

Unwind Me

by

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EXT. A POETIC VISUAL OF A COLLEGE CAMPUS - DUSK

We PAN ACROSS buildings made out of red bricks, mortar and white marble, and grassy lawns littered with brightly colored chairs washed by the last rays of sunlight.

Darkness descends. Windows start lighting up, framing the reel of college life in its inexhaustible variety.

EXT. A MONTAGE OF WINDOWS - NIGHT

CLOSE ON a few windows and PULL OUT: Someone giggling while watching The Office... A heated cerebral debate in English and Hindi... Screams of "Rat!!"... Music pounding... A lone voice memorizing Organic Chemistry terms... Someone sobbing "Matt, please call me back, I love you!"... Someone shouting "Fuck you, Harvard!"... A buoyant, earnest chorus of "Amen".

All these drama and vignettes of vulnerability are merely one of the countless many that play out on this campus, night after night.

SUPERIMPOSE: Harvard University.

INT. LIBRARY CAFE - NIGHT

June (19, Chinese) is bobbing on her feet while in a queue, earbuds in. She is wearing a dress under a HARVARD hoodie, revealing two tanned, muscular legs. An athlete.

The cafe blanketed by a sluggish quiet, which is occasionally punctuated by the staccato notes of furious typing and the monosyllabic grunts from the dead-eyed, tired-looking barista behind the counter.

June stares at the back of the two heads lining up before her.

Her phone frantically buzzes. She furrows her brows and fishes it out of her pocket.

ZOOM IN on the lock screen with messages popping up:

- Missed Call (3)
- Mom: June, you have to call me back.
- Aren: are you coming??? are you asleep?!

She looks up. One boy left. June shuffles forward and looks back down at her screen.

- Gmail: Professor Tana

CLOSE ON: the words "the extension will not be allowed".

June abruptly stops bobbing and blinks. She looks up again, eyes desperate. It's her turn.

JUNE

Hi, can I get a latte please?

BARISTA

Sorry. Mm. We're closed.

JUNE

It's literally 12:59AM.

BARISTA

Mm. It's 1:01 on my watch. Sorry we all gotta sleep.

JUNE

(upset)

I NEED coffee.

(in defeat)

I have a paper due by 10AM.

INT. LIBRARY CAFE - MOMENTS LATER

June looks at the vending machine. Begrudgingly, she bends down and takes out two cans of Red Bull.

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM A - NIGHT

A still, waif-like silhouette stands in the darkness of the common room. We hear a mechanical hum. And then, her voice.

SILHOUETTE

(mumbling)

I'm okay, I'm okay. Not hungry, not hungry, ok, hungry..

CLOSE ON: the silhouette from the front. Meet Cecilia (19, white). Her face is lit by an orange glow. She is far too skinny, even in an oversized shirt and shorts.

The glow is from the microwave, heating up a plate full of fat meatballs.

DING! The microwave stops.

She takes out the plate and picks up a meatball with her hand. She then puts it down after a bite.

As she chews, she looks down the corridor at the three doors in the suite. Two are shut. The third one is left slightly ajar.

INT. ENSUITE BATHROOM

Cecilia turns the lights on in the bathroom. It's spacious and amazingly clean. In the fluorescent glare, her pallor is clear as day.

She quickly averts her eyes from her reflection in the mirror.

Mechanically, she scrapes the barely touched meatballs off the plate into the trash can.

MATCH CUT:

INT. A DIFFERENT BATHROOM - NIGHT

A different trash can, slick with liquid and brimming over with red solo cups. There are grating sounds of someone retching. But, apart from a chewed-out piece of gum and dribbles of saliva that fall into view, nothing else comes out.

With a wheeze, Aren (19, half-South Asian) pulls her head up from the trash can. PULL OUT to see her kneeling on the dirty concrete floor of a bathroom. She takes a few gulps of air. Her lips are chapped and her eyes puffy.

She scrambles up towards the sink. We can see her from head to toe now. There's an edge to her: she's wearing a tight-fitting black dress, with a leather jacket, and black boots.

She takes a hard, long look at her reflection. Her knuckles grips the edge of the sink hard, turning white.

AREN

(gingerly touching a pimple)

Yikes.

She splashes some water on her eyes, heaves a sigh, but hesitates. Carefully, reverently, she applies lipstick. The bold red shade that makes her look slightly garish, but still undeniably pretty.

She reaches for her phone by the sink. The lock screen

displays the time of 1:10AM. She swipes it open to text JUNE, thumbing several messages.

AREN (TEXT)

i'm going back to the room now, so
don't bother coming.

i NEED to talk.

where have you been all day???

She slips the phone in her pocket and opens the bathroom door. The rumble of music pours out...

INT. DORM ROOM B - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

We follow Aren into the room. A party is still underway. The sweaty grind of bodies and thump of music shake the air.

People are huddled together in intimate, slurred conversations. Bodies are splayed out on the couch.

Aren weaves through the crowd. Faces swerve in and out of view. Some mumble her name or squeal out a greeting. She doesn't reply and heads towards the door.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Aren slams the door shut behind her, sealing the sounds. She leans against the door for a few breaths, hands stretched out, bracing herself.

Her fingers grope frantically for something to grasp onto. But, the wall is too smooth.

She starts walking down the hallway. Her steps grow more frenetic. SUDDENLY, she breaks into a run. She stumbles down the stairs, tearing through the door:

EXT. BUILDING STEPS - NIGHT

Aren bursts out through the entrance of an imposing Georgian building.

CLOSE ON: her face, her eyes are red.

A streetlamp gently washes her with light. She whips out her phone and starts dialing.

WOMEN'S VOICE

The customer you are trying to reach

isn't accepting calls.

She dials again.

WOMEN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

The customer-

Again.

WOMEN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

The cust-

Aren looks increasingly agitated. The lawn before her is barren of life. She tries to rein in her emotions, and then:

She explodes.

AREN

Matt!!! I HATE YOU!

A voice crashes down from several floors above.

VOICE (O.S.)

Shut up!!! Goddammit. It's 2 frickin'
AM!

Aren whips her head up. She is still brimming over with pent-up anger and is about to unleash it.

The distinct sound of a window being slammed shut pierces the night.

She stands there in the pool of light, defeated. She looks down at her stomach and gingerly pinches the barely visible rolls.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

June sits at a table in the library hall. There's one other guy snoring at the opposite end of the room.

June types slowly on her Mac keyboard. On the table, there is an empty can of Red Bull standing guard on each side of her laptop. Beside it lies her phone, vibrating with an incoming call from MOM.

A few moments as she wills the phone to stop vibrating. It doesn't. June takes a deep breath. Picks up.

JUNE

(bright)

Ma? Yeah, I'm still awake. Yes, I'm safe. I'm not drunk. Or kidnapped. Sorry I didn't pick up.

(lying)

Sure, I'm good. Yes, yes. I'm going to sleep soon.

A beat of silence. Her face buckles. She looks like she's going to lose it.

JUNE (CONT'D)

Love you, Ma. Good night.

She hangs up. Stares at the phone in her hand.

The screen lights up.

- Mom: Good night love. We were so worried.

June smiles to herself, but then it freezes.

- Mom: You are the pride of our family. Be responsible. Don't let us down!

Very slowly, she buries her face in her hands.

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM A - NIGHT

We hear the same, familiar hum.

This time, the microwave is heating up a paper plate of soggy fries.

Cecilia wanders over to the window and opens it. Then, she returns to her position before the microwave.

DING!

She takes the plate out and brings it into the room with the ajar door.

INT. CECILIA'S ROOM - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Cecilia turns on the lights.

CLOSE ON: a half-eaten sandwich on the desk, a days-old bagel by her bag, a haphazard stack of take-out boxes on the floor

containing food in different stages of consumption and decay, a kettle, a plate of crusty, crumbling cake, and a pile of instant macaroni and cheese cups spilling out of a CVS bag.

