

## **Page One**

### **SPLASH**

Welcome to the next year(s) of your life, Niko! I can't wait to summit this intimidating new mountain with you.

We're going to open in the present, or at least what will be the present when these first few pages are released by Substack: January of 2022. Our 40-something protagonist, VAL NORWICH (long story, but I changed her last name and some biographical details from my original pitch to you) is sitting by herself in the back row of a movie theater.

Originally from a middle-class family in suburban Ohio, Val has been (barely) carving out a living in New York City since she came to NYU for film school in the early 1990s. Happily childless, Val has been dating on and off for the last two decades, rarely with much passion or long-term success. Moderately overweight and grayer than she used to be, Val nevertheless carries herself with stylish confidence. Maybe she's got a youthful pink streak in her hair? As always, up to you, Niko!

Either way, Val seems to be looking *right at us* (her standard expression is one of understated interest) as she sits in a blood-red leather recliner like one of these: <https://static01.nyt.com/images/2021/05/30/arts/30movie-essay3/30movie-essay3-superJumbo.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp>

Dressed in jeans, boots, and a nice top, Val has left her bulky winter coat on the seat to her right (presumably for a friend), while the seat to her left has a crudely taped-over tear in its leather. Val's got a medium popcorn resting on her lap, but she's not yet eating.

Oh, and to help place us firmly in our (currently kind of lousy) real world, Val clearly has a blue SURGICAL MASK dangling from one ear.

No Text

## **Pages Two and Three**

### **DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD**

For what will eventually be our first page-turn, let's please cut BEHIND Val, so that the back of her colored hair is large in the central foreground of this spread.

I'm envisioning this fairly large theater having stadium-style seating, much like the one in this recent AMC commercial (scroll down to the end of this story for video): <https://deadline.com/2021/09/amc-theatres-national-tv-ad-campaign-nicole-kidman-1234828739/>

The two (off-panel) entrances to this theater are in the wings off to the sides, and there's only one emergency exit to our right of the screen. In other words, in case of catastrophe, Val will have no easy escape from her seat at the very back of this theater.

For now, we can see what Val is looking at on the big screen, a static welcome message from our (fictional) movie theater: **NYC'S VILLAGE VIII WELCOMES YOU BACK TO THE MOVIES!**

There are about A DOZEN OTHER SOCIALLY DISTANCED PEOPLE already in their seats or just arriving in the still-undimmed theater. Here are some general suggestions, Niko, but we'll only be seeing these people in this opening scene, so they can really look however you like. Whatever will hopefully be fun to draw (or at least not too torturous) for the next couple of pages! Anyway, some examples:

- \*A MALE LONER sitting by himself towards the front

- \*An older African-American HUSBAND AND WIFE

- \*A PREGNANT ASIAN WOMAN and her BOYFRIEND

- \*THREE MALE TEENAGERS, sitting together, but each staring at his own phone

- \*Two twenty-something GIRLFRIENDS, one of whom is wearing a traditional headscarf

- \*A HEAVYSET GUY and a SKINNY GUY, both who have just walked into the theater carrying snacks

These background players should be variously masked/unmasked/masks beneath their noses/etc., whatever you think feels right for each character, please. What's most important here will be your hopefully vibrant and diverse COLORS, as our palette is going to change significantly after this lengthy opening scene. More about that in a bit...

No Text

## **Page Four**

### **Panel One**

I'm picturing these next three horizontal panels all being similarly sized, page-wide, "letterbox" panels. First up, this is a nice shot of a happy Val, as she eats some popcorn with her right hand, while thumbing her clunky, wallet-encased iPHONE with her left hand.

No Text

### **Panel Two**

Next, cut to the slightly CRACKED SCREEN of Val's phone, as she sends the following message, which appears as two blue word balloons. And Niko, I don't know how you feel about this, but I actually think it looks better (or at least more organic) when artists attempt to HAND-LETTER in Apple's font instead of cutting and pasting actual text. Sorry, just trying to make your life as difficult as possible!

1) iPhone Text Message: Got here early, grabbed us seats in the last row so we won't get coughed on Outbreak-style.

2) iPhone Text Message: Feels awesome/fucking insane to be back in a theater!!

### **Panel Three**

Now we're again behind Val in the foreground of this shot, looking over her shoulder as she glances up from her phone and smiles at the two girlfriends she spies tenderly KISSING each other in their seats.

3) SFX of Val's Vibrating iPhone (from just off): *vnnn vnnn*

## **Page Five**

### **Panel One**

Cut to a close-up of the iPhone screen and its evolving conversation. These two GRAY WORD BALLOONS appear below whatever portion of Val's sent BLUE WORD BALLOONS we can see above them.

- 1) iPhone Text Message: oh
- 2) iPhone Text Message: shit

### **Panel Two**

Cut to Val's silent reaction, concerned.

- 3) SFX of Vibrating iPhone (from just off): *vnnn vnnn*

### **Panel Three**

Back on the cracked screen, two more texts from this mystery doofus:

- 4) iPhone Text Message: got my nights mixed up, now stuck at office.
- 5) iPhone Text Message: we'll pull off that second date yet, promise! *[Niko - Please insert winking emoji with tongue sticking out here.]*

### **Panel Four**

Cut back to Val, now understandably fucking PISSED.

