

GAS

written by

Dalia Gulca

"The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win,
you're still a rat." - Lily Tomlin

10.11.22 Revision

1 EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT (PRESENT)

A GAS STATION squats on the side of a busted road. It's in stock-photo suburbia, but bordering on Texas backcountry--the kind of nameless town you'd be told to get out of if you ever wanted to do anything with your life.

2 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Inside the gas station--in a shoddy office full of backstock--an older Indian man, CHEF (stocky, straight-laced, but warm-looking) sits behind a desk, gazing at a PICTURE FRAME on the corner. It's a smiling photo of Chef with an Indian woman--his DAUGHTER--in a cap and gown.

CHEF

You know, you remind me of my daughter.

Across the table, a girl in her 20s (eye bags, tired-looking, otherwise put together) sits, slumped.

NIRVANA

She dropped out?

CHEF

(offended)

No, she is extremely successful.

He turns the picture frame toward her.

CHEF

Why can't you be more like her? When she was your age, she worked all day long next to me, never took a break, everybody loved her. Then she would go home and study, ah?

NIRVANA

I would rather sit here forever...and freeze to death. It's fucking cold in here.

CHEF

And now she's a doctor, very successful. Very very successful. You know, back home...

NIRVANA

In India?

CHEF

In Wisconsin, we used to run the gas station together. Made lots of revenue, very popular for gas. I let her eat snacks. And she would not steal the baby food like some people.

NIRVANA

Wait, you know about that?

CHEF

The baby food is missing, it disappears; do I think a baby is stealing it? No.

WONDERBREAD (20s, gangly, easily flustered, with a put-on air of coolness) walks in with a COMMERCIAL LEASE TERMINATION LETTER.

WONDERBREAD

(reading)

Dear Ms. Torbati, I am writing this letter to inform you that I will not be renewing the lease for the commercial property located on 308 South Creek Drive...

CHEF

Where did you get this?

WONDERBREAD

...Please accept this letter as three weeks' notice of our intention to vacate the property by May 12th.

CHEF

Wonderbread, were you sneaking around my office?

NIRVANA

(interrupting)

Wait, is this what you called me in to tell me? I can't believe you!

WONDERBREAD

You were really gonna ditch us and not even tell us? How long have you been planning to close this place down and leave us to die?

CHEF

I never sent it, you buffoon. That's why you're holding it. Get out, go mop the floors, you are on the clock, you know.

Wonderbread, still indignant at the near-betrayal, opens his mouth to object--but changes his mind and huffs out of the office.

NIRVANA

So you're really ditching us.

CHEF

We will talk about that later. I still need to lecture you about your actions. What happened? You used to be so good, Nirvana. I had high hopes for you. Now you hardly care whether the Cheez-Its are fully stocked, or the cans of Spam are all facing the same direction, or--If you can't work hard here, Nirvana, what will you do when you get a real job?

NIRVANA

Lecture me? I'm not your kid, Chef. This is a real job. Lecture Wonderbread; he's the one who needs it. Plus, it was *his* weed pen.

Chef ponders this. He turns his head to yell out the open door--

CHEF

Wonderbread, get in here!

Wonderbread trudges in, mop and bucket in tow.

WONDERBREAD

I'm *mopping*.

CHEF

Sit down. We need to talk.

WONDERBREAD

About you closing down the gas station? *Without* telling us?

CHEF

That's not what this is about. It's

about you. And your actions.

Wonderbread thinks for a minute, putting two and two together.

WONDERBREAD

Is this about the pen? Look, I know you think it's a distraction or whatever, but taking that away from us--

CHEF

It is not about the weed pen. It's about learning to take responsibility for your negligence. I can't pay the rent if no one is at the counter to sell goods to customers. No one wants to come in here if the glass is dirty and the floor is unswept and the merchandise is disorganized. I need you to do your work.

NIRVANA

No one wants to come in here because it's fucking freezing. Turn the AC up, Chef. No wonder your business is suffering.

WONDERBREAD

Shut up Nirvana, you're probably just anemic.

(frustrated)

Look. If it's about the pen, it's not even just me; it's *her*, too.

NIRVANA

Bitch, don't drag me into this.

CHEF

It is not about the pen! That was a mistake. With or without it, you children don't do your jobs. It was a last-ditch effort.

WONDERBREAD

So you are gonna shut down this place.

Chef stares at Wonderbread with sympathy in his eyes. The resolution in his face softens into unsureness.

CUT TO:

3 INT. GAS STATION - EVENING (PAST) - HOURS AGO

The register of the gas station--the hum of the air conditioner, a radio playing obscure rap, and the puff-puff-sucking of someone pulling on a weed pen. Beneath the counter, Wonderbread is inhaling a FAT RIP, evacuating all the molecules of oxygen from his lungs. As he coughs, we cut to the opposite side of the counter, where a vacant-eyed customer--Pillsbury DOUGHBOY incarnate--stands with a large cup of coffee, a warm premade taco, and a dumb look on his face. With a ridiculous number of HOT PICKLES spread across the counter.

Wonderbread snaps up from beneath the counter, surrounded by a cloud of gas. The high immediately dissolves when he sees the Doughboy.

Wonderbread raises his eyebrows.

DOUGHBOY

What are you looking at?

WONDERBREAD

That's a lot of pickles.

DOUGHBOY

(indignant)

What are you, the pickle police? Y'all have a limit on how many pickles I can buy now? Let's take this outside, come on!

WONDERBREAD

Calm down, I was just making an observation. Don't get so defensive. Hey real quick, what do you think of this song?

DOUGHBOY

The song that's playing?

WONDERBREAD

Yeah.

DOUGHBOY

I dunno, it's a song. It's alright.

WONDERBREAD

I made it.

DOUGHBOY
It sounds like bad rap.

WONDERBREAD
Man, y'all don't know anything.

Wonderbread hastily scans the pickles and the Doughboy leaves.

WONDERBREAD
Ridiculous. Addict.

As soon as the customer is out in the parking lot, Wonderbread fake drops some coins and ducks under the counter, taking a rip from his pen.

4 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - EVENING (PAST)

Chef is shifting around a stack of overdue bills on his desk with the tip of a pen. He's on the phone with his daughter, ANU.

ANU (O.S.)
You're closing it down, right? LUKE is turning two next month. I want you to meet him, finally.

CHEF
I have met him. FaceTime!

ANU (O.S.)
That's not what I meant.

CHEF
I can come visit! I can take a couple of weeks off, the station will be fine.

ANU (O.S.)
That's not what I mean, Papa. Also, no you can't. You'd stress out and who are you gonna leave in charge? Thing 1 or Thing 2? And your business is failing anyway. I know you don't want to admit it, but it's true.

CHEF
(in Hindi)
Anu, you know I want to be closer to you. You know that.

Chef eyes the COMMERCIAL LEASE TERMINATION LETTER on his desk.

CHEF
(in Hindi)
But you know I can't leave them like this.

ANU (O.S.)
Papa, you know all they do is cause you trouble. They're adults, you don't have to look after them.

CHEF
(in Hindi)
Anu, I can't leave them. They're helpless.

ANU
I know you don't want to hear this, but Papa, you're old. You should be retired by now. Isn't that why you moved in the first place? To retire somewhere warm, quiet? And yet you still work. Too hard. I'm done with medical school now, Papa. I moved back. Why don't you move back too?

Chef stares through the open door at his belligerent employee-children. Wonderbread is staring blankly into space, and Nirvana is gutting a can of Gerber Puffs and filling her pockets with the baby snacks.

ANU (O.S.)
Do they still share that weed pen?

A beat as Chef swallows his remorse.

ANU (O.S.)
They promised you they wouldn't when you hired them. It's not that they're helpless, but you can't help them if you don't show them some tough love. They don't even know you know. You're too easy on them.

5 INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT (PAST)

Nirvana is chewing on Gerber Puffs and scrolling through the Gmail app on her phone. We see a string of emails--rejections from jobs, colleges, banks, clinical trials, plasma donation

sites--basically anything you could possibly get rejected from--and one acceptance letter from a community college, somewhere in the middle.

NIRVANA

(mumbling)

We regret to inform you...too
dumb...not enough credit...BMI too
low?...The fuck...

Nirvana shoves her phone in her pocket. She peers over the counter.

NIRVANA

You ever feel like you're surrounded
by closed doors?

WONDERBREAD

The fuck.

NIRVANA

Like, metaphorically or whatever.

WONDERBREAD

Sometimes I feel like I'm surrounded
by *idiots*...but that's 'cause I'm an
idiot, and like attracts like.

NIRVANA

Right...wait, are you calling me an
idiot?

WONDERBREAD

Well nah, but you know how the people
you surround yourself with become like
an echo chamber of the same opinions
spinning around? Like you can't ever
see a new perspective because you
don't have a way to talk to people
like that? Who didn't grow up the way
you did or in the place you did?

NIRVANA

What are you on about?

WONDERBREAD

Like you know how people say you're
the average of the five people you
surround yourself with?

NIRVANA

I've never heard that.

WONDERBREAD

Ok, well, it's actually more than that. It's everybody you surround yourself with. It's friends of friends. Friends of friends of friends. Your mom's cousin's, like, masseuse. You know they did a study and figured out that if a friend of your friend of a friend becomes obese, you have a greater chance of gaining weight? It radiates outward. You're literally entrenched in your position and relationships in life.

NIRVANA

Do you think I have Alzheimer's?

WONDERBREAD

Huh?

NIRVANA

'Cause I don't remember asking.

WONDERBREAD

Shut the fuck up.

NIRVANA

Heh heh heh. Ok, I'm sorry, go on.

WONDERBREAD

Just like, externalities that are out of your control affecting your internal perception of yourself and limiting your potential.

NIRVANA

(trying to navigate whatever the fuck Wonderbread just said)
...Right.

WONDERBREAD

Like, you know, working in this gas station feels like an endless array of Sisyphean tasks. Like every day it's the same thing, mopping, checking people out, restocking. And we never gain any skill from it and we never progress in any way, and all the while

time is passing and we are getting
nothing in return except older.

(momentarily distracted)

Heh heh look. That bird outside has a
nugget.

Nirvana looks outside.

NIRVANA

Heh heh heh.

(serious again)

Isn't it fucked how Chef makes us do
drug tests? Isn't it like classist or
something? Is anyone drug testing Elon
Musk? No.

WONDERBREAD

It was hard enough to get this job
after getting unceremoniously
terminated from my last one. At least
Chef is nice and kinda cares about us.
But honestly, I don't think I could
get a better job. In this fucking
town, who's gonna hire me? What's
there even to do?

NIRVANA

It's like, we're on spin cycle.

WONDERBREAD

Spin cycle, yeah. Like we're dirty
laundry.

NIRVANA

Or like, rats running on wheels.

WONDERBREAD

We're stuck on a loop. It's like we're
cars doing donuts in parking lots and
we're not even getting anywhere and
it's not even fun, we're just wasting
gas.

NIRVANA

Wonderbread.

WONDERBREAD

Yeah?

NIRVANA

How'd you learn all that?

WONDERBREAD
(serenely)
YouTube videos.

NIRVANA
Have you ever considered...college?

WONDERBREAD
No. I hate institutions.

Nirvana reaches for the weed pen in Wonderbread's hand. He holds it out of reach.

Nirvana grabs it and blows a fat cloud into the air.

Chef walks in.

Nirvana waves her hand in the vapor cloud she just made to dispel it and chucks the pen at Wonderbread. He scrambles across the floor to get it and slides it under one of the display shelves.

CHEF
Nirvana, did you mop the floors? Clean the glass? Wonderbread, get up, you know how much bacteria is on the floor?

NIRVANA
Uh, none, I mopped it.

CHEF
Good job Nirvana, one gold star for you. At this rate you might make it to heaven. Or purgatory, I don't know. Anyway, we need to restock. Please go to the office and start on that.

Wonderbread and Nirvana glance at each other--then at the display shelf with their pen under it--then make their way back to the office.

CUT TO:

6 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

NIRVANA
Wait, so you took our pen because your fucking daughter told you to? Wasn't that a bad choice, Chef?

WONDERBREAD

Yeah, I feel like it caused us to do our work less.

CHEF

It was already negatively impairing your ability to do good work, and I wouldn't have taken it if you weren't *addicted* to it.

NIRVANA

Wonderbread's the addict! Don't you know how he got fired from his last job?

CHEF

(bluntly)

I know.

WONDERBREAD

Shut up. At least I wasn't selling morning glory seeds--

CUT TO:

7 EXT. NIRVANA FLOWERS - DAY

Through the open doors of a family-owned flower shop, we see Nirvana at the counter, counting out packets of morning glory seeds. There's a TEENAGER on the other side of the counter.

NIRVANA

(turns face to camera)

Shut up, bitch.

TEENAGER

(to NIRVANA)

So like, these are like acid, right?

NIRVANA

Yeah, they'll get you high. You might also throw up. Be careful.

TEENAGER

Sick!!

NIRVANA

(back to camera)

Yeah, at least what I did wasn't stupid. I was making money. Plus, I didn't get fired. I quit.

BACK TO:

8 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

WONDERBREAD

You were literally selling drugs to children and all you got was a slap on the wrist and I get fired?

NIRVANA

Yeah, like I said, what I did wasn't dumb stupid.

WONDERBREAD

Shut up. It wasn't that bad.

CUT TO:

9 INT. BREAD FACTORY - DAY

Wonderbread nervously stands in a hallway, twiddling his thumbs.

An ATTENDANT writes his real name--GILBERT PAN--on a URINE CUP in marker and hands it to him.

10 INT. BREAD FACTORY BATHROOM STALL - DAY

Wonderbread is in the bathroom, looking cool and collected, trying to open a bag of artificial urine that he has stashed in his pants. An empty urine cup waits on the ledge. It's harder to open than he thought--then he panics. He fumbles the bag and it spills all over the tile.

WONDERBREAD

(whispering)

Fuck.

The spilled pee begins to make its way to the crack underneath the door...

WONDERBREAD

(whispering)

Oh shit, no no no no no...

Wonderbread tries vainly to wipe up the piss, using paper towels and then cupping his hands and vainly trying to shove the liquid away from the door.

WONDERBREAD
(whispering)
Fuck, no no no.

The piss begins to leak underneath the bathroom door.
Wonderbread shoves open the door.

WONDERBREAD
It's not real piss!

The Urine Cup Attendant stares at him blankly.

BACK TO:

11 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

CHEF
I don't know why losing a single item
would affect your ability to do your
work so much. That just proves that
it's a crutch. And it's holding both
of you back.

NIRVANA
So it *is* about the pen.

WONDERBREAD
Oh, back from what? The illusion of
upward mobility? Back from knowing and
accepting the fact that in the South,
barely any poor kids make it out of
poverty? Back from your fucking
American Dream?

NIRVANA
Chill out, Bread, you're spitting on
my face.

CHEF
My American Dream is for you children
to love what you do! To get out of
here!

Wonderbread storms out of the office.

CUT TO:

12 INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT (PAST)

As Nirvana and Wonderbread restock shelves, Chef returns to
his office.

As soon as Chef is out of sight, Nirvana immediately goes to the display shelf where the pen is supposed to be and reaches underneath.

NIRVANA
Where's the pen?

WONDERBREAD
Should be there.

NIRVANA
It's not.

WONDERBREAD
What?

NIRVANA
It's gone. Are you sure you put it here?

NIRVANA
Can you check the security cams?

WONDERBREAD
The security cams? What?

NIRVANA
Hey, somebody's coming in...you go.

A CUSTOMER strolls in. It's the Urine Cup Attendant.

WONDERBREAD
Oh shit.

NIRVANA
Go to the register!

WONDERBREAD
(attempting nonchalance)
...You go to the register.

NIRVANA
What? You go!

Wonderbread meanders to the register, trying to look inconspicuous.

URINE CUP ATTENDANT
Hey yeah, so can you scan these...OH
HEY I remember you! The piss guy!

WONDERBREAD

How do you remember me?

URINE CUP ATTENDANT

Hard to forget when someone screws up that badly. Hey, you're doing alright though, right?

Wonderbread stares apathetically at the Urine Cup Attendant. Nirvana walks up.

NIRVANA

Can you do us a favor? Distract our boss for a sec.

URINE CUP ATTENDANT

Excuse me?

NIRVANA

CHEF! This coupon isn't working!

13 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PAST)

Chef is in his office, watching a video of his grandson on his phone.

14 INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT (PAST)

Nirvana snatches a coupon from the Urine Cup Attendant and tears it in half.

Chef walks in from the office.

CHEF

That's because that's half a coupon.

NIRVANA

Oh yeah, you're right.

CHEF

...Is there the other half somewhere?...

Nirvana eyes the Urine Cup Attendant in a desperate attempt to get her to comply.

URINE CUP ATTENDANT

Uhh, yeah...it might be in my purse, hold on a sec.

The Urine Cup Attendant rifles through her bag.

CHEF

Let me see if I can look it up in our
systems...

15 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PAST)

Wonderbread barges into the office and clears the desk to work at the computer. He can't figure out the password. Looking through the sticky notes and papers on the desk, he finds the TERMINATION LEASE LETTER.

WONDERBREAD

(under his breath)

What the fuck.

Wonderbread folds up the letter and sticks it into his pocket.

Nirvana sticks her head in the door.

NIRVANA

Did you find anything?

WONDERBREAD

No, I have something to show you
though.

NIRVANA

What? What about the pen?

Something outside the window catches their attention. The unmistakable puff-suck of someone pulling on a weed pen, and a plume of VAPOR SMOKE. They see a customer vaping from something that looks suspiciously similar to their missing weed pen.

NIRVANA

That bitch!

WONDERBREAD

(unsure)

Do you think that's it?

Nirvana storms out the door, Wonderbread tailing behind.

16 EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT (PAST)

A CUSTOMER struggles at a gas pump in the foreground. As he steps to the side, they see, clutched in his hand, a WEED PEN.

Wonderbread and Nirvana saunter up to him like two gutter punks.

NIRVANA

Hey! Where did you get that pen?

The Customer jumps a little bit, caught off-guard.

CUSTOMER

Uhh, inside.

NIRVANA

What? You bitch, that's ours!

CUSTOMER

Inside. My car. Fuck off. You twig.

WONDERBREAD

I'm sure there's been some misunderstanding...

NIRVANA

Let me see it! Give it to me!

CUSTOMER

Fine, take it.

Nirvana takes it from him and turns it over in her hand.

NIRVANA

Actually you're right, this is yours.

The Customer snatches his weed pen back and goes back to the pump, which he proceeds to kick.

WONDERBREAD

Where's our weed pen then?

NIRVANA

You're the one who had it last.

WONDERBREAD

What? No you did!

NIRVANA

How was it me? I threw it at you!

WONDERBREAD

YOU!

Chef walks out of the gas station into the middle of their

screaming match.

17 INT. GAS STATION OFFICE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

NIRVANA

CHEF, are you really gonna do it?

CHEF

Do what?

NIRVANA

Sell the gas station?

Chef looks around, chews the inside of his lip.

CHEF

My grandson is only getting older. And it's not doing too well, financially. And you need a real job, that you like.

NIRVANA

What if this is all I wanna do, for the rest of my life?

CHEF

It's not.

NIRVANA

I know it's not. Why can't I just live my ratty life, and do this every day? Why torture myself to get a degree to work forty hours a week for a job I don't even like?

CHEF

Well how about you find something you like to do?

Nirvana shrugs her shoulders. Chef sighs.

18 EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT (PAST)

CHEF

Why is no one at the register? I'm telling you, if you both are not at the register, how are we supposed to make sales and stay in business? It's like you WANT this place to fail.

Nirvana and Wonderbread go quiet, trading eyeballs, wondering

who's going to spill the truth. Nirvana stares daggers at Wonderbread.

WONDERBREAD

It's...umm...so...

CHEF

Yes. Mhm. Go on.

WONDERBREAD

It's ok, I'm fine.

CHEF

You were yelling at each other. I want to know what has you flustered.

WONDERBREAD

So Nirvana and I have something we share...And we lost it.

NIRVANA

Nothing, don't worry about it.

CHEF

I can help you look. What is it?

WONDERBREAD

Hmm...that's not important, but we lost it and we can't find it.

NIRVANA

Yeah, it's nothing, CHEF.

CHEF

How do I help you look if I don't know what I'm looking for?

WONDERBREAD

I mean...so...

CHEF

Show me a picture, describe it...

WONDERBREAD

It's...um...so...

NIRVANA

Bread--don't--don't...

CHEF

WHAT IS IT WONDERBREAD?! I CANNOT HELP YOU IF YOU DO NOT TELL ME WHAT IT IS!

The simmering anxiety in Wonderbread comes to a rolling boil. His mannerisms get frantic and his eyes dart around.

CHEF

WONDERBREAD!

Wonderbread dramatically collapses on the ground.

WONDERBREAD

Ok, it's a weed pen!

NIRVANA

(exasperated)

Dude! You can't tell one lie?

WONDERBREAD

He broke me.

Wonderbread is on the ground, crying.

CHEF

It's ok. I'm not mad.

WONDERBREAD

You're not?

CHEF

I am a little hurt. Honestly I wish you children would stop relying on a crutch; I wanted to give you a second chance. You all need to do something with your lives, why do you work at this gas station? You all need to spread your wings, leave the nest, fly like little birdies...

As Chef gestures, making bird movements, a PEN falls out of his pocket. They all stare at each other, trading more eyeballs. Wonderbread grabs the pen off the ground.

WONDERBREAD

You took it, you knew!

Wonderbread takes a long drag from the pen, then pauses.

WONDERBREAD

Why do I feel so...CALM?!?

Wonderbread takes a closer look at the pen.

CHEF

I didn't take it, that's my CBD pen; I would never take your pen. It's from my daughter. So I can handle you children.

NIRVANA

So you're allowed to have a CBD pen
but we're not allowed to have a little
weed pen?

CHEF

Like I was saying, you need to do
important things with your lives--you
can't just be here forever, you all
need to leave the nest, go. Don't you
kids have dreams?

WONDERBREAD

Chef, c'mon!

CHEF

I'm serious, what are you all doing
here? You have so much potential! All
you need is to apply yourselves! Take
care of yourselves! Think about the
consequences of your actions!

Another PEN falls out of Chef's other pocket. They all go
quiet and look at each other, including the customer at the
pump.

WONDERBREAD

Is that the...?

They all trade eyebrows.

Wonderbread grabs the pen and takes a fat rip. Nirvana stares
at him.

WONDERBREAD

IT IS.

CHEF

Ok, so I did take it. I'm sorry. But
that doesn't mean that everything I
said isn't true.

WONDERBREAD

This is bullshit. Why do you hide
things from us Chef? And this isn't
even the worst thing! Because you're
gonna--

CHEF

(interrupting)

Ah ah ah--You are still on the clock,

get back inside. I'm pretty sure there's a customer waiting at the counter. And I need to have a discussion with you. Both of you. Nirvana, in my office.

Chef is still miffed at this point. Everybody grumbles as they walk back into the gas station.

CUT TO:

19 INT. GAS STATION - PRESENT

NIRVANA

You can sell it, actually. I think we'll be ok. But before you leave, can I ask for a letter of recommendation? I actually re-applied to college.

CHEF

(subtly shocked)
Good for you.

NIRVANA

I swear Chef, you need to turn the AC up, we're not in fucking Wisconsin. It's freezing in here...

Chef gasps--Nirvana is putting on a Harvard-zip up.

CHEF

You're going to Harvard? I'm so proud of you, you're going to do such great things, I knew you had it in you--

NIRVANA

What? No. I'm going to West Creek.

CHEF

The--the community college?

NIRVANA

...Yeah. I mean I don't really care where I go. I just wanna be out of here, like you said.

CHEF

Good. Good. I'm proud. Uh...do you really need a letter of recommendation?

NIRVANA

Yeah, they ask for one, Chef.

CHEF

What about Wonderbread? What's *he*
doing?

Nirvana shrugs.

CHEF

(yelling at the open door)
WONDERBREAD! GET IN HERE!

FADE OUT