

Success

By

Aliona Tsypes and Scott Danzig

sneakyghostfilms@gmail.com

FADE IN

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

AJ, aged 36, half-dressed in wrinkled clothes, clutches his knees, rocking back and forth on his bed in a dark bedroom, suffocated with clutter. His vacant eyes stare past the empty coffee mugs and pills in front of him.

AJ

I know this is going to work. It's
going to work this time.

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - DAY - 6 MONTHS EARLIER

The sun is streaming onto the bed where Sylvie, 35, with long, silky hair and soft eyes, lounges in shorts and a T-shirt alongside AJ, wearing a blue bathrobe, as he looks over a notebook.

AJ

Why the hurry? How about we do some
roleplaying warmups?

AJ glances back hopefully. Sylvie levels her gaze at him.

SYLVIE

I thought Graydor the Brave does
not forsake his companions. Let's
go already.

AJ lifts a pencil and makes a correction. Sylvie's fingers play with AJ's hair.

SYLVIE

Your hair is still wet.

AJ

You're making Graydor angry.

Sylvie smirks with an eye roll and crosses her arms.

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

A hand rolls a 20-sided die, stopping on a 2.

Chelsea, 35, with her wild, short hair, peeks over the edge of a tri-folded cardboard barrier.

Maxine, 40, with dark-framed, boxy glasses, abruptly breaks his gaze from the lowly number, waiting, slack-jawed, for Chelsea to explain.

CHELSEA
Graydor the Brave slips and falls
on Jeznal's familiar... and it
died.

MAXINE
(turning toward AJ)
Nooo!!!

Sylvie rolls backward, guffawing.

AJ
Sorry about your turtle.

MAXINE
(fuming)
It was a tortoise! Sylvie, you said
that symbol you painted on its
shell would protect it!

SYLVIE
Ask Chelsea why it didn't work.
She's the DM.

Chelsea starts cleaning up her papers and books, then grabs
the 20-sider.

CHELSEA
That spell is only for deflecting
arrows and small knives. A half-orc
in full armor fell on him. He
rolled a 2 on a bull rush in the
mud. The die don't lie, Max!

MAXINE
(weakly)
But he wasn't just my familiar. He
was my friend.

AJ seems lost in thought. Fingers snap at him.

SYLVIE
AJ, are you still with us?

AJ
Oh, sorry. I've just been thinking
about my latest project.

CHELSEA
You making another film?

MAXINE

Just put the camera down and keep your day job, dude. Your last film about Sylvie's cat was painful.

CHELSEA

It was better than his used car lot commercial. That's for sure.

Maxine and Chelsea start to giggle.

AJ

Enough about the commercial already.

SYLVIE

It's just a bad economy.

CHELSEA

Oh, and that travel vlog?

MAXINE

But he left Sylvie all alone!

Sylvie scoffs at Maxine's feigned sympathy.

Chelsea returns to her beer, struggling to recompose herself.

AJ

Okay, okay, I get it, but this is different. I will finally write a success story of my own. You know that documentary series "Humans of New York?"

Maxine nods.

SYLVIE

I love Humans of New York!

AJ

Every video he posts has millions, MILLIONS of views and thousands of comments! I want to make a documentary where, instead, I interview successful people, and ask them how they got to where they are.

Chelsea looks thoughtful.

MAXINE

Okay.

AJ

Who wouldn't want to see a documentary that lays out recipes for success, from real people?

(turns to Sylvie)

Hey, remember when I told you about that actor I met when I was vlogging? Guess who I filmed yesterday?

SYLVIE

No way! Seriously?

AJ nods.

MAXINE

Which actor?

AJ

This could be my big break. I can feel it.

AJ lights up with manic energy, and Sylvie raises her beer to him.

SYLVIE

To AJ's big break!

Maxine and Chelsea glance at each other, before clinking glasses.

INT. LARGE OFFICE - DAY

AJ sits across from DANNY, aged 32, in a neutral-colored office space, engaged in conversation, with a camera recording.

