

THE MISERABLE PLANET

written by

Scott Danzig

scott@sneakyghost.com

FADE IN:

INT. JAMIE'S APARTMENT - DAY

ON SCREEN: A listing with "700 sq ft "starter home".
\$1,200,000, perfect for first-time buyers!"

JAMIE (early 20s, septum piercing, "The Miserable Planet" t-shirt with cartoon crying Earth) at her laptop on a desk littered with prescription bottles and powder residue. She minimizes the house listing and clicks to start a recording.

JAMIE
(to camera)
In tonight's episode of The
Miserable Planet, I'm tracking down
Dr. Maxwell Levin. Lost his license
for gambling. Let's see what our
disgraced therapist is up to.

CUT TO:

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY (DUSTIN'S CAMERA)

A genuinely devastated woman, DIANE MORRISON (40s, mascara-streaked face, professional clothes from yesterday), sits at a table. Her shoulders shake with sobs.

The camera lingers uncomfortably on her real pain - 15 full seconds of raw grief.

JAMIE (V.O.)
Actually, change of plans. This
woman looks way more miserable.

Jamie slides into frame with a microphone.

JAMIE
Hi, I'm Jamie from 'The Miserable
Planet.' Can you tell our viewers
what's wrong?

Diane recoils.

Pull back to reveal DUSTIN (20s, expensive camera gear, Portland hipster aesthetic), gazing at Jamie more than through his viewfinder.

JAMIE (CONT'D)
(snapping fingers without
looking)
(MORE)

JAMIE (CONT'D)
Closer, Dustin. When you see the wrinkles, you see the pain.

THROUGH CAMERA LCD: Dustin's frantic zooming. Auto-focus hunting. REC indicator blinking.

DUSTIN (O.S.)
On it!

INT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

DR. MAXWELL SOLOMON LEVIN (38, disheveled blazer over coffee-stained shirt) drums his fingers on the counter, shifting weight oddly. A pair of customers wait behind him. FRANKIE (50s, old-school coffee shop owner) behind the counter points to a sign hanging above a key: "RESTROOM FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY"

Max's phone screen shows: BANK BALANCE: -\$247.83

MAX
(desperate)
I don't have my wallet-

FRANKIE
(firm)
No exceptions, pal.
(softer)
Just buy something already, before you wet yourself.

TOMMY "THE SOLUTION" TORRINO (42, expensive suit), sipping a perfectly pulled cortado, looks up.

TOMMY
He did what before he wet himself,
Frankie?

Frankie ignores him. Tommy shrugs.

Max spots the camera and starts to retreat, crossing his legs desperately.

DIANE
(grabbing his sleeve)
Please. I just need someone to listen.

Max, focused on biological necessity, tries to deflect. Jamie makes "keep going" gestures behind Diane's back.

MAX

(distracted by the sign)

I'm not really practicing anymore
but, well, I don't suppose you
could spare--

DIANE

(desperate)

Seventeen years and he leaves me
for someone half my age--

MAX

(rapid, shifting weight)

Wait, hold up. That's seventeen
years of data. You have a PhD in
what doesn't work.

From a nearby table, LILY CHEN (late 30s) stands there,
ukulele case on her back - held together with duct tape, a
broken string dangling, wood cracked.

LILY

(testing)

Max?

Diane glances over as Max starts to turn. Jamie slides in
between, obstructing their view.

JAMIE

(scolding whisper)

That broken ukulele's killing my
shot, sadness.

Lily freezes, trying one last time to make eye contact with
Max, then relents as Jamie guides her toward the door. Max
and Diane reconnect.

DIANE

You said I learned about what
doesn't work, but I'm not with him
anymore.

MAX

I didn't mean you learned what
doesn't work for him. I meant what
works for you.

DIANE

But seventeen years!

MAX
(almost frantic now)
Seventeen years spent learning
exactly what you want. That's worth
everything.

Diane wipes her tears, suddenly calm. Blinks. Something just shifted.

DIANE
(almost laughing)
Oh my god. You just... in
seconds...
(reaches into purse)
I only have five bucks, but-

MAX
(eyes widening)
Perfect.

Max reaches for the bill, hesitates for Diane's approval, then snatches it, rushing back to Frankie.

Max slams the fiver on the counter.

MAX (CONT'D)
Coffee. Keep the change.

FRANKIE
Hey, that gets you an Ethiopian
pour-over! Just a sec.

Frankie grabs a cone of coffee grinds from behind and sets it over a cup.

MAX
Umm, can I just...

Frankie drizzles hot water over the grinds in a circle, entranced. Max grimaces and lunges, snatching the key.

MAX (CONT'D)
I'll wait in the restroom!

He rushes off. Tommy watches from his table, amused.

MOMENTS LATER:

Jamie stands in front of the restroom. We hear a flush and then the sink faucet. Dustin monitors the camera.

JAMIE
Dustin, we'll title this one
"Shrink... The Bladder".

