

MERLE

## SYNOPSIS

*Merle* tells the story of an ailing old man, tired of the end-of-life routine he has found himself in. One night, after another visit from his worrying daughter, Merle sneaks out and makes a few unlikely friends as he tries to find something about life to enjoy again.

INT. MERLE'S ROOM - DAY

The bedroom is bright, almost sterile. Next to the bed, an oxygen tank and some other various medical devices. A bedside table with a pillbox and thick coke bottle glasses.

In the bed is a withered, bony old MAN (MERLE, 94). His eyes are sunken, his nose massive and red, and his wispy hair only exists in patches now. He lies on top of the sheets, glaring at the ceiling.

A KNOCK. Merle closes his eyes. A NURSE (KIT, 36) enters with a MOTHER (LORIEN, 52) and DAUGHTER (ELLIE, 10). Lorien is carrying a massive purse, Ellie listening to music on her iPhone.

KIT  
(quietly)  
Merle? They're here.

Merle does not react. A beat.

LORIEN  
Dad? Dad?

KIT  
He's been sleeping a lot lately,  
maybe we ought to--

LORIEN  
It's okay. I'll look after him.

KIT  
You sure?

LORIEN  
Yes, you're free to go.

KIT  
Alright, I'll just be in the other  
room. If that starts beeping  
(points at a device)  
just call me in.

LORIEN  
I know. Thanks, Kit. You've been  
such a help.

Kit leaves the room. Lorien pulls up a chair to Merle's bedside. Ellie stays in the corner of the room.

LORIEN (CONT'D)

Dad?

(touching Merle's hand)

Dad?

Merle pretends to wake up, eyes fluttering open.

LORIEN (CONT'D)

Hey Dad. It's me. It's Lorien.

Merle grunts.

LORIEN (CONT'D)

I brought Ellie. Ellie, can you  
come say hi?

Ellie doesn't hear.

LORIEN (CONT'D)

Ellie? Ellie.

(sighs)

Well, we were just actually in  
town. Keith's sister's son is  
getting married in two weeks so we  
thought we could come by. We'll be  
staying with her, so we'll only be  
ten minutes away if you... well if  
you need anything or want anything.  
We could bring dinner? Would you  
like that?

Merle gives no response.

LORIEN (CONT'D)

Alright, we'll bring dinner. How  
does Monday night sound?

Merle turns over in the bed.

INT. MERLE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Merle lies in bed, unchanged except for the old striped  
pajamas. He tosses for a few moments, then hits a small  
button on the bedside table. A soft BUZZ echoes from outside  
his room. Merle waits.

Nothing. He presses it again. BUZZ. Nothing. More  
impatiently, he presses the button a few times.

Merle grumbles and rolls out of the bed shakily, grabbing his  
glasses from the table. He can walk, but slowly, and gripping  
to the walls and tables. He slowly makes his way out the  
door.

## INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Merle stutters into the room, a small living room and attached kitchen. On the couch, Kit is asleep, sprawled out in an exhausted slump. Merle gives him the stink eye and makes his way to the sink.

He fills up a glass of water and drains it slowly. Looking over at the door, he spots his folded up wheelchair.

He takes another long look at Kit, SNORING away.

## EXT. RURAL ROAD - NIGHT

Merle is wheeling himself down the middle of the country lane as fast as he can. He looks behind a few times as his small house shrinks in the distance. For the first time, Merle looks alive.

## EXT. CROSSROADS - NIGHT

Merle is running out of steam as he approaches the intersection. The only building out here is a "QwikMart" gas station. The flashing 24 hour sign illuminates Merle's face.

## INT. QWIKMART GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER

Merle wheels up to the electronic doors which slide wide open for him. Inside is an average dingy convenience store, manned by one tired, scrappy teenager (ANNIE, 19). She doesn't look up from her phone.

Merle tries to wheel in, but gets stuck on a bump in the doorway. As he backs up, the doors begin to close. He waves his hands to open them again, and then wheels back in.

Again, he can't cross the bump. Frustrated, he grunts. The doors close on both sides of the wheelchair, opening again after making contact. Merle doesn't back up, but instead tries to power over it.

The chair tips backwards, and almost in slow motion, Merle topples backwards out of the chair, letting out a garbled SHRIEK. Annie looks up from her phone just as the doors attempt to close once more. She runs over to see what happened.

EXT. QWIKMART - CONTINUOUS

Sprawled on the concrete outside the station, Merle attempts to gather himself.

ANNIE

Whoa, dude. You okay?

She grabs his arm and helps him up, until Merle shakes her off. He's breathing heavily.

MERLE

I'm fine, I'm fine.

Annie stares.

MERLE (CONT'D)

What? I fell. I'm old, old people fall all the time. In between bingo and wetting the bed.

A beat.

ANNIE

Are you sure you're okay? Should I call someone?

MERLE

No, I don't need anyone. I'm fine.

Merle staggers into the store, shoving the wheelchair out of the way of the ever vigilant electronic doors. Annie follows.

INT. QWIKMART GAS STATION - CONTINUOUS

Annie walks back to her post behind the counter and goes back to her phone, glancing at Merle every so often.

Merle browses up and down the aisles of junk food, candy, and soda. At the magazine rack, he finds a tabloid with the headline "REAL ELVIS DEAD AT 85: Star in hiding's final battle with pancreatic cancer!"

He returns it to the shelf.

Annie slowly raises her phone to sneak a quick picture of Merle, and writes on it "Another graveyard shift weirdo" and puts it on her snapstory.

Merle has walked back near the front, and grabbed a pack of Salt and Vinegar chips. He puts it on the counter. Annie warily scans it.

ANNIE

Two dollars ten cents.

Merle reaches in his pocket and grabs three loose dollar bills. Annie takes them and give him the change as the receipt prints out.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

Would you like your receipt?

Merle shakes his head. She throws the receipt away.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

Have a nice day.

She goes back to her phone. A beat.

Merle slowly opens the bag of chips. Annie looks back up, surprised he's still there. He pops a chip into his mouth.

CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH. A beat. He pops another chip in.

Annie watches Merle as he eats another chip, CRUNCHING loudly. And another chip. And another one. This is excruciating for Annie. Merle just looks at the chips.

After the fifth chip, Annie pipes up.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

Are you just going to eat those here?

Silence. A few small CRUNCHES as Merle finishes his chip.

MERLE

Am I not allowed to?

A beat.

ANNIE

(sighing)

I guess you're allowed to.

Merle goes back to eating the chips without hesitation. He crunches through several more as Annie tries to ignore him on her phone.

MERLE

(mouth full)

What're you watching?

ANNIE

What?

MERLE

What're you watching on your phone there?

ANNIE

I-- I'm not watching, I'm playing. I'm playing a game.

MERLE

Uh-huh.

(pause)

How do you play?

Annie gives an "are you serious" look. Merle doesn't even notice, crunching another chip. Annie gives in and puts her phone on the counter where Merle can see.

ANNIE

You're trying to line up as many blocks of the same color as you can. You switch them around by tapping, and you have to have three to make a match.

MERLE

So it's like Bejeweled.

ANNIE

I-- what?

MERLE

It's basically Bejeweled, isn't it?

ANNIE

Yeah. You played Bejeweled.

MERLE

I'm not ancient, I had a phone.

ANNIE

Yeah, well, basically you just-- yeah, it's exactly like Bejeweled.

MERLE

What level are you on?

ANNIE

Umm, two-hundred and thirty-one.

MERLE

Lots of slow shifts here.

ANNIE

Usually.



Merle reaches back into his pocket and pulls out the change.

MERLE

Do you have anything here that costs ninety cents?

He smiles. Annie smiles back.

INT. LORIEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Lorien lies facedown on a pullout bed. Ellie is asleep on the discarded couch cushions on the floor.

Lorien's cell phone RINGS. She groggily rolls over and grabs at it. The bright screen blinds her as she answers.

LORIEN

Lorien?...Yes?... No he's not-- he what?!

INT. QWIKMART GAS STATION - NIGHT

Merle and Annie are both sitting on the floor behind the counter now, eating from another bag of chips. Annie has her phone in front of the both of them.

ANNIE

Okay, in this one you're this snake, and you're trying to eat the other snakes on the map. But you can only eat the smaller snakes.

MERLE

How do you get bigger?

ANNIE

You have to eat the little dots. See, like that. And then you can tap this to boost, but it makes you smaller.

MERLE

And you're playing with real people?

ANNIE

Yup.

MERLE

At one in the morning?

ANNIE

Well, they're probably from all over the world.

MERLE

Hmm...

The doors slide open and a young, well dressed teen boy with a duffel bag jogs in confidently, like he does this a lot. This is NOAH (18).

NOAH

Annie? Are you in tonight?

Annie's eyes widen and she bolts up.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Oh hey! We confiscated a bunch of stuff tonight and I was wondering if you wanted to go out back and--

At this point, Noah has made it to the counter, and sees the top of Merle's head, absorbed in the game.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Is that-- Am I interrupting something?

ANNIE

No! No. This is uh-- this is a friend I made tonight.

NOAH

Uh-huh. A friend...

Noah points at Merle, and then makes a finger gun, pretending to rob Annie. Annie shakes her head. Noah makes the sign for crazy. Annie shakes her head to this too. Noah shrugs, and Annie shrugs back.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Excuse me, uh, Annie's friend--

MERLE

Hold on a second.

Noah shuts up, surprised. Merle plays on until he's finally defeated.

MERLE (CONT'D)

Shucks.

He slowly stands up and gives the phone back to Annie.

MERLE (CONT'D)

That's a hard one. It's too fast.

NOAH

What?

MERLE

Oh, hi. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt anything.

An awkward pause.

ANNIE

Umm, this is my friend Noah. And uh, Noah, this is...

MERLE

Merle. Pleasure to meet you.

He reaches out his hand, and Noah warily shakes it.

NOAH

Pleasure to meet you too.

ANNIE

Well, Merle, do you have somewhere you're supposed to be right now?

MERLE

Nope.

ANNIE

Really? I mean, it's pretty late.

MERLE

I know. I just like to roam.

NOAH

Did you drive here? I didn't see a car.

MERLE

Nope.

Annie and Noah exchange glances.

NOAH

Do you need a ride somewhere? I can--

MERLE

Look, if I'm going to bother you guys, just tell me. I can go sit outside and find something to do.

Merle starts to walk out from the counter.

ANNIE

No, it's not that it's just-- we're curious, that's all.

MERLE

Well, if you want to be curious any more, I'll be out there.

Merle grabs his wheelchair and drags it through the doors. They slide shut behind him. Noah turns to Annie.

NOAH

Is he cool?

ANNIE

What?

NOAH

I mean, is he okay?

ANNIE

Yeah, he's cool. I think. He just seems kinda lonely, you know?

NOAH

All old people seem lonely. It's the droopy faces.

Noah pouts his lips and sags his eyes.

NOAH (CONT'D)

See?

ANNIE

Whatever. I just-- I feel kinda bad for him, you know?

NOAH

Yeah, me too. He doesn't look well.

ANNIE

He fell out of his wheelchair when he came in.

NOAH

He what?

ANNIE

Yeah, and then he just ate a whole bag of chips in front of me. He seems lost. And sad.

NOAH  
 (thinks)  
 You know what would cure that  
 sadness?

Noah grabs the duffel bag from the floor and sets it on the counter.

NOAH (CONT'D)  
 Eh? Eh?

ANNIE  
 No way.

NOAH  
 Oh come on, who's he gonna tell?

Annie bites her lip.

EXT. QWIKMART - MOMENTS LATER

Merle sits in his wheelchair on the corner of the store, looking at the ground. Noah and Annie come out with the duffel bag.

ANNIE  
 Merle? Merle?  
 (spots him)  
 Umm, this might be weird but  
 (pause)  
 Do you want to light some fireworks  
 with us?

Merle looks up.

EXT. BEHIND THE QWIKMART - NIGHT

CLOSE-UP

Noah's hand strikes a match near a fuse and lights it. PULL BACK as Noah runs away from a comically huge firework drum.

Noah joins the others near the dumpster, some fifteen feet away when the firework goes off. And boy, does it go off.

Immediately several rockets SCREAM into the air, and EXPLODE in a shower of red sparks. A few more launch, this time showering blue. The last wave is also the biggest as several gold rockets shoot up and shimmer back down. Noah yells and dances in triumph; Merle and Annie clapping and laughing.

NOAH  
 Lady and gentleman, lemme tell ya.  
 You ain't seen nothing yet!

Noah practically skips out there to light another one.

MERLE  
 I've never seen fireworks like that  
 here. Where did he get them?

ANNIE  
 Noah works as a junior police  
 officer, and they usually  
 confiscate a lot of illegal  
 fireworks around this time of year.

MERLE  
 These are illegal?

ANNIE  
 Well...

NOAH  
 (running back)  
 Hey now, you better not narc on me,  
 Merle.

MERLE  
 Me? I would never.

He holds his hand up to swear to it.

NOAH  
 Good, because this one definitely  
 shouldn't be lit so close to a gas  
 station LET'S GO!

This firework is a loud firecracker that rockets around the  
 back lot, spewing curling trails of fire left and right.  
 Merle wheezes laughing as Noah dances up close playing  
 chicken with it.

MERLE  
 I liked that one!

ANNIE  
 Me too, do more of those.

NOAH  
 If you liked that one, you're going  
 to love what I have planned next. I  
 call this the Noah Tipperman All-  
 in-One Fires-of-Hell Chain Reaction  
 Inferno!

Noah pulls out three massive fireworks and begins tying the fuses together.

ANNIE

Now wait a second.

NOAH

Come on, this is the grand finale.

ANNIE

Grand finale? You've still got like, half the bag left.

NOAH

Exactly. Half a bag's worth of grand finale material.

Noah starts placing the other fireworks in the arrangement.

ANNIE

No way dude, we're not lighting a bonfire of illegal fireworks outside my work.

NOAH

It'll be fine. Besides, this is special! We want to give Merle a show right?

Merle turns to Annie, pleading.

ANNIE

Are you trying to give me puppy dog eyes Merle?

MERLE

Is it working?

ANNIE

Ugh, fine.

NOAH

Yes! That's my man Merle!

ANNIE

Only because he says we can.

NOAH

Alright, since this is the grand finale, I'm going to need your help, okay? On the count of three, ready?

Noah strikes a match.

NOAH, MERLE, ANNIE  
Three, two,

MERLE, ANNIE  
ONE! NOAH  
Wait, shoot.

The match blew out. Noah drops it and strikes another one.

NOAH (CONT'D)  
Okay, now here we go.

NOAH, MERLE, ANNIE  
Three, two, ONE!

Noah lights the bundle of fuses and runs back to Merle and Annie who are cheering him on. He turns around as the first rockets start to go.

It's a symphony of light, color, and explosions. Piercing WHISTLES and thunderous BOOMS. Merle's face is radiant in the colorful glow. All the noise fades out apart from Noah and Annie cheering as his face breaks into a wide smile, laughing.

He laughs as another explosion reflects off his glasses, but he fails to catch his breath after. He breathes in, struggling. The smile disappears and he clutches his chest. He gasps for air.

The lights are still going, and Annie turns to see Merle's eyes close as he slumps down in his chair. Her eyes widen.

Merle catches another breath, smiles as the last firework explodes, and then slumps off the chair.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. MERLE'S ROOM - DAY

Merle is back in his bed, in fresh pajamas, hooked into a monitor and oxygen mask. Kit, Lorien, and Ellie are all standing by; Kit checking the monitor, Lorien biting her nails, and Ellie playing on her phone. Lorien jumps to the side of the bed as Merle's eyes flutter back open.

LORIEN  
Dad? Dad?

Merle looks at his surroundings, and sighs.



LORIEN (CONT'D)

Dad you had us so worried! I can't believe-- you left us in the middle of the night? Why didn't you wake Kit? Or call me? You knew I was nearby? You're lucky that boy at the gas station knew CPR or I don't know what would've happened?

Merle sighs and closes his eyes.

LORIEN (CONT'D)

I got the call in the middle of the night and had to get Ellie into the car with me. We went out searching for you for a whole hour in the middle of the night. I can't believe this.

Merle ineffectively swats at the oxygen mask. Kit takes it off for him. He breathes in deep a few times before looking right at Lorien.

MERLE

You only ever care about me when I'm dying.

Lorien frowns.

MERLE (CONT'D)

The only times you ever come by anymore is when I've had a fall, or I've got a fever, or some cold or something and their sure I'm on death's door.

LORIEN

I don't-- I don't know what to say to that, Dad.

MERLE

I'd appreciate it if every time you came around, I wasn't instantly reminded of my own impending mortality.

LORIEN

Impending mortality? Dad, you're ninety four, I think you need to be more considerate of your state.

MERLE

I know I don't have long to live,  
but damn it, I'd like to live out  
what I do have not worrying about  
taking every little pill on time,  
waiting for charity visits over  
dinner!

LORIEN

Charity visits? I drive halfway  
across the state to be with you--

MERLE

And I didn't ask you to!

Silence. Kit coughs.

KIT

Excuse me.

He gets up and walks out.

MERLE

I'm sorry.

LORIEN

I know.

MERLE

(pause)

I am fine. I am okay with it.

LORIEN

I know. I-- Maybe I'm not. Maybe  
that's why I want to be near. In  
case...

MERLE

In case.

Lorien wipes at her eyes and runny makeup.

LORIEN

I, uh, I'll be right back.

She leaves the room, wiping her eyes. Merle sighs. A long  
pause.

Merle looks over at Ellie, who is in the corner oblivious, on  
her phone.

MERLE

Ellie. Hey, Ellie. Ellie!

Merle waves his arms trying to get her attention to no avail. Finally, he grabs a hard candy from the side table and throws it at her, hitting her arm. She takes out her earbuds and looks up.

ELLIE

Huh?

MERLE

What're you playing?

ELLIE

What?

MERLE

What game are you playing?

ELLIE

Oh. It's uh, just a game.

MERLE

Have you played the snake game?

ELLIE

What?

MERLE

The snake game. Where you try to eat all the other smaller snakes? Come here, let's see if we can find it. I'm pretty good.

Ellie walks over and sits on the bed with Merle.

MERLE (CONT'D)

Wait, what's this game?

ELLIE

Umm, it's called Soda Dungeon.

MERLE

Soda Dungeon? What do you do?

ELLIE

Well, you send guys through dungeons to try and coins and stuff. And they fight monsters.

MERLE

Are those your little guys?

ELLIE

Yeah.

Ellie leans in closer and starts explaining the game in depth to Merle, both of them huddled over the iPhone in Ellie's hands.

FADE OUT.

THE END