No Text

## **Page Six**

### **Panel One**

We can see Val's thumbs furiously typing in the following (not-yet-sent) message:

- 1) iPhone Text Message: DUDE. ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING M
- 2) SFX (of typing): *taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap*

### **Panel Two**

Cut back to Val, as she closes her eyes, takes a deep breath.

No Text

### **Panel Three**

And now a blinking cursor starts DELETING that previous message...

- 3) iPhone Text Message: DUDE. ARE YOU FU|
- 4) SFX (of text being deleted): *tktktktktk*

### **Panel Four**

...and then, still on the phone's screen, we see a simple little THUMBS UP "tapback" pop over the man's last gray text balloon, decisively ending the conversation: <https://discussions.apple.com/content/attachment/bcf073ae-b768-4735-ad99-25e43f2dec61>

- 5) SFX (of Thumbs Up bubble being added): *-pop-*

## **Page Seven**

### **Panel One**

Another page with three tiers, starting with this letterbox profile shot of Val, alone in her otherwise empty final row, glumly setting down her popcorn on the empty seat next to her.

No Text

### **Panel Two**

These next two panels can be next to each other on the page's second tier. First, we're in front of Val, as she slyly checks to her right (our left) to make sure no one is watching her.

No Text

### **Panel Three**

Similar framing, but now Val subtly puts a little white wireless Apple AirPods-thing in the ear facing us as she checks her left (our right).

No Text

### **Panel Four**

And finally, for this last widescreen shot, cut down to what's now on Val's cracked iPhone screen. Her browser is open and set to private mode, and she's just opened the orange and black mobile homepage way too many of our readers will instantly recognize as PORNHUB (and I encourage you to please use their actual logo, etc., instead of creating a distractingly fake-sounding site). We can already catch a glimpse of a surprisingly explicit ad for PENIS ENLARGEMENT underneath the PornHub banner.

No Text

## **Page Eight**

### **Panel One**

With apologies to my mother (and maybe our new employers), we'll really be going for it with these next few panels! But I think it's important we show exactly the kind of images literally millions of people around the world are discretely looking at right now.

First up, Val types three words into a search bar with a little magnifying glass next to it:

1) ALL CAPS text typed into search bar: AMATEUR COUPLES REAL

2) SFX (of typing): *taptaptaptaptaptap*

### **Panel Two**

We're close on Val's screen as her thumb scrolls past EXTRAORDINARILY GRAPHIC IMAGES of consenting adults doing more or less what's being described in the titles beneath these images, starting with the first one Val will skip past: "POUNDING OUT THE WIFEY IN GARAGE, SHE SQUIRTS EVERYWHERE"

No Text

### **Panel Three**

Followed by the next (somewhat misspelled) title that the algorithm has selected to show us, accompanied by a shockingly graphic P.O.V. image: "REAL employe sucks off boss and gets creampie!!"

No Text

### **Panel Four**

Finally, she lands on a promising clip, a relatively chaste image of a topless woman straddling a naked collegiate male inside of a cheap-looking apartment, all over this description: "My dumb boyfriend gives himself a charley horse during sex"

No Text

## **Page Nine**

### **Panel One**

Similar framing to last shot, but now that image of the fucking couple changes slightly as Val's thumb presses PLAY, causing the video to come to life.

1) Tailless balloon (of video): *...nggh, you like that?*

### **Panel Two**

Cut to this close-up of Val, quietly transfixed by the off-screen images casting faint illumination across her face.

2) Tailless balloon (of video): *Yeah, but wait a sec.*

### **Panel Three**

Cut back to a close-up of the video, as the naked woman reaches out towards us/the couple's camera.

3) Tailless balloon (of video): *I want to shoot your face while I ride you.*

### **Panel Four**

Cut to Vals' LAP, as she subtly moves her free hand between her legs, touching herself over her jeans.

4) Tailless balloon (of video): *No one wants to see that, babe.*

## **Page Ten**

### **Panel One**

Cut to this close-up of the porn clip's laughing young man from his lover's point of view, as he tries to hide his face.

1) Tailless balloon (of video): *Come on, show me your pretty smile, cumslave.*

### **Panel Two**

Cut to this close-up of Val's unmasked mouth, as she subtly bites her own lower lip.

2) Tailless balloon (of video): *Jesus Christ...*

### **Panel Three**

This last shot of the porn clip is an almost impressionistic close-up of the young man's eyes, as he looks right at us/the camera.

3) Tailless balloon (of video): *...you are so fuckin' weird.*

### **Panel Four**

Cut to an extreme close-up of Val's eyes, which WIDEN as she suddenly hears some unexpected sound.

4) SFX (from off): *boom*

## **Page Eleven**

### **SPLASH**

And now we cut down to the front of the theater for a big establishing SPLASH of as much of our assembled crowd you can fit into this shot.

We should definitely see the LONER GUY in the front row, and we can just barely see Val all by herself way in the background. Every single person in the theater seems at least mildly concerned about the increasingly loud noises coming from below (perhaps the theater beneath them?).

- 1) SFX (from off, growing louder): boom badoo BOOOM

BACKSTORY

## Page Twelve

### **Panel One**

Push in on the three teenagers, who are trying to act tough.

- 1) Teenager #1: Dang, yo.
- 2) Teenager #2: What's playing downstairs?
- 3) Teenager #3: I dunno, but we should be watching **that**.

### **Panel Two**

Cut over to the suddenly concerned Loner, who's slowly getting to his feet.