DANNY

A food cart. Yeah, it all started with a food cart, but... I was determined to make the best damn food cart ever. I had all sorts of French cuisine in that cart. It was all so good! But they just called me "the crepe cart".

Danny and AJ share a chuckle.

AJ
But how'd you go from that food
cart to such an incredible
restaurant?

DANNY
I got rid of all distractions and
got to business. I worked on my
food, and, I drove everywhere:
softball games, beaches, my
brother's wedding... I miss those
days, but hell, my second Michelin
star sure makes up for it!

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Allison, 60, carefully sprinkles salsa over the meats of a
carefully arranged assortment of tacos. The door opens
behind her and she rushes to clean her hands.

ALLISON
Alex!

Allison lights up and rushes to kiss her son on the cheek.
AJ laughs.

AJ
Tacos!

ALLISON
Lamb tacos! New recipe!

Allison holds a plate bearing a single taco and holds the
taco up. AJ obliges.

AJ
This is so good. Lamb tacos! I had
no idea!

Allison brushes AJ's mouth with a napkin as he gets his food
down. An older man in a business suit, with peppered hair
and a stoic face walks out.

AJ
Hi Dad.

DAVID
Good to see you, Alex.

AJ
I'm working on a film. A
documentary!

DAVID
Filmmaking? Hey, that's great. Good
luck with it.
(checks his watch)
Sorry, I have a meeting.

David kisses Allison on the cheek, then gives a token nod to
AJ and turns to leave.

AJ
It's about successful people--

A door shuts.

AJ
Like you.

Allison remembers the plate in her hands and heads to the
sink to wash it.

ALLISON
So Sylvie's busy?

AJ
Sushi night with the girls or
something.

ALLISON
When ya gonna finally propose to
her? I want grandkids!

AJ rolls his eyes as his mother rejoins him.

AJ
Mom! I'm still trying to become a
success first. I just finished the
first interview of my documentary.
This guy gave up so much for his
restaurant, but he made it. I wish
I could be that dedicated.

ALLISON
Nonsense. Hey, we can start our own
taco restaurant!

Allison and AJ share a laugh.

AJ
You think I have it in me? I want
this documentary to succeed so
much. Even Dad will be impressed.

ALLISON

Your don't need to prove anything to your father, honey. Hey, I still have a lot of phone calls to make for my 60th birthday party.

AJ

You really want to do something that big?

ALLISON

You know me and birthday parties. I've been telling all my friends about how talented and smart you are! They can't wait to meet you! Hey, guess what I'll be serving?

AJ glances over at the tacos and then back incredulously at his squealing mother.

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

Sylvie and Maxine sit silently, nursing their beers, looking sympathetically at the stack of gaming materials in front of Chelsea. Chelsea glances at the door behind her.

MAXINE

Where is he?

SYLVIE

Something must have come up...

MAXINE

Maybe we can play without him?

CHELSEA

I really need the whole gang for this.

Chelsea starts collecting empty glasses.

MAXINE

Come on AJ! It's the third time already!

CHELSEA

I guess I'll just rewrite the quest for two players.

(beat)

Umm, who wants another round?

Sylvie glances again at the door, biting her lip, then back toward Chelsea with sincerity.

INT. LARGE OFFICE - EVENING

AJ converses at a table with MELANIE, aged 35, again with a camera recording. Melanie's attention drifts, then, her eyes jerk back to wide-eyed attention. AJ reaches for a coffee carafe.

AJ
Would you like more...

Melanie shoves her coffee mug at AJ. He glances side-eyed, but then relents and pours.

MELANIE
Ever since I believed in my
writing, and took that leap of
faith... I quit my job. It was all
or nothing. No going back!

Melanie leans in and whispers.

MELANIE
Do or die.

Melanie starts sipping her coffee.

AJ
Getting rid of the safety net did
the trick?

MELANIE
It was scary, sure, but it
simplified my life. If I did
anything but write, I'd be out on
the street. I sold my TV. The only
friend I stayed in touch with was
Mr. Coffee over there.

AJ
Do you think this would work for
anyone?

AJ is startled as Melanie grabs the pot again.

MELANIE
Well, you need talent, but, you
won't know until you try, right? I
still can't believe it. The New
York Times Best Seller List! It was
all worth it!

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - LATE NIGHT

AJ sits at his computer desk in his orderly apartment, taking another sip from a large mug of coffee. He takes notes while reviewing the recording of his interview with Melanie.

MELANIE'S VOICE

I quit my job. It was all or nothing. No going back! ... Do or die.

INT. FRONT OFFICE

Chairs and tables with brochures lean against the walls of a reception area. Sylvie peeks over a receptionist busy on his phone, at a clock.

She hears fast-approaching footsteps and looks up to see AJ, a box in hand, with a man in his 50's dressed for business, chasing after, wearing a look of exasperation.

BOSS

You have to give me some notice.
Come on!

AJ

I'm sorry! I just need to focus on my project.

The boss's phone starts ringing and he speaks over it.

BOSS

What project? I have to take this.
Just call me tomorrow. We can work something out.

The boss answers his phone, rushing away. AJ shakes his head then notices Sylvie and does a double-take.

AJ

Oh, hey! Umm... Dinner! Right!

SYLVIE

(shocked)

Did you just quit your job?

AJ motions with his head toward the door and continues walking

AJ

Yep. I've just been trying to streamline my life more. I need to

AJ
be able to just wake up, have
coffee, and get to work on my film.

SYLVIE
Is that why you stopped showing up
to the gaming nights? Chelsea's
really upset.

AJ
I know...
(rakes his hair)
I'll call her. But this project has
become an obsession of mine. I
should have time for pizza?

SYLVIE
I'm worried about you.

AJ
(upping his pace)
Don't be. It's do or die now!

INT. LARGE OFFICE - DAY

AJ leans back in his chair, in front of his camera and
tripod, watching Jason tucks his phone away and looks back
up.

JASON
Right, so where was I?

AJ
I asked about your preparation for
the bar exam.

JASON
Oh, yeah. I was worried. I heard
about this one guy -- on the second
day of the exam, he felt sick. He
went up to the proctor to ask for a
break, and freaking puked all over
him! That wasn't gonna be me. I cut
myself off from the world, and
worked until I couldn't, every
single day, and then kept pushing,
and pushing.

AJ
(chuckling)
I take it you had coffee in your IV
or something?

JASON
Not just coffee.

AJ
Something stronger, huh?

JASON
(glancing at the camera)
And you want to record me saying
what, exactly? Let's just say I
wasn't screwin' around. I did what
I had to. But look at me now.
(spreads arms)
I'm the youngest partner in the
history of the firm.

AJ
It sounds like you made their
choice easy, with all that hard
work and sacrifice.

JASON
Exactly. There's a reason why
makin' it big is so difficult. Most
people? They lack commitment.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Empty coffee cups and some pills are strewn over the night
stand in a motel room. A smartphone rings. AJ is trying to
get a tie right, but gives up and answers the phone.

ALLISON
How are you, AJ?

AJ
Hey Mom, what's up?

A pause. AJ starts to privately motion for her to "get on
with it" with his hand.

INTERCUT WITH ALLISON'S KITCHEN:

ALLISON
Hey, can you pick up some tomatoes
and come a little early? I used
them all up in the salsa and it'd
be great to have more for the
tacos.

AJ's eyes close as he claws his hair and mouths the word
"Fuck".

AJ
Mom, I'm in Ohio.

ALLISON
But my birthday...

David stands at the kitchen doorway.

FATHER
He's busy with that film, isn't he?
Good for him.

END INTERCUT

AJ
I know Mom, I'm sorry. I'm
preparing for another interview. A
good one.

Another long pause.

ALLISON
(weakly)
Okay, AJ.

AJ
I'm really sorry, Mom. I've just
been so focused and it slipped my
mind. Trust me, you and... even Dad
are going to be so proud of me.

ALLISON
We are proud of you, AJ.

AJ
I'll talk to you later, okay? Bye
Mom.

AJ hangs up and gets back to his tie.

INT. DARK ROOM - EVENING

AJ listens intently to ALYSSA in a quiet, dark space
streaked with light from a single window.

ALYSSA
And I just knew... Journalism was
too important to me. Just a little
bit more to make all the sacrifices
worth it. I just had to take a
break. We were together for so
long...
(beat)

ALYSSA

I loved him. But I was so damn close to success. You can't be a successful journalist if you feel tied down. And now, I'm busier than ever, traveling the world, covering the top stories. They're even talking about giving me my own time slot now. I'm on cloud nine.

AJ

You sound really happy. All those sacrifices obviously paid off.

INT. AJ'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sylvie approaches a door of an apartment and knocks. No answer. She tries the doorbell. Eventually she tries the knob, and it opens. She enters cautiously.

SYLVIE

Hello? AJ?

Sylvie hears movement and follows it.

Sylvie approaches a partially open door leading to a dark room, where the noise of key clattering is coming from. She peeks in.

In his bedroom, AJ sits in front of his computer, in his pajamas, with headphones on, watching one of his interviews. The room is littered with coffee cups, fast food packaging, and clothes.

Sylvie walks in a bit and speaks louder.

SYLVIE

AJ?

No response. AJ takes out a bottle of pills from a drawer and washes one down with coffee. He catches sight of Sylvie in his peripheral vision and freaks.

AJ

Ahhh!!!

The coffee goes flying, splashing on his keyboard.

AJ

Shit!

AJ looks up, agitated. Sylvie backs away.

AJ
Don't sneak up on me like that.

SYLVIE
I didn't mean to. I was worried.
You're not answering your phone at
all.

AJ
I can't have any distractions.

AJ looks around, then shakes his head and grabs a t-shirt to
start mopping up his keyboard.

SYLVIE
What are those pills you're taking?

AJ
(irritated)
Sylvie, look, it's none of your
business.

SYLVIE
You don't look well.

AJ
I think we need to take a break.

Sylvie's eyes widen, her mouth agape. AJ's eyes connect.

AJ
Sylvie... I can't be distracted
right now...

SYLVIE
I'm just a distraction? AJ, I love
you.

AJ
It'll be just for a little while.
Just until I get this done.

SYLVIE
Wrong answer. I'm done.

Sylvie stares AJ down, fresh tears streaming down her face.

SYLVIE
(voice cracking, but with
resolve)
We're done.

Sylvie storms out the door. AJ chases but stops at the door.

AJ
Sylvie! Wait! Shit!

AJ's shoulders slump, but his eyes go cold with resolve.

AJ
This will all be worth it.

INT. LOUNGE/RESTAURANT - EVENING

AJ, sweaty and unshaven, sits at the bar at the usual restaurant, finishing a burger. A bill is placed in front of him by a waiter.

The waiter ducks away discreetly. AJ flips through his wallet, only finding twenties. He shakes his head, then slaps one on the counter and turns to leap off his stool. Chelsea and Maxine loom right over him.

MAXINE
Hey, look who climbed out of the sewer. Dude, you're kinda rank.

Chelsea glares at Maxine.

CHELSEA
You really hurt Sylvie. You've been together for how long? To end it all over some movie?

AJ
You don't understand. I don't have a choice. The film is coming together so well, but I need to stay committed.

MAXINE
Don't be such an ass, man. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

AJ stands up, his eyes wild, staring Maxine and Chelsea down angrily.

AJ
YES IT DOES! You don't get it! I can't be on top if I do anything less!

Chelsea and Maxine back away.

CHELSEA
Hey, calm down!

AJ
Just leave me alone!

AJ storms out, leaving exasperated friends in his wake.

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - EARLY EVENING

A catastrophic mess of equipment, clothes, papers, trash, and more coffee cups and pill bottles have successfully besieged AJ's bedroom.

Beep.

CHELSEA'S VOICE
Hey AJ, how are you? Maxine told me he had also tried calling you before, but no luck. You looked in bad shape last time we saw you. Call me, please?

Beep.

