
 What're you doing?

TOM
 Telling her the truth.

JENNY
 She's six years old!

TOM

You want her to believe in flying creatures that trade body parts for cash? What's next -- the kidney fairy?

Jenny rolls her eyes.

TOM (CONT'D)

You know how many problems in this world are caused by people who can't handle the truth? Who make up stories about --

JENNY

She's a CHILD! It's HEALTHY for her to have an imagination. Even if you don't.

TOM

I didn't need an imagination to get where I am today. I'm an award-winning journalist who's --

JENNY

Divorced, unemployed, and broke.

Tom picks up his bags and leaves, SLAMMING the door.

Carl finally looks up at the sound, befuddled.

CARL

What the fuck?

Jenny shakes her head.

INT. TOM'S APARTMENT - DAY

SUPER: Three Months Later

A lame, bare, studio apartment.

Tom works on his laptop, amid piles of past-due bills, sending out resumes, a job-hunting site open on the screen.

In the background, the TV news shows the Curiosity Mars rover, but Tom's oblivious. His phone RINGS. He picks it up; his face falls when he sees it's Jenny.

TOM

(into phone)

I know I'm late again. I'm sorry.