Behind her, Max exits the restroom, visibly relieved, triumphantly claiming his pour-over. ANOTHER CRYING PERSON at a nearby table steals his attention.

MAX
(approaching)
You look like you need someone to talk to.

Jamie's eyes widen. She spins around, frantically signaling Dustin.

JAMIE
Look, he's doing it again. Keep rolling!

INT. COFFEE SHOP - LATER

CUT TO:

Frankie is cleaning up. Max sits at a table, nodding as a little, tearful man standing across from him slides him cash and walks away. As Max pockets the money, Jamie joins him and shows him her phone screen - the view count. Max's pupils dilate at the number.

JAMIE (CONT'D)
Max Levin, right? That went viral fast.

MAX
That many people watch you?

JAMIE
I find the clients. You fix 'em while the dork films you. Sixty-forty split.

MAX
(still staring at phone,
hesitating)
I... I don't know...

JAMIE
(checking her phone,
knowing)
Or we can just talk about your career history?

Jamie turns toward her camera. Max intercedes.

MAX
Right. Deal.

INT. JAMIE'S APARTMENT - LATER

Jamie at her laptop editing multiple clips.

ON SCREEN: An editing project named "The Therapy Grift"

QUICK CUTS:

- LAUNDRY ROOM: Woman obsessively matching socks. Max gently pushes two mismatched socks together. She tears up, nods. Hands him coins for his machine.

- BAR: Frazzled bartender wiping his face, exhausted. Hands Max cash from the till. Pours himself a shot, downs it.

- USED CAR LOT: A salesman sobs against Max's shoulder. He wipes the "1" off a windshield: \$16999 → \$6999. Max tries to wipe the "6" too but his hand is slapped away.

- OTB PARLOR: Max takes betting slip. "EMOTIONAL DAMAGE" wins 15-1

- CHURCH: Max exits a confessional. The PRIEST follows him out, tears streaming down his face. He hands Max the donation bucket.

JAMIE
(shaking her head)
Who needs Bitcoin when ya got
empathy?

INT. MAX'S APARTMENT - DAY

Max lounges on his sofa, setting down a coffee cup on a table as he fiddles with a "FireAndIce Slots" smartphone app. A notification chimes.

ON SCREEN (a message): Jacques: Will you be at the coffee shop again tomorrow?

Max hesitates, then clicks to bet \$50. He loses immediately.

MAX
(to himself)
I'm democratizing healing.

Max types a message.

ON SCREEN: Yeah, I think so.

Max switches back to the slots app and ups the bet to \$75, hesitating again.

A knock at the door. Max pockets the phone and opens the door.

TOMMY "THE SOLUTION" TORRINO (42, expensive suit, nervous energy) fills the doorframe.

TOMMY

You're the therapy guy. I saw a clip of you on Late Night and recognized you from the coffee shop. I need help.

MAX

(nervous)

I... how did you find my—

TOMMY

(walking past him, pulling out cash)

I got money. Five hundred cash.

Max spots Jamie and Dustin behind Tommy, filming from the hallway.

Tommy stops dead in the middle of the living room. He stares at a BOOKSHELF hanging precariously off one hinge, slanted at a 45-degree angle.

Tommy winces. Visibly pained by the asymmetry.

MAX

Oh, yeah. The landlord said he'd send someone, but—

TOMMY

(muttering)

It's hanging by a thread.
Disgraceful.

Tommy produces a LARGE TACTICAL SWITCHBLADE. SCH-LICK.

Max flinches, backing against the wall, hands up.

MAX

Whoa, okay! Take the money!

TOMMY

(ignoring him, approaching shelf)

You let things slide. I don't like letting things slide.

He inserts the knife tip into the loose screw head, begins tightening with surgical precision.

MAX
(confused, lowering hands,
desperate)
You're... you are the handyman?

TOMMY
(working the screw)
I'm "The Solution." I fix problems.
Speaking of which... these reviews.

He holds up his phone: the WhoozGoodz app, all one-star -
"Most traumatizing experience" / "Still can't sleep" /
"Ruined my life."

TOMMY (CONT'D)
I collect debts. Guy owes five
grand, I break a thumb, take the
car, he pays. But his wife? One
star: "Most traumatizing experience
of my life."

MAX
(trying to stay calm)
You hurt people for money.

TOMMY
I collect what's owed.
Professional, by the book. But
these reviews are killing me.

MAX
(therapeutic instinct
despite fear)
Maybe... maybe the low ratings are
actually better. In your line of
work.

TOMMY
(stops turning the knife)
What?

MAX
Think about it - 'Most
traumatizing' means you were
extremely effective. The worse the
review, the better you did.

TOMMY
(processing)
Holy shit... So when they say
'ruined my life'...

MAX

They're saying you completely
transformed their reality.
That's... excellence.

DOORBELL RINGS.

MAX (CONT'D)

(panicked, backing toward
door)

I should get that.

Max opens door. Lily stands there, with the same rickety ukulele.

MAX (CONT'D)

Lily, wow.

Behind Max, Tommy continues working, twirling the knife tip in the screw. The scraping stops. He's listening.

THROUGH CAMERA VIEWFINDER:

Auto-focus sharpens Lily's desperate face.

LILY

Max, please, I really need to talk.
I tried to talk to you at the
coffee shop and have been texting-

MAX

Sorry, but our sessions concluded.
I do things a bit differently now.

LILY

I would have never pursued music if
not for you. But I just feel numb
lately.

The frame shakes - Jamie zooming in on Max as he briefly glances at his vibrating phone.

INSERT: "PARLAY LOST. HOUSE WINS. BALANCE: -\$1,247.83."

Max exhales sharply, notices the red REC light and hides his phone in annoyance.

MAX

(cold)

That's \$200 for an emergency
session. Cash up front.

Camera shifts from Max's face to Lily.

LILY
(shocked)
But I don't have that. You used to do a sliding scale.

MAX
(desperate)
That was before I understood my value.

A beat. Max rubs his chin.

MAX (CONT'D)
(quieter)
Well...

He shakes his head slowly, not meeting her eyes. Lily turns and walks away.

Camera follows Lily as she leaves, devastated. Comments overlay: "This is fucked" / "He's a monster"

Max closes the door, turns to find Tommy lowering his blade. The shelves are perfectly level.

He stares at Max.

TOMMY
That girl who just left. She's drowning.

MAX
(defensive)
That's not my responsibility anymore.

TOMMY
She needs you and you're just talking about money.

MAX
I have expenses. Rent-

TOMMY
(quiet, cutting him off)
I said she's drowning.
(beat)
Hey, what do you keep checking on that phone?

MAX
(nervous)
The shelves are fixed. We're done.

TOMMY
No. The shelves are fine, but you?
You're still broken.

Tommy motions at Max's phone with his knife.

TOMMY (CONT'D)
Let's see it.

Max instinctively covers his phone screen. FireAndIce Slots visible for a moment.

TOMMY (CONT'D)
You're not broken. You're an
addict. These are decent people.
Not your poker chips.

MAX
(defensive)
How would you—

Tommy glances down at his switchblade.

TOMMY
(quiet)
Had my own demons. I learned to fix
my own problems.

Tommy gives Max a long stare.

TOMMY (CONT'D)
Today, I'm gonna fix yours.

MAX
But, why?

Through the window, Max sees something on the street below. His face changes.

MAX'S POV: Lily at the corner, stepping off the curb toward rushing traffic.

SLOW MOTION: Max knocks over the coffee cup and explodes through the door as Tommy spins.

DUSTIN'S CAMERA - RUNNING:

Shaky, frantic movement as Dustin sprints after them. The lens struggles to focus. Street rushing forward. Lily's figure growing larger. The BUS entering frame.

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

Max grabs Lily, yanking her back as the bus ROARS past, horn BLARING.

Normal speed resumes. They tumble onto the sidewalk. Lily sobbing in his arms.

LILY
(broken)
I just wanted it all to stop.

Max holds her, comforting her.

EXT. MAX'S APARTMENT - LATER

An EMT checks Lily's vitals. She's wrapped in a blanket.

Max stands apart, staring into the distance. His phone BUZZES in his hand.

INSERT: SCREEN - "BREAKTHROUGH BONUS - \$100"

He silences it without looking, eyes staying on Lily.

Tommy approaches, hearing police car and stowing his knife away. He puts a hand on Max's shoulder.

TOMMY
Hey, how about Frankie's? The coffee shop where you wet yourself?

MAX
(confused, still shaken)
Wait wha? I didn't-

TOMMY
Sure looked like it.

MAX
(giving up, hollow)
I don't have any money anyway.

TOMMY
I got it.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Tommy and Max, sit side by side on a sofa. Max cries freely and leans onto Tommy's shoulder. Tommy rolls his eyes.

MAX

Lily trusted me and I let her down.
What's wrong with me?

Tommy perfunctorily pats Max's shoulder.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Dustin filming Max and Tommy through the window.

JAMIE

(to camera, gleeful)

THERE IT IS! Already at rock-bottom!

Through the window, Max notices them.

INTERCUT:

Max looks from the window, and back down.

TOMMY

So what are you gonna do about it?

Max slowly raises his eyes, and meets Tommy's. He stares hard, and then stands.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Max storms out, gets in front of Jamie's camera.

MAX

Listen!

Jamie immediately tries to step in front of him, reclaim her show. Tommy blocks her, takes the microphone from her hand, and gives it to Max.

MAX (CONT'D)

(to camera)

Listen. I've been selling you quick fixes. It's not enough. Real change takes time.

(turning to Jamie)

People like us are what make this planet miserable.

Max looks at the microphone and discards it with disgust. Tommy joins him, patting his shoulder.

TOMMY

Attaboy. We'll get you sorted.

FADE OUT.