

Positive Phototaxis

Treatment, [Jan 2026]
Lourdes Escobar

Logline

When a 16-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

Phycological Thriller/Coming-of-Age Drama

Themes

POSITIVE PHOTOTAXIS is about the painful but necessary process of breaking free from your parents to become your own person, even when you love them deeply. It explores how love can transform into a cage when driven by control rather than freedom - Pete genuinely loves Annie, but his way of "protecting" her, is not right, just like the moths he kept trapped in a jar to save them from the bug zapper's light when he was a kid.

The film examines the loss of innocence that comes with realizing your parents are flawed human beings, and that good intentions don't justify terrible actions. Annie's journey isn't about discovering her father is evil - it's about understanding that even people who love you can hurt you in irreparable ways.

Ultimately, this is a story about choosing identity over loyalty. Annie's decision to leave with James and Aiden isn't a rejection of her father's love, but an acceptance that she needs to write her own story - and sometimes the family you create matters more than the family you were born into.

Synopsis

A 16-year-old skater called Annie, and her dad, Pete, move to a new town after her great grandma passed away. In the town she meets two new friends who are also skaters, James, 16, and Aiden 14. The three kids want to go to a skateboarding competition in North Carolina, but it cost a lot of money to get there and Pete tells Annie she is not allowed to go, and that she will not be able to do it alone, but this just makes Annie want to go even more. At the same time in the town a bully goes missing, he is the son of the richest man in town, and

because the police in the town is terrible, the bully's father puts up a missing poster with a reward to whoever finds him. The kids will look for the bully in order to get the money for the competition. But what they don't know, is that the person who took the kid, is the loving father of Annie, who in his own twisted way is trying to reform bad people and protect Annie from what he knows as the real world. At the end when she finds out who her father really is, Annie as the head of reason, makes him see that he is not protecting her but actually doing more bad than good. She makes him understand how that protection was not done the right way, just like the moths he kept in a jar as a child - thinking he was saving them from the bug zapper. His love, however real, has become a cage. Annie must choose between staying in the familiar life with her father or leaving everything behind to create her own family with James and Aiden, and finish to grow together.

Three Act Structure

ACT 1: SETUP - "The Nest"

OPENING IMAGE: Young Pete's childhood - dysfunctional family, domestic violence, moths in the bug zapper. Establishing the origin of Pete's damaged psychology and the moth metaphor that will run through the film.

As a kid both of his parents die. He stays in their house with her grandma, a tough love woman.

When Pete is a young adult he meets Anna, the only person who changes him, and gives him a new idea of life, a life that is not as boring and dark, but that is actually filled with love and fun.

Anna leaves, Pete goes back to black.

Anna comes back, she is now sad and low like everyone else, she has a baby and a new "friend" Richie, a control and abusive biker who comes to Pete asking for money.

When Pete tries to defend Anna, the situation goes out of control, Richie with a gun in his hand argues with Pete. Anna tries to make him stop, the gun accidentally shoots itself, killing Anna, and killing a part inside Pete. Before Anna dies completely, she tells him the baby is his.

Filled with anger, Pete kills Richie. "Protecting" Annie for the first time.

A NEW LIFE: Annie and Pete move to the new town after her great grandma's death. Annie is isolated, following her father's

rules, no real friends of her own. Pete, keeps on doing what he did that night, he believes he can reform bad people.

NEW WORLD: Annie meets James and Aiden. Two local skaters who are almost like brothers to one another, giving that James is a foster kid and Aiden doesn't really like his house, they spend all their time together skating.

For the first time, she has friends her own age who accept her for who she is. She discovers a sense of belonging outside her father. But she also meets Derek, the rich bully from the town. He thinks he can do whatever he wants because of the money he has and is an asshole to Annie and her friends.

CALL TO ADVENTURE: The three friends learn about the skateboarding competition in North Carolina with a cash prize. This represents freedom and independence for Annie - a chance to prove herself without her father.

