

REALITY IS:

A SHORT FILM EXPLORING REALITY TELEVISION (ACCOMPANYING PAPER)

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Introduction

The following paper will explore the conception and development of a fictional script for a short horror film informed by autoethnographic research methods entitled *Reality Is* about a former reality television star who comes to believe she is being stalked. Exploring themes around the exploitative and highly gendered aspects of reality television and the immersive nature of the genre, the film aims to contribute to conversations about celebrity creation, state surveillance and governmental policy, online violence, companion species work, and performance art. This paper will discuss the rationale for choosing an autoethnographic position for script writing and look at how the method manifested in the screenplay. It will also reflect on the conventions within the horror genre and their role in this project. The academic themes within the work relating to reality television and neoliberal labour practices, online violence, and the role of woman v. nature as a storytelling tool will then be explored in relation to artistic choices in the creation making process of *Reality Is*.

Reality Is aims to examine a dialectic world where reality tv is simultaneously shocking and mundane, dangerous and life-changing, exploitative and liberatory - fake and real. Sarah Hanlon, our main character, has been given a whole new life because of winning a reality television game show. Leaving an unstable and abusive job for the life of performance and installation art via reality television, a genre not without its own questionable labour practices (Canada Newswire, 2020; Doyle 2016; Fairness in Factual TV, 2020; Fox, 2018) and coming away with a cash prize that secures her a home and practical sanctuary for her and her pets, Sarah feels indebted to the genre notorious for its

negative outcomes and manipulative tactics (Andrejevic, 2006; Quail, 2009; Ruehlicke, 2020, Pozner, 2010; Pozner 2015; Zulekha & Hunt, 2019). There is only one winner on reality television competition shows which seek to capitalize off budget cuts to writer's rooms and talent they see as unskilled. Sarah's liberatory world is not only limited in its individualistic bent but it is also not without its sacrifices. What has come to protect her – being on reality television – is precisely the thing which threatens her world. Privacy, safety, and genuine human connection stand as ephemeral constructs in Sarah's reality – but how much are individuals who are subjected to the torments of capitalism and patriarchy familiar with these concepts beyond ephemerality in 'real life' anyway?

How much of what Sarah is willing to subject herself to is based on the need for solidity under neo-liberal capitalism? More directly, how much agency does Sarah have in her plotline? Do reality stars bring it on themselves? Are they willing strategic partners, exploiting typecasting and non-unionized job opportunities for their step in the door, or subversive performance artists, seeking solace from bad labour conditions in service industries and beyond? *Reality Is* lets the viewer decide.

Autoethnography – Why. Ethics, Action and Reaction.

The initial vision for this major research project was a podcast featuring voices from participants of reality television discussing their experiences on and after participating on reality television. The idea was to explore the dialectic between reality television as an exploitative neoliberal practice and the potential personally liberatory aspects of the genre. After ethical considerations informed by three main pillars; Respect for Persons,

Beneficence and Justice (Sayles & Shilton, 2016) and the realization that caring for such ethical considerations and implementing mitigating strategies would be difficult if not impossible within the timeframe of this major research project, I decided to explore other artistic avenues for the work. The biggest concerns were the lack of time for ethics review and the lack of resources to implement proper consent and participant aftercare, as I had not done enough research at the time of ethics submission and the consent process would have been on a tight time period with certain results necessary for success. As I did not want to force any of these results or rush any participants a focus became finding an alternative source for data collection.

During the research phase, I came to realize that much of the reality tv literature I was coming across echoed my own experiences participating on reality television and as such the project became geared towards finding ways to represent and communicate that data. Autoethnography seemed an appropriate choice for this reason. The richest literature on reality and factual television often includes participant perspectives (Patterson, 2015; Quail, 2009; Quail 2015). This can be conceptualized as a feminist practice by which theory is made accessible and grounded in lived experience (hooks, 1990; hooks, 1994; hooks, 1995). *Reality Is* hopes to further this tradition by engaging in conversation with television studies work which prioritizes participant perspectives.

Another issue concerned this relationality to the project. As a former reality television contestant myself, I wanted to follow a reflexive approach and choose the most suitable research method in terms of acknowledging any short-sightedness I may experience because of my positionality, which allowed for complicated realism to develop

(Lichterman, 2017). By embracing auto-ethnography I embrace my role in and potential fingerprint on the data, as other prudent and productive researchers in television studies have done in the past (Gamson, 2009; Johnson, 2014). Projects like Gamson's *Freaks Talk Back* and Johnson's *Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory* inspired this work not just through their inclusion of firsthand experiences but also in the recognition of the power of representation and the subversive nature of performance art in public spaces, positioning participating on reality television as an artistic act of self-performance.

Using the creative writing process as a method of inquiry as discussed by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) allowed me to learn about reality television and myself, allowing the messy and often contradictory nature of my own “processes and preferences” (p. 959) to guide the exploration of reality television studies with the aim of contributing a unique voice to existing literature. Writing a script for a fictional horror movie informed by autoethnographic method made room for the work to explore opposing ideologies through screenwriting conventions anchored in dialecticism (Eisenstein, 1949; THR, 2018).

This film form relies upon putting two opposing ideas in conflict to create action. In the case of *Reality Is* research about reality television's tendency to produce cruel, invasive, and dangerous results (stalking, hypervisibility, online violence against women, 2LGBTQIA+ communities, and racialized peoples) is presented alongside other data sets that may suggest some productive and positive outcomes (stability within capitalism, diverse media representations, authentic human connections). At its core, the dialectic

tension in *Reality Is* was produced by the conflict between reality television's innately exploitative means and the lived experience of a reality television performer who used the genre as a path to sovereignty.

Autoethnography – How. Personal, Paradoxical Plotlines

A reflexive method to autoethnography grounded in a humanistic approach, envisioned the work as having a social responsibility. This guided the project and shaped the ways in which it was used (Maguire, 2006). A focus on allowing dialectical ideas exist simultaneously foregrounded this choice and was used in several ways in the script writing process. Firstly, it guided the plot and the intended messages of the work, illuminating the personal struggles and successes of a reality tv star while positioning that individual within a larger setting of exploitative labour practices. The essential conflict in *Reality Is* revolves around the tempestuousness of participating on reality television. The main character lives a semi-dream life as a result of her participation in a show which robbed her of her privacy. Principally, the audience can explore the tension of whether reality television is 'good or bad'.

This conflict is informed by my own experiences and feelings about participating on reality television and from observing the culture of former participants. Almost every former contestant I have interacted with or seen talk publicly on the subject have articulated detrimental effects from participating on reality tv (relating to things like lack of privacy, public critic of their character, loss of trust with people, and the mental health struggles that can come from such experiences) while simultaneously admitting they would happily

participate again. This is also true of my own feelings about being on Big Brother Canada (Abboud et al., 2013) and as such the basic truth of the *Reality Is* plotline comes from my own paradoxical perspective on the subject.

Things that happen to Sarah in the script are experiences which I have both read about in literature on reality television and experienced myself. The areas where the convergence is most evident, labour practices, negative outcomes, and celebrity creation, became salient to the story. In this way I practiced a method of autoethnographic study which attempts to describe my experiences in ways which engage with representations in the literature and to highlight the participant perspective as a way of engaging everyday life and those living it (Ellis et al., 2010, Manning & Adams, 2015; Pratt, 1991; Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

My own life is reflected in *Reality Is* in the following ways; I won season three of the reality television show Big Brother Canada (Abboud et al., 2013) and I bought a house with the money, something I never would have envisioned myself being able to do. I have an incredibly special relationship with my 13- and 14-year-old dogs. I began the audition process for the show while I was working under exploitative and abusive working conditions, which framed how I felt about my opportunity to participate. While I do not live alone (that was added for dramatic sake) I have become more reclusive since being on the show, trying to avoid people around my home as a result of trying to maintain some privacy and control. Once someone knows I have been on reality tv – they can know most everything about my life and personality if they choose to watch or search my name on the internet.

Myself and other reality show contestants I know, including my now best friend, (represented in the character Toni) have all received heartfelt messages of appreciation as well as hate-filled defamatory comments from strangers online. I cannot help but contemplate that my neighbors may be the people (or the type of people) who hate me the way people claim to online. It can be a scary feeling and avoidance becomes an acceptable and even pleasant mitigation. While nothing has ever escalated to violence like the scene in *Reality Is*, 'Toni' and I have experienced many odd and uncomfortable encounters like the one that takes place at their dinner. I have also never been what I would consider stalked, but I have been in a crowded public place when an anonymous stranger messaged me on a social media app: "I can see you". This was the main inspiration for the action of the script. *Reality Is* treats moments from my life, like the small fear I felt from this encounter, and the treatment myself and my reality tv peers receive online, as autoethnographic data, imagining it in dramatic and hyperbolic form.

I consider participating on reality television as a gift and a curse, but it is something I have actively continued to engage with years after my participation in the show, appearing in later seasons and helping to promote auditions and the show itself. This is the general theme that underlies *Reality Is*; while our main character's life has been dramatically affected by her appearance on the show to the point where she is fearful and concerned for her safety, she is still willing to subject herself to reality television fame; *Reality Is* lets the viewer explore why. In the end, it is left up to the viewer to decide if Sarah has a hand in her own stalking; if she knows she is being watched/filmed, if she is purely innocent and unknowing, or if the reality lies somewhere in the middle. In this way it hopes to examine

consent and agency under capitalism, pointing to ways in which the reality television industry exploits and condones the surveillance state and neo-liberal working conditions for its success (Andrejevic, 2002; Baltruschat, 2009; Patterson, 2015; Quail, 2015a) while foregrounding the agency of those who participate.

Reality Is poses the following questions: can reality television be used in positive ways to increase representation of under-represented cultures or is its reliance on ‘unskilled’ labourers as performers indicative of the genre’s innate corruption? Are reality television participants performance artists? Most importantly, I think the work asks the question: how can we foster the positive aspects of the genre, representation for marginalized identities (Otterson, 2020; Wu, 2018), opportunities for learning (Dreyer, 2011; Hartley, 2005; Kelly, 2008), and entertainment (Lundy et al. 2008; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004) while mitigating some of its more negative effects, like subpar working conditions (Canada Newswire, 2020), a lack of union power, and the online harassment/public scrutiny that comes with the inter-activity of the genre (Grindstaff, 2012; Holmes 2004b, Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002; Zulekha & Hunt, 2019).

Autoethnography allowed this project to speak within a contextual framework while allowing themes to reach beyond that context in hopes to contribute a uniquely creative and accessible perspective (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). This research-based project also provides a non-conformist framework for approaching the inquiry of reality television and fame studies research (Richardson, & St. Pierre, 2005). Adding a fictional element also helped in achieving this goal as the narrative was able to move in and out of fact and fiction

while still maintaining truth (Hall, 2006, Morrison, 1995). Autoethnography was also present in character constructions.

In attempting to create a relatable character to explore a complicated and unrelatable world, autoethnography was used to lean into character development in authentic and natural ways. This concept was guided by autoethnographic work like Issa Rae's *Insecure* (Rae, 2017) and David Chase's *The Sopranos* (Grey et al., 2008). In interviews, both writers refer to their unabashed and unmitigated use of people in their own lives (specifically for Chase his mother and for Rae herself) to craft relatable character that could serve as the grounding force for their story's universe (AT&T Developer Program, 2018; Bustle, 2020; New Rockstars, 2013; Reuben Barker, 2014). *Reality Is* attempted to use autoethnography in an analogous way, not shying away from intimate personal details but embracing them to create realism – a deliberate choice based in paying homage to a realism that is so prevalent in the horror canon; specifically, *Rosemary's Baby* and its impact on the work of Jordan Peele (*The Take*, 2016).

In scriptwriting literature, character development is listed as a key component for creating realistic and engaging scripts (Field, 1984; Trottier, 2014; Sandler, 2007). Writers are prompted and urged to create backstories and personalities for their characters around things irrelevant to the plot. Things like favourite colour, vacation style, childhood fears and dreams, most hated foods etc. are questions writers are encouraged to ask about their characters. Autoethnography provides a productive and useful timesaving strategy here as these questions about characters are answered through relying on facts about their real-life counter parts (or a hybrid of many real-life counterparts.). Immaterial details about

character's personalities are peppered through the script of *Reality Is* to create a sense of realism, something that helps horror movie audiences be drawn into the story. Even the personalities of the dogs in the script were guided by the different personalities of my two dogs. Other examples of this are found in relationship between Toni and Sarah; the sunflower gift and much of the dialogue is taken straight from real life. In this sense many writers practise autoethnography when developing realistic characters.

Autoethnography also informed the use of insider details about reality television practices which are not common knowledge and could be quantified as quantitative data within the creation-based project. Examples including, day-rates, union dues, reality television performer pay, talk show talent pay. Real life experiences with production and fan encounters became moments to insert data while helping to create a rich and realistic fictional universe. Experiences with media outlets over the years informed the ET Canada scene for example, relying on past appearances and protocol to create realism and help facilitate the messaging about unpaid labour and the Canadian arts and media scene.

Certain data is pulled directly from primary sources. The negative Instagram comments are pulled from real comments that exist on the internet today. The sentimental photo caption exploring the power of representation on pop culture came from a direct message I had received while writing this script from someone who had recently watched my season on the internet. Relying on autoethnography in moments like this it was useful as a writer writing about her own experience because I did not have to imagine what these comments would entail but instead, I was able to source these perspectives straight from

the source and keep the script moving at a fast pace without the disruption of such emotionally taxing labour.

Horror - Why. Action, Activism & Art.

After feedback from the graduate committee which specified that film is about showing rather than telling and that the proposal for my screenplay fell more to simply telling, horror was chosen as a genre which could provide action, move the plot, and leave space for symbolic interplay, realism, and a compelling story arc. Horror conventions like jump scares, long/slow shots and gory aesthetics can serve to entice the audience in ways that can make empathy and relatability a natural inclination. These moments are placed strategically throughout the script to build a connection between the audience and the main character, drawing them into the action and making them root for the main character's safety. This is particularly salient for a story about a reality television performer, as they are often viewed as unrelatable (Lundy & Park, 2008).

Horror also provided a vehicle for action, something the initial proposal for this project was lacking. The genre also served as a productive medium for which serious and complicated issues could be explored, as can be attested through many examples in the genre, both recent and formative (Sharrett, 2014). *Reality Is* used many of these films as inspiration for this project and this paper will discuss them in this section.

Horror – How. *Get Out*, *Rosemary's Baby* and Other Influences

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) was a main stimulus for the choice of genre in the way that Peele uses the film to address real life issues (racial inequality and white supremacist

ideology) through horror conventions in engaging and creative ways. Besides the use of horror in conveying social commentary, Peele's use of symbolism, man v. nature motifs, and soundtrack also informed this research creation project.

Peele's work is a lesson in subverting expectations and audience reactions for emotional impact, realism, and relatability. *Reality Is* hopes to address neoliberal labour ideology, violence against women, and the impacts of reality tv on individuals and society in an equivalent way. This sparked a large amount of research to be focused on Peele's work as well as the work he has described as being formative to his process.

In many interviews (Perelman, 2018; THR, 2018; UCTV, 2018) Jordan Peele describes being inspired for *Get Out* by Ira Levin's two stories; *Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1972) and *Rosemary's Baby* (Levin, 1967; Polanski, 1968), in the way that both these films speak to social issues (society's compulsory submissiveness for women) in intriguing ways. Therefore, a great amount of research was spent on these three films, and many of the elements in *Reality Is* pay direct homage to them as nods to their influence in story creation. Both films explore women's roles in society, their subconscious complicity, and the rejection of that complicity in different forms. Levin's characters are complicated and flawed, standing as non-conformist resistors in some scenes and willing accomplices in others (Rosemary does choose to raise her devil baby in the end). This dynamism shaped the character development and plotline of *Reality Is*. *Rosemary's Baby* also helped draw out themes of fame and the length people will go to for artistic success, positioning Sarah as both Rosemary, being exploited by powerful and corrupt forces, and Guy Woodhouse, who benefits from that exploitation. The joke Sarah says to her bartender about being in

Nobody Loves and Albatross is a nod to this connection. Sarah telling her bartender that her drink has a slightly bitter after taste is also homage to *Rosemary's Baby*. *Get Out* also speaks to this concept of what evil deeds people will attempt to pursue their creative endeavors.