There's not much space for maneuvering.

She draws her knees towards herself by the foot of the bed, balancing the plate of fries on her kneecaps. She nibbles on a single fry.

Then, she stiffens. Something switches on her face and she gives the plate of yellow fries a deadpan look.

She gets up to her feet.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

June is still typing on her laptop.

JORDAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Oh wow, hey June.

June looks up from her screen, startled. It's Jordan (20, Hispanic), with dark circles under his eyes. She's happy to see him.

JORDAN (CONT'D)

We keep seeing each other at ungodly hours. First at the shelter, now at the library.

There's a beat before she processes what he is saying and replies. She looks lost.

JUNE

I know! Wait, what time is it?

She checks the digital time displayed on her laptop clock: 2:33AM.

JUNE (CONT'D)

Gosh, I haven't slept at all in more than forty hours.

JORDAN

Since the overnight shift?! Man, that's tough. Even I took a seven hour-long power nap...

June says, wistfully:

JUNE
That sounds so good.

JORDAN
Are you still feeling okay? I mean,
people don't really sleep much around
here, but even then forty hours is a
bit much.

JUNE
Yeah, I think so. I'm okay.

She gives a small wave.

JUNE (CONT'D)
(sadly, under her breath)
Actually, I don't know. I don't know.

But, she sees that Jordan has already turned away. The CAMERA TRACKS AWAY with him, leaving June alone at her table, getting smaller every second. Looking very lonely and scrunched up.

CUT TO:

EXT. BUILDING STEPS - NIGHT

Aren is sitting on the stone steps, the dormitory looming unfeelingly behind her.

She takes out a cigarette, fumbles around in her pockets to find a lighter, and inexpertly lights it.

She chokes on the smoke upon inhaling and starts coughing. Tears start welling up in her eyes.

Then, as she stares with loathing and disgust at the cigarette between her fingers, tears begin streaking down her face. She starts addressing the cigarette, sarcastically at first:

AREN
So I'm too fat for you?
(hiccups)
Well, you are a big effin' idiot,
Matt. I'm not fat, you hear me?
(trembling)
Why don't you see that anymore? Why
don't you see that I'm right? Am I

right?

CLOSE ON: her face. The tears keep falling.

CUT TO:

INT. CECILIA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Lights are off. Cecilia is lying on her bed, her face lit up by the blue glow from her phone screen.

She is looking at photos of food on Instagram. It's 3:17 AM.

One after another, on her screen:

- A gorgeous Eggs Benedict topped with smoked salmon.
- A plate of golden lobster roe noodles.
- A warm bowl of Pho topped with generous slices of beef.

Her thumb pauses in its scrolling. Swiping, she clicks 'Photos' and then 'Favorites'.

She taps on a photo.

It's a piping hot, golden, gooey bowl of Mac and Cheese, held by a middle-aged lady with crinkly eyes, who is candidly laughing. A gentle, effervescent photo.

Cecilia takes a ragged breath, and then says with a smile in her voice:

CECILIA

Oh gosh, Mom. You look so dumb here.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

JUNE

(mouthing)

Yes!

June exhales. It's 4:55AM. The tension leaves her body as she sprawls on the chair and throws back her head to stare at the ceiling. She has finally finished her paper. Her eyes are in a daze.

She looks absolutely, thoroughly, unspeakably exhausted.

JUNE (CONT'D)

(muttering)

Why do people glorify this? I've never
felt crappier.

She closes the tabs on her laptop. Pauses on the open
Facebook page. It's her own profile.

ZOOM IN on the cover photo: June, beaming, wearing a HARVARD
2021 shirt and proudly holding up a letter.

She breathes in hard. Slams the laptop shut.

More wearily, she packs her things and stacks the four empty
cans of Red Bull in a teetering tower.

JUNE'S P.O.V.:

Her hands try to keep the tower of cans in balance. We hear
the sound of heartbeat. Padam. Padam. It gets weaker.

She blinks a few times. Sudden patches of darkness. June is
breathing, breathing, BREATHING.

