HALF LIFE

Written by

Jett Bell

SHORT FILM
2026

FADE IN:

INT. DARKROOM - EARLY MORNING

Amber safelight. The smell of developer solution.

FIONA (18) slides a sheet of photo paper into the chemical tray. Images resolve slowly, the way a bruise comes up - gradual, certain.

This is how she starts most mornings. Before class. Before the city wakes. The darkroom is the only quiet she's found in New York so far.

She drops a new negative strip into the enlarger. Focuses. Exposes. Slides the paper into the tray.

A face begins to emerge from the white.

She goes very still.

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

EXT. CAMPUS - AFTERNOON

Fiona photographs a pigeon eating a pretzel off the sidewalk. Fully committed to the shot.

XAVIER
(nearby, watching the pigeon)
That bird is going to eat better than most freshmen this week.

She looks up. XAVIER (22, unhurried) watches the pigeon with genuine interest.

FIONA
Are you a freshman?

XAVIER
No.

FIONA
What year?

XAVIER
(a beat)
I'm not really enrolled. I use the library.

FIONA
You're a library squatter.

XAVIER
Independent scholar.

She laughs - short and real. He watches her laugh. There's something in it: someone who doesn't do it often, watching someone who does.

EXT./INT. VARIOUS - THE NEXT TEN DAYS

They walk the city. A film screening someone invited them to. Coffee from the cart by the east building.

(MONTAGE - quick, natural, light.)

Twice during this period, she raises her camera toward him and he turns away a moment before the shutter fires. Her hand pauses each time, sensing something that won't quite resolve.

INT. DINER - EVENING

Comfortable now. Fiona eats. Xavier has coffee in front of him he doesn't drink.

FIONA
You've never eaten anything when we're together.

XAVIER
I'm not hungry.

FIONA
Ever?

XAVIER
Some people aren't.

FIONA
That's not a real thing.

He looks at her steadily.

FIONA
You answer questions without answering them. Like you're used to people not pushing back.

XAVIER
(quiet)
Most people don't.

FIONA
I push back.

XAVIER
(there's a weight to it)
I know.

Beat. She studies him.

FIONA
Can I take your picture?

A pause longer than it should be.

XAVIER
No.

FIONA
Why not?

He looks at his hands. Something deliberate in the pause.

XAVIER
I just don't.

She lets it go. But she's looking at him differently.

EXT. STREET / INT. HIS APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sparse and still. Almost nothing personal. She's noticed this before - tonight it's heavier.

She photographs the room - shelves, a window, the fire escape. He watches from the doorway. There's a tiredness in him he isn't hiding as carefully.

She turns. Raises the camera. His back is to her. She fires the shot.

He goes very still.

When he turns, he doesn't look angry. He looks like someone who has been waiting for this.

XAVIER
Fiona.

FIONA
I'm sorry, I didn't-

XAVIER
(quietly)
Show me it later.

He means the photograph.

She checks the screen. Her expression shifts - something she doesn't have a word for yet.

FIONA
(barely audible)
Wrong.

XAVIER
Yeah.

A silence that fills the whole room.

FIONA
What does 'yeah' mean-

XAVIER
It means I know.

She looks at the photo again. Then at him.

FIONA
Xavier. What are you?

He moves to the window. Looks out at the street.

XAVIER
You should go.

FIONA
Tell me what I just photographed.

XAVIER
(long beat)
Something that shouldn't still be here.

FIONA
How long?

XAVIER
(barely audible)
A while.

She looks at the door. Then back at him, still at the window, back to her.

She puts the camera down on his table.

She sits on the floor.

He looks over his shoulder at her.

Neither of them speaks. Neither of them moves.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. DARKROOM - EARLY MORNING

The print resolves fully in the developer tray.

Fiona stands over it. She's been here before - this specific image, this specific wait.

She lifts the photograph out with tongs.

Holds it up to the safelight.

We see what she sees:

A man, photographed from behind. Standing at a window. The city below him.

And where his reflection should be in the glass - nothing. The glass shows the room, the camera, Fiona.

Not him.

She clips it to the wire.

She stands in the amber light for a long time.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END

PRODUCTION NOTES

RUNTIME:

Approx. 6-7 minutes

LOCATIONS:

Darkroom (framing device), campus exterior, diner, apartment

STRUCTURE:

Present-day darkroom open -> flashback body -> return to present at close

CAST:

Fiona (lead), Xavier. No supporting cast required.

VFX:

The reflection shot requires careful lighting setup at a window or mirror. Achievable practically.

TONE:

The most romantic version. The horror is existential, not violent. Let the silences breathe.