At the same time Pete and Derek meet for the first time, Derek is an asshole to Pete as well, Pete tries to keep himself from doing anything he'll later regret. This doesn't last long, as soon as Derek starts to talk bad about Annie, Pete can't take it anymore. That night, at his own party, Pete captures Derek.

REBELLION: Annie asks Pete if she can go to North Carolina. Pete refuses - she can't go alone, it's too dangerous, he doesn't know anyone there. This shows his overprotective nature and unwillingness to let her grow up.

Annie decides to rebel - she'll find a way to go anyway.

ACT 1 TURNING POINT: Derek is missing. His father posts a reward poster. The kids see this as their opportunity - if they find Derek, they get the reward money and can go to the competition. They begin their investigation.

ACT 2: RISING ACTION - "The Investigation"

GOOD COP/BAD COP: The kids work together as amateur detectives, following clues, interviewing people, and bonding as friends. Annie is becoming more independent but still has a great relationship with her father. We see her transformation beginning.

We see Pete's "normal" life - being a good father, cooking dinner, caring for Annie, or working at the pizza place, but at the same time we see his interactions with Derek in the torture

house, with his mask on and his twisted philosophy about "reforming" bad people, he asks Derek a lot of questions. We start to understand who Derek really is, and why he is the way he is.

RELATIONSHIP: Annie's friendship with James and Aiden deepens. They become her chosen family. James and Annie start to fall in love.

Aiden's home situation is revealed (problems with his family). By having some money already saved up, and having the bus schedules very clear, we see how he's always wanted to escape.

S.K.A.T.E AND THE RED CAR: The kids make a breakthrough in their investigation - they find a significant clue that points them in a direction and are only able to get it thanks to skateboarding. By winning a game of S.K.A.T.E against Milton, a poser the kids knew from the skatepark, he agrees to show them the cameras of the gas station, which leads them to see the red car that took Derek that night.

DISCOVERY (PIZZA GUY): Derek knows who Pete really is. The mask Pete wears does not protect him anymore. Even though Pete was starting to believe Derek was changing, he can't let him go now.

RELATIONSHIP 2: While Annie and James start to fall in love, they start to spend more and more time together, this only makes Aiden fall in jealousy and anger, he thinks he is losing his best friend to the new girl. Aiden decides to escape with the money they've been collecting; he sleeps on the crappy house one last night.

The next day, James gets to the crappy house looking for Aiden. When he finds him and discovers what his planes were but specially what his home situation looked like, he tries to calm him and comfort him. To what Aiden only responds with more anger, telling him the reason why he is mad at him, and why he thinks Annie is taking him from him.

ALL ALONE INTO THE LIONS DEN: Milton calls Annie with information on the car. She knows where it is. Annie tries calling James, but since he is fighting with Aiden about her, James doesn't answer. Annie will have to save Derek all by herself.

THE BREAKING MASK: Annie discovers the truth - her father is behind Derek's disappearance. The person she loves and trusts

most in the world is a kidnapper/serial killer. Everything she believed about him, about her life, comes crashing down.

This is her lowest point. She has to process this devastating revelation alone.

ACT 2 TURNING POINT: Annie confronts her father. This is the moment of no return - she can't ignore what she now knows. She must make a choice.

END OF ACT 2: The confrontation between Annie and Pete in the torture house.

ACT 3: RESOLUTION - "Flying Free"

CLIMAX: Pete tries to defend himself and make Annie understand why he did the things he did.

Annie, as the voice of reason, makes Pete see the truth about himself. She uses the moth metaphor - how he kept moths in jars thinking he was saving them but was actually suffocating them when he was a kid, and how he's done the same thing to her. His love has become a cage.

Pete realizes what he's become.

Derek escapes and calls the police.

DEREK IS THE ONLY ONE WHO KNOWS: When Pete sees Derek calling the police, he tells Annie that they can go away together, Derek is the only one that knows Pete's real identity. Annie understands what he really means by that, but everything she's learned throughout the movie makes her see the answer clearