

Defragged
by
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FADE IN ON:

INT. OFFICE - DAY

A SCREEN flickers, slick advertisement rolls. Punctuated by four images:

- Brunching FRIENDS chatter in French; switch to Latin mid-stream.
- A TEEN GIRL plays chess against a computer. Wins with one brilliant move.
- A TEEN BOY plays tennis. Every swing's spot-on!
- A WOMAN sits at a piano. Uncertain - *until* she lays fingers on the keys. One tentative note. Another follows. Then the flood gates open. Flawless Chopin plays.

The pictures freeze, shrink. Then retreat to the corners of the screen.

In the center, a logo and motto flashes on the black background: "Speed Skills, Inc. Why wait a lifetime? Master life now!"

A male hand reaches for the image, which BUZZES.

The owner of that hand - STEPHEN (30s) - retracts his arm. His flannel shirt and cheap haircut scream "introvert."

Stephen sits back, awkward. Smiles across the desk at -

CIELY (30s) - though cute in her business suit, the soul in her eyes and pixie cut hint she's not the rock-all-night kind.

CIELY

If you'd like, we'll rewind.

STEPHEN

No need to. Really, I get the point. It's just that last clip hit home.

Ciely pushes a BINDER across the desk, flips it open.

CIELY

And that's just the icing on the mental cake! Here's a full list of skills you can imprint. They're divided into categories: language, sports, hobbies, college degrees...

Stephen leans in, almost bumps heads with Ciely. Recoils.

STEPHEN

Oh, I'm so, so sorry!

CIELY

You missed me. So don't be sorry. Or shy - look!

More careful this time, Stephen squints.

STEPHEN

Wow. Doctor. Lawyer. Engineer. I can earn - I mean get - a whole college education in one sitting?

CIELY

Well, those are luxury packages. It takes a few extra hours. And they're not cheap.

Stephen hesitates. Ciely slides paperwork his way.

CEILY

But if it's something you *really* have a craving for, Speed Skills has a great financing package. Low interest across the board.

Stephen chuckles. Ciely blinks.

CIELY

Excuse me? Affordable's not funny - for many it's a godsend!

STEPHEN

No. "Low interest". That's me in a nutshell. My bank account's not big enough to splurge. And with my "introverted" habits, the profession I've already got suits me fine.

Ciely perks up, genuinely curious.

CIELY

So what do you do for a living...

(reads)

Stephen?

STEPHEN

I'm a librarian. Not sexy or high powered, I know.

He steels for Ciely's bored look. Seems surprised it doesn't come.

CIELY

Are you kidding? I'm jealous! Quiet time, with no people bugging you with questions. Surrounded by books, reading all you want?

STEPHEN

Well, I can't lie. Having a world of information at my fingertips is quite the career perk. Science. History.

CIELY

And Art!

STEPHEN

Every field known to humanity, yes. But I have to help folks with questions, too.

CIELY

(grins)

That makes two of us. And here's my burning question for you...

She rests her chin on steepled fingers.

CIELY

What field would YOU like to become an expert in?

Stephen glances at the screen, wistful. His eyes gravitate toward one freeze frame.

STEPHEN

I... I've been going through some life changes recently. So I need something profound to fill the void. And, I'd really love to learn piano. That's been a dream since I was a kid. That's an affordable option, no?

CIELY

Absolutely! Now, is there a specific type of music you'd like to focus on?

STEPHEN

Uh, Classical? That's for my parents' sake. They'd love to hear me play. And - if it's possible - throw in some Rock, too?

CIELY

What style specifically? Our catalog has sixties, heavy metal, grunge...

STEPHEN
70s and 80s, if you don't mind.

CIELY
I love it. Those Golden Oldies are the bomb!

Ciely grabs the binder and a CALCULATOR. Stephen watches her flip to a page, and type.

STEPHEN
Is that add-on extra cost? Maybe I should limit it to just Classical for now?

CIELY
No need to penny pinch, promise. Piano's one of our most basic packages. I'm just calculating the memory capacity required. On YOUR end, that is.

She finishes with a flourish, writes a number down.

CIELY
Looks like we need to erase three and a half months of memories. That's a quick session in the chair. Two hours, give or take.

Stephen's eyes widen, concerned.

STEPHEN
"Erase memories"? I want you to put memories in, not take them out!

Ciely freezes, mid-pitch. Oops. Awkward!

CIELY
Doug at reception didn't tell you?

STEPHEN
Tell me what? Is there a catch?

CIELY
(mutters to herself)
Dammit, Doug. Not again!

Anxiety floods Stephen's face. Ciely grounds herself with a meditative gesture: "Keep calm - let it flow!"

CIELY
(sighs)
Sorry. I swear, it's nothing to fret about.

But it's company protocol to fill you in on procedure details and side effects, in the waiting room. I guess Doug - just forgot?

She shoots a nasty look towards the closed door. Turns back to Stephen, beams.

CIELY

Speed Skills *does* install memories. But where we put them - needs to be "steam cleaned" first.

STEPHEN

(blinks)

But I thought we only use about ten percent of our brains?

CIELY

Oh, that old myth's been debunked! We use a whole lot more of our brains than that.

STEPHEN

Still. I haven't done all that much in life... yet. So, even if ten percent's a low estimate, why erase anything? Don't I have plenty of "empty" space left?

Ciely purses her lips. How to explain? Tapping the desk, she activates a PROJECTOR.

A BRAIN hologram rotates in thin air. Stephen's eyes glow at the high tech display.

STEPHEN

Ooooooh.

CIELY

Major cool, I know!

She points at a glowing section of the hologram.

CIELY

Look here: that's the retrosplenial cortex - the portion of the brain Speed Skills funnels memories through. The data we transmit imprints in -

She clicks keys; the hologram switches to BRAIN CELLS.

CIELY

Neurons. Now, I've no doubt you've got plenty virgin synapses handy...

Stephen chokes. Ciely laughs the misunderstanding off.

CIELY

I mean in the scientific sense, of course! Specifically, synapses which haven't recorded memories yet. Try to picture brain cells like farming soil. For the new skills to take root and grow, they've got to have some biochemical fertilizer already sunk in deep.

STEPHEN

I don't quite follow. Meaning?

CIELY

The cells *have* to have been used before. That primes them for new data. But we need to clear out existing RAM to shove it in.

She turns off the machine. Sits back. Sighs.

CIELY

Sorry to lay all this on you. Doug's gonna get an earful from HR. If you're having cold feet now, I understand.

STEPHEN

You're gonna defrag me, like a PC?

CIELY

Well, I'd prefer a more poetic metaphor. But in a manner of speaking... yes.

(soft)

If you want to play piano, three and a half months of memories have to go. Look at it from this angle, Stephen: everyone's had a few bad moments in their lives they'd rather forget. This is your opportunity. Do you have any you'd rather do without?

Stephen thinks. Sits abruptly up.

STEPHEN

Yes. I want to start the procedure now.

INT. TECH IMPLANT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Stephen squirms in a high-backed, cushioned chair. ELECTRODES cling to his forehead.

Ciely types on a console, a BLACK MONITOR on the wall.

STEPHEN

Her name was Rebecca. We dated for three whole months. So I guess it's karma that's about how much space you need.

CIELY

Mmm, hmmm. How long ago was that?

STEPHEN

We broke up two weeks ago.

Ciely's head snaps up, empathy in her eyes.

CIELY

Gosh, I'm sorry. Maybe this is too soon?

STEPHEN

To be honest, the relationship was heading south two months before. I swear - we tried. And cared, too. But in the end we just weren't a fit. Just as well we broke it off.

The screen flickers: displays distorted images. Of a woman, but the features aren't clear. Ciely frowns.

CIELY

I can't get a connectome lock. I know this question might seem odd, but do you have a photo of her handy?

STEPHEN

Of my ex? Do I look like a stalker to you?

CIELY

I mean, a photo on your phone! Unless you deleted everything when you broke up - which really depends on who "dumped" who.

STEPHEN

Rebecca dumped... I mean, broke up with me. Which isn't to say I wasn't secretly relieved. But my phone? Ooooh, good point. Here!

He pulls out his cell, scrolls through the gallery. Slaps it into Ciely's palm. Revealing:

A picture of REBECCA and Stephen hugging. In the shot, Stephen sticks out a curled tongue at the lens.

STEPHEN

Needless to say, Rebecca's the red head.

Ciely eyes the picture. Scans it. The console BEEPS.

CIELY

Wow, for an "introvert", you're really hamming it up in this pic.

STEPHEN

(chuckles)

Rebecca brought out the wild side in me. Just silly stuff, as you can see.

The screen flickers. Memories load. A jumble of images:

INT. LIBRARY - DAY - FLASHBACK

Stephen hovers over a desk. Library stacks all around. Rebecca approaches, clearly lost.

STEPHEN

Hi, can I help you?

REBECCA

God, I really hope so! I'm looking for a book on Stage Managing. So far, all I've found is History, Programming and Chemistry. None of it's even close.

STEPHEN

(points)

Drama? That's Aisle Three - five racks back.

Rebecca's eyes widen.

REBECCA

You know that by memory? Man, you're smart!

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING - FLASHBACK

Rebecca and Stephen cuddle on the couch. Stephen's absorbed in a book. She throws it on the floor and pouts.

REBECCA

Who are you dating, silly - that book or me!?

She kisses him passionately. Stephen reciprocates.

INT. TECH IMPLANT ROOM - PRESENT DAY

Stephen blushes at the PDA. Ciely winks.

CIELY

What we see in Speed Skills is strictly confidential. Cross my heart, this stays right here.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - FLASHBACK

Rebecca throws plates at Stephen as he ducks.

REBECCA

You didn't want to go to the party!

STEPHEN

Can you blame me? Your friend Richard sucks!

REBECCA

Not to my favorite restaurant, either!

STEPHEN

What's wrong with ordering in, and staying home?

REBECCA

And every time I want to see a film, you decide to stream old stuff here instead!

STEPHEN

Honey, I just don't like public places. How many ways do I have to tell you? Don't you get the drift by now?

REBECCA

I'm calling bullshit, Stephen! You don't want to be seen with ME. We're done!

INT. TECH IMPLANT ROOM - PRESENT DAY

In the chair, a tear trickles down Stephen's cheek. Ciely sees it, freezes the video.

CIELY

There's no other memories you'd rather erase? Even if there aren't, people take time to process things and grieve. We could stop this right now. Then you could come back later... if you still want.

STEPHEN

(sniffles)

Sure, we had bad memories. But erasing Rebecca does seem wrong. I mean, things were very, very good... at first.

Ciely lights up as inspiration hits.

CIELY

Why don't we just implant a few LESS skills? If we trim it back far enough, we'd only need to erase one month.

Stephen raises an eyebrow.

STEPHEN

How's that work?

CIELY

Say we keep Classical music as a bundle. But for Rock options, we choose only a few songs to install. What's your favorite 80's tunes? Pick three - that's a start.

Stephen rolls his eyes. Thinks hard.

STEPHEN

Careless Whisper by Wham - of course.

CIELY

Ooooh, that one's fab. What's number two?

STEPHEN

Sweet Dreams are Made of This, by...

CIELY

Eurythmics? Splendid choice!

Invigorated, Ciely types.

CIELY

And - to top those gems off?

Stephen looks down, suddenly bashful.

STEPHEN

You're gonna think I'm cheesy, but -

CIELY

Most 80s songs are cheesy. No judgments.

She leans close, whispers in Stephen's ear.

CIELY

Cheesy is my jam, too. When no-one else is watching, I dance to *Foreigner* tunes sometimes.

Stephen sits up, shocked.

STEPHEN

My number one pick's *Foreigner*!

Ciely shoots Stephen a dirty look.

CIELY

No! You're messing with me, right?

STEPHEN

Scout's honor. It's my favorite of all time. My folks played it constantly when I was a kid, after they thought I'd gone to sleep. Joke's on them, I was usually still up, reading. I heard that tune so many nights: *Waiting for a Girl Like You*.

Realizing how that sounds, Stephen freezes.

STEPHEN

That's the title. I didn't mean-

CIELY

(stammers)

No worries. I didn't think...

Her hand hovers over the console and a button: Start.

CIELY

Are you totally, completely *sure* you want to erase Rebecca's memories? A word of warning: removal's final. No backups. No recording. They're 100% gone. If we do this, there's no re-dos or take-backs.

STEPHEN

But I'll be able to play those songs on my own?

CIELY

Flawlessly. With feeling, too.

STEPHEN

Then that's a price I'm willing to pay.

Ciely moves to activate. Stephen throws a palm out.

STEPHEN

Stop!

Ciely droops.

CIELY

Second thoughts? That's... ok.

STEPHEN

I just want to ask one last question.

CIELY

By all means. Shoot away.

STEPHEN

Doesn't this feel like cheating to you?

CIELY

(gulps)

Cheating? Never! I've always been professional...

STEPHEN

No, I mean "cheating" with me learning to play piano in an hour. Other people take decades of practice. Is it fair all I do is pay, sit - and the algorithm does the work?

CIELY

Personally? I don't think of it as "cheating". It's just a streamlined process towards a goal - which saves time for other valuable things in life.

Stephen thinks it over; gives Ciely a thumbs up.

STEPHEN

Works for me. Erase away!

Ciely's hand drifts towards the "start" button again. Stephen sputters.

STEPHEN

Wait!

CIELY

Again?

STEPHEN

I've got one more question.

CIELY
(sarcastic)
You said before that was the "last".

STEPHEN
This one is. You've got more word... as
an introvert and a librarian.
(beat)
I'm always professional, too.

CIELY
Is that a joke?

STEPHEN
A little yes. A lot no.

He looks up at Ciely. The two lock eyes.

STEPHEN
After the procedure's over - might you
want to... go somewhere? With me, and
test things out?

A small smile curls at Ciely's lips.

CIELY
To play piano? Warning - I'd just be
listening. I imprinted language skills.
There was no room left for music. Not
unless I wanted to erase my teen years.
And with the lessons I learned *then*, that
was definitely a no-go!

STEPHEN
Then - would you rather stay home with me
and read books?

Ciely's soulful eyes light up.

CIELY
Sure, Stephen. I'd like that, too.

She holds his hand. Squeezes.

CIELY
You ready?

Stephen nods. Ciely reaches for the "start" button.

CIELY
OK, then. Implant in 3, 2, 1...

FINAL FADE OUT: