

"The Unchained Reaction"

By

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Fresh out of rehab, a reformed gang member adjusts to a life free from addiction, and finds himself paying it forward.

FADE IN:

INT. MEETING ROOM - REHAB CENTER - DAY

A diverse group of men and women sit in a circle as a fifty-something, clean-cut, PASTOR reads from the Bible.

A few of them are half-listening, while most are outright ignoring him. One young woman is even asleep.

PASTOR

"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

PABLO is a twenty year old, tatted-up, Hispanic man who, by all appearances, would be the last one paying attention. And yet....

PASTOR

"The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Pablo is pensive, while the RICH PUNK next to him looks as if he's about to bust a gut.

PASTOR

And with that, we'll close our final session. The outside world is rife with temptation, but I've imparted all I can to help you live an addiction-free life.... Make it count.

RICH PUNK

So... are we done?

PASTOR

Yes, but I'd like to --

Before he can finish, there's a mass exodus to the door.

RICH PUNK (O.S.)

Now, this is what I call freedom!

Pablo, however, stays behind and calmly collects his things.

PASTOR

Here.

Pablo looks down at the proffered Bible and furrows his brow.

PASTOR  
It's easier to walk the path when  
you have a road map.

PABLO  
(amused)  
That your final metaphor?

PASTOR  
I always hang onto one or two for  
emergencies.

Pablo takes the Bible and the pastor holds out his hand,  
which Pablo shakes firmly.

PASTOR  
I'll be praying for you, Pablo.

Pablo says nothing, not sure how to even respond until the  
pastor has left the room.

PABLO  
You'd be the first.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. BUS - DAY

Pablo looks out the window at the rundown houses with a  
worried expression. The bus comes to a stop.

BUS DRIVER  
Here's your stop. Be quick about  
it, yeah?

The bus driver nods in the direction of a house crowded with  
gang members. HISPANIC RAP MUSIC THUMPS in the background.

PABLO  
Keep driving.

BUS DRIVER  
Isn't this... I dunno... your turf,  
or something?

PABLO  
Please.

BUS DRIVER  
O-kay. It's your bus fare.

CUT TO:

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE - GROCERY STORE - NEXT DAY

Pablo is as presentable as he can be in his long-sleeve shirt and cheap slacks.

Behind the desk, the STORE MANAGER looks through his employment documents.

STORE MANAGER  
Looks like everything's in order,  
Poncho. I'll have this filed and  
we'll get you started on bagging.

The manager holds out his hand with a cheesy smile. Pablo gratefully takes it.

PABLO  
You got it, boss. And it's Pablo.

STORE MANAGER  
Uh huh. Here's your apron.

Pablo hesitantly takes it. His eyes saying, "Really?"

CUT TO:

INT. CHECKOUT - GROCERY STORE - AFTERNOON

Pablo bags a customer's groceries. He looks at the other baggers. None of them are wearing aprons.

One of the clerks, FRANCIS, finishes ringing up a customer.

FRANCIS  
Take over, newbie. I gotta use the  
"el bano."

PABLO  
You have to use the "the bathroom?"

FRANCIS  
Just stand here and look pretty,  
funnyman.

The clerk leaves and Pablo reluctantly takes his place.

An ELDERLY WOMAN is his first customer. He rings her up.

PABLO  
That'll be fifteen sixty-six.

She shakily opens her wallet and hands him twenty dollars.

He takes the money, but can't figure out what to do next. He looks around, but all the other clerks are busy with their own customers.

ELDERLY WOMAN  
Did I give you the right amount?

PABLO  
You did, ma'am. Just let me figure out how to get you some change.

ELDERLY WOMAN  
(feisty)  
Oh, I see. I have trouble with all this new technology too.

PABLO  
Well, if you want a receipt on your usual stone slab, the chisels are on aisle ten.

They both laugh.

ELDERLY WOMAN  
First day?

PABLO  
What gave me away?

ELDERLY WOMAN  
For me, I'd say it's the apron.

Pablo chuckles. He looks and sees Francis coming back.

FRANCIS  
What's the matter, newbie? Buttons too complicated for you?

Pablo ignores the tone and focuses on the problem at hand.

PABLO  
I need some help getting this very patient customer her change.

Francis rolls his eyes and brushes past Pablo.

Pablo's nose wrinkles as he catches a whiff of something off the clerk. He recognizes the smell and frowns.

Francis finishes the transaction.

FRANCIS  
There. It ain't rocket science.

Pablo turns to the woman with a strained smile.

PABLO  
Can I help you to your car?

ELDERLY WOMAN  
Please. My son drives me, but he  
thinks I should do my own shopping.

PABLO  
Then maybe he should get you one of  
them snazzy scooters.

She lets loose a wheezing laugh and he grabs her bags.

JUMP CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT - GROCERY STORE - CONTINUOUS

Pablo follows her through the doors.

PABLO  
Thank you.

ELDERLY WOMAN  
He was rather rude, wasn't he?

When they get to the car, her son, AVERY, jumps out.

AVERY  
I got it, thanks.

ELDERLY WOMAN  
Tip the man, Avery.

He clears his throat and dips into his wallet.

AVERY  
Well, I don't have anything smaller  
than a --

ELDERLY WOMAN  
Oh, for goodness sake!

She snatches a ten dollar bill and gives it to Pablo.

ELDERLY WOMAN  
Thank you for your help....

Pablo looks down on his "Trainee" name tag.

PABLO

Pablo.

She smiles. He returns it gratefully, then leaves.

AVERY

Mother, I really think --

ELDERLY WOMAN

Oh, shush, Avery.

CUT TO:

INT. CHECKOUT - GROCERY STORE - MOMENTS LATER

Pablo walks past the checkout area to the back of the store.

MANAGER'S OFFICE DOOR

He knocks and waits.

STORE MANAGER (O.S.)

(muffled)

What d'ya want?

PABLO

Got ten bucks helping an old lady  
with her bags. What do I do with  
it?

The door flies open to reveal the grinning manager.

STORE MANAGER

Poncho, my boy! Way to take some  
initiative. Keep it. I'll make sure  
it's on the up-and-up in your  
payroll.

PABLO

Sounds good to me.

He goes to leave, but hesitates.

PABLO

Do I really have to wear the apron?

STORE MANAGER

(amused)

You know, you're the first one to  
ask on day one.

(MORE)

STORE MANAGER (CONT'D)

Heck, most of you don't make day two. Keep your nose clean and you could make clerk in two years.

Pablo forces a smile just as the manager closes the door.

He sighs, then turns right into a looming Francis.

FRANCIS

Where's my cut, newbie?

Pablo raises an eyebrow at the attempted shakedown.

PABLO

Huh. Don't know anything about that, Francis. Let me check with the boss.

He goes to knock on the door when the clerk gets in his face and pokes him in the chest.

FRANCIS

Watch your back, newbie.

He stalks away and Pablo looks up, exasperated.

PABLO

Love thy neighbor? Sure. But he ain't invited to Sunday dinner.

CUT TO:

EXT. GROCERY STORE - NIGHT

Pablo shrugs into his jacket and breathes into his cold hands as he sets a fast pace.

He spots a familiar scene across the street - a shady character pacing near the mouth of a dark alley.

Pablo's expression cycles through pain, regret, and pity when, suddenly, he notices a car parked not too far away.

PABLO

'Cuz Crown Vics are so stealthy.  
(snorts)  
Cops.

He continues walking until he sees someone approaching the alley. It's Francis.

ACROSS THE STREET

Francis walks up to the antsy drug DEALER.

FRANCIS  
Where's RJ?

DEALER  
Got busted. Want some China White?

FRANCIS  
China what? How long you been  
selling?

DEALER  
How long ya been buying? It's  
heroin, stupid.

FRANCIS  
Whatever.... What'll this get me?

He holds out some cash and the dealer snorts.

Francis shoves the bills at him.

FRANCIS  
Just give me twenty bucks worth.  
I'm in a hurry.

DEALER  
You got it, thrifty.

The dealer reaches out, but instead of taking the money, he slaps cuffs on Francis' wrist. He's really OFFICER DREWS, an undercover narcotics cop.

OFFICER DREWS  
Will that be consecutive or  
concurrent?

