

Misha and the Penguin

by
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Original Screenplay

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FADE IN:

EXT. ANTARCTICA - DAY - 19TH OR 20TH CENTURY

A PENGUIN is being pursued by HUNTERS.

The MEN are wearing crudely sewn together animal pelts, and carrying rifles -- they look hungry and mean. Their breath billows out before them as they run.

LONG SHOT

They are specks in the vast, white landscape; their yells are muffled and indistinct.

The penguin is running for the water, and he's almost to it.

CLOSE ON

The penguin takes a dive into the water.

The hunters reach the edge of the glacier and steady their rifles, pointing at the surface of the water.

The penguin's head breaches the surface, and a bullet pierces the water next to him. The penguin turns his head around.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. COAST OF NOVA SCOTIA - DAY - THE PRESENT

MISHA, age eight, turns around looking confused and frightened. He is dripping wet, sprawled out in a tide pool.

A GROUP OF KIDS, same age, come running up to Misha, taunting and jeering at him. They SQUAWK and flap their arms, call him names like "penguin boy," "psycho freak," and "motherless misfit."

SAM JONES leads the pack. He is big for his age - a bully. He throws another rock at Misha.

Misha ducks out of the way, and the rock just barely misses his head. Misha stares incredulously at Sam, like, "Did you really just throw a rock at my head?"

SAM

What are you gonna do about it, huh? Tell? No one would care. No one would believe you. You're not like us. You're a freak, Misha McGuinness!

The other kids pick up the taunt, repeating it over and over.

KIDS
 YOU'RE A FREAK, MISHA MCGUINESS!
 YOU'RE A FREAK, MISHA MCGUINESS!

Misha scrambles to his feet. He clenches his fists and stiffens his upper lip.

MISHA
 I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU ALL!

Sam puts Misha in a headlock.

SAM
 Now that's not nice. Apologize to everyone for saying such a mean thing, Misha. Say you're sorry.

The other kids laugh, and demand an apology.

MISHA
 No! I hate you! I hate this whole place!

Sam releases Misha, and goes back to the head of the pack.

SAM
 Well if you hate it so much, why don't you GO BACK TO YOUR OWN COUNTRY?!

KIDS
 YEAH! YEAH! GO BACK TO YOUR OWN COUNTRY!

Misha is shaking with anger, but silent. Sam folds his arms over his chest, sneering at Misha.

SAM
 Come on, guys. Let's go. I'm getting bored by poor, pathetic, Misha McGuiness. Let's go have fun. Without him.

Sam laughs and the other kids join in. They all turn to leave, some sticking their tongues out at Misha.

CLOSE ON

The kids' feet are connected to the ground by a gummy substance that stretches, tears, and reforms with the ground as they walk.

Misha looks at this phenomenon in horror. The other kids don't seem to notice it at all.

EXT. DOCKS - DAY - LATER

MISHA hangs his head low and drags his feet along the dock - there's no gummy substance connecting him to the ground.

LIAM MCGUINNESS, a rugged fisherman and Misha's father, is tying up his boat. He spots Misha coming toward him.

LIAM
(thick Scottish brogue)
What happened to you, then, boy-o?

Standing there, wearing a black zip-up hoodie and white tee, and shifting his weight from foot to foot, Misha sort of resembles a penguin.

Liam holsters his thumbs in his rubber coveralls, rocks on his heels and waits. His feet have the gum.

MISHA
Fell.

LIAM
Well, let's get yeh cleaned up.
Don't want your mother seein' you
like this, we don't.

EXT. SEASIDE CLIFF - LATE AFTERNOON - LATER

MISHA is walking along the cliff towards a ratty old HOUSE. He and the house are tiny dots engulfed in a verdant but harsh landscape.

CLOSE ON

Misha hops up the back steps, his father's wool sweater hanging down to his knees. He wipes his shoes on the doormat.

INT. MCGUINNESS HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON - CONTINUOUS

MISHA hurries inside and runs into another room.

A cuckoo clock TICKS away time. The kitchen is still and lonely. The floor is uneven, the linoleum peeling; the faucet is leaking, and the radiator steams.

Misha comes back in wearing a fresh set of clothes: black hoodie and white tee. His inner penguin is out. He waddles, and holds his arms down by his sides. His hood is pulled up low over his eyes and he has his nose stuck up in the air. He even makes little "Mer mer mer" noises as he puts on the kettle and makes toast.

He turns on the TV and pops in a VHS labeled "PBS Penguins".