The vision gets blurry.

We hear a CLACK of two hard things knocking against each
other. Then, jarringly, the RATTLE of cans falling all over
the ground like metal marbles.

Everything TURNS TO BLACK.

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM A - NIGHT

A different darkness, offset by dim moonlight.

We hear the same, familiar hum of the microwave. Cecilia
blocks our view of the microwave.

Abruptly, she looks towards the main door. There's the sound
of the key turning in the lock.

The door opens to reveal Aren. She, in a habitual act, turns
on the light. Under the light, she looks strangely collected
despite her exhaustion. Her eyes are bloodshot and framed by
dreadful dark circles, and her face taut and greasy.

Their eyes meet.

Aren tenses up when she sees Cecilia. She looks like she wants to turn around and walk back out. She gives a bold, slightly irreverent stare that manages to convey: do you have a problem?

Cecilia freezes before the microwave. She looks like she's caught red-handed in the middle of some misdeed. A deer in headlights kind of look. She awkwardly gives a nod.

AREN

Hi. Up so late?

CECILIA

Yeah... I was feeling hungry.

AREN

Oh, me too.

CECILIA

(hesitantly)

Back from a party?

AREN

Yeah. It was fun.

Silence spreads across them, viscously.

Cecilia looks like she's about to say something. Aren sniffs the air like she smells something. Cecilia averts her eyes, guiltily.

When Cecilia looks back up again, Aren has already turned into her room.

AREN (CONT'D)

(from inside her room)

Night.

The first door shuts with a click.

CUT TO:

INT. AREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Aren collapses onto her bed, which is against a wall decorated with photos in a heart arrangement and Yayoi Kusama posters. She sits up and starts tearing photos down, throwing them on the floor.

AREN

Oh, what the hell.

She gets up and takes a pair of scissors. Starts cutting herself out from the photos.

She takes those cut-outs to her desk and surveys the shelf full of books. She picks THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS and A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN and slides the cut-outs into their pages.

AREN (CONT'D)

Ta-da.

She gathers the remaining heap of photos with gaping holes, all featuring a boy who must be Matt, and dumps them into a trashcan.

The light goes off.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY - DAWN

June slumped on the floor, motionless. The first rays of sunlight seeps through the library windows, cradling her.

CLOSE ON: June's face covered in sweat.

In the distance, footsteps. They hasten.

SOMEONE (O.S.)

Hey! Hey! Are you okay?

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM A - LATE MORNING

Aren paces around in the common room. She eats an apple. She knocks on the second door.

AREN

(loudly)

June? You in there?

The third door opens. Cecilia comes out looking like a walking wraith, yawning. Aren turns towards her.

AREN (CONT'D)

Hey, did June come back last night?

CECILIA

I... I don't know.

AREN

I've tried texting and calling her.
But she's not reachable.

CECILIA
(awkwardly)
Oh.

Aren furrows her brows.

CUT TO:

INT. DORM ROOM A - LATER IN THE AFTERNOON

Cecilia is eating from a takeout box in the common room. She has a pensive expression on her face.

Aren bursts out from her room, through the first door. She pauses when she catches sight of Cecilia.

AREN
(a slight smile in her voice)
You're always eating.
(suddenly accusatory and a bit sad)
But, you're still so thin. How? You
know what, just ignore me.

Cecilia stops mid-chew and just stares at Aren. She mumbles with her mouth full of food:

CECILIA
(unclear)
But you're so healthy. I wish I was
pretty like you.

AREN
What?

Aren walks over to Cecilia.

Cecilia swallows with a gulp and says, bravely:

CECILIA
I wish I looked like you. You're
beautiful.

Aren laughs.

AREN
(disbelievingly)
Really.

CECILIA

I mean it.

AREN

Oh. Thank you, Cecilia.

Cecilia withers under the genuine gratitude in Aren's voice. Her courage now gone. She quickly looks down at her lap, staring at some invisible hole on her shorts.

AREN (CONT'D)

Hey, do you want to talk?