FRANCIS  
What the --

OFFICER DREWS  
You're under arrest for attempting  
to purchase a controlled substance.  
You have the right to remain  
silent...

He walks the handcuffed, shell-shocked clerk to the Crown Vic as he Mirandizes him.

PABLO

watches it all go down, then sees another COP get out of the car to meet them. They put Francis in the back seat.

COP  
Nice catch, Drews. That makes,  
what, five this week?

Pablo's eyes widen.

PABLO  
Officer Drews!

Both cops turn to him with guns nearly drawn.

COP  
Stop right there!

Pablo cautiously puts his hands up.

PABLO  
Officer Drews. It's me.... Pablo.

Drews recognizes him and the cops relax.

OFFICER DREWS  
Oh, yeah. Just get out of rehab?

PABLO  
Yesterday.

COP  
Another one of your charity cases,  
Drews?

PABLO  
Hey, um... I dunno what you saw in  
me, or if it was a one-time thing,  
but....

He looks at the mortified Francis in the back of the car.

PABLO  
You took a chance on me.

OFFICER DREWS  
He a friend?

PABLO  
(matter-of-fact)  
Nope. Pretty sure he hates my guts.

Drews is taken aback by the frank admission. His partner chimes in.

COP

Look... most second chances "do not pass go" or "collect two hundred dollars" if you get my drift. You probably won't last a week.

PABLO

"Once an addict, always an addict" right? That might be good enough for some, but I don't let the past hold me hostage, not when I've found complete freedom. To quote a friend who loves metaphors, "Why negotiate when SWAT can clear the building?" I'm not a recovering addict.... I'm not an addict, period.

OFFICER DREWS

You expecting the same for him?

PABLO

Just hoping I'm not a fluke.

Beat.

OFFICER DREWS

I'll see what I can do. And I'll be checking up on you soon.

Pablo smiles.

PABLO

I've broken my chains... but it doesn't hurt to have some accountability.

He walks into the distance with a bounce in his step.

Drews' partner crosses his arms.

COP

I always say nothing cures addiction like a good five-year stretch, but that guy.... I just might believe him.

He looks at Francis, who's hunched over and sobbing into his hands.

FADE TO:

EXT. REHAB CENTER - ESTABLISHING - DAY

SUPER:

"Six Months Later"

PABLO (O.S.)

And I know if I hadn't cleaned up,  
I'd be doing one of three things:

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. MEETING ROOM - REHAB CENTER - SAME

Pablo is speaking at a group session.

PABLO

Lookin' to score, in jail, or  
dead.... I didn't know how to fight  
my addiction, let alone want to.  
So, before you leave today, there's  
Bibles for you all at the door.

Most of the group groans and scoffs.

PABLO

I'm not saying it's for everyone...  
actually, it is, but don't dismiss  
it so fast. I've been threatened  
with hellfire by people who didn't  
understand what was really written.  
All I'm saying is: take it as it  
is, not what you've heard.... Any  
questions?

No one dares to raise their hand.

PABLO

Alright, then. You're free to go.  
And as someone very wise once told  
me... "make it count."

Most seem to be considering his words as they quietly make  
their way out - a stark contrast from Pablo's own experience.

The pastor approaches Pablo and shakes his hand.

PASTOR

Nicely done, son.

PABLO

Thanks. I hope at least a few of  
the Bibles get picked up.

PASTOR  
Hope is all we can do.

Pablo looks over at Francis. He's the last one left.

PABLO  
Think he's ready?

PASTOR  
I have faith.

PABLO  
You always have faith.

The pastor chuckles just as Francis tries to slip past them.

PABLO  
(to Francis)  
You ready?

Francis looks uncomfortable. His eyes refuse to meet Pablo's.

FRANCIS  
I'll just take the bus.

PABLO  
If you want. Don't forget this.

He hands him a Bible - the one that the pastor had given him.

FRANCIS  
That's nice and all, but I don't  
need charity.

PABLO  
It's not charity... it's free. If  
you want it.

Francis looks down at the Bible with uncertainty.

Then reaches out to take it.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END

"For Robert,  
May you find freedom."