SYLVANNA MCGUINESS (O.S.)
 (in Ukrainian)
 Mishka! Is that you? Come here, my
 boy.

Misha's ears perk up, and he starts doing things quicker.

INT. MCGUINESS HOUSE - MASTER BEDROOM - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

Misha nudges the door open with a serving tray loaded with
 tea and snacks.

SYLVANNA MCGUINESS (O.S.)
 Mishka, my love.

Misha smiles, and holds himself high.

MISHA
 Ma - Ma.

Misha sets the tray down on the bedside table. He puts his
 hand over his mother's.

SYLVANNA is a frail looking woman - you can tell she's been
 ill for a long time. Misha sits down in a chair next to the
 bed.

His mother looks like she's hovering slightly over the bed.
 She isn't under the covers, and there's a light between her
 white nightgown and the white bedspread under her. Misha
 stares at the empty space and smiles.

They converse in UKRAINIAN.

SYLVANNA MCGUINESS
 Mishka? Will you close the
 curtains, please? I can't stand
 that dreadful sun.

Misha goes over to the window and looks out.

MISHA
 What's wrong with the sun, Mama? It
 feels nice.

SYLVANNA MCGUINESS
 It's not the same.

Misha closes the blinds. He sits again, and holds her hand.

MISHA
 It's the same sun in Ukraine.

SYLVANNA MCGUINNESS

Mishka, it's the same sun on Mars,
but you wouldn't sit there and tell
me it feels the same, would you?

MISHA

No, Mama.

O.S. THE BACK DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES.

LIAM (O.S.)

Misha! Come and help yer da fix
dinner!

Sylvanna looks at Misha and smiles. She holds her cheek out
to him and he kisses it.

INT. MCGUINNESS HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

LIAM is getting things out to make dinner. MISHA watches him
from the doorway: Liam's feet aren't connecting with the
linoleum like they were earlier at the dock.

Liam puts a package on the counter and unwraps it. Misha runs
up, excited by the sight of FRESH FISH.

He jumps up and down, he's so excited - still no gum.

LIAM

(laughing)

I guess you're hungry, eh lad?

Misha fervently nods his head. Liam laughs and kisses the top
of his son's head, and tousles his hair.

LIAM (CONT'D)

Lucky a poor fisherman like me's
got a son like you who never get's
tired of eatin' the same old thing
every day.

Misha shakes his head.

LIAM (CONT'D)

You want to clean it?

Misha nods, smiling big. He takes the knife Liam holds out.

Misha pulls out the fish's spine, holds it up for a second
then tosses it into the sink.

INT. AQUARIUM - DAY

A little FISH dangles in the air. A ZOOKEEPER is feeding the
PENGUINS. She takes notes on her clipboard.

MISHA, his CLASSMATES and TEACHER are on a field trip to the aquarium. Misha is standing apart from the rest of the class, but they all watch the penguins swimming and being fed, pointing at them and trying to touch them even though they are far out of reach.

INT. AQUARIUM - DAY - LATER

The ZOOKEEPER is taking the CLASS on a tour around the aquarium. Presently, they are walking by the viewing window of the PENGUIN POOL.

The zookeeper is pointing things out and talking, but MISHA doesn't hear any of it. He is by himself, looking at the penguins. He puts his hand on the glass, leaning in close to watch them swim by at break-neck speeds.

EXT. AQUARIUM FOOD COURT - DAY - LATER

The ZOOKEEPER leads the CLASS out to the food court.

TEACHER

Okay, class. Say thank you to Ms. Jennings for that wonderful and informative tour of the aquarium.

CLASS

THANK YOU, MRS. JENNINGS!

ZOOKEEPER/MS. JENNINGS

You're all very welcome. Enjoy your lunch, and I'll be back in a little while to take you to the dolphin show.

CLASS

YAY!!!

They all run off to the tables, hurriedly pulling sacked lunches out of their backpacks.

SAM JONES and his CRONIES push a few kids up from their seats and take over the table in the center of the court.

MISHA tugs on Ms. Jennings' hand.

MS. JENNINGS

Yes, dear?

MISHA

Um...

Misha turns bright red and looks at the ground.

MS. JENNINGS

Do you have to go to the little boy's room?

Misha shakes his head.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)

Did you have a question?

Misha nods his head. He goes into penguin mode: unzipping his black sweatshirt and peeking at Ms. Jennings from under his hood.

MISHA

Um...what do you think makes a bird a bird?