Quiet. Cecilia looks up from her lap, surprised.

CECILIA

Talk?

AREN

About life and stuff.

Cecilia blinks.

AREN (CONT'D)

You know, I've seen the food in the bathroom and how often you eat. Are you okay?

CECILIA

'Okay'?

Aren shoots her a look that says 'duh'. Cecilia seems to be making up her mind. Finally:

CECILIA (CONT'D)

(Breathily, slowly)

I'm not okay.

Aren eyes her searchingly.

A beat. Cecilia turns her entire body towards Aren.

CECILIA (CONT'D)

(earnestly)

You? You've been eating a lot less, I noticed. And you don't seem as... happy.

Aren looks cornered. She backpedals:

AREN

Wait, let's talk about you first?

Cecilia just stares at her.

AREN (CONT'D)
(defensively)
What?

Aren struggles to smile breezily, but it looks like she's going to cry. Finally:

AREN (CONT'D)
Fuck it. Me too. I'm so not okay-
(hiccups)
-you can't even imagine.

Cecilia looks shocked.

AREN (CONT'D)
So, my boyfriend broke up with me. Remember Matt? No? Right. Ok. He's been telling me I've been looking kinda fat for a while. I know that's just an excuse for him losing interest, but still it hurts. It's so STUPID. I read all these books about strong female characters who don't give a fuck about men, and here I am, more insecure than ever.

CECILIA
(stunned)
Wow.

AREN
But, I've had enough. Last night, I thought about it and realized that I didn't need all this negativity in my life. I tried changing so much for this guy who never did love me anyway. So, I'm going back to loving myself, or at least trying to.

Awkward silence.

CECILIA
Thank you for telling me this. You just always look so confident, I didn't know...

AREN

Ha, everyone looks great here. At least on the surface. It's basically the duck syndrome. Everyone's gliding effortlessly on the water blah blah, but our feet are all paddling real hard below.

CECILIA

But...aren't there people like June?

AREN

Oh, June's an exception. I don't know how she does it. All the rowing, five classes, homeless shelter, AND internship applications.

CECILIA

I wish I could do that. I've just been so homesick that-

(voice breaks)

It has been really hard.

Cecilia starts to cry. A few awkward, silent beats between them before Aren moves in to pat her. And then Aren pulls Cecilia in for a hug.

INT. HOSPITAL - AFTERNOON THE SAME DAY

June's eyes open.

Her pupils dart around. She tries to turn her head. She realizes that she can't move her neck, secured with a protective brace.

We PAN ACROSS the sparse and functional hospital room.

A big-boned middle-aged Chinese woman sits beside the bed, texting. Meet June's mother, Auntie Wu.

JUNE

Er...

Auntie Wu's face enters her vision.

JUNE (CONT'D)

(a croak)

Ma?!

Auntie Wu tries to look happy. They stare at each other for a few beats. Almost disapprovingly, heartbreakingly:

AUNTIE WU

Oh, June. I couldn't believe it when I saw you like this. How could this have happened to you of all people?

June looks away.

AUNTIE WU (CONT'D)

You might have to take some time off from school, the doctor says.

JUNE

(staring at Auntie Wu)

What? Wait, what exactly happened to me? How serious is it?

AUNTIE WU

You had a concussion when you fainted from exhaustion. It's not the most serious, but you will have to be away from school...

JUNE

For how long?

AUNTIE WU

For two weeks. To recuperate. Your dean will be coming later to discuss.

June is silent. She breaks eye contact with Auntie Wu and stares at the ceiling. Not looking at Auntie Wu:

JUNE

(slowly, painfully)

I know what that means.

Auntie Wu takes a ragged breath. She is visibly distraught but tries to hide it.

AUNTIE WU

(agitatedly)

We don't know it yet. Maybe they won't force you to take time off. This can't happen to you. What will everyone think? I will tell the dean.

June closes her eyes.

AUNTIE WU (CONT'D)

June? Say something. June!

June's eyes are still closed. The room is tense. They are silent for a prolonged moment, before, seemingly out of nowhere:

JUNE

Ma, you remember how much I wanted to get into Harvard?

AUNTIE WU

(a beat)

Oh yes. You were always so driven. Even as a child, you were the best.

JUNE

(almost to herself)

The day I got my admissions letter, I was so happy I thought I would never be unhappy again. That nothing could beat me down. Ever. Because I was validated by the best school in the world. I was good enough. I was the best.

Something is leaking out from beneath June's lashes.

JUNE (CONT'D)

I still remember that feeling, sometimes. That feeling of all my dreams coming true in one moment. Of being handed the keys to the kingdom.

More tears are now streaming down June's face, her eyes still shut. Her voice continues, strangely steady, but if we listen carefully enough, it's slowly unravelling with each word:

JUNE (CONT'D)

Then, when you called me, Ma, I was sitting in Lamont, struggling to finish a paper. To hold it all together. I tried to think back to that day, and I just couldn't remember. How did it become like this? Why am I here but feeling the shittiest I've ever been in my entire life? So, so inadequate. At Harvard yet not happy and never good enough. Nobody would possibly believe me.

June's body sags against the cushion, exhausted from the effort.

CLOSE ON: Auntie Wu's eyes are red and wide. She cups a hand to her mouth, as if holding back a sob.

MATCH CUT:

INT. DORM ROOM A - SOME TIME LATER IN THE EVENING

Cecilia's eyes are puffy but she is no longer crying. She looks relieved.

CECILIA

It feels good to say all these out loud...

AREN

Me too. God, I really needed to tell someone these few days. It's hard though because everyone's just so busy.

CECILIA

We do so much... But, I guess we don't really have much time for one another, do we?

AREN

We don't. But, hey, I'm really glad we had this roommates talk. June should really have been here with us.

(a beat)

Also. Where on earth has she been the past few days? I haven't seen her since two days ago.

CECILIA

Oh...gosh you're right. I'm usually in the room, but she hasn't come back at all.

AREN

I was planning to talk to June but she hasn't been replying to my texts. Or my calls.

Aren looks extremely concerned.

AREN (CONT'D)

Let me ask around. Oh God. Maybe we should go look for her.

CECILIA

Does she have any usual spots?

AREN
Lamont. The River.

CUT TO: MUSIC SWELLS

INT/EXT. MONTAGE

- At the library: Aren and Cecilia scans the crowded tables. They shake their heads at each other.

- By the river boathouse: Some rowing girls shrug and shake their heads as Aren and Cecilia ask questions.

- In the hospital room: We see June and Auntie Wu talk. They look at each other, kind of awkward, kind of emotional. No one breaks eye contact. We don't hear what they are saying, but something slow, fragile, and genuine is budding.

- Back in Dorm Room A:

CECILIA
(to Aren, tentatively)
You want some Mac and Cheese?

AREN
(surprised)
What?

CECILIA
Macaroni and Cheese.

AREN
(instinctively)
Oh! I really shouldn't. Thanks though.
(a beat)
You know what? Actually, yeah I would love some.

Cecilia smiles. Her eyes get crinkly.

INT. HOSPITAL - MORNING - A FEW DAYS LATER

A sunny song of longing (with CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' vibes) is playing in the room. The shadows of the fluttering curtains dance faintly across and sunlight seeps in like a soft, molten yolk.

June is reading a book. Her cheeks are rosier but the neck brace is still on. A KNOCK on the room door.

Auntie Wu gets up from the sofa and opens the door to reveal: Aren and Cecilia. They stand awkwardly, Aren holding some books and Cecilia holding a bag of Mac and Cheese cups.

June looks up, surprised. A slow delight takes root in her eyes.

JUNE

Hey. Aren! Cecilia!
(overwhelmed with feeling)
Wow, thank you, guys.

AREN

We've missed you, dummy.

CECILIA

(hopefully, hesitantly)
Hi June. Also, thank you.

Auntie Wu smiles in spite of herself, and gently shuts the door in our faces.

FADE TO BLACK