

The scene opens with ARTIE opening their zoom birthday call in the midst of the never-ending pandemic in 2021. After checking the camera, they begin to set up their basement birthday decorations, hoping the invitees will show up, finishing off with a sigh as they strap on their birthday hat all while humming the birthday song.

ARTIE: *(Practicing to themself in anticipation.)* Hey gang! No, that's not right. Uh, howdy partners! No, that's even worse... Hey... you? This is crazy! *Charlie enters the zoom call.* I'm talking to myself on a zoom call just like any totally normal person—

CHARLIE: Uh, hey? Artie, you good?

ARTIE: *Startled.* Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry. Hey gang! Oh yeah it's just one of you I'm stupid, I...sorry.

CHARLIE: Hey it's all good! *Obscenely awkward silence.* It's just me Artie, you don't have to act so stuck up just cause you're a year older now. Speaking of, I like your... banner?

ARTIE: Really? Thanks! I made it myself.

CHARLIE: No kidding. *Off of Artie's look.* Ha! I'm just messing with you Artie... So, how you been since I last saw you, like what, five months ago now? Since the total societal lockdown?

ARTIE: For real? I guess it really has been that long. Oh you know, using a shower curtain as toilet paper, making my fifth sourdough starter of the week, arguing with my dad, the usual. The birthday zoom was his idea, actually, but I didn't think either of you would show up... You?

CHARLIE: Actually, dear Artimus, I thought you'd never ask. All this lockdown time gave me the opportunity to finalize, drumroll please, The SoulSucker 9000!

ARTIE: The wha—

CHARLIE: Good question! The SoulSucker 9000 is the latest and greatest paranormal presence liquefier (*evil laugh*), but *this* time... it has a legit electromagnetic field scanner.

ARTIE: Wizard! No way! You made it yourself?

CHARLIE: From yours truly, Charles Chewley. It should be arriving at your birthday butt's door any day now.

ARTIE: Wow Charlie, I... that's crazy. Thanks. I wish we could test it out in person together but... yea. We really thought it'd be over by the end of 2020.

CHARLIE: Really makes you miss those pre-covid good ol' days huh? Playing D&D after ghost hunting on our roller skates... Then Rasheen had to go and grow up on us.

ARTIE: Uh yea, Charlie? That sort of little conflict was kinda what I was hoping to avoi—

CHARLIE: He was never even good! The dude could never use the equipment right. I had to practically baby him half the time because all our parents were having "adult time" or whatever.

ARTIE: Haha, yea. About that, I sort of invited him to the ...

RASHEEN enters the zoom call.

CHARLIE: Say what.

RASHEEN: Oh hello, Charles.

CHARLIE: ... Rasheen.

RASHEEN: It's *Sheen* now, or have you stopped caring about the inner workings of my personal life? I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

ARTIE: Hey Rasheen! Thanks for coming to my birthday party, well I guess it's not much of a party, but—

CHARLIE: *Shеееееn??* What kind of a nickname is that? I guess the debate team can really change a person for the worse.

RASHEEN: Still clinging to the past I see? I know you're just jealous that I am a more convincing public speaker than you. At least *I'm* not some child still chasing their ghoul sucking daydreams.

CHARLIE: Public speaker? Pu-lease. More like the coach's butt-kisser. Mwa mwa mwa! *You're* the one not caring about the inner workings of people's life. *I* showed up to Artie's call on time.

RASHEEN: Please Charles, we're eighth graders now. Can we at least try to act like it?

ARTIE: He-Hey! *Both* of you are acting like 10-year-olds. I didn't want to pull this card but you two were the only people I could think of to invite to celebrate with me. Can you at least try to keep your differences aside for just one measly call, for my sake? Please?

RASHEEN: ... Fine.

CHARLIE: Sure thing, Artie.

ARTIE: Gracias. Now that that's settled... did you both get the cupcakes I uh, mailed to you? I personalized them! Although you probably can't tell anymore—

CHARLIE: (*Holding the cupcake up.*) Yea I got it!

RASHEEN: In all it's squished glory.

ARTIE: Great. Well, then I guess we should light some candles and so some singing. I think that's what usually happens in these situations.

They ALL stick a candle in their cupcake and light it. Then awkwardly and begrudgingly they all start to sing the birthday song. RASHEEN and CHARLIE start to bicker mid-song, leaving Artie singing the rest by themselves.

ALL: Happy birthday to you / Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Artie, happy birthday to you.

RASHEEN: You look stupid, Charlie.

CHARLIE: Who's immature now?? You're stupid.

RASHEEN: Especially in your ghost hunting costume, you need to find better coping mechanisms for dealing with your mom's three-year-long "business trip".

CHARLIE: It's NOT a costume and WHO NEEDS HEALTHY COPING MECHANISMS?!

ARTIE blows out his candle and the lights in their basement flicker and go out, turning their zoom frame dark. CHARLIE and RASHEEN were not expecting this

CHARLIE: (overlapping) Artie? Artie, are you there?

RASHEEN: (overlapping) I think they're frozen. Artie?

They both look down at the cupcakes in front of them in a moment of synchrony, maybe taking the candle out, then put them to the side.

CHARLIE does not eat any, but RASHEEN, curious, takes a bite

After a moment and some shuffling noises, ARTIE is illuminated by a flashlight. Perhaps they have put their camera at a strange or disorienting angle. A ouija board is visible within the frame.

ARTIE: *(spookily, but determined)* For all those of mortal means who dare enter into the space between the worlds of the living and the dead, you must / bear in mind the price that comes with such a feat. Under no circumstances should the circle be broken. It is imperative that we all concentrate on the energy in the room.

RASHEEN: *(recovering from the momentary shock)* Holy toledos, Artie, what are you doing? Come on, we're too old for this.

CHARLIE looks apprehensive. ARTIE continues to talk, ignoring the interjections.

RASHEEN (cont): Come on, I mean you don't actually still believe in all that stuff do you?

CHARLIE: *(cutting in)* Shhh! Shut up Rasheen. You can't just stop it part way through the spirits'll get all-

RASHEEN: It's Sheen.

Reluctantly, SHEEN quiets down, looking unenthused, but resigned. Both RASHEEN and CHARLIE are focused on ARTIE, who has just placed the planchette in front of themself on the board

ARTIE: So, who do we want to call?