Rosemary's Baby, *Stepford Wives* and *Get Out* all play to the audience's sensibilities, predicting what they are thinking and subverting their expectations, something that Peele perfects in *Get Out* (UCTV, 2018; The Take, 2016, THR, 2018). Peele notes that it is important to think like a comedian on stage when writing horror – by placing yourself into the headspace of the audience and thinking the thoughts they might think – asking the questions they might ask (Perelman, 2018). This guided the story of *Reality Is* in many ways. The plot points of the initial view of the stalker, the appearance on ET Canada and the creepy phone call all came from this rationale.

The eerie and potentially threatening phone call was also directly inspired by a viewing of Walton's *When a Stranger Calls* (1979) which is a film whose first act is a lesson on suspense and for the purpose of this project was viewed as a short. This film also inspired the ways in which the script might be written to allow moments of auditory drama and suspense as well, a convention the genre is notorious for. Moments like the bird crashing into the window, the reaction screams, the train horn, are examples of this influence.

Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1955) about a serial killer born out of being filmed since birth also served as inspiration to the work, informing themes of surveillance and the

lengths people will go to pursue artistic passions (like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Get Out*). The weapon used at the end of the film, a camera tripod with a dagger attached to it, is a direct reference to the work which also speaks on concepts regarding violence against women, exploitative labour practices, and fame. Other films which speak to themes around fame, artistic vision and human v. nature motifs were also researched for this project.

Dario Argento's *Tenebrae* (1982) also speaks to narratives about authorship and self-harm, revealing minute details which implicate its main character throughout the second and third acts. *Reality Is* attempted to use this strategy as well. *Tenebrae* is also a lesson in tension and suspense, and provided many strategies for such conventions within *Reality Is*.

Andrea Arnold's short film *Wasp* (2003) is another example of a film which provided these strategies. It begins with action and sets a tone for suspense and unease that was crucial to the development of this project. While residing outside of the horror genre, the tempo and tone of this film was a lesson in sustaining a suspenseful arc and drawing the audience into the story, making them care deeply for characters they have just been introduced to. Inspiration was also pulled from Arnold's use of woman v. nature narratives and insect visuals to elicit a strong audience reaction. Despite not being directly about reality television, many films screened in the undertaking of this research had tangible connections to the themes explored in *Reality Is*.

Themes Within *Reality Is*

The portrayal of surveillance through ‘reality TV’ as a form of entertainment and self-expression can thus be understood as playing an important role in training viewers and consumers for their role in an ‘interactive’ economy...Surveillance is portrayed not as a form of social control, but as the democratization of celebrity – a fact that has disturbing implications for the democratic potential of the internet’s interactive capability.

(Mark Andrejevic, 2002, p. 251)

Much of the impressive literature in reality television studies converge on this adept and chilling sentiment; reality television condones and helps maintain the globally exploitative mode of governance and labour while undermining and masquerading as democratic equality machines (Andrejevic, 2002; Andrejevic, 2006; Murray & Ouellette, 2009; Pozner, 2010; Quail, 2015a; Quail, 2015b). *Reality Is* is set in this world; utilizing horror tropes to explore a dialectic dialogue about what the “disturbing implications” described by Andrejevic and others could look like on film. Additionally, it investigates what role reality television performers play in this horror story, shifting its main character’s part from protagonist to antagonist, anti-hero, villain and finally, victim.

Work on reality television also often focuses on why people audition and participate on such shows (Fairclough, 2005; Fox, 2018; Patterson, 2015; Quail, 2009b). *Reality Is* stands to contribute directly to that conversation by presenting qualitative data about an individual perspective in an engaging and creative way.

New media are so powerful because they mess with the distinction between publicity and privacy, gossip and political speech, surveillance and entertainment, intimacy and work, hype and reality.

(Chun, 2017, p. xi)

Another axis of study comes from the interactive nature of such shows, promising democracy and empowerment through voting and fan engagement online (Andrejevic, 2006; Baltruschat, 2009) and delivering online violence, harassment, and the mental health consequences of hyper-visibility (Murray & Ouellette, 2009; Pozner, 2010; Pozner, 2015; Quail, 2009a; Zukekha & Hunt, 2019). *Reality Is* takes up this theme both directly and symbolically. The main driver of tension in the script comes from the stalking and cyber harassment of former marginalized contestants.

Work from online violence scholars informed the project in this capacity, from highlighting the prevalence of online violence towards racialized women and queer communities, to exploring the lack of protections against such violence and harassment while relaying subversive strategies to combat it (The Alchemists, 2016a; The Alchemists, 2016b; Bailey, 2015; Chun, 2017, Cowan & Rault, 2018).

Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicone, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways.

(Donna Haraway, 2006, p. 4)

The interactivity plotline is reinforced through a woman v. machine motif which embraces Donna Haraway's cyborg theory to work through positioning reality television within the greater landscape of global digital technology, envisioning a chiasm of interplay rather than a binary opposition (Haraway, 1991; Haraway, 2015).

Reality Is posits that the interactivity embedded in the foundations of reality television create cyborgs out of participants – interrelating and subsequently altering their lives, personalities, and hard-wiring through the interactive nature of the genre which so many scholars problematize. Whether the public votes online for a contestant to win or a former participant is bullied online, reality television's performers cannot prevent this blurred line between self and digital other. Even if the reaction is a non-reaction, it influences our cognitive framing. "I am someone who doesn't let the hate get to me" is just as impactful to our consciousness as "I am what people online think of me," for example. These digital influences come from the interactivity of the genre in which people can download information about an individual and then communicate their opinions about them online. This phenomenon creates a cybernetic organism that blurs the line between woman and machine; self and other. Reality tv stars are cyborgs.

The story here is mainly about dogs

(Haraway, 2006, p.3)

Reality Is also embraces the rejection of representationalism and modernity's tendency of binary thinking by utilizing Haraway's (2006) work on companion species to further illuminate the symbiotic and chiasmic nature of the reality television genre and the

global neo-liberal structure which created it. The precious relationship between Sarah and her pets, the use of birds and maggots as antagonists and the focus of the power of nature in general are all direct references to this work, which seeks to explore the relationships between living things as imbricated, dynamic, and ever changing. Most importantly, this symbolism represents shifting power dynamics, agency, and the idea of fear. Specifically, who should be fearful, woman or nature, individual or institution, performer or audience. On the macro, *Reality Is* hopes to highlight the complexities of reality television and its interactive outputs as a ‘natureculture’ (p. 3) where participants, producers, viewers, and the global politics which created the genre are, as Haraway would articulate it, “training each other in acts of communication we barely understand” (p. 3).

The nuanced and detailed use of natural elements, pets, bugs, critters, birds, and snails within the script intends to give respect to these relationships both visually and metaphorically. The work of Murawski and Copeland (2020) which features snails living in elaborate diorama's gave inspiration to the art that Sarah does. In execution of this film, a collaboration with artists such as Copeland and Murawski as well as nature videographers could ensure an aesthetic focus on this element, helping to heighten the intended symbolism. Specifically in creating a tonal switch between the serene and bucolic tone of the first act and the violent and jolting inciting incident with the blue jay's crash into the window. The script for *Reality Is* was written with this aesthetic dynamic in mind, envisioning room for lush nature shots, high-production audio work, and deliberate symbolism portrayed through visual elements. Themes within *Reality Is* grew and evolved

during the process of screenwriting, exemplifying the practical use of research creation projects and the autoethnographic method.

Conclusion

Reality Is contributes a unique participant perspective to reality television studies through the production of a fictional narrative informed by autoethnographic research methods and screenwriting theory.

Autoethnography was chosen as the main research method as a result of reflexive thinking which sought it best to embrace the researcher's fingerprints and bias, positioning themselves as the central character in the story of reality television studies.

