

## CONDITIONING

Written by  
J.E. Clarke

FADE IN ON:

**EXT. URBAN SIDEWALK - NIGHT**

Trees sway in a gentle breeze. The beauty's almost surreal: nights don't get more romantic than this.

Feet tap on pavement, in perfect sync.

CRAIG STILLSON (31, wholesome/handsome) strolls along with SAMANTHA (26). Her pearl necklace screams "innocent."

The two hold hands. They're in love - big time.

SAMANTHA

I don't want this night to end.

CRAIG

It's only 10. It's just begun!

Ahead, neon light blinks. Pounding music streams from bar doors.

SAMANTHA

Hey - why don't we duck in for a drink?

CRAIG

And share you with the world? Nah.  
I'd rather we spend time alone.

One quick hug, then he steers her into...

**EXT. URBAN ALLEY/GARDEN - CONTINUOUS**

A rustic bench provides a front-row seat to a flower garden "guarded" by an ANGEL STATUE. A dim, flickering lamp illuminates this hideaway from the world.

SAMANTHA

Wow! This place is -

CRAIG

Awesome? Yeah, I know.

SAMANTHA

How'd you find this?

CRAIG

When I was a kid, my best friend lived on the fifth floor. He called it: "the garden of nowhere else".

CRAIG (CONT'D)  
The folks who own the building  
don't advertise it's here. They  
like their privacy. Who doesn't?

Craig sits on the bench, joined by Sam. The two gaze at the garden: a quiet moment of peace.

CRAIG  
Far better than yelling over loud  
music, isn't it?

SAMANTHA  
(coy)  
Did you bring me here to seduce me?  
'Cause you did that, long ago.

CRAIG  
Nah. I brought you here to... talk.

Smiling, Sam nestles under Craig's arm.

CRAIG  
About the future. Ours.

He reaches for *something* in his pocket. Samantha bolts upright, eyes wide.

SAMANTHA  
You're kidding! Now? Oh, Craig -

Craig caresses Sam's cheek with his free hand. Cups her chin.

CRAIG  
The moment's perfect. You are, too.  
The timing couldn't be better.

Sam leans in for a kiss.

So close she doesn't see the flash of Craig's knife. He shifts his hand to muffle her mouth...

#### **MOMENTS LATER**

Shadows testify what happens next. Blood spatters white flowers. Runs down the angel statue's stone cheeks.

Soon, Sam's screams stop. The wet tear of flesh continues.

The TAP TAP TAP of footsteps intrudes. Craig's "secret garden" has a visitor.

LESLIE TRAVIS (30s). Lab coat. No nonsense heels. Long blonde hair cinched in a bun.

Face as stoic as the statue, she looks down at Sam.

Gasping like a gutted fish, Samantha's *almost* dead. But not quite.

Even more grotesque, Craig's still "at work".

Not acknowledging Leslie, Craig drags his knife seductively down Sam's face, pries out an eye.

LESLIE  
Still not satisfied?

CRAIG  
(grunts)  
Don't interrupt. Almost done.

Leslie squats down to his level.

LESLIE  
Craig, tell me how you feel.

CRAIG  
Now? Do I have to?

LESLIE  
I need truth. Communication's key.

Craig gapes at his handiwork. Then back at Leslie's emotionless face.

CRAIG  
I feel free? Like I've finally  
crossed that line. There's no way  
to go back, after this.

Craig wipes blood from his lip, unsure.

CRAIG  
I'm in trouble now, aren't I?

LESLIE  
I won't judge you. No-one will.

CRAIG  
If this is what I am, you should!

Leslie lifts her chin, exposing her pale throat.

LESLIE  
Are you? Would you do *that* - to me?

CRAIG  
Hell no! I'm no monster.

He glances down at Sam's perforated body.

CRAIG  
I mean, I wasn't... before.

LESLIE  
You wouldn't hurt me, because I'm  
nothing like her. You know Samantha  
means nothing.

Leslie gently takes Craig's knife. She touches Sam's face,  
near the gouged socket.

Her fingers phase through skin like it's not there.

LESLIE  
Because I'm real. She's not.

Leslie reaches for the statue, toggles an unseen button.

Her body flickers, distorts. Craig jumps up, alarmed.

CRAIG  
I need you. Wait!

Too late. Leslie's gone.

The garden, statue and bench dissolve like Alice in  
Wonderland's Jabberwocky on an acid trip.

Leaving Craig standing in a blank void. Until...

#### **INT. LESLIE'S OFFICE - AFTERNOON**

Lush. Expensive. The garden hideaway's vanished like a bad  
dream. Steady female hands reach for Craig's face.

On his feet, he looks about to bolt. Though the VIRTUAL  
REALITY VISOR hides the terror in Craig's eyes.

Leslie removes the visor gently. And smiles at her patient.

LESLIE  
That muscle relaxant wore off as  
fast as it took effect. You're  
stronger than I thought.

Disoriented, Craig stares.

LESLIE

Phase one of the session's over.  
Consider this your new garden of  
"nowhere else". Relax, Craig. Time  
to *really* talk.

**MOMENTS LATER**

Craig's nervous fingers pick at his chair's arms. Relaxing's  
as far away as that garden now.

Fearless, Leslie sits close enough to touch - takes notes.

LESLIE

How are the urges now?

Craig self-reflects.

CRAIG

They're... gone?

Leslie smiles, checks a box on her pad.

CRAIG

It's been years, and *this* is my  
magic bullet? Drinking didn't help.  
Meditation did jack-shit, too.

LESLIE

Everyone finds their own way to  
cope. Does it feel like they're  
"forever" gone?

CRAIG

(mutters)  
Define "forever."

LESLIE

Imagine your fantasies are tumors.  
Are they surgically excised? Or  
more like an itch you've scratched  
once?

CRAIG

Way better than an itch. This is  
like a five course meal! It's like  
stuffing yourself at Thanksgiving.  
Once you're done, the sight of food  
makes you ill.

His face falls. Remembering...

CRAIG

What I did makes me sick, too.

LESLIE

It's just virtual reality. There's no Sam. Just a bank of zeros and ones - harmless images. No-one got hurt. And in here, confidentiality rules. Outside company files, no-one need ever know.

She reaches out; touches Craig's knee. He jumps.

CRAIG

How come *none* of this wigs you out?

LESLIE

If I didn't have a strong stomach, I'd be in a far different line of work. What matters is I understand what you're going through, Craig. Deep down...

CRAIG

Deep down, I'm evil!

LESLIE

No. If you were, you wouldn't have sought VR conditioning. Bad people act out in real life. Good people seek help.

A gentle chime rings. Craig sags.

CRAIG

Yeah, I know. Time's up.

LESLIE

(chuckles)

A session can only last so long. But let's give your "Thanksgiving" metaphor one last whirl. Imagine VR sessions as a dish. Each is satisfying, but none comprises the full meal. The conditioning process requires multiple "courses" be served, to fully establish in your subconscious what's real and what's not. Once you're satiated, I guarantee the hunger - and urges - will fade. Like the insignificant fleeting thoughts they always were.

Leslie takes Craig's hand and leads him towards the door. On the other side:

RECEPTIONIST AMY (50s): Matronly, prim and short. A pearl necklace and earrings accent her gray hair.

AMY  
Counselor Travis, your 4 o'clock's arrived.

One look at Amy's pearl necklace, and Craig flinches: the memories of "Sam" are too raw. He turns to Leslie instead.

CRAIG  
What if I... get "hungry" before next week?

Leslie smiles, hands Craig a pass-card.

LESLIE  
As my client, you have 24/7 access to the simulator. After today's progress, I rather doubt you'll need it soon. But scratch that itch whenever you like.

Craig grabs the card. Avoiding Amy's gaze, he scuttles off. Leslie yells after him.

LESLIE  
And if you need me... call!

Amy watches Craig leave. Revulsion floods her stern face.

AMY  
I saw the playback. Even among your patients, that one's looney tunes.

Anger flares in Leslie's eyes. For a moment, her professional calm dissolves.

LESLIE  
Amy! Mr. Stillson is harmless.

AMY  
You can't be sure. What he did to that poor girl-

LESLIE  
Yes, I'm sure. And a VR simulation is no girl.

AMY  
I bet she reminds him of someone. He'll act out his disgusting fantasies on her next! I don't know how you stand it all.



AMY (CONT'D)

Sex perverts and murderers. If you ask me, we should lock them up. Monsters like that can't be cured!

LESLIE

That's why I'm the therapist and you're not. Next time, I'm locking you out of monitor mode. Everyone has dark thoughts now and then. It's no-one's place to judge.

Fingering her necklace, Amy shakes her head. Scowls.

**INT. LESLIE'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

Texts on abnormal psychology fill a massive bookcase. A digital clock pulses in dim light: 11PM.

Classical music plays. Dressed in a kimono, Leslie relaxes on the couch with a book: Stress Relief Techniques.

Shifting into a cross-legged pose, she closes her eyes, hums.

LESLIE

Oooooomm. The world is what you make it. Release tension into the void.

Her moment of serenity's shot to hell by a RINGING CELL. Leslie snarls, grabs the phone.

LESLIE

What?!?

On the other line, Amy's voice warbles. Not from disapproval this time, but... fear.

AMY (O.S.)

Ms. Travis, it's -

LESLIE

After hours. I'm well aware.

AMY

I don't mean to interrupt.

LESLIE

Yet you do. If this is about a client, tell them to use the after hours hotline. Counsellors need their down-time, too!

AMY

It's not just any client. Mr.  
Stillson -

LESLIE

(beat)

After our breakthrough, I expected  
his refractory period would last  
longer. But he still has the right  
to use the simulator any time he  
wants!

AMY

It's not the simulator. Stillson  
broke into the office and stole  
files!

LESLIE

Damn it! I assured him everything  
was confidential.

AMY

No. Not his files - yours!

LESLIE

Why would he do that?

Leslie stares at the phone. Amy's voice stumbles on.

