

THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION



Screenplay by Joelle Shefts

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FADE IN:

INT. OLIVIA'S WRITING STUDIO

A small room with piles of YELLOW FILE CARDS arranged in piles on every surface. OLIVIA, a woman in her forties, sits at a desk illuminated by her computer screen. Her dishabile suggests an ex-sixties type.

INT. DIANA'S NEW YORK MANSION

A pair of grand double doors open onto the foyer of a mansion in serious disrepair. The camera travels through room after room, disaster zones; piles of construction debris, broken antiques, windows covered with filthy sheets. Here and there, HISPANIC CONSTRUCTION WORKERS move about as if mesmerized. The sound of typing gives way to...

ADULT OLIVIA (V.O.)

It was a mansion built six cinderblocks thick in the Communist-fearing fifties. The bedspreads were so heavy it took two servants to pull 'em back. The bathrooms featured sculptures by Rodin and servants walked at right angles over plastic runners. Smack in the middle of Manhattan. And this treasure trove became the last house of my mother, a nightclub singer born to a Jewish mob family during the depression. She was a nightclub singer of the torch variety who wore dresses so tight she had to be carried to the edge of the stage. I was sixteen when her career breathed its last at the Americana Hotel, where she happened upon the owner of this house, a seventy-year-old of the Protestant persuasion and his wife, at a table. Later that very night, the wife dropped dead in their Bentley. For the next six months, my mother played the widower like a pinball machine and struck "Win! Win! Win!" The man was an innocent born to international banking whose social life consisted of afternoons at the club since his wife had banned visitors for fear of germs. He was nice but very soon my mother was chomping at the bit. Lunches with repressed old money wasn't what she'd had in mind and so her husband did her the favor of going gentle into that good night. (A beat) For the next twenty five years, in this house, my mother pursued a dream; to bring society to it's knees. With his money and a crew of illegals, she'd make a backdrop of such taste and daring that the trendiest tongues would be struck dumb. Rooms, stairways, dresses, her own face and body were ripped apart, rebuilt by surgeons, dress-makers, carpenters, stone masons, then ripped again. For twenty five years the ripping went on while she tore

her hair out in an excess of anxiety..

The camera has moved to another vast room. THREE SEAMSTRESSES work amid piles of bodices, sleeves, belts, pant legs etc.

ADULT OLIVIA (V.O.)
(continuing)

...Except for the occasional fortune hunter, virtually no one came. By the time cancer took her down, she was laying on top of the most expensive pile of rubble in Manhattan.

OLIVIA, age 14, steps out of the shadows. She's a 1960's handful; wild hair, pea coat, old jeans, no bra.

OLIVIA/14
(to camera)

Why we doing this? Was all I could do to get the fuck away without OD'ing and this is how we spend adulthood? Stop or finish this shit or something, could you?

OLIVIA/14 fades away disgusted. The camera continues to another huge room littered with dusty antiques, piled carelessly. A middle-aged woman sits among the debris. She wears the tattered robes of a Greek Muse and a moth-eaten cardigan for warmth. Her greying hair hangs lifelessly. There's wistfulness on her once-beautiful face. This is the MUSE. She cradles a broken 17th century harp.

MUSE
(to camera)

Agh! But the stuff.. is.. so rich.

She plucks a string, a dead twang.

MUSE
(continuing)

How do you not use it?

INT. MANSION'S DINING ROOM

The camera arrives in a semi-finished dining room with marble floors and a huge chandelier. In a hospital bed, DIANA LESTER, 73, is being fed by her adult daughter, OLIVIA. DIANA'S in late-stage brain cancer, frail, bald, but the amount of plastic surgery still maintains her face in an odd, mummified beauty. A NURSE is also present. The room is mirrored on opposite sides, extending it into infinity.

DIANA
(slurred from medication)

Why would they? They can't remember.

OLIVIA

I don't know, Mom. Just a bit more?

DIANA

(shaking her head "no")

It's ridiculous. The brains are unformed. And this whole thing about the actual mother. As if there's something special about the *actual* mother. A baby could be raised by...a gorilla really. A baby could be raised by a gorilla as long as it's a nice gorilla. But you think..

OLIVIA

(sighing)

I don't think anything.

DIANA

No, you've just read everything and you think you know... But the truth is much simpler, it's made up.

OLIVIA

You really need something under the meds or you're gonna be nauseous.

DIANA

You wanna know about your childhood?

OLIVIA

(offering up a spoonful)

Why? Was I out cold?

DIANA

You want the truth? OK. You want the truth. Go ahead. Ask anything. I'll tell you. If it's good for me or bad for me..I'll tell you. Go ahead. One condition. No debate.

DIANA lifts her head and stares at her challengingly.

OLIVIA

I don't have any questions, Mom.

DIANA lays her head back on the pillow and sighs with triumph and contempt.

DIANA

Right.

OLIVIA (V.O.)

She owned everything. Even memory. Getting away from her didn't help. My own memories questioned

themselves and wavered. I thought writing would be my salvation.

INT. OLIVIA & PETER'S BEDROOM LATE AT NIGHT PRESENT

ADULT OLIVIA sits up in bed. Next to her, sleeps her HUSBAND, PETER. In her lap, a pile of YELLOW FILE CARDS on which she writes the end of the previous scene. She stops and thinks.

OLIVIA (V.O.)

That was ten, TEN! years ago. My life's become a writer's joke.

She rearranges the YELLOW FILE CARDS in her hands.

OLIVIA

Fit this in. Fit that in. MAKE IT COHERE. And don't leave anything out. I don't mean facts, I mean levels of reality. Make it music. And it works for a bit, it does, till it doesn't and the music stops and the dancers stop and look at me and I burrow deeper into my failure. My family doesn't find it funny.

She tosses the YELLOW FILE CARDS on the floor. PETER, stirs, half-wakes. Then turns away. She turns down the already dim light.

OLIVIA

Fuck it. I'm finishing. Whatever it is, it is.

A portly man fades up near her bed. He has the fastidious bearing and unwavering contempt of a middle-aged German School master. He is known as the WHIP.

WHIP

In that case, why bother at all?

OLIVIA (V.O.)

Vita Brevis.

WHIP

Yes, and mediocrity Longa.

The WHIP sits down on her bed. She takes a pill from a bottle on the bedside table, then takes another half.

WHIP

Could you go easy on those things? Look, There's a reason why Dedalus built a labyrinth for the Minotaur. Very art inspiring creature it was. Best kept in a structure NOT of it's own design. You wanna put Mom in motion without a plan? (A beat) Look some mothers, you dredge 'em up, they do their bit, they sink back in the grave..more or less

peacefully. Yours? You barely made it with her in the flesh.. Now she's the queen of the underworld. You wanna haul up the queen of the underworld you better have a through-line of steel, sweetheart, or SHE will be calling the shots and YOU will be in a lock-down ward. (Pointing at her sleeping husband) Is that fair to them? I say admit defeat and stop, you can always make a dinner story out of how you wasted ten years. Or else, sweetheart, find the DNA of story telling and lock her in.

OLIVIA takes another pill.

OLIVIA
Go or I'll take the whole bottle.

The WHIP rises and walks into the shadows.

INT. BOARDING-HOUSE HALLWAY CONTINUOUS

The WHIP is walking down a tawdry, boarding-house hallway at the same pace. He carries a tray with two espressos and Sacher Torte. Sounds emerge from the rooms as he passes: STRIP MUSIC, TIBETAN CHANT, BABY CRYING, CHIMPANZEES, URBAN WARFARE, TOY PIANO.

INT. BOARDING HOUSE IMP'S ROOM SAME TIME

A paean to absurdity: Dutch-angled walls, lopsided furniture. The IMP, a four-foot rag doll, sits on the floor playing a toy piano. It is a Sonata.

IMP
(singing with eyes half-closed)
*The girl is losing her sanity,
It's a case of delusional vanity.
Her mom was a turd,
So she wants the last word,
But for us it's a giant calamity.*

A bang is heard on the door.

WHIP (O.S.)
Lights out.

INT. BOARDING HOUSE HALLWAY CONTINUOUS

The WHIP passes a door from which URBAN WARFARE SOUNDS emerge.

INT. BOARDING HOUSE RAGE'S ROOM SAME TIME

Just inside the room from which these sounds emerge, a dangerous looking creature sits on a

crate at the door. He's not quite real; half human, half animated. He's an assembly of madman, Gothic saint, revolutionary, child's demon. Chunks are missing. One might say he's a work-in-progress. He will be referred to as RAGE. He's been sawing the door around lock with a butter knife. Hearing the WHIP pass, he stops. It would appear he's been at it for years because the hole is almost complete.

INT. BOARDING HOUSE DESIREÉ'S ROOM SAME TIME

The SOUNDS OF WARFARE seep into this faux-Roman temple. It's dominated by a bed on a raised dias with offerings of elongated fruits and vegetables on either side. DESIREÉ, a middle-aged woman who resembles OLIVIA, is done up like a Roman courtesan. She lays on the bed, next to her a bottle of scotch and a half empty glass. She's been drinking and looking at herself in a hand-mirror. Half-bagged she touches her eyes and cheeks to see what a face lift would look like. She lays back, closes her eyes and lets the mirror go.

INT. RESUME BOARDING HOUSE HALL

The WHIP, now carrying a tray with Sacher Torte and a double espresso, has arrived at the end of a long hall. He knocks at a door and enters.

INT. BOARDING HOUSE MUSE'S ROOM CONTINUOUS

A dust-covered library crammed with ancient books, scrolls, even inscribed tablets. The MUSE (seen before holding a broken harp) has dozed off in an armchair. A large tome lays open on her lap. On top of that, is a small pile of YELLOW FILE CARDS. He places the tray on a low table in front of her and sits across from her, exhausted.

MUSE
(waking)

I'm asleep.

WHIP

Not the time.

MUSE

Leave me alone.

The WHIP downs one of the espressos and shakes himself awake. He looks at the open book in her lap and sees a few YELLOW FILE CARDS that have writing. He takes them and slumps back in his chair. The MUSE doesn't open her eyes.

WHIP
(reading)

"We are speaking here -- see Alcmaeon, Babo Africanus, Al Rumi and Hui Kaitung -- of Pangeonics, the language of the continents before they divided. Hermes Trismegistus cites it as the

root of all grammars. The only language in which every word contains all others and nothing can be lost.”

WHIP

(Looking up at her)

This is great! Write it in...what?

MUSE

Pangeonics.

WHIP

I have a good feeling about this. Contain everything...

MUSE

Why?

WHIP

Why not?

MUSE

(mumbling)

Because it's dead.

WHIP

(closing his eyes)

Dead's just fine by me.

EXT. STREET LOWER EAST SIDE OF NY MORNING

OLIVIA walks down the street. It's summer.

INT. OLIVIA'S STUDIO MORNING

OLIVIA sits with her hands in her lap, exhausted, at her computer. A few feet behind her, on a blank wall, a door fades up. The MUSE enters through it. She puts her hands on OLIVIA'S shoulders and touches her forehead lovingly on the top of OLIVIA'S head.

MUSE

Start again if you must.

INT. OLIVIA'S CHILDHOOD ROOM THIRTY YEARS AGO NIGHT

Open on a twenty-gallon fish tank. It's filthy. Fancy tropical fish look ill, algae hangs in sheets off the glass. Stuck to the inside of the glass is the open mouth of a grey, grizzly-looking Sucker Fish.

MUSE (V.O.)

...if it's chaos, it's chaos. So was your life.

Pull back to reveal OLIVIA, nine years old, standing at the tank in her white nightgown. MARY, a maid, stands behind her, braiding her long hair.

MARY

Ollie, girl, you better clean that. Clean that soon.

A fancy fish is seen floating.

MARY

Now looka there. At's another one.