Horror was utilized as a vehicle for both creating and sustaining action, delivering social commentary, and highlighting complex and complicated themes of interactivity, hypervisibility, state surveillance, exploitative labour practices, companion species, online violence, and more. These themes were enhanced by autoethnography and by the research creation method in general, allowing for creativity and storytelling conventions to guide the project in innovative and inimitable ways. The research speaks to a particular story and lived experience but hopes to contribute to a much larger conversation about labour, capitalism, fame, and artistic passion. *Reality Is* intends to leave the audience not just asking what is real about reality television – but what is real about their own lives.

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"REALITY IS"

by

sarah hanlon

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McMaster University
A Major Research Project
Communication & Media Arts
Supervisor: Dr. Christine Quail

INT. SARAH'S HOUSE - DAY (August, 2019)

Two snails sit together on a couch. In front of them, is a video camera. In front of the video camera, is another snail. Towering over the snails, Sarah Hanlon (31) films the snails with a much larger camera of her own.

SARAH

Ugh, I'm gonna need you two to start making out again!

Sarah places her camera down with a sigh and picks up a sparkling clean glass bong.

EXT. SARAH'S HOUSE - DAY

A small home in a suburban neighborhood surrounded by blooming trees bathes in sunlight. A single large window on the house is visible, a freshly cut looking tree stump sits below it. Sarah is visible through the window. She takes a large pull off the bong.

INT. SARAH'S HOUSE - DAY

Sarah blows a thick billowy cloud of smoke out her window, taking a moment to shake her head, before placing the snails in a large octagonal aquarium. Above the aquarium is a heat lamp, a DEFUND THE POLICE poster, and a photograph of Sarah being hoisted in the air by a group of people. Sarah shuts the large lid of the tank.

SARAH

Let's stop there for today shall we? You all did great, fabulous.

Sarah hunches over and moves her face close to the tank, which exudes a green hue from the lushness of the plant life inside, she moves closer, until her nose almost touches the glass. Beside the tank sits a stack of flyers and a local newspaper.

INSERT: HAMILTON SPECTATOR NEWSPAPER

TWO HUGE LIZARD'S MISSING FROM LITTLE RAY'S REPTILE ZOO.

Locals have been asked to keep their eyes out for two gigantic monitor lizards which escaped or were stolen from Little Ray's Reptile Zoo at Barton and Gage late last night. If you see either of these dangerous lizards, keep your distance and call 613-807-6889.

Sarah rests her hand gently on the warm glass.

SARAH

I could just watch you babes for hours.

Sally, a border collie, paws at Sarah's leg.

SARAH

Oh, you want some attention too?

Sarah bends over and kisses the small dog on the snout.

SARAH

I just love you soooo much! You too miss
Annie! My whole world right here.

A slim German Shepard raises their head off the floor, then
puts it back down. A loud bang startles the whole group.

SARAH

ANNIE

gasp

barks

A blood-spattered shadow is cast over the diorama.
Coagulated blood and guts run down the large window. Sally
runs towards the door.

EXT - FRONT YARD (DAY)

Outside, a large blue jay lays in a mangled, bloody heap on
the tree stump. Sarah is visibly shaken, tears in her eye,
hands shaking.

SARAH

The fucking city! See what fucking happens
when you cut down a massive fucking tree
for no fucking reason?!

Sarah almost begins to sob, but catches herself at the
sight of a shadowy figure across the street. Letting her
eyes adjust in the sun, Sarah sees the figure's spiked
hairstyle and confuses it with a bird before she notices it
is a man. A moment more comes the realization he is staring
at her through his horn-rimmed, turtle shelled glasses
which gleam in the sun. Embarrassed, Sarah runs inside.

INT - LIVING ROOM (DAY)

As Sarah stands in confused shock. A loud *DING* alerts her to a new email.

INSERT: EMAIL

From: user3748236426@hotmail.com

Subject: I AM STILL WATCHING YOU.

Sarah opens the email and the contents are empty. She glances again at the window; nothing. She is concerned. Sarah turns her attention towards a clock which hangs above her head. It reads 3:30 pm.

SARAH

Fuck.

Sarah hurries towards her bedroom.

INT. BEDROOM (DAY)

Sarah manically grabs clothes from her dresser and throws them on.

SARAH

I love you guys so much and I don't wanna leave you, but I gotta go. I will be back soon!

Sally whines as Annie raises her head. Sarah grabs a pair of high heels and quickly puts them on as she runs out the door.

EXT. SARAH'S HOUSE

As Sarah locks her door she hears a loud crunching noise, she lifts up her shoe to reveal an oozing snail, crushed under her stiletto.

SARAH

Oh my god. No!

An alert on Sarah's phone reads: ET CANADA!!! Sarah reluctantly wipes her heel through some grass and takes off.

EXT - TRAIN STATION (DAY)

Sarah stands nervously at the train station carrying two large bags; jazz music plays softly from her headphones. She wears a hat, large sunglasses, and an obnoxiously loud patterned 60's vintage dress. She glances nervously at people as they pass. She leans up against a trash can.

SARAH

SCREAMS

Maggots squirm in between Sarah's fingers and the trash can. Their bodies stick to her sweaty palm. She cannot shake them off. Sarah drops all of her things and uses her other hand to swipe off the maggots. She pulls her hat down over her face and moves to the other end of the tracks to wait for the train.

INT - TRAIN (DAY)

Sarah sits in an empty section of the Go Train, she is reading a book: Caring for Snails.

INSERT: BOOK PAGE

How to tell if a snail is male or female:

Most land snails, or pulmonates, are hermaphrodites, meaning they possess both male and female sexual organs. However, land-oriented prosobranch snails, as well as many water snails, are dioecious, meaning they can be either male or female.

Sarah underlines the last 8 words with a pencil.

GO TRAIN ANNOUNCER

This is a security message. If you see something that doesn't look right, speak to staff or text the Transport Police at 61016.

Sarah looks around the car. She sees a man sleeping at the end of the train car and a mother with her two children a few seats away.

Sarah opens her Instagram app

INSERT: PHONE SCREEN

You have been tagged in a post.

INSERT: INSTAGRAM POST (PICTURE CAROSEL)

Pictures of Sarah kissing a woman, smiling with a group and crying by herself fill the screen. A caption reads: First and only openly Queer woman to win a North American Big Brother! Watching Sarah on BBCAN3 changed my life!

Sarah's smile turns to a concerned frown as she scrolls through the comments on the post.

INSERT: INSTAGRAM COMMENTS

Comments read:

so confused is sarah bisexual? Dyke? Or just curious?
The Sarah haters are upset. *crown emoji*

I really hated Sarah. What kind of a player threatens to vote against the person who evicts them? Ugly Bitch.#BBCAN3

I was glad when Chad called Sarah a dirty bitch whats wrong with that its what she always been. Its ok to call a bitch a dirty ass bitch

Sarah clicks on the profile of JACKLOVESMONEY, one of the commenters.

INSERT: INSTGRAM PROFILE

A picture of a white man wearing a red hat that reads: MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. Canadian #trump supporter. Arrest #TRUDOPE

SARAH (MUMBLES)

SHOCKER.

Sarah responds to some comments.

INSERT: INSTAGRAM COMMENTS Sarah types: SUCK MY CLIT JACK

Sarah types: Listen fuckface no one cares what you think

Sarah types: maybe get over it - it's been 6 fucking years.

SARAH

Fucking Fucks.

GO TRAIN ANNOUNCER

Now approaching Union Station.

INT -ET CANADA TELEVISION STUDIO (DAY)

Sarah waits nervously in a lobby.

ET CANADA PRODUCER

Sarah! SO great to see you again! How have things been?

SARAH

Hi! Great to see you too! Thank you so much for having me - you know I always love to get my face in front of a camera!

Sarah chuckles.

ET CANADA PRODUCER

So what about Big Brother?! Who do you think will win this season?!

SARAH

Well, I will be cheering for Veronica - Hamilton represent!

ET CANADA PRODUCER

Oh I love Veronica! Great pick! We will probably ask you that on camera as well.

SARAH

Sounds great!

ET CANADA PRODUCER

Do you ever get tired of talking about Big Brother?

SARAH

Never!

Sarah winces.

ET CANADA PRODUCER

Haha. Ya right. Okay we will get you into hair and makeup for touch ups and then get you on camera with Bill! Thanks again for making the time for us.

INT - MAKEUP ROOM

Bright lights and makeup products fill the room. Sarah sits comfortably in the makeup chair.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Oh my god you were on Big Brother! I could never do that.

SARAH

Believe me, if I could do it, you can do it.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Isn't it hard though? No family, no friends, no outside contact for how long?

SARAH

70 days.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Ya, that is definitely TOO HARD!

SARAH

I always say Big Brother is hard as hell yes, but life is also hard. And at least you sign up to play Big Brother. No one asks for consent for living.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Hahaha, True. And you won of course! That makes is worth it. What do you win again?

SARAH

100k. A trip of a lifetime. 25K to The Brick furniture store.

MAKEUP ARTIST

WOW! Incredible! Good for you! What did you do with the money if I can ask?

SARAH

I put it all down on a house in Hamilton. It's the only way I could have ever bought my own place. And of course it's filled with furniture from The Brick. I call it The House That Big Brother Bought aka The Brick House.

MAKEUP ARTIST

That is amazing. Ya, the housing market here is just ridiculous! I want to buy in Toronto but it's just not possible. Even Hamilton is getting up there lately! Must be so nice to have your own space.

SARAH

Absolutely. I would have loved to stay in the city but rent was going up and I was always terrified of getting reno-victed or something like that. And I have two older dogs that really need the stability. I do not know how people with kids rent! Terrifying. I am so lucky. I really don't know what I would do without my home. Without Big Brother.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Okay maybe I do need to audition so I can get my own place! Haha!

SARAH

I am telling you!

ET CANADA PRODUCER

On in five!

INT - ET CANADA STAGE

Sarah sits in one of two chairs in front of 3 cameras. Bill Deed (29), ET CANADA host, sits in the other.

BILL DEED

Welcome back to the show everyone! You are going to be glad you tuned into today because we have a BIG surprise for you today; we are joined by Big Brother season 3 winner - Sarah Hanlon.

Bill takes an awkward pause.

BILL

The former champion is here to chat with us all about the new season of Big Brother Canada, what she has been up to since her unexpected win on season 3, and who she thinks is going to take it home this year! Welcome Sarah, thanks for being here with us today!

SARAH

Oh the pleasure is absolutely all mine!

BILL DEED

Okay so first things first, who is winning this season!?

SARAH

I am a huge Veronica fan! She is a youth social worker from Hamilton and I think that will give her a huge edge!

BILL DEED

And who do you think does NOT have what it takes to last in the BBCAN house?

SARAH

Well, based of first impression interviews, I think Ryan may struggle in there. You gotta leave you ego at the door and that guy has a lot of ego!

BILL DEED

And Sarah, you have been doing some exciting stuff since you won your season of Big Brother Canada. Can you tell us a bit about that?

SARAH

I have been so lucky to get into the art and media world through my participation on the show. When I left the house I had a huge following of people who appreciated the same kinds of things I did and so I decided to follow a life-long passion for performance, art and making. I started my own art practice and now six years later I am lucky enough to have a little following which sustains my work. I have a new show coming up next month at Factory Media Centre in Hamilton. It will feature diorama's I make for my pet snails.

BILL DEED

Snails?!

While BILL is talking, pictures of Sarah's work take over the screen.

INSERT: PICTURES OF SARAH'S WORK

A snail stands behind a burger counter, wearing a tiny paper hat. In another shot, a snail rides a mini treadmill. A third shot shows a snail gripping a mop, the mop sits in a sudsy bucket.

SARAH

Yes. Haha. Snails are the characters in a lot of my work. I relate to them a lot. They are small, they move slowly and are quite banal, but they are fascinating and complex creatures that defy the norm...

BILL cuts Sarah off

BILL DEED

Wow! Incredible stuff! And we have also seen you on our screens talking about pop culture and art.

SARAH

Yes, I am lucky enough to be a regular guest on a couple shows and podcasts. I love connecting with people and talking about media and art, something...

BILL cuts Sarah off again

BILL DEED

Well, we always love connecting with you Sarah. Thanks for popping in today! Maybe we will see you throughout this season to get your takes on the gameplay of #BBCAN9! And remember - someone is always watching!

SARAH

Haha, you know I never forget that! Sounds great BILL. Thank you!

ET CANADA PRODUCER

Annd cut! That was great, thanks Sarah. Sorry we didn't have more time to talk about your art. Next time for sure!

EXT. DOWNTOWN TORONTO (DUSK).

The sun sets on shining skyscrapers. Sarah walks down the street looking disappointed and numb. She lights a joint. A few passersby give her strange looks, but she doesn't seem to notice.

INSERT: SECUIRTY CAM FOOTAGE

Sarah walks down the street in black and white.

EXT. EARLS RESTRAUNT PATIO (NIGHT)

Sarah walks toward a beautiful woman, Toni (29) sitting at a table alone.

SARAH

Why did we pick this place? So douchey. They told me I wasn't following the dress code but that they would let me in. Like omg thank you so much - I don't know what I would have done without your \$20 avocado toast!

TONI

They did what? Let's leave!

SARAH

No, no its fine. We're here already and all the spots around here are kinda like this. I think I look great.

TONI

I think you look great too!

SARAH

Not as good as you! Wowza! I will never get over that I am friends with an international supermodel.

TONI

Shut up! hahaha

The two embrace in a long, deep hug. Sarah pulls a bouquet of sunflowers out of one of her bags and gives them to Toni.

TONI

You didn't have to do that!

SARAH

You know I did! I cannot see sunflowers without thinking of you.

A server approaches

SERVER

Can I get you started with anything ladies?

Toni looks at Sarah.

TONI

Are we drinking today?

SARAH

What do you think?!

EXT - EARL'S RESTRAUNT PATIO

Sarah and Toni laugh. SARAH slaps the table and snorts. The table is filled with empty glasses and plates which clatter from the impact.

SARAH

Damn that dip was good!

Sarah mops up the remaining dip with a piece of bread.

TONI

I guess douchebags do a good dip.

The two women laugh again.

SARAH

Let's do a shot.

TONI

Oh I can't, I work super early tomorrow.

SARAH

Just one!

As Sarah is pleading with Toni, a man wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans begins walking toward the women from the curb. He walks fast, with intention.

MARK

I can't believe I am doing this but are you girls from Big Brother?

Sarah and Toni exchange a quick glance.

TONI AND SARAH (TOGETHER)

Yes.

MARK

My wife loves that show. Can I get a picture with you guys?

BRITNEE AND SARAH (TOGETHER)

Ya for sure. Yes.

MARK

Great.

Mark pulls out his camera phone and stands in between the two women. He holds out his arms, holding his camera in front of their faces. He takes a few pictures.

MARK

Oh you can smile more than that. Pretend you're into me.

The two women exchange glances. An awkward silence presents itself.

MARK

Oh don't get all snobby on me, it's not like your famous.

SARAH

We are just finishing up our dinner if you wouldn't mind...

MARK

Oh please, can it with the attitude, you didn't even deserve to win. You didn't do anything in that house. You are lucky..

Sarah leaps from her chair, coming face to face with the man. A shot at their feet lets us know Sarah is wearing high heels which makes them the same height.

SARAH

Get the fuck outta here you stupid fuck.

Other tables begin to look at the commotion happening.

TONI

Sar!

MARK

You dirty hippy. Chad was robbed.

SARAH

Oh a Chad fan! Big fucking shocker. White man roots for the white man - how novel! How fresh!

MARK

Suck my dick you ugly, fame seeking...

SARAH

If you don't get outta my face...

Restaurant staff rush over and get in between Mark and Sarah to break up the fight. As Mark begins to walk away, we get a glimpse of his hat - a Toronto Blue Jays cap.

EXT. DOWNTOWN TORONTO SIDEWALK (NIGHT)

Sarah and Toni walk down a bust street.

TONI

You cannot get like that every time some guy is a dick Sarah. Remember the grocery store guy?

SARAH

Ya...

TONI

You got so lucky the owner of the store was a fan. You could have been arrested Sarah.

The two women stare at each other for a moment. Toni looks concerned.

SARAH

You're right. I need to relax. It's just so hard to see this shit online and then

it walks right up to your face. I got the votes - I deserved to win. And what really pisses me off is that bullshit narrative completely erases *your* contributions. You won 5 Head of Households. You got rid of a professional baseball player, a university quarter back, a gymnast, a poker star and fucking Chad okay?! And you kept us both safe. People need to realize we are real people and we know what happened in there. We lived it. They think because they watched a live feed or two, they know better than us who deserves what - it's so fucking frustrating.

TONI

Well, these former houseguests out here who egg them on make it easy for jerks like that - they totally feed into their made-up narratives. I bet Chad and that guy have kiki'd and commiserated about how Chad should have won. I bet Chad has retweeted him and now this guy thinks he knows what's up.

SARAH

Fuck, you are so right. It's so funny because people think everything on reality television is fake and bullshit but it's only fake and bullshit once the audience gets their claws into it. We all really cared about each other in that house. Where is that in the narrative?! And people just so clearly root for the people who they like. Who they would fuck or be friends with - and do they think we don't get it? Like no matter what a player does - a dude like that will always root for the straight white guy. Always. And everyone else has to be framed as 'the worst' and 'undeserving' so that their favs can be 'the best' and "robbed kings". Just like society. It's so obvious and yet they think they are being sly. Like they set the standard and it's totally unachievable for anybody not like them.

Sarah is getting worked up. She takes a long deep breathe.

TONI

You are right, but here's the thing though Sar, you gotta disengage. It's not good for you to care so much. You are still *in it*. You are literally still in it.

For a brief second, Toni looks directly in the camera.

TONI

And I know you think you have to stay in it for your work but you cannot sacrifice your peace for this crap. It's dangerous at this point. I'm worried about you. Your isolated out in Hamilton. You need to start letting people in again.

Sarah looks nervously away from her best friend.

SARAH (RANTING)

I got a creepy email today. What's worse is a bird flew into my window because the city cut down my big Maple, even though they say they didn't I know they fucking did, I mean who else could do that? Now my privacy is just fucking gone! and remember when they threatened to...

TONI

Wait what?! Slow down. Why didn't you tell me about this? What did the email say?

SARAH

It said... "I am still watching you". Dun Dun Dunnnnn. Could just be fan. I am telling you right now, its happened right before I left!

TONI

That is creepy. Very - *I know what you did last summer*. But your right, it could just be a fan. Now what happened to your tree?!

Sarah sighs.

SARAH

Its just a bad couple week. I didn't need this guy today. I am sorry I ruined our night.

TONI

Never babe. I always have the best time with you. Even if I have to break up a fight.

The women laugh.

TONI

Be careful with this email stuff. People are messed up. Remember that guy who used to send me the most racist, hateful messages?

SARAH

Oh my god - Yes! That was so fucked. You hunted him down though. Turned those fucking tables.

TONI

Haha, I sure did. Found his Facebook friends, his girlfriend, his mom - and DM'd them to let them know their little Shaun was spending his days cyberstalking and abusing Black women online. I am the stalker now Shaun!

Both women let out a laugh that ends with a sigh.

SARAH

How do you stay so calm about this kind of behavior?

TONI

What choice do I have?

The two women share a moment of exhaustion.

TONI

Shit, I really have to go babe; gotta get to the apartment before Jonathan, he forgot his keys - again! Why don't you just spend the night at ours -it is getting dark already and you look tired.

SARAH

Tired?! Oh thanks a lot!

The women laugh.

SARAH

I gotta get home to Annie and Sally.

TONI

Of course... Of course, Give them a kiss for me!

The two women hug and from security camera footage from across the street - we watch them say goodbye and follow Sarah as she walks away.

EXT. DOWNTOWN TORONTO (NIGHT)

Sarah makes her way down the city street when her cell phone rings. She scrambles through her pockets and multiple bags before she finds it. The phone reads PRIVATE NUMBER. She answers it.

SARAH

Hello?

CALLER

You dogs are very cute.

Sarah takes a moment. She looks confused.

SARAH

Who is this?

The phone goes silent.

SARAH

Hello?!

There is a click on the other end of the phone followed by a dead-end tone.

Sarah begins to look around frantically and panicked.

SARAH

What the fuck?

Sarah begins to jog down the sidewalk. The jog turns into a run. The streets are congested and loud. As we watch Sarah maneuver through them, we see a sewer grate in Sarah's path. A do not walk sign flashes. Sarah picks up her speed - trying to get through before the light actually changes. A horn beeps. Distracted, Sarah's stiletto heel slips through the grate and she comes crashing down on her face. Her nose pours blood. A car making a right turn at the light slams on its breaks, almost hitting her fallen body. A man makes his way over as Sarah pops up like nothing happened.

STREET STRANGER

Jesus, are you okay?

SARAH

Ya, ya. I am okay. I gotta go.

Sarah begins to walk away from the man and a small, concerned crowd of people gathering around the bloody pool on the street.

STREET STRANGER

Oh my god - are you that pothead from Big Brother?

Sarah grabs her bags, holds her nose with one hand as the blood gushes out and runs away.

STREET STRANGER #2

Are you okay?!

EXT. TORONTO'S UNION TRAIN STATION (NIGHT)

Sarah, exhausted and out of breath, drops a bag as she tries to open the door for the train station. She picks it up and runs inside.

INT. TORONTO'S UNION TRAIN STATION (NIGHT)

Still out of breath, Sarah stops in front of a large screen filled with departure and arrival times. Her eyes focus in.

INSERT: DEPARTURE/ARRIVALS SCREEN

Lake Shore West 23:10|00:10

Sarah looks at a digital clock on the wall next to the departure times screen, the clock reads 23:05

SARAH

Fuck.

Sarah frantically looks around the station. A CLOSED sign hangs above a ticket teller booth. Three people stand in an automated kiosk line. Sarah glances back at the clock, it now reads 23:06. Sarah darting toward the machines, she notices one going unused. She moves her face closer to the machines as she takes her place line and squints. Blood is caked beneath her nose and down her chin.

TRAIN STATION STRANGER

Those two are broken.

SARAH

Of fucking course they are.

The stranger gives her a puzzled look, then their expression changes to one of vague recognition. Sarah looks down, concealing her face, and waits impatiently in line. Sarah tries to glance back to the clock on the wall but the angle makes it impossible to read.

SARAH

Fuck it.

Sarah runs away from the machines right at the moment they become free.

INT. TORONTO'S UNION TRAIN STATION (NIGHT)

Sarah runs down a long empty corridor, bags in tow, blood caked to her face. When she gets to a set of cement stairs, she begins to take them by twos. She slips, but catches herself before she falls. She keeps climbing. As she gets to the top of the stairs, the sound of a train engine can be heard.

SARAH

Please, please, please.

As Sarah runs up to the track, the train speeds away into the distance, the city scape sparkles with lights in the background.

SARAH

FUUUUUUUCK.

Sarah drops all of the bags she is carrying. Tears form in her eyes. She looks at her phone. She smiles at her screensaver - a picture of Annie and Sally. The time on her phone says 23:11.

INT. TRAIN STATION (NIGHT)

A large gendered bathroom sign sits with the words WOMEN and MEN above pink and blue dress and pants icons, braille below it. Sarah runs by it and enters the side with the pink dress icon.

INT. TRAIN STATION BATHROOM (NIGHT)

Sarah washes the blood off her face. She hears a loud thud coming from one of the stalls. She bends her face down to see if she can see any shoes in any of the stalls - nothing. As she is bent down, someone opens the door to the bathroom and the handle from the door hits her head. She yells in pain.

BATHROOM GOER

Oh my gosh I am so sorry! I didn't see you there.

SARAH

That's okay - my fault. I did it to myself.

INT. TRAIN STATION BAR (NIGHT)

Sarah walks towards a long empty bar with metal barstools. She drops all of her bags and grabs a seat. The bartender, a young gender queer person wearing skinny jeans and a t-shirt with rolled up sleeves throws down a menu in front of Sarah.

BARTENDER

What can I get cha?

SARAH

A train to Hamilton that leaves before
midnight.

BARTENDER

Can't do that.

SARAH

How about some common sense?

BARTENDER

Try again.

Sarah glances down at the menu.

INSERT: BAR MENU

Beers:

Collective Arts Ransack the Universe

Left Field Brewing Greenwood

Mill Street Lager

Wrigleyville Foeder fermented grisetete

Cocktails

The Blue Jay: vodka, blue curaçao, lemonade, topped with
blueberry garnish.

The City Scraper: 1 ounce whiskey, sweet vermouth, and
bitters, garnished with a dehydrated orange.

SARAH

Ransack?

BARTENDER

Now that, I can make happen.

SARAH

Thanks.

The bartender tilts an oblong glass sideways and brings it up to the tap. A beautiful orange liquid fills the glass, and the top layer forms a thick uniform layer of foam.

BARTENDER

So, what brings you into the city today?

SARAH

Work.

BARTENDER

What do you do?

SARAH

It's kinda complicated.

BARTENDER

Try me.

SARAH

Well, I am a *uses air quotes* media personality... I guess. And a wanna be artist.

The bartender looks at Sarah, waiting for an explanation. She doesn't give one.

BARTENDER

Would I have seen you in anything?

SARAH

I was in *Luther* and *Nobody Loves an Albatross*.

BARTENDER

Huh?

SARAH

Sorry...joke. I was on reality television and I talked a lot about weed, and art and pop culture - so when I got off the show, I had a little niche of an audience and I kind of... exploit that as much as possible. I do podcasts and morning shows and radio spots - shit like that.

BARTENDER

Well that is cool!

SARAH

Meh, it mostly serves as veiled advertising for shit I have moral issues with but... I get to do some creative stuff I have always wanted to do.

BARTENDER

Ads?

SARAH

Like today, I was on ET Canada to talk about Big Brother Canada, the show I was on. So, it's basically just an ad for Big Brother and ET Canada doesn't have to pay me for my time, or do hair or wardrobe - they just know I will do it for the exposure.

BARTENDER

So...

SARAH

Well, its not too bad for me because I do get something out of it, I can sell my work or get a paying job from the publicity. Without publicity my engagement shrinks and paid work goes away, but it sets this standard ya see, so they always have people who are willing to do this for free - so they don't hire people or pay them. Why would they invest in the content when there is always a sucker like me. And

to have one of the biggest outlets in Canada not contributing anything to the output of arts and culture in this country except for PR bullshit - that...is...problematic...to say the least.

BARTENDER

I see.

SARAH

And sometimes companies pay me for the spots. Like cannabis companies or beer brands - I just gotta mention them or like use them in my art. Its...complicated. I have to make it look like I am successful so that I can keep my audience up and just get by...it's just... exhausting.

BARTENDER

Sounds pretty phony.

Sarah stares at the bartender for a moment and takes a sip of her beer.

SARAH

...ya.

BARTENDER

How is the beer?

SARAH

Good. Kind of has a bitter aftertaste though...

The bartender turns their back to Sarah and starts polishing glasses. They speak to her with his back turned.

BARTENDER

So, Big Brother - what was that like? Even more phony than ET Canada stuff I presume?

SARAH

Actually, you would be surprised. It's as real as you could get. People always

assume is scripted and it's not. And it's HAAAARD. You don't see anyone but the people you are playing with for 70 days! No TV, no music, no reading, no outside contact at all. It was a roller coaster for sure. Felt like living in a genre bending movie. So much action, comedy, drama. Definitely a unique experience.

BARTENDER (LOOKING AT SARAH AGAIN)

Sounds like a horror movie to me. I could never do that.

SARAH

Oh yes you could. I always say - if I can do it - anyone can do it. I am always telling people to apply.

BARTENDER

Was it worth it though? It sounds like hell.

Sarah checks her phone for the time.

SARAH

Hey, life is hell and at least playing Big Brother is exciting. And you know what... it *was* worth it! I met my best friend on the show, I got to represent the queer community and cannabis users on mainstream television. I still get messages from young people, or their parents about how much it meant to them to see an unapologetically queer woman on TV. Plus, I won. So that makes it worth it ya.

BARTENDER

Wow! How much?

SARAH

Hundred thousand dollars. Bought my house with it. I would have never in a million years been able to make that happen for myself. Had to relocate to Hamilton though

- even with a hundred thou cash for a down payment, Toronto was not in the cards.

BARTENDER

What were you doing before?

SARAH

I worked at that cannabis lounge on Yonge Street; Vapor Central.

BARTENDER

I remember that place! What a fun job.

SARAH

I mean in some ways. I met the greatest people there but the manager was an absolute sexual harassing loser who paid minimum wage, docked hours and installed a secret camera in our bathrooms and staff area so that he could spy on us. Plus, there was a lot of vomit cleaning.

BARTENDER

Oh shit.

SARAH

Ya. So for me Big Brother was an escape.

Sarah takes another sip of beer; it's a long one and the drink almost disappears from the glass. Sarah notices the bartender look behind her. She swivels around on her chair and sees a familiar looking man in horn-rimmed glasses and a slight faux-hawk. She takes another drink, smaller this time. As she looks at the man, her face drops. She chokes on her beer. It is the man she saw on the street earlier that morning.

HORN-RIMMED GLASSES MAN

Good evening kind sir. Could I please have... Hmmm... I guess I'll get a 'Blue Jay'?

Sarah's aghast. She quickly reaches for her bags, throws a 20-dollar bill down on the bar and runs away. The bartender and the man watch her run away.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS (NIGHT)

Sarah stands on a quiet train platform by herself. She impatiently waits for the train while staring at the set of stairs she just ran up. She holds her many bags in her hands. She checks her phone for the time: it reads 11:55.

SARAH

Just 15 mins.

As Sarah stands near the tracks, we see her from behind, she is so close to the edge. The camera moves closer to her.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS (NIGHT)

We see Sarah from security camera footage as she stares at the stairs. Her vision becomes blurry. She checks her phone again, the battery is dying, the time reads: 12:08.

SARAH

Come on!

At that moment the sound of a train approaching is heard. It is getting louder and louder. Then, almost out of nowhere, a train speeds along the platform, moving oddly fast. Sarah takes a step away from the yellow line near the tracks. The train begins to slow and the noise morphs into a loud, high-pitched squeal. When it finally stops, Sarah takes a step forward, waiting for the doors to open. A very long few seconds go by.

SARAH

COME ON! OPEN!

The doors slide open and Sarah enters the train with her belongings. She turned around and continues to stare at the stairs and the platform, impatiently waiting for the doors to close.

SARAH

Come on, come on.

TRAIN ANNOUNCER

This is a Lake Shore West train, it will be making all stops before its final destination at Aldershot station. Please stand away from the doors.

A moment goes by and Sarah peaks her head out of the train and scans the platform. No one is there.

TRAIN ANNOUNCER

Please step away from the doors.

Sarah looks again; no one.

TRAIN ANNOUNCER

Please step away from the doors.

SARAH

Why aren't you closing!?

The doors close. Sarah takes a deep breath. At that moment, she sees the man with the Horn-rimmed glasses walk up the stairs towards the train. He walks directly to Sarah's car and the two make eye contact through the glass doors as the train pulls away. Sarah face goes white.

INT. TRAIN CAR (NIGHT)

Sarah is sweaty and pale. She checks her phone; the low battery beeps and the time reads 12:50. Sarah's eyelids become heavy, she lets them close for a moment only to jerk them back open. Just then, the car doors open and two transit officers walk into the train car.

SARAH

Fuck.

The officers walk directly toward Sarah, the only person in the car. They both look serious and stern, bordering on angry.

OFFICER 1

Ticket check.

SARAH

I totally forgot. I was in line and then I was going to miss my train...

OFFICER 2

You forgot or you almost missed your train?

