

POSITIVE PHOTOTAXIS

Treatment

Logline

When a 15-year-old girl moves to her late great-grandmother's small town and befriends two local skateboarders, their search for a missing bully leads her to discover that her loving father, the person she trusted most, is a serial kidnapper who believes he's reforming bad people.

Genre

Psychological Thriller/Coming-of-Age Drama

Tone

The story walks a tightrope between tender family drama and dark psychological thriller. It begins with the mundane bleakness of suburban dysfunction and evolves into an intimate portrait of disillusionment, blending moments of teenage camaraderie with the creeping dread of uncovering terrible truths about someone you love. The skateboarding sequences provide lightness and freedom that contrasts sharply with Pete's suffocating control and violence.

Themes

Positive Phototaxis explores the dangerous allure of false light. Like moths drawn to bug zappers, the characters are attracted to things that ultimately harm them; Pete to his warped sense of justice, Annie to her idealized vision of her father, Derek to his toxic lifestyle. The film examines how we inherit trauma, the lies we tell to protect those we love, and the painful moment when a child realizes their parent is human, flawed, and capable of monstrous acts. It asks: What do we do when the person who taught us right from wrong has been doing wrong all along?

Summary

Fifteen-year-old Annie moves to her father Pete's small hometown after his grandmother dies. She quickly makes friends with James, a sweet foster kid, and Aiden, a skateboarder from a troubled home. When Derek—the rich town bully—vanishes from his own party, the three friends start investigating to win the reward money. They need it for a skateboarding competition in North Carolina that could change their lives.

As the kids follow clues and grow closer, we discover Pete's terrible secret: he's been kidnapping Derek, keeping him tied up in an abandoned house. Pete believes he's making Derek into a better person through fear and punishment. Flashbacks show us how Pete became this way—a lonely childhood, his mother's mysterious death, and losing Annie's mother to violence fifteen years

ago. Since then, Pete has been secretly kidnapping people he thinks are bad, trying to "fix" them. He's failed every time, and people have died.

Annie's investigation leads her straight to the torture house where she finds her father standing over Derek. The discovery destroys her. Pete tries to explain that he only hurts bad people, that everything he's done is to protect her and make the world better. But Annie realizes the father she loved and trusted has been a monster all along. "I feel like a moth flying toward your light," she tells him through tears, "but that light was just a flame, and if I got too close it would burn me." She leaves as the police arrive, her heart broken but her eyes finally open to the truth about the man who raised her.

Three-Act Structure

ACT ONE: The Inheritance

The film opens with Young Pete at the dinner table, parents fighting above him in slow motion while he eats with detached indifference. Through voiceover, adult Pete introduces us to his "typical American family"—a stark contrast to the 1950s TV ideal playing in the background. We witness his father's soul-crushing factory job, his mother's depression, and young Pete's fascination with moths drawn to the bug zapper—a visual metaphor that will haunt the entire film.

After his father chokes to death and his domineering grandmother moves in, Pete's childhood becomes even more suffocating. His mother slowly morphs into her own mother, and when she dies under mysterious circumstances (bandaged wrists hidden under long sleeves), Pete is trapped with a woman he despises.

Flash forward: Pete, now a numb young adult working at a burger joint, meets Anna Smith—a woman who "looks happy," something he's never seen before. Their four-year relationship transforms him, but when she leaves, Pete returns to his catatonic state. Until Anna comes back with Richie, an abusive boyfriend, and their baby. During a violent confrontation over money, Richie accidentally shoots Anna. She dies telling Pete the baby is his. In a rage, Pete kills Richie with a conch shell, setting him on his dark path.

We jump to the present: 15-year-old Annie and Pete arrive in Pete's hometown after his grandmother's death. Annie is a talented skateboarder adjusting to another new town, another fresh start. Pete gets a job at Bambino's pizzeria. Annie quickly befriends James, her sweet foster-kid neighbor, and Aiden, a troubled teen from an abusive home. Everything seems normal—a father and daughter finding their way in a small town.

But the normalcy cracks when Derek Mayfield, the rich bully son of the town's wealthiest man, humiliates Pete at the restaurant and steals Annie's wallet. That night, Derek disappears from his own party.

ACT TWO: The Investigation

Annie, James, and Aiden begin investigating Derek's disappearance, motivated by the substantial reward his father is offering, money they need for a skateboarding competition in North Carolina. They set up their "base of operations" in an abandoned house (the "crappy house"), interview Derek's friends, and slowly piece together clues.

Meanwhile, we see Pete in his secret torture house, holding Derek captive. Wearing a clown mask, Pete interrogates Derek about his life, his cruelty, his distant parents. Pete believes he's "rehabilitating" Derek, making him a better person through fear and isolation. Through their conversations, we learn Pete has done this many times before, always failing, always ending in death. But he believes Derek can change.

As the kids investigate, we watch them grow closer. James transforms the crappy house into a beautiful hangout space and confesses his feelings for Annie on the decorated rooftop. Aiden grows increasingly jealous and reveals his desperate home situation—his family needs money, and he's considering running away to North Carolina permanently.