AMY

Who knows how that psycho thinks?

LESLIE

I'm supposed to?

AMY

He has your address. Get out now!

A metallic FLASH behind Leslie and the couch. Followed by a  
dark, brooding form...

The wet sound of something sliding into flesh.

Leslie stiffens. Her hand relaxes, limp. The cell drops to  
the floor.

Amy's concerned voice warbles from the speaker.

AMY

Hello, Ms. Travis? Are you there?

The dark form rounds the couch. Putting a bag down, he  
disconnects Amy's call. CLICK.

Seen in this "romantic" light... it's Craig.

He waves a hand in Leslie's face. Eyes glazed, she croaks.

LESLIE

Craig. What have you done?

Craig grins, and holds up a NEEDLE.

CRAIG

You weren't kidding. This muscle relaxant I "borrowed" from your office works super quick.

Except for ragged breaths, Leslie's paralyzed. Craig circles the couch like a predator. Evaluates her, her head to toe.

CRAIG

You look so different, dressed in that. Innocent. Kinda like Sam.

LESLIE

We discussed that, Craig. I'm real. She's not.

CRAIG

(grins)

I know. And that's why I'm no monster. That is, until now.

He reaches to unzip the bag.

LESLIE

Stop!

Craig's eyes slide to Leslie's panicked face.

CRAIG

You think there's a knife in here? That I'm gonna carve you up? I'd have to be crazy to kill the only person who doesn't judge me.

LESLIE

What?!?

Craig laughs. Digging into the bag, he pulls out...

The VR headset.

CRAIG

What do they think I took? "Files"?

He extends the goggles toward's Leslie's face. She dodges. Her head can move, though not much else.

CRAIG  
Come now, Dr. Travis. A session only lasts so long. But there's no time to waste. If you don't call the office soon, cops will come.

He jams the VR headset on Leslie, flicks it on. There's no way to shake it loose. The goggles glow as she squirms.

**INT. URBAN ALLEY/GARDEN**

BLINK. The garden's "regrown." Digital Craig stands reverently before it, at Leslie's side.

"Sam's" back, too. Propped against the statue, she gasps for breath, arms extended. A crucifix gone monstrously wrong.

Craig grins at Leslie.

CRAIG  
Isn't she beautiful?

LESLIE  
Craig, stop this now!

CRAIG  
You said I could use the simulation any time I wanted to.

Leslie runs to the statue, gropes for that invisible "termination" switch. It's gone.

CRAIG  
I've got the controls now. You don't.

One shove, and he topples her onto Samantha. Leslie shudders, stares into the digital girl's remaining eye, transfixed.

She rolls around to face Craig, righteous anger unleashed.

LESLIE  
What the hell are you trying to accomplish?

CRAIG  
I saw the real you in our simulation. Ironic, isn't it? How fake worlds reveal truths?

LESLIE

Craig, you're projecting.

CRAIG

Nah. I'm awake enough to see our common bond. Back there, you touched Sam's face like... well, it kinda turned you on.

(beat)

Then tonight, I read your employee file. Based on your notes, I was right. You groove on "patients" like me, don't you, Doctor? So I'm giving you what you want, "deep down". After years of struggling with my demons, you set me free. I owe the same to you, in return. You said you've got a strong stomach. And a partner to share my new found freedom with would be nice.

Craig hands Leslie a virtual KNIFE. Leslie gawks.

LESLIE

You want me to stab her?

CRAIG

No judgement. Go on - explore.

LESLIE

If you do, will you let me go?

CRAIG

After our session's over? Sure.

Leslie gulps, closes her eyes. She stabs "Sam" with the knife. The simulation convulses under her fist.

Craig whispers in Leslie's ear.

CRAIG

Leslie, tell me how you feel.

LESLIE

Do I have to?

CRAIG

Communication's key. I need the truth.

LESLIE

I feel... this has to end. Now!

CRAIG

Only if you commit to therapy.  
Trust me, it's great stress relief.  
She's just a bank of zeros and  
ones. Give it everything ya got.

In frustration, Leslie stabs again. Once. Twice. After a few thrusts, she just can't stop.

Watching, Craig smiles... then fades into a digital void.

CRAIG (O.S.)

Welcome to my garden of nowhere  
else, Doc.

Leslie screams in horror. Blood lust in her eyes.

#### **INT. LESLIE'S HOUSE**

Craig packs the VR headset in his bag. Leslie curls on the couch, speaks calmly into her cell:

LESLIE

Amy? Yes, everything's fine. Mr.  
Stillson was just shaken from  
today's session. Break-ins are,  
well, unconventional, but no-one  
was harmed. We just talked. So  
please, we're not pursuing charges.  
I'll bring back the goggles  
tomorrow. And clear my calendar?  
I...we'll need time to clear things  
up.

She hangs up, turns to Craig. The two lock eyes.

CRAIG

Thanks for understanding, partner.  
See you tomorrow?

The two hold hands, like they're in love.

LESLIE

That's a session I wouldn't miss  
for the world.

FINAL FADE OUT: