

"The Waiting Room"

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Screen Story #24

FADE IN:

INT. -- WAITING ROOM

We are in a small waiting room for some sort of corporate or medical purpose. The room has no windows and only one door. It contains several padded chairs, a bit more comfortable than usual. It also has a table of refreshments and a high-quality television playing some kind of daytime talk show. On one wall of the room is a full-length dressing mirror.

The door opens and a woman comes in, JANICE. She is in her mid-30s and is dressed conservatively as though for a job interview. She is accompanied by a RECEPTIONIST.

RECEPTIONIST

They'll call you when they're ready. Feel free to help yourself to the drinks and snacks.

JANICE

Thank you.

The RECEPTIONIST leaves, closing the door behind her. JANICE is now alone in the small room. She remains standing for a moment, apparently getting used to the environment.

The sound of audience laughter comes from the television. A guest on the talk show, a young man with multiple metallic piercings on his face, has just said something funny.

JANICE looks at the food on the table. It consists of an assortment of brand-name soft drinks resting in a bucket of ice and a basket of packaged snacks, mainly chips and cookies. None of it appeals to her.

Hesitantly, she sits down in a padded chair directly facing the television, setting her purse down on the chair beside her. Her attention turns to the television.

The program is called "Lifechangers," and it is a pop psychology show in which ordinary people bring in their relationship problems and the charismatic host, DR. RUDY, dispenses frank and sometimes brutal advice.

DR. RUDY
(on television)

The fact is you're a bum. You're 26 years old and you're still living with your parents. You don't work. You don't go to school. You don't help around in the house. What good are you? You're a parasite, Josh. You need to GET A JOB!

Off-screen, the studio audience applauds enthusiastically to show its approval. On the television, we see the pierced young man, JOSH, looking embarrassed and humiliated. In a chair across from him on the stage is his MOTHER, nodding her approval for DR. RUDY's words.

JOSH

I've got a band. We're trying to get some gigs. We're just having trouble getting started.

DR. RUDY
(with theatrical sensitivity)

But those are YOUR dreams, Josh. Everyone has the right to dream, but your mother doesn't have the obligation to finance your dreams.

In the waiting room, the door opens and the RECEPTIONIST escorts a man inside, the CASSANOVA.

RECEPTIONIST

You can help yourself to the drinks and snacks.

The door closes, and JANICE and the CASSANOVA are alone in the room. He is a man in his twenties, and we can see from his style that he thinks a little too

much of himself. His shirt is open halfway down his chest to expose his chest hair. He is wearing gold chains around his neck. His hair is slicked back as though out on a date. He sits down immediately in the chair closest to the door. He and JANICE obviously don't know each other.

The CASSANOVA smiles at JANICE in a smarmy and too-friendly way.

CASSANOVA

Hello.

JANICE
(flatly)

Hi.

JANICE does not make eye contact with the man and tries to pretend he isn't there. She concentrates on the TV.

DR. RUDY

...You have to own your own feelings. They're YOUR feelings, not somebody else's. We've all suffered misfortune, but we can't afford to be victims. WE HAVE TO TAKE CONTROL.

The CASSANOVA is clearly uncomfortable with the waiting. He is sitting with one leg crossed over the other, and his free foot is twitching nervously. He looks past JANICE to the dressing mirror on the wall opposite him. He examines himself in the mirror, takes a comb out of his pocket and fine-tunes his greasy hair. Then he gets up from his chair and peruses the snack table. He takes a diet soft drink and a bag of chips and returns to his seat.

DR. RUDY

...What happened in the past is irrelevant. All that matters is where we go from here. The future starts now. If you're tied to the

past, by revenge or whatever,
you'll always be imprisoned by it
and will never get to the future.
You've got to let the past go.

The CASSANOVA pops the top of his soft drink and noisily opens the bag of chips. Then he drinks and eats while idly watching the television.

DR. RUDY
(looking at the camera)

Coming up on Lifechangers: A woman
who was sexually abused as child
confronts the father she hasn't see
in twenty years.

The studio audience applauds; the Lifechangers music rises, and program's logo appears on the screen.

Just then, the door of the waiting room opens and a young man leans in, the ESCORT. He is wearing a bright blue blazer and is carrying a radio.

ESCORT

Janice? We're ready for you.

The audience applause is louder now, because it is coming through the door!

JANICE gets up and reaches for her purse.

ESCORT

You can leave your bag here. It
will be okay.

JANICE leaves her bag on the chair but casts a nervous glance at the CASSANOVA. She follows the ESCORT out of the waiting room and the door closes.

The CASSANOVA is now alone in the waiting room. He stands up, checks the snack table again and paces nervously.

From the television, we still hear the Lifechangers theme music.

TV ANNOUNCER

Do you have a family or relationship problem? Maybe Lifechangers can help. Go to Lifechangers dot com or write to the address on your screen.

The CASSANOVA now sits down in the same chair JANICE was in, directly facing the television.

On the television, the next segment of the program begins. The theme music comes on and the audience applauds, then both sounds fade away. DR. RUDY is looking directly at the camera.

DR. RUDY

On this very special segment of Lifechangers, we explore the tragedy of childhood sexual abuse. What is it like to have ones innocence stolen away at an early age? How does it affect one's adult relationships? It's a very personal trauma that most victims don't want to talk about. That's why we feel very fortunate today to explore one woman's experience on our show.

The television program cuts to JANICE seated alone on stage. She looks uncomfortable.

DR. RUDY

Janice, thank you for coming here to share your story with us.

JANICE
(awkwardly)

Okay.

CUT TO:

INT - TELEVISION STUDIO

We are now in the television studio itself. It is a surprisingly confined space. There are three television cameras: one pointed at JANICE, one pointed at the studio audience and one pointed at DR. RUDY, who is standing near the audience. The audience is much smaller than we imagined when watching the show on television. It consists of about forty people seated in a fenced-in area in one corner of the room.

DR. RUDY

Janice, I understand you were abused by your father when you were about ten years old. How does that make you feel.

JANICE shrugs and seems to go blank.

JANICE

I don't know. I don't really feel anything right now.

DR. RUDY

Do you feel that your childhood was stolen from you?

JANICE

I guess.

DR. RUDY

(showing some frustration)

How has this affected your relationships in adulthood? Do you feel that you have trouble trusting men?

JANICE

Maybe.

DR. RUDY

And haven't you been through a number of unsuccessful relationships in the past few years? Why have those relationships failed? Is it that you are choosing the wrong men, or do you feel that all men are evil like your father?

JANICE

I don't feel my father was evil. He was an alcoholic.

DR. RUDY

Does that excuse his behavior? Isn't drinking a personal choice?

JANICE

I guess.

DR. RUDY

Don't you want to confront your father and tell him about all the ways he has hurt you?

JANICE

I guess so, yes.

DR. RUDY

Well, we found your father, living in the streets of Newark, New Jersey. This is the father you haven't seen in twenty years. The same man who abandoned your family after he abused you. This is the man who your mother says never paid one cent of child support, who didn't attend your high school graduation, who was never there for you in your adolescence. Janice, I want you to meet your father Patrick.

A run-down old man wanders from behind a partition and onto the stage. He is obviously a homeless alcoholic who has been dressed up for the occasion. He is missing half his front teeth. He has a deer-in-the-headlights look, as though he doesn't really know where he is. A stagehand has to direct him to the chair opposite JANICE, about six feet away from hers.

DR. RUDY

Janice, is there anything you want to say to your father?

JANICE

[After an awkward pause.] I can't think of anything.

DR. RUDY

Don't you want to ask him why he did this to you?

JANICE

(without much feeling)

Why did you do this to me?

PATRICK

(dazed)

Do what?

A voice comes over a loudspeaker.

DIRECTOR

(voiceover, via intercom)

Cut! This isn't working. Let's take a break.

Everyone on the crew relaxes. DR. RUDY rolls his eyes and looks annoyed. Any empathy he had for JANICE turns off with the cameras.

A PRODUCER, who had been standing beside one of the cameras, comes forward and crouches down to talk to JANICE privately.

PRODUCER

This is your big chance. We talked about this. Here's the guy who caused so much damage to your life, and now you have the chance to tell him off on national TV. Don't you want everyone to know what a predator he is? You're never going to get an opportunity like this again, so you have to come out swinging.

JANICE

Okay, I'll try.

PRODUCER

Good.

The producer retreats behind the camera and the production starts up again.

DIRECTOR

(V.O. via intercom)

Are we ready?

DR. RUDY

Where do I start?

DIRECTOR

"Do you have anything to say to your father?"

DR. RUDY

Okay, I'm ready.

DIRECTOR

Rolling... and action!

The show is back on-line.

DR. RUDY

Janice, this is the man who sexually abused you starting when you were ten and who abandoned your family entirely when you were twelve. Do you have anything to say to him?

JANICE
(to her father)

I'm sorry.

DR. RUDY
(taken aback)

YOU'RE sorry? Why are you sorry?
He's the one who hurt you?

JANICE

I'm sorry for bringing you here.
I'm sorry for interfering in your life. I'm sorry for thinking that humiliating you on television would make any difference.

DR. RUDY

Janice, this doesn't make any sense. You don't want to bottle up your feelings; you want to get them out. You want a catharsis.

JANICE

I think I just had it.

DIRECTOR
(V.O. via intercom)

Cut!

PRODUCER

Why? That was pretty good.

DIRECTOR

The alcoholic is falling asleep.

We focus on PATRICK and see that it's true: He's beginning to nod off while seated. Then he recognizes that everyone is looking at him and wakes up with a jolt. He still looks confused.

PATRICK

What?

PRODUCER

Can we try it again?

JANICE
(assertively)

I'm done here.

DIRECTOR

Yeah, it's not going to work. If there's no conflict, there's no show. It's one for the trash bin.

The PRODUCER looks disappointed, while DR. RUDY just looks bored.

The ESCORT in the blue blazer approaches JANICE and motions her to come with him. She gets up from the chair and follows him off stage.

As they are leaving the stage, they pass the CASSANOVA waiting in the wings, apparently for the next segment. JANICE looks at the man with some sympathy.

JANICE

Good luck!

CUT TO:

EXT. -- URBAN ALLEY IN NEW YORK CITY -- DAY

We are in an alley between buildings in Manhattan. The alley is a little messy, with dumpsters and jumbled

boxes along one side. A door opens in the back of one of the buildings and JANICE comes out, accompanied by the ESCORT.

ESCORT

It's okay. A lot of these shows don't work out. Thanks for participating anyway. Don't you want me to get you a cab?

JANICE

It's okay. I'm fine.

The ESCORT goes back into the building, and the door closes. JANICE doesn't leave, however. Instead, she leans up against a wall opposite the door and waits.

After a moment, the door opens again, and PATRICK comes out. The door then closes, and he stands there, looking confused. Then he notices JANICE watching him. He squints, as though trying to remember who she is.

He shuffles over to JANICE.

PATRICK

I remember you. You're Janet.

JANICE

Janice.

PATRICK

I remember you. You've changed.

JANICE

All grown up.

PATRICK

Yes, all grown up. Your face is thinner and you've gotten a lot taller.

JANICE

Yes, I have.

PATRICK

Say, can you loan me twenty dollars?

JANICE

No.

PATRICK

[Shrugging.] Doesn't hurt to ask.

PATRICK turns and starts shuffling away down the alley.

JANICE
(reconsidering)

No, wait.

PATRICK turns back toward JANICE, while she rummages around in her purse. She pulls out a twenty dollar bill and hands it to PATRICK.

PATRICK

Thanks. I'll pay you back.

JANICE

Don't worry about it. Here's my card if you want to contact me. [She hands it to him.] You have to understand, though, I can't give you any more money.

PATRICK

I'll pay you back. I've got some job prospects coming up.

JANICE

It's totally up to you. I want to apologize again for bringing you out here.

PATRICK

They paid me \$500 to come. I still don't understand it.

JANICE

Good for you. Where's the money now?

PATRICK
(sheepishly)

I invested it.

JANICE

Well, I hope the investment pays off for you. Good luck!

There's an awkward pause between them. They have nothing more to say to each other.

PATRICK

Well, goodbye then.

JANICE

Goodbye.

JANICE watches him walk away down the alley, then she turns and walks in the other direction.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END