The clues mount: they find Annie's wallet (with an AirTag) in a dumpster, discover security footage of a red car, learn about a "lame pizza guy" Derek mentioned at the party. Aiden spots a suspicious red car with a scraped bumper leaving Bambino's, but loses it while trying to follow on his bike.

Pete attends his grandmother's memorial service with Annie, where tension builds between them. She's growing more independent, more curious, and he's growing more controlling and paranoid. When she asks about Derek and the restaurant, Pete snaps at her, showing cracks in his carefully maintained facade.

In the torture house, Derek slowly realizes his captor is "pizza guy"—Pete from Bambino's. The power dynamic shifts. Pete, cornered by his own mistake, knows he might have to kill Derek to protect his secret and, more importantly, to protect Annie.

ACT THREE: The Truth Burns

Annie discovers through the AirTag in her wallet that it's been discarded near an old dumpster, along with Derek's smashed phone. Following the trail with increasingly urgent determination, she eventually tracks the red car to an abandoned farmhouse on Gambit's Run.

She sneaks into Pete's torture house through a window and finds Derek tied to a chair. As she frantically unties him, Pete returns. Annie hides in a closet, then emerges with a piece of wood when Pete approaches Derek. In the moment of striking her father, Annie sees his face—the recognition is devastating, but she can't stop the blow from landing.

The confrontation that follows is the emotional core of the film. Annie, tears streaming, demands answers. Pete insists he was trying to make Derek better, that he only hurts people who deserve it, that everything he's done has been to protect her and create a better world. He reveals he's been doing this for fifteen years—since Annie was a baby.

Annie delivers the film's thesis through her devastation: "I feel like a moth, always flying towards the light you gave me, your stories about my mom, your protection, your love, all lies. But now I realize that light you gave me was just a flame, and if I got too close, it would burn me, and it did."

James and Aiden arrive, and Annie leaves with them, telling Pete she loves him but can't help him—he's broken her heart. Pete, completely defeated, doesn't resist when Derek calls the police. As the kids ride away on their bikes, patrol car lights flash red and blue behind them.

Ending

At the bus station, Annie looks at herself in the bathroom mirror, cleans her tear-stained face, and puts on Pete's sunglasses—a complicated gesture of both rejection and acceptance of who she is and where she comes from. At the ticket counter, when asked where they're going, the three friends look at each other, smile through their trauma, and answer together. The film cuts to black before we hear their destination—it doesn't matter where they're going, only that they're going together, away from the false lights that have burned them.

Character Arcs

Annie Cole: Begins as an adaptable teenage girl used to moving from town to town, trusting her father completely while harboring unexamined grief about her dead mother. Through the investigation, she gains confidence, friends, and first love—only to have her entire foundation shattered. She must reconcile the father who raised her with love and taught her right from wrong with the monster who kidnaps and tortures people. Her arc completes when she chooses truth over comfortable fiction, friendship over family loyalty, and her own moral compass over inherited trauma.

Pete Cole: A man traumatized by his loveless childhood who found brief happiness with Anna, only to lose her to violence. Believing he can prevent others from becoming like the people who hurt him, he becomes the very thing he hates—a predator who justifies his cruelty as righteousness. His arc is a tragic descent: the more he tries to be a good father and create a safe world for Annie, the more he risks everything. When Annie discovers his secret, he loses the only thing that ever mattered to him.

Derek Mayfield: The spoiled rich bully who seems irredeemable at first. Through his captivity, we discover a lonely kid with absent parents, clinging to his dead grandmother's memory, performing cruelty to fill the void. His arc questions whether people can change and whether Pete's methods could ever work—the film suggests that genuine change comes from empathy and connection, not fear and isolation.

James: The foster kid who's learned to adapt and survive by being kind and building community wherever he lands. He represents healthy resilience—the ability to move forward without becoming bitter. His feelings for Annie are genuine, and his choice to leave his foster home for her and Aiden shows he's found his real family.

Aiden: The most visibly damaged kid, struggling with an abusive home and feeling increasingly like a third wheel as Annie and James grow closer. His theft of the group's money is a desperate act born from fear and jealousy, but his ultimate choice to join them on the bus represents choosing found family over blood family, hope over despair.

Visual Style & Atmosphere

The film should feel claustrophobic and intimate, with the small town's pastoral beauty hiding rot underneath. Pete's memories are washed out and slow-motion, emphasizing his dissociation. The skateboarding sequences provide kinetic energy and freedom—wheels on concrete, wind in hair, bodies defying gravity. The torture house scenes are lit harshly, with practical lights creating stark shadows. Bug zappers should appear throughout as a recurring motif, their electric buzz a soundtrack to Pete's psychology. The color palette shifts from the warm, golden tones of Annie's idealized vision of her father to the cold blues and harsh whites of truth.

Why This Story Matters

Positive Phototaxis is ultimately about the painful, necessary process of seeing clearly. It's about how we're drawn to the people and ideas that make us feel safe, even when they're destroying us. In an era where we're constantly asked to choose sides, to decide who deserves compassion and who deserves punishment, the film asks uncomfortable questions about justice, redemption, and whether anyone has the right to decide these things for others. It's a film about breaking cycles, about choosing to be better than what made you, and about the courage required to walk away from the only light you've ever known—even if it means stumbling through darkness to find something real.