- 4) Loner: No.
- 5) Loner: Those sounded real.

### **Panel Three**

Change angles for this shot of the Loner trying to persuade the nearby Girlfriends, who are also starting to get up. They both look skeptical, and one of them is already gesturing for the rest of the theater to remain in their seats.

- 6) Girlfriend #1: Bullshit.
- 7) Girlfriend #2: Everybody, stay calm, we don't need to get **trampled** 'cause of this fool.
- 8) Loner: Trust me, I'm a vet...

### **Panel Four**

Cut back to a horrified Val, who's taken out her AirPods to listen to this increasingly troubling debate.

- 9) Loner (from off): ...and someone in this building just fired off **live rounds**.

## **Page Thirteen**

### **Panel One**

Cut over to the Pregnant Woman (calmly talking on her cell phone) and her more freaked-out Boyfriend.

- 1) Boyfriend: So this might be, like, gang activity?!
- 2) Boyfriend: We gotta call—
- 3) Pregnant Woman: Yeah, 911 has me on hold.

### **Panel Two**

Cut over to a keyed-up Heavysset Guy and a more cautious Skinny.

- 4) Heavysset Guy: Screw that, let's get out of here!
- 5) Skinny: And go where?
- 6) Skinny: We're on the top floor!

### **Panel Three**

We can be looking over the shoulder of a still-silent Val, as she watches the Loner converse with the older African-American Husband.

- 7) Loner: He's right.
- 8) Loner: Even if we use the emergency exit, we risk running smack into whatever's happening down there.
- 9) Husband: Then we barricade the entrances!

### **Panel Four**

Change angles for this shot of the bickering African-American Husband and Wife.

- 10) Wife: How? All theater doors open **outward**. It's a law.
- 11) Husband: What are you, the goddamn fire marshal all of a sudden?
- 12) A New Voice (from off): Hey.

## **Page Fourteen**

### **SPLASH**

Smash cut to this terrifying full-figure image of our SHOOTER, who's just appeared at the front of this theater, presumably having entered from one of the off-panel normal entrances.

This dark-haired, clean-shaven, white male is roughly six feet tall and 25 years old. He's dressed in normal civilian attire... underneath a BULLETPROOF VEST with the phrase **#LEADERBOARD** clearly written on its front in bright yellow.

Also, he's wearing a logo-less, black, MOUSE EARS BASEBALL CAP not unlike this one: <https://www.amazon.com/Disney-Mickey-Toddler-Little-Baseball/dp/B08DH8X79F>

Most disturbingly, our Shooter is carrying in front of him a HYBRID TACTICAL SHOTGUN/RIFLE, specifically an ATI Omni .410 AR-15 like the one in this... colorful review: <https://www.firearmsnews.com/editorial/review-ati-omni-hybrid-ar-15-410/316579>, as well as some kind of SIDEARM holstered at his belt.

He looks right at us with an eerily blank expression, and says:

- 1) Shooter: Don't talk to her like that.

BACKSTORY

## **Page Fifteen**

### **Panel One**

Cut to this close-up of a horrified Val, who covers her mouth to scream in silence.

No Text

### **Panel Two**

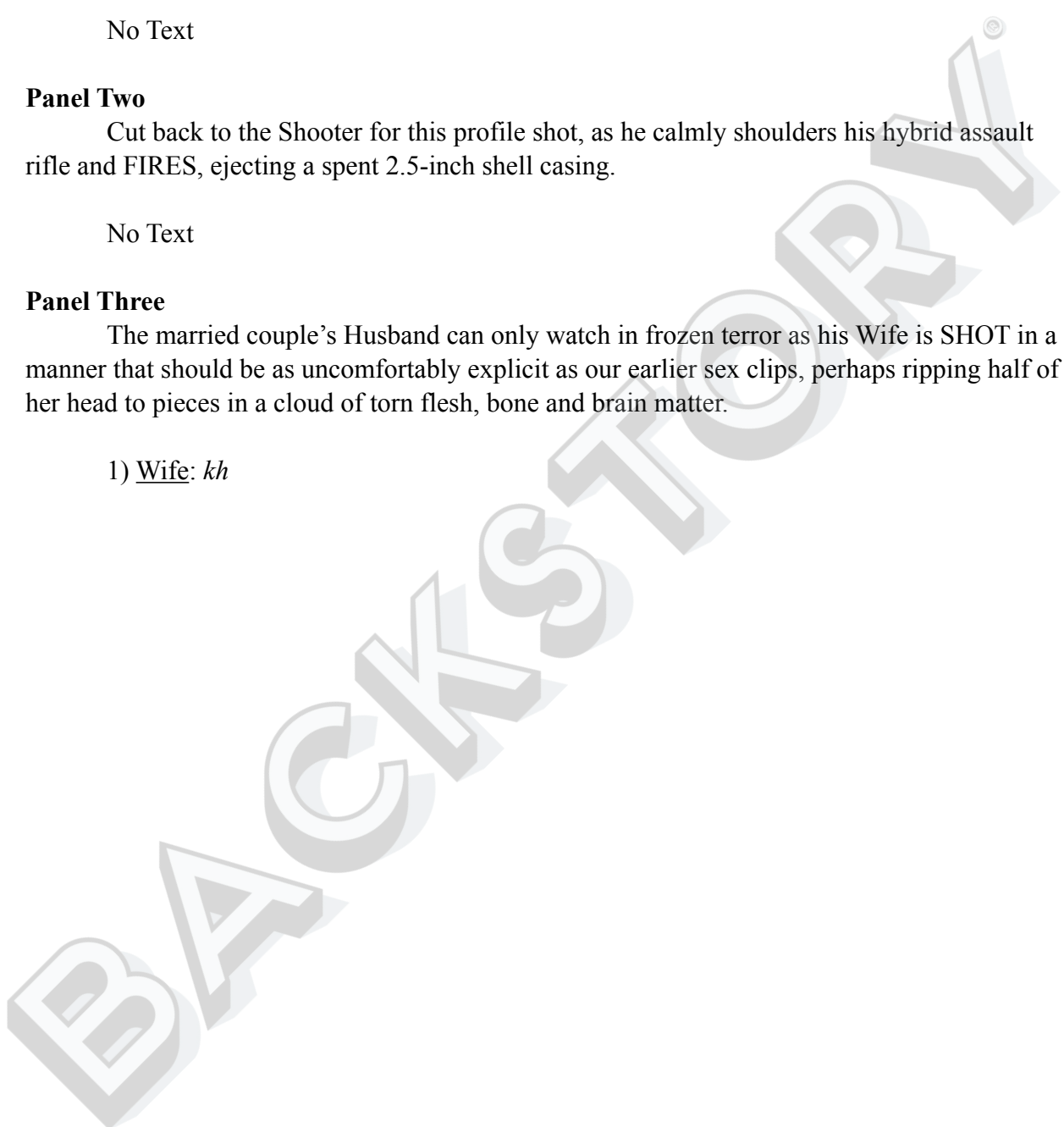
Cut back to the Shooter for this profile shot, as he calmly shoulders his hybrid assault rifle and FIRES, ejecting a spent 2.5-inch shell casing.