MS. JENNINGS

How do you mean?

MISHA

You know, 'cause most birds can fly, but penguins can't fly, they don't even have wings, not really, but they're still birds. Why is that?

MS. JENNINGS

My, aren't you an inquisitive young fellow, Mr...?

MISHA

McGuinness. Misha McGuinness.

MS. JENNINGS

Well, Misha McGuinness, the answer is actually very simple.

She crouches down to be at his eye-level.

In the background, Sam elbows one of his friends in the side and points at Misha and Ms. Jennings. They start whispering and giggling.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)

See, a bird is quite simply any animal with feathers, a beak with no teeth --

She points to her own teeth.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)

A four-chambered heart --

She points at the spot on his chest over his heart.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
 And is capable of laying hard-shelled eggs. But I'll tell you a secret about penguins.

Misha's eyes go wide.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
 (whispering)
 You're right to ask about penguins. They're not really birds, but nobody really knows what they are because they're so special. They're in their own class of bird, did you know that?

MISHA
 (nodding vigorously)
 They're high waterbirds!

MS. JENNINGS
 That's right. And that's because they're highly adaptable.

MISHA
 I'm writing a paper about adaptation!

MS. JENNINGS
 You are?

MISHA
 Uh-huh. Wanna see?

MS. JENNINGS
 Of course.

Misha pulls a NOTE PAD out of his backpack. His penmanship is flawlessly neat, not at all like a child's.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
 You have very nice handwriting, Misha McGuinness.

MISHA
 I'm from Ukraine. Penmanship is very important in Ukraine.

MS. JENNINGS
 I thought it was called The Ukraine?

MISHA
 Noooo. Ukraine means "the boarder," so if you say The Ukraine, you're saying The The Border, and you're stuttering.

(MORE)

MISHA (CONT'D)
 (giggling)
 Isn't that funny?

MS. JENNINGS
 (laughing)
 Very. Here, sit down and have some
 lunch while I read this, okay?

Misha smiles brightly, and they sit down together at the
 nearest table.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
 (reading aloud)
 "Animals move and adapt to their
 environments, which is different
 from humans, who force nature to
 adapt to them." -Very good point.
 (teasing)
 Are you sure you wrote this?

Misha nods.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
 "But like humans, animals also
 define home by who they are with,
 not only by where they were born.
 An example would be the hermit
 crabs that populate tide pools. The
 moon moves, the tide goes out and
 they get stuck there. They eat
 sleep and mate there until the tide
 comes in again and they can go back
 out to sea. But some of them decide
 to stay together instead of being
 separated by the waves. This is
 good for the hermit crabs, because
 together they can protect their
 pool from unwanted creatures and
 predators. Animal communities are
 another important part of animal
 adaptation. For example, the
 Galapagos ecosystem exists as it
 does today because those creatures
 weren't accepted anywhere else.
 That means that adaptation isn't
 always a scientific process, but a
 social one, too. Animals have to
 be willing to adapt to a place, and
 the other animals already living
 there have to be willing to accept
 the newcomers."

Ms. Jennings raises an eyebrow and puts down the pad.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
 Misha, did you really write that?

Misha nods.

MS. JENNINGS (CONT'D)
How old are you?

MISHA
Eight. Why? Is it bad? Do you think
I'm stupid? I knew I shouldn't have
shown you!

Misha's face has fallen and he is on the verge of tears.

The TEACHER approaches them with her hands on her hips.

TEACHER
Is everything all right?

Ms. Jennings smiles brightly at her.

MS. JENNINGS
Mrs. Albright, you didn't tell me
that Misha here is a genius!

TEACHER
Misha McGuinness? A genius?
AHAHAHAHA!

The teacher doubles over with laughter, and most of the kids join her. Misha bursts into tears. Ms. Jennings has no idea what to do or say - she's shocked and appalled.

Misha gets up and runs away. His teacher stops laughing and glares at Ms. Jennings.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Oh, now look what you've done!

INT. AQUARIUM - DAY - CONTINUOUS

MISHA hides in a corner near the PENGUIN POOL. He is crying.

A PENGUIN falls to the ground in front of Misha, and flops to his feet.

Misha can't believe it. He stops crying and stares at the PENGUIN. The Penguin flaps his flippers and hops closer to Misha. Misha flaps his arms and squawks. The Penguin responds, and Misha is overcome with joy.

Misha opens up his backpack, and sure enough the Penguin hops right in.