ALLISON'S VOICE
Alex, are you okay? You haven't called me for months. I don't know what is going on with you. I know you don't have time for your mother, but I'm so worried about you. Can we talk?

AJ, in wrinkled clothes on his bed, holds his knees, rocking, midst a sprawl of coffee cups and pill bottles. His eyes are void of emotion.

VOICES
I got rid of all distractions and got to business.
(louder)
It was all or nothing. No going back!
(louder)
Most people? They lack commitment.
(louder)
Just a little bit more to make all the sacrifices worth it.

Silence.

AJ
(under his breath)
I know this is going to work. It's going to work this time. I just want it all to be perfect. I will

AJ
not give up this time. I need this
to work. It's almost there, it has
to be almost there. It will be a
huge success. Nothing else matters.
Sacrifices have to be made.

INT. THEATER LOBBY - AFTERNOON

A young, perky festival volunteer smiles at an approaching
AJ from behind a table, in front of a sign advertising the
Solar Flare Film Festival.

VOLUNTEER
Welcome to the Solar Flare Film
Festival! Our admission costs are
suggested donations...

AJ
I'm one of the filmmakers.

AJ spots his name on a clipboard on the table.

AJ
That's me.

VOLUNTEER
Oh, congratulations!

The volunteer opens a box and pulls out a badge.

VOLUNTEER
And how many have you brought with
you?

AJ
Umm, just me, thanks.

AJ wears his badge as he walks past.

INT. MOVIE THEATER - EVENING

AJ is on stage with two film festival committee members as
one presents him with a certificate for "Best Picture".
Black clothes do little to mask AJ's gaunt figure, with
shadows pooling in the pockets of his tired, emotionless
face.

HOST
Congratulations, AJ, your highly
critically-acclaimed documentary,
Success, is quite a success!

The festival host chuckles.

AJ
Success...

HOST
Your own rise to success was very rapid. Naturally, we all are very interested in hearing your thoughts about this. To what do YOU owe your success, AJ?

AJ's lips move as he stoically mouths silent answers. The words of AJ's interviewees echo louder and louder. One question manages to be heard.

TREASURER
I'm sure it's all worth it in the end, isn't it? Is there anyone in the audience who you would like to acknowledge? I'm sure your loved ones are very proud of you!

AJ grimaces and wordlessly replies as his gaze drifts over the audience:

MONTAGE

- Chelsea shakes her head, pointing at him, then Maxine glances over and shrugs in response. They vanish, leaving behind empty chairs.
- AJ continuing his answer.
- Sylvie leans against the wall, her eyes full of earnest pain. She slumps to the floor and disappears.
- Allison howls mournfully in the front row then fades away.

END MONTAGE

AJ's eye sheds a tear as he silently finishes.

HOST
AJ, you are such an inspiration. Please, everyone, give AJ a huge round of applause.

The host cheerfully shakes hands with AJ and congratulates him again, contrasting sharply with AJ's somber disposition.

A man, sitting alone in the shadows of the back rows, picks up his coat and makes his way out.

AJ passively allows a festival volunteer to guide him away.

HOST
And now, let's move on to Best
Comedy...

INT. THEATER LOBBY - EVENING

AJ walks out of the theater and squints his eyes.

AJ
Dad?

David retracts his hand from the door and turns around,
pauses for a moment, then smiles widely and backtracks
toward AJ.

DAVID
AJ! Congratulations!

AJ
I didn't know you were here!

DAVID
I... wasn't sure I could make it. I
just wanted to see the ceremony.

AJ brightens.

AJ
I worked so hard for this, Dad.

An excited committee member pops up beside David and puts
his hand on his shoulder.

TREASURER
Thank you so much, Sir, for your
... generous donation.

David's eyes glance nervously at AJ.

DAVID
Yes, well, it was a small offering.

TREASURER
(laughing, incredulous)
That's what you call small?

The committee member turns toward AJ, who looks confused.

TREASURER
I hope you enjoy that win! I think
it'll be great for you!

AJ glances back and forth between the committee member and
his father, with pain flooding his eyes.

20.

FADE OUT