No Text

### **Panel Three**

The married couple's Husband can only watch in frozen terror as his Wife is SHOT in a manner that should be as uncomfortably explicit as our earlier sex clips, perhaps ripping half of her head to pieces in a cloud of torn flesh, bone and brain matter.

1) Wife: *kh*



## **Page Sixteen**

### **Panel One**

Change angles, as the Shooter then takes out all three Teenagers and both Girlfriends in one sweeping arc of his weapon, while the Loner fearlessly CHARGES at their firing attacker.

No Text

### **Panel Two**

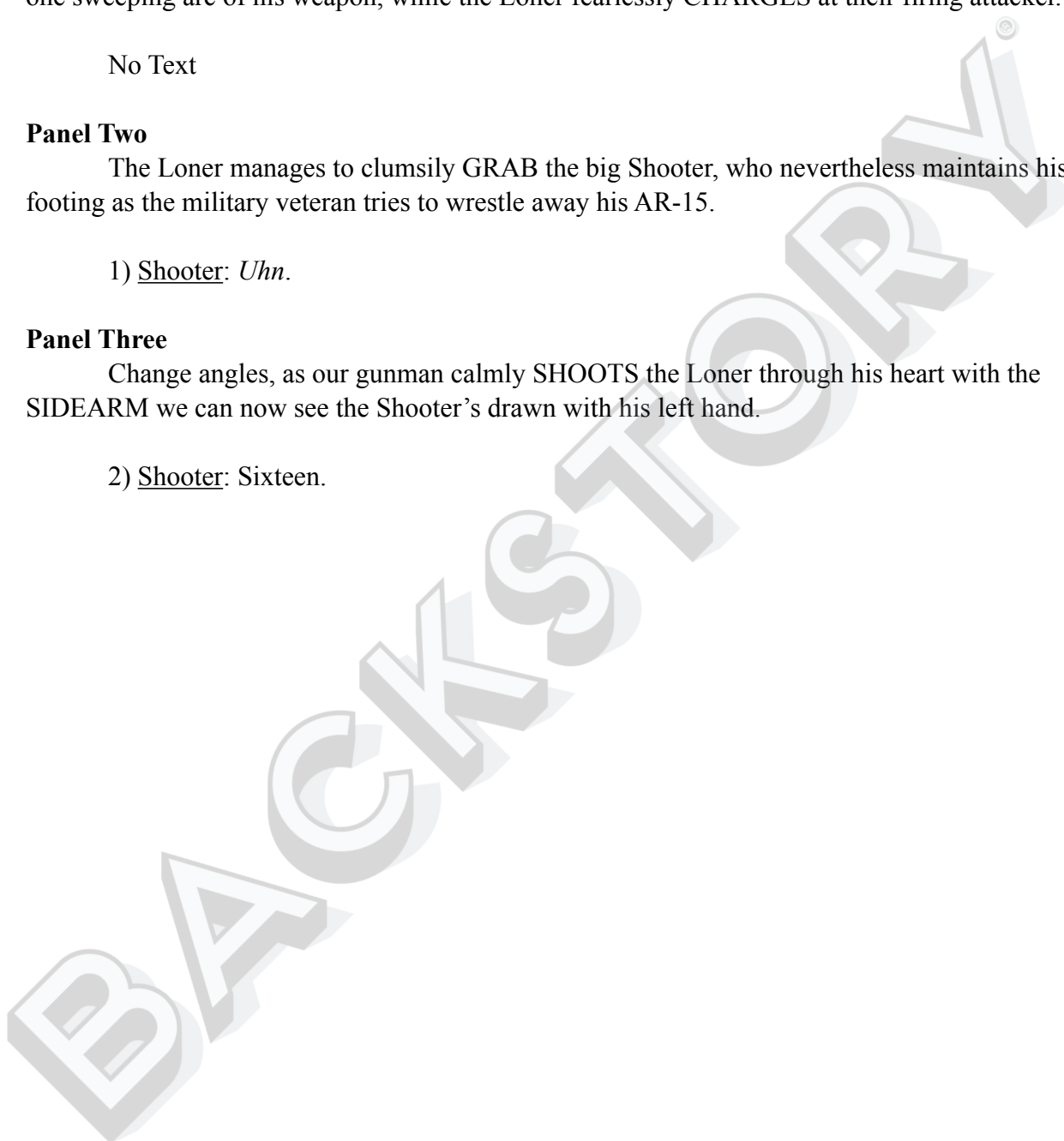
The Loner manages to clumsily GRAB the big Shooter, who nevertheless maintains his footing as the military veteran tries to wrestle away his AR-15.

1) Shooter: *Uhn.*

### **Panel Three**

Change angles, as our gunman calmly SHOOTS the Loner through his heart with the SIDEARM we can now see the Shooter's drawn with his left hand.

2) Shooter: Sixteen.



## **Page Seventeen**

### **Panel One**

Pull out to reveal that any survivors (except Val, who we can't yet see) are scattering and screaming, as the Shooter brutally takes out Heavyside Guy and Skinny.

- 1) Shooter: Seventeen.
- 2) Shooter: Eighteen.

### **Panel Two**

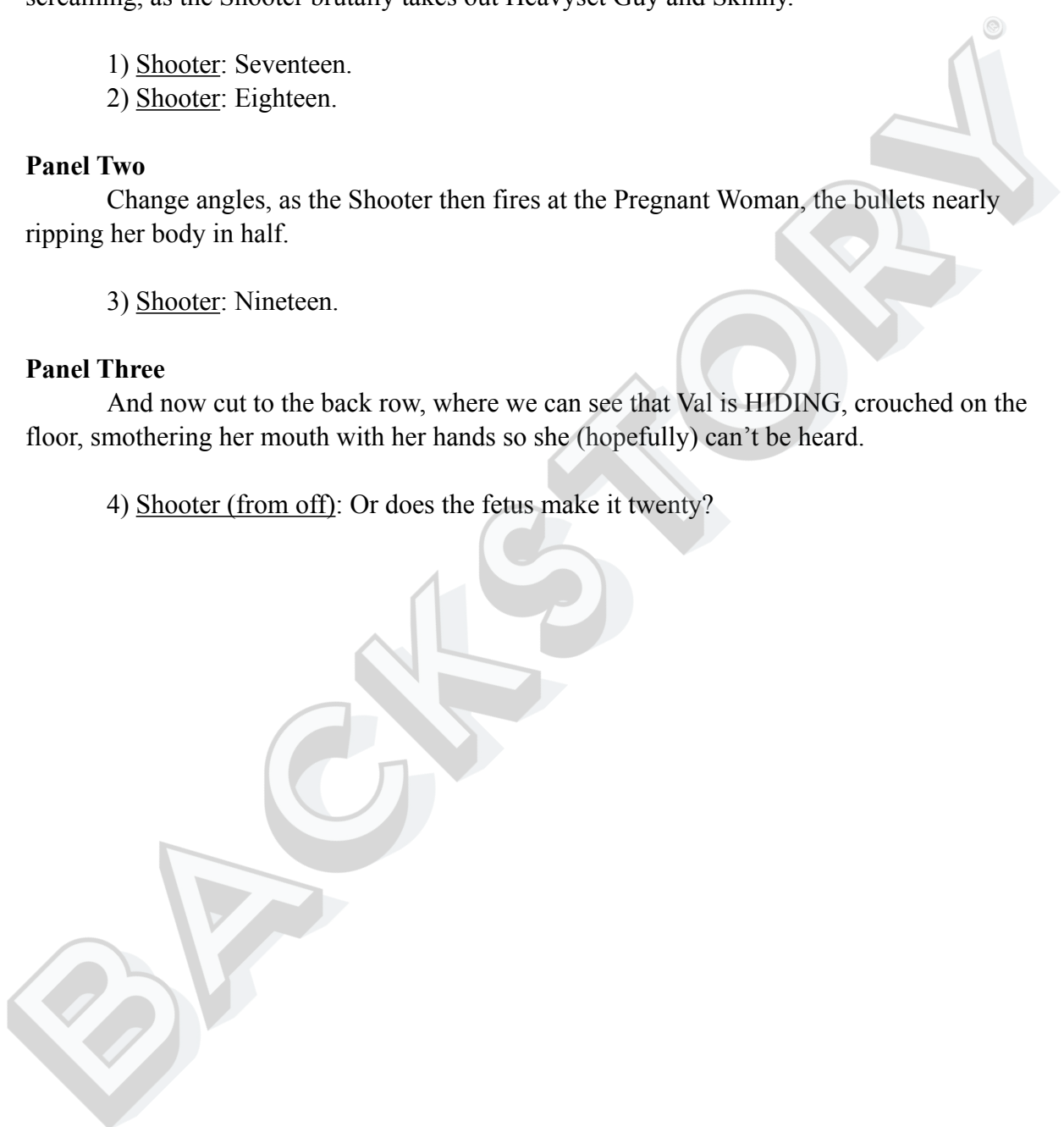
Change angles, as the Shooter then fires at the Pregnant Woman, the bullets nearly ripping her body in half.

- 3) Shooter: Nineteen.

### **Panel Three**

And now cut to the back row, where we can see that Val is HIDING, crouched on the floor, smothering her mouth with her hands so she (hopefully) can't be heard.

- 4) Shooter (from off): Or does the fetus make it twenty?



## Page Eighteen

### **Panel One**

Cut back to the Shooter, as he surveys his horrid work, calmly replacing his sidearm in its holster. All of the moviegoers (except for Val) are DEAD, their bodies strewn over seats/each other/etc. across the theater.

No Text

### **Panel Two**

Change angles, as the Shooter turns to leave...

- 1) Shooter: Anyway.
- 2) Shooter: Guess I should be heading out...

### **Panel Three**

...but instead stops in his tracks to look back at the seemingly empty last row.

- 3) Shooter: ...just kidding.
- 4) Shooter: **Lady in the back**: don't make me come up there.

### **Panel Four**

Cut to the back row, as a terrified Val slowly rises from behind the seats, her hands raised in surrender, to finally speak her first dialogue of this story:

- 5) Val (smaller font, whispered): Please.
- 6) Val (smaller font, whispered): Please don't kill me.

## Page Nineteen

### **Panel One**

Pull out to a profile shot of these two characters, as a trembling Val tries to open a dialogue with the Shooter, who just calmly RELOADS a fresh 15-round clip into his weapon.

- 1) Val: My...my name is Val, and I'm a **human being**.
- 2) Val: I, I, I write recaps of tv shows for a living. Like, like *Stranger Things*? Do you watch *Stranger Things*?

### **Panel Two**

Push in on Val, starting to cry as she struggles to justify her existence to this stranger.

- 3) Val: I'm begging you.
- 4) Val: My parents. My brothers. My **bird**.
- 5) Val: I...I help take care of a—

### **Panel Three**

Cut to the Shooter, who doesn't even make eye contact with the off-panel Val, just keeps looking down at his AR-15.

- 6) Shooter: How the hell did Paddock rack up sixty-one?
- 7) Shooter: Pimp's high score is crazy.

### **Panel Four**

Cut back to Val, as she quietly utters her final word:

- 8) Val (**smaller font, whispered**): Sorry?

**Page Twenty**

**SPLASH**

Pull out for this nightmarish full-figure shot of Val, as her body is eviscerated by a volley of hellfire.

No Text

BACKSTORY

**Page Twenty-one**

**Panel One**

Val's lifeless body COLLAPSES backwards onto the blood-red recliner.

No Text

**Panel Two**

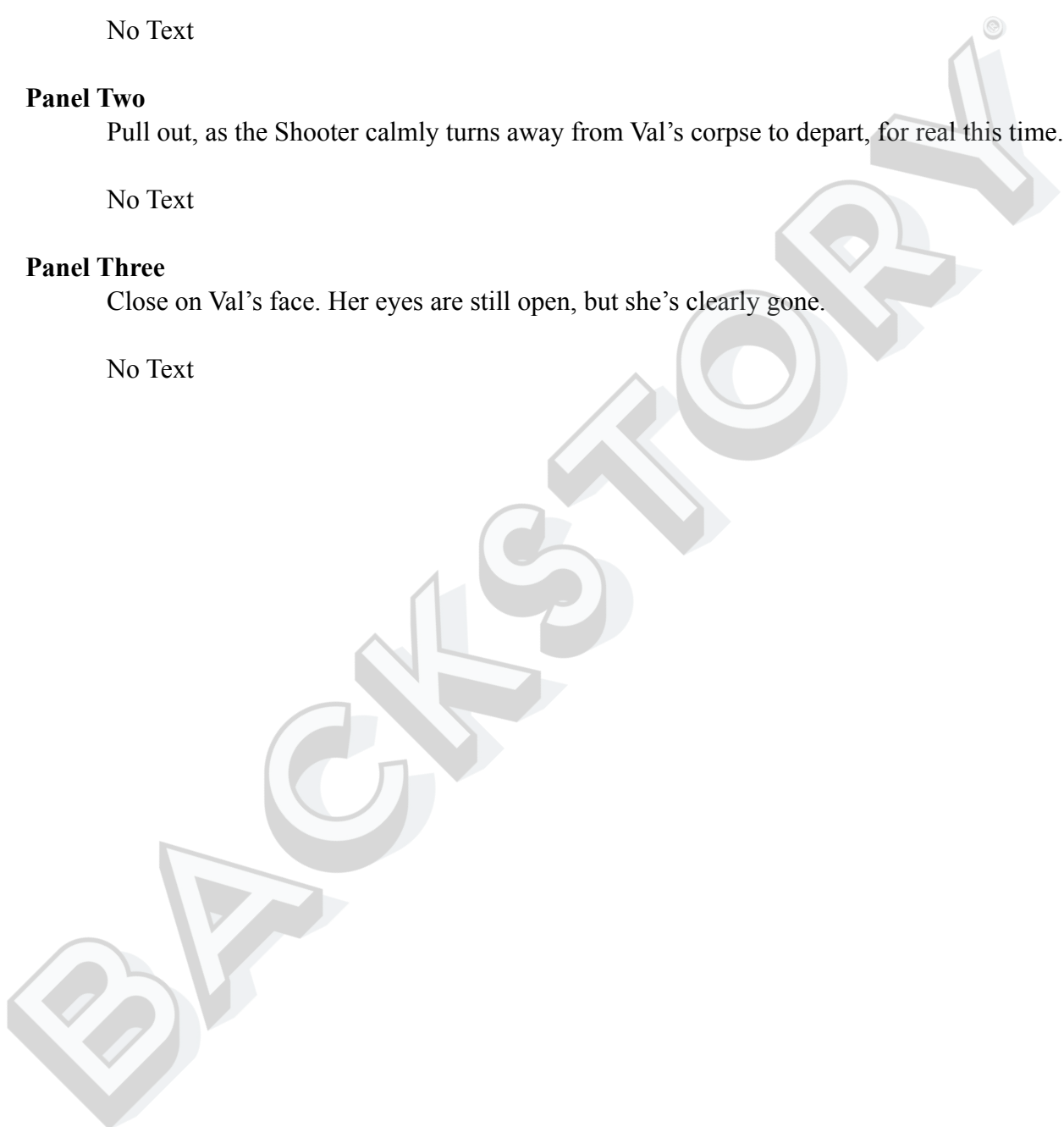
Pull out, as the Shooter calmly turns away from Val's corpse to depart, for real this time.

No Text

**Panel Three**

Close on Val's face. Her eyes are still open, but she's clearly gone.

No Text



**Page Twenty-two**

**Panels One through Four**

These four panels should all have the exact same framing (you can even use the same stat image over and over, Niko!), a strangely beautiful shot of Val's lifeless body.

In each panel, the color gradually DRAINS from Val's corpse and clothes, until in the fourth panel, she's entirely BLACK AND WHITE.

No Text Throughout

BACKSTORY

**Page Twenty-three**

**Panels One through Four**

These next four panels are all a repeat of the panels from that last page, but now the color *also* drains out of Val's SURROUNDINGS, until the fourth panel is entirely black and white.

No Text Throughout

BACKSTORY

## Pages Twenty-four and Twenty-five

### **DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD**

And now for the money shot of our decadently extended opening scene. This is a profile image of Val's prostrate corpse (mostly on Page Twenty-two), as the Eels shirt-clad GHOST OF 20-SOMETHING VAL comes supernaturally BURSTING out of her still-cooling body (mostly materializing onto Page Twenty-three, I think?).

Most importantly, while 40-something Val's corpse and all of her surroundings remain in black and white, Val's ghost is in VIVID COLOR (as are all ghosts in our story, as we'll soon learn!).

Niko, I loved your suggestion of our story being at least partially in black and white, and I like this unexpected reversal. In comics, ghostly astral projections like Doctor Strange's are usually black and white, but we'll be doing the *opposite*, with ghosts being in color and the living world being in black and white.

This does mean that the entire far-flung future where we'll eventually be heading will also be black and white (another reversal of expectations, since black and white usually means the past!), but I actually think that could work really well for our story, so please let me know what you think about this possible direction...

No Text

BACKSTORY

**Page Twenty-six**

**Panel One**

Push in on Ghost Val, as she takes in her monochromatic surroundings with confusion.

No Text

**Panel Two**

Pull out, as the young woman looks down to see her own (older) corpse.

1) Val (*a ghost now, but her lettering hasn't changed*): No.