SARAH

Both, I was initially going to buy a ticket but the booth was closed and then I missed the 11:10 train, like by seconds - you shoulda seen it, it was like a movie - ran up right as it was leaving. And then I was just... I was so stressed and kerfuffled I forgot to buy one for this train.

OFFICER 2

You probably would have made the train if you were not wearing such inappropriate shoes.

The officer looks down at Sarah's stilettos. Sarah's upbeat, relatable demeanor changes.

SARAH (SLURRING)

And you would look like less of a giant dick if you were not wearing that uniform but I guess to each their own right?

INT. TRAIN CAR (NIGHT)

Sarah looks down at the ticket in her hand.

INSERT: TICKET

FARE EVASION 12:51 \$119

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. She touches her nose and winces. Tears well in her eyes.

SARAH

You are almost home.

INT. TRAIN CAR

Sarah gathers her belongings, stands, and walks towards the door of the train.

TRAIN ANNOUNCER

Aldershot station. Doors will open on the right.

The doors open and Sarah peeks her head out and sees a dark and empty train platform. She turns her head the other way and sees the same thing, in the distance however, is the shadowy figure of a sole person standing in front of a set of stairs. The stairs she needs to take. She waits a moment and squints towards the shape, she can't make out much, just that it is a person standing still. She hesitates...

TRAIN ANNOUNCER

Please step away from the doors.

SARAH

groans

Sarah waits a moment more, sticking her head out and straining her neck to get closer in order to make out what the shape is doing.

TRAIN ANNOUNCER

The doors are now closing. Please step away from the doors.

Sarah knows she must make her decision. She quickly jumps through the train doors onto the platform, dropping one of her bags as she does, the bag slips between the train and the platform, spilling its contents and itself onto the tracks.

SARAH

No, no, no, no, no!

The doors close and the train speeds away. Sarah's belongings have been thrown under the train. A hair brush, a change of clothes, makeup and sunscreen litter the tracks, some of the items have been runover. Her phone rests directly on the metal rails - it is still intact. Sarah quickly turns her head toward the stairs where the shadowy figure stood: it is gone. She looks around again and sees nothing and no one, just a half-darkness and a set

of street lamps trying to fight the darkness. They are losing the fight. Sarah puts down the rest of her bags and gets on her knees. She outstretches her arm and reaches for her phone. Her fingers are close but do not make it to her phone. She shimmies her body closer to the tracks and tries again. Her fingers touch the phone but cannot grab it. At that moment a train from another track honks its incredibly loud horn. Sarah's scared and tense body jerks at the sound and she almost slips off the platform onto the tracks but instead she gets close enough to grab her phone and pull herself fully onto the platform. She looks down at her scraped and bloody knees and then towards the stairs. She pulls herself up, grabs the rest of her belongings, including her phone and slowly begins to walk down the dark platform towards the stairs. Her high heels click and echo as she walks.

EXT. TRAIN STATION PLATFORM (NIGHT)

Sarah slowly and cautiously approaches the stairs, the streetlight above her flickers and then goes out. She hesitates at the top of the stairs and peaks down them, she sees no one. Sarah sprints down the stairs, her heels wobbly but she manages to stay on her feet despite her speed. She gets to the bottom of the stairs and keeps running down a long, underground corridor. Her heels continue to create an echo. Suddenly there is another sound; another set of feet are running in this corridor - creating another echo. Sarah turns her head to see who is behind her, she stumbles but catches herself and keeps running. No one can be seen but the footsteps continue. Sarah reaches another set of stairs and takes them by twos. When she reaches the top, she sighs with relief at the sight of other people standing in a line for a bus. She looks back, down the stairs and sees no one. We see Sarah from security camera footage and she looks down at her phone screen.

INSERT: PHONE SCREEN OPEN TO UBER APP

Where to?

Sarah clicks the icon and the word HOME appears - she taps the button and three options appear: UberPool, UberX, UberXL. An alert pops up on the phone screen: LOW BATTERY. Sarah dismisses the prompt and chooses the UberX option. 1 car icon appears on the phone, signifying it is 4 mins

away. Sarah touches her screen on the CONFIRM UberX prompt.
The screen changes:

YOUR CAR IS A CHEVROLET TAHOE LICENSE 4BC FA2

Sarah stands by the group of people waiting for the bus and
looks out the glass windows of the station.

INT. UBER (NIGHT)

Sarah sits in the back of an uber staring out the window,
she looks nervous, tired and distracted. Her eyes close for
just a moment before she jerks them open again.

UBER DRIVER

Long day?

SARAH

Pardon?

UBER DRIVER

You okay? You look ...

SARAH

Oh... yes. I am okay, just tired. How about
you?

UBER DRIVER

Oh I just started. You on your way home?

SARAH

Ya. So you drive all night then?

UBER DRIVER

It depends on how busy it is and how I am
feeling.

SARAH

I see. Nice to work on your own time
frame.

UBER DRIVER

Oh definitely, but uber takes too much of a commission, they are always changing it, its always going up.

SARAH

Ya I have read about that. That is bullshit.

UBER DRIVER

How about you? What do you do?

SARAH

Uh...

Sarah exhaustingly thinks of what might be the easiest thing to say in this moment, but decides all she can muster is the truth.

SARAH

A bunch of stuff really. I was on a reality tv show.

UBER DRIVER

No way! Which one?

SARAH

Big Brother Canada.

UBER DRIVER

How much do you get paid for that?

SARAH

100k if you win.

UBER DRIVER

And if you don't?

SARAH

70 bucks a day.

The uber driver pauses a moment.

UBER DRIVER

Huh, not bad.

SARAH

Definitely not bad, it was more than I was making at the time that's for sure. But it's also about \$1400 hundred dollars less than the day rate for union actors.

UBER DRIVER

Really? Actors make that much? In Canada?

SARAH

Yup.

UBER DRIVERS

Drivers need a union.

SARAH

Right?!

The driver lingers at a stop sign, changing the radio station, The White Strips song, Take, Take, Take plays from the speakers.

SARAH

I don't mean to be annoying but I am kind of in a hurry to get home to my dogs.

UBER DRIVER

Heard my friend.

The driver takes off from the stop sign with some speed.

UBER DRIVER

I have a dog myself. My kids have been on me for years so I finally caved. It's part of why I am driving now, someone needed to be there in the day to train the little terror. So, I definitely understand.

SARAH

Dad of the year award goes to you!

To Sarah's relief the rest of the ride happens in silence. As the car comes to a stop, Sarah is ready to exit.

SARAH

Thank you so much.

Sarah jumps out of the car and jogs towards her front gate before she can hear the driver's response. The car drives to the end of the street and turns right, disappearing. As she gets to her gate, she notices it is ajar. In that moment Sarah hears two dogs barking. She breaks into a run towards her front door. It is also ajar. Without hesitation Sarah runs into her house.

INT. SARAH'S HOUSE (NIGHT)

The only light source in the room comes from the snail aquarium in the corner which has been shattered and lays upon the ground. Snails, some crushed and some living are splayed across the floor. Two massive monitor lizards surround the tank, when they see Sarah walk in the door they begin to hiss and moan, it's a loud, deep and chilling noise. One lizard crushes a snail in between its teeth. From shock and fear, Sarah falls back onto the floor. The lizards move toward her. Dogs can be heard faintly barking from a distance. Sarah looks around the room. In the corner of the room she sees a camera with a flashing red light activated. The camera sits on a tripod. At that moment, a human figure stands out from behind the camera and tripod. The person is wearing all black from head to toe, including a balaclava which covers their face. Sarah screams and tries to stand up as the lizards move closer to her. She cannot steady herself to stand and continues shuffling on the floor. The camera operator picks up the tripod, with the camera still attached, and bends one of the tripod legs forward. A blade attached to the end of a tripod leg gleams in the light reflected from the smashed aquarium. The camera operator lunges towards Sarah with the blade jettied straight at her. We see Sarah through the lens of the camera as the blade comes closer to her and she struggles to get on her feet.

SARAH

Screams

The Camera cuts to a black screen with text written on it.

INSERT: SCREEN WITH TEXT

LIVE FEEDS ARE CURRENTLY DOWN.

FADE OUT:

THE END