MARY fishes it out with a net and exits, mumbling. OLIVIA stands looking at the ugly Sucker Fish, her nose level with his gaping mouth clasped to the glass. Sound of the TOILETTE FLUSHING. MARY reenters.

MARY

Get into bed now. After that stunt, you best be on A-1 behavior.

OLIVIA

Why can't I call?

MARY

Aint no kids make no long distance calls! How'd you even know where to call her at?

OLIVIA

He had it in his desk. I called the operator.

OLIVIA gets into bed. Next to her is a rag doll we've seen before playing a TOY PIANO (AKA the IMP). The room is lavish. On her bedside table is a silver tray and a cup.

MARY

(tucking her in)

Listen to me, your father..first time you was too young to understand. But that was a heart attack. He has a bad heart. You understand? You can't be upsetting him like you do.

OLIVIA

He could die?

MARY

I'm not saying he's gonna die..just be careful is all.

MARY kneels to put the night light on then turns off the ceiling light. A weird low light illumines the room.

OLIVIA

Leave the lights on? I can sleep with the lights on.

MARY

I don't make the rules around here.

OLIVIA

(fearfully)

Then lie down with me? Just for a few minutes?
Ignacia did. Maria did.

MARY

I ain't a nanny. You too old for a nanny.

MARY picks up the tray and turns to leave.

OLIVIA

Could I have it now?

MARY

It's cold now!

OLIVIA

It was too hot before.

MARY

You something else.

MARY heads for the door.

OLIVIA

Will she be here for my party?

MARY

Who?

OLIVIA

Mommy.

MARY

Don't she always come for your party?

OLIVIA nods.

MARY

Nightie, night girl. Sleep tight and don't let the
bedbugs bite.

MARY shuts the door and exits. OLIVIA'S eyes roam the shadowy, underlit room. The WHIP appears, looking quite the same as he did before. He sits down on the bed, takes her hand and

stares at her.

WHIP

I'll stay with you. Go to sleep. And when you wake up, try and be a better child. In fact, try and be another child.

INT. OLIVIA'S STUDIO SAME AFTERNOON RESUME PRESENT DAY

ADULT OLIVIA sits at her computer. The ADULT MUSE sits behind her on one side of the room, the WHIP sits on the other, nodding tensely.

WHIP

Little girl waiting for her mother?

He looks at his watch, then at OLIVIA.

WHIP (CONT'D)

Remind you of anything?

OLIVIA

Oh, my fucking God!

OLIVIA jumps up, grabs her stuff, runs out the front door of her studio.

EXT. LOWER EAST SIDE OF NY BUS STOP SAME AFTERNOON

ADULT OLIVIA arrives at an empty bus stop. Time lapse; people coming home as day turns into evening. OLIVIA makes many calls on her cell phone.

ANSWERING MACHINE (V.O.)

This is the office of Peter Trask, Attorney at law. No one is in the office now. Please leave a message after the beep.

OLIVIA

(On the cell phone)

Peter! It's almost six! Where ARE you? Hello?
Marlene! Call me back somebody! Please! There's no bus! Where's Anna?! Please call me!

Time passes in cross-fades as OLIVIA waits.

INT. OLIVIA & PETER'S HOME KITCHEN/DINING AREA LATER THAT NIGHT

ADULT OLIVIA and her daughter, ANNA, nine years old, sit at the table. PETER paces. On the table is a box of day-camp creations.

PETER

What do you mean you forgot?

OLIVIA

I forgot the TIME. I didn't FORGET, damn it!!! (To ANNA) I'm so sorry, sweetheart.

PETER

Wednesday. Last day of the month. Last day of camp. The early drop off. It didn't penetrate? Or it's not important enough?

OLIVIA

Oh please don't say that! You could've called me back at least! I was having a heart attack!

PETER

I was in court! Then I had to grab a cab to get to Queens to find our child in a dispatchers office. It's getting out of hand, Ollie.

ANNA

I wasn't scared.

PETER pours himself a big scotch.

OLIVIA

You brave, big girl!

ANNA

The driver was nice. We watched TV. He said he liked Sesame street. Is that normal for a grown up?

OLIVIA

And you with all your stuff.

OLIVIA picks a mask out of the box.

OLIVIA

(continuing)

Look at this wonderful thing you made! We'll hang it in your room?

PETER

I guess no one shopped.

OLIVIA

Are you, joking?!

ANNA puts stuff back in the box. PETER looks in the pantry.

ANNA

They were all for you.

PETER (O.S.)

There's spaghetti.

INT. OLIVIA & PETER'S HOME ANNA'S ROOM SAME NIGHT

OLIVIA lays in bed with ANNA.

ANNA

What if he kidnaped me? Would you look for me?

OLIVIA

All over the world.

ANNA

What if you didn't find me? Would you keep looking?

OLIVIA

My God, Anna!

ANNA

Mommy?

OLIVIA

What, sweetie?

ANNA

Are we in an earthquake zone?

OLIVIA

Absolutely not.

ANNA

How do you know?

OLIVIA

I know these things. We're not. They exist, but not here.

INT. OLIVIA & PETER'S ROOM LATER THAT NIGHT

PETER'S in bed. OLIVIA'S still dressed and sitting in a chair.

OLIVIA

I'm sorry, Peter. She was having the fears. Big time. Now it's earthquakes.

PETER

That makes two of us.

OLIVIA
(defensively)

I'm sure this scared the shit out of her. I'm getting a watch I can program to beep or something. You know my thing with time.

PETER

Hours or decades?

OLIVIA

When did I ever do this before? Really?

PETER

I feel you drifting away. More lately.

OLIVIA falls silent. Then,

OLIVIA

I'm so scared, Peter. Panicked really. Like a black hole has opened up in my stomach and every hope just gets sucked in faster and faster. Nothing sticks.

PETER practically rolls his eyes.

OLIVIA
(cont)

You don't wanna know, do you?

PETER

You think I don't?

OLIVIA

And I should keep it to myself?

PETER

No. Maybe. I don't know anymore. I just feel so helpless. When was the last time I said anything that stuck for more than a day?

OLIVIA hangs her head.

PETER (CONT'D)

I feel like I'm nowhere near the center of your life. So yeah, shit, I resent this obsession. Your mother's gone from being the biggest problem in your life to BEING your life.

OLIVIA

So I should quit? She won? The last voice was hers?

OLIVIA looks down, ashamed. He remains silent for a moment.

PETER

Maybe. So what! Let it go. Listen. I just got a call today from Michael. We're invited for a week. I think you need a break.

A look of displeasure washes over OLIVIA'S face that she tries to hide, but PETER sees.

PETER (CONT'D)

Come on. For God sakes. The beach, kids for Anna. I know Enid's not your cup of tea but...she's probably editing something herself and we can drink ourselves into a stupor with Michael.

OLIVIA

What's her latest triumph? Getting the baby into Princeton?

PETER

You know if you finished, you wouldn't feel so jealous.

OLIVIA

If I'm jealous of her I should be horse-whipped.

PETER

What page are you up to?

OLIVIA

Peter! That's such a...wrong question. You write here there..it's not like consecutive.

PETER

You're starting again aren't you?

OLIVIA sits like a stone, hanging her head in her hands.

OLIVIA
(angrily)

OK. We'll go.

PETER

No. We won't.

OLIVIA

We will.

PETER

We will go. Me and Anna. Don't come with us. Stay and finish.

OLIVIA

Peter! I can't finish in ten days!

PETER

No busses to meet, dinners, nothing.

OLIVIA

I feel so manipulated!

PETER

YOU feel manipulated?

PETER picks his book back up. Ashamed, OLIVIA exits to:

INT. OLIVIA & PETER'S BATHROOM

She closes the door, turns on water to cover the sound, bends over it and bursts into tears. The WHIP fades up in the sink mirror.

WHIP

Nothing worse than a piddling talent trying to fill a big hole. Quit. Save your marriage. Your mother's out of your league.