**Panel Three**

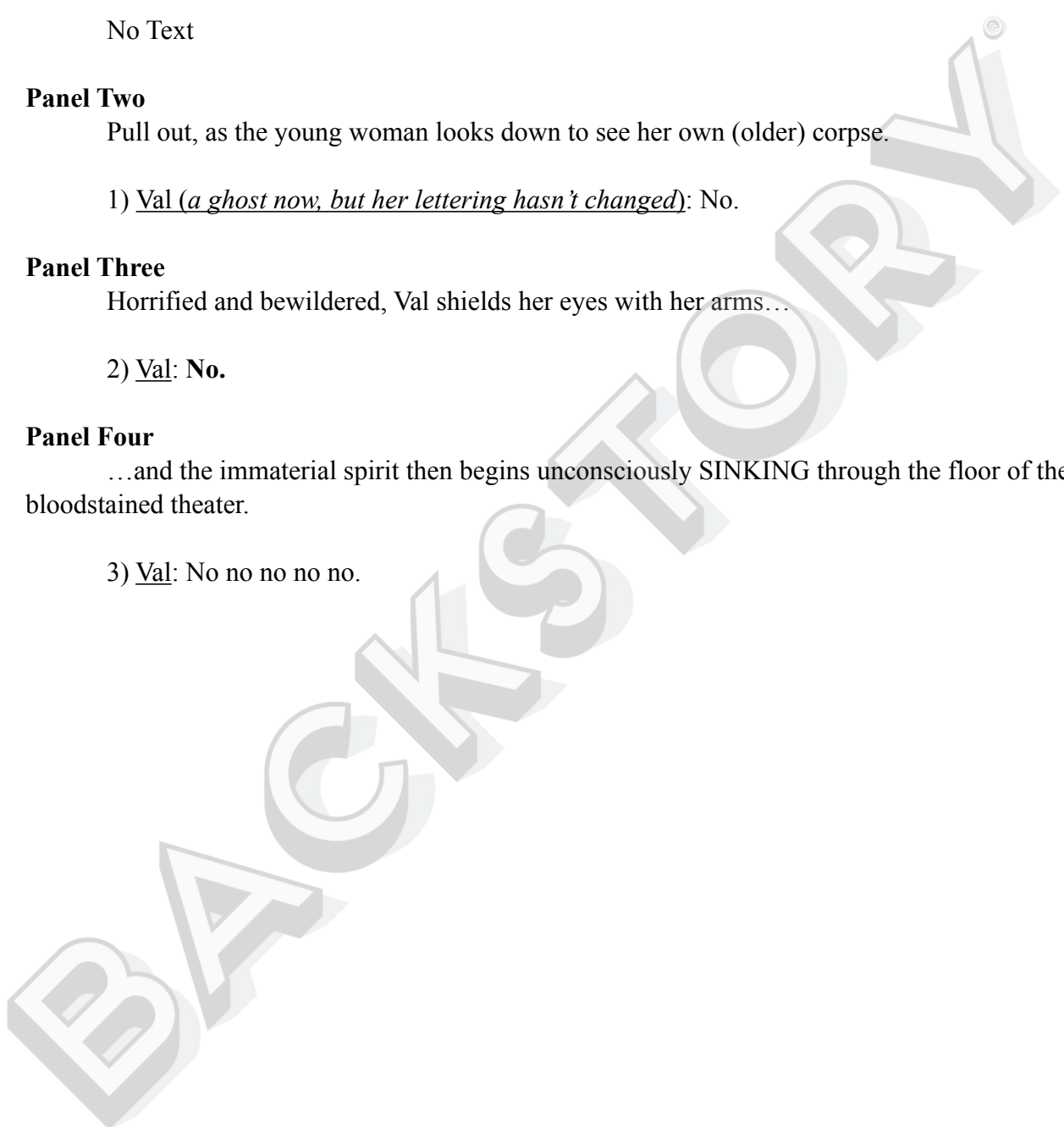
Horrified and bewildered, Val shields her eyes with her arms...

2) Val: No.

**Panel Four**

...and the immaterial spirit then begins unconsciously SINKING through the floor of the bloodstained theater.

3) Val: No no no no no.



## **Page Twenty-seven**

### **Panel One**

Cut to a well-lit hallway beneath this theater (a lightly fictionalized version of this multi-level cinema complex across from my old NYU dorm in Manhattan: <http://photos.cinematreasures.org/production/photos/118294/1424301427/large.jpg?1424301427>), as the lower half of Val's ghostly body DESCENDS from the ceiling.

No Text

### **Panel Two**

Pull out, as Ghostly Val drops into this hallway and suddenly and unexpectedly comes into contact with the SHOOTER, who's still stalking the black-and-white world of the living.

1) Val: ***FAHH!***

### **Panel Three**

Panicking, Ghost Val BOLTS from this assailant (who obviously doesn't acknowledge this specter's existence), running right THROUGH one of the towering glass panes overlooking Third Avenue.

2) Val: Help!

3) Val: Somebody, please...

### **Panel Four**

Cut OUTSIDE this building's sixth floor, as a bewildered Val tumbles *through* the glass and materializes in midair amidst a January SNOWSTORM, her seemingly levitating body almost parallel with the off-panel ground.

4) Val (**smaller font, a whisper**): ...help?

**Pages Twenty-eight and Twenty-nine**

**DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD**

Niko, I'm picturing us being kinda above and behind a dumbstruck Val in the foreground of this wide-angle overhead shot, maybe looking over her shoulder as she stares several stories down at what should feel dizzyingly far below: the snow-covered intersection of Third Avenue and East 11th St., where numerous LOCALS have gathered to watch as several contemporary NYPD VEHICLES finally skid to a halt in front of the besieged movie theater.

For now, only Val is in color, and everything else in this visually spectacular spread remains in glorious black and white, please.

No Text

BACKSTORY

## Page Thirty

### Panel One

Cut to this close-up of an absolutely transfixed Val.

1) New Voice (from off): How bad is it in there?

### Panel Two

Widen to this semi-SPLASH, our first reveal of *another* ghost (also in vibrant full color) standing in midair above and behind Val: a thirty-something, hourglass-figured Puerto Rican woman named LITA, who happens to be completely naked, except for a single black thigh-high stocking (of the “hold-up” variety; no garter belt necessary) on one leg.

Her hairstyle seems vaguely 1960s, but without other clothing, it’s hard to tell what era Lita might be from. Either way, this confident spirit seems more concerned about what’s just happened inside the theater than her own lack of attire. The whipping snow appears to pass right through her.

2) Lita: I don’t have the stomach to watch.

3) Lita: Not when it involves kids, you know?

*[I’ll pause here, Niko, but this will begin a new outdoor scene in the snow with Lita, who will help explain the “rules” of our ghostly realm (as the Shooter opens fire onto the street below). We’ll eventually transition to the New York City of our distant future—where Val continues to spectate—and finally introduce **SPOILER REDACTED**. But for now, feel free to call or write anytime with questions/concerns/complaints after you’ve had a chance to digest this first chunk. This is all still very new and pliable to me, so any ideas more than welcome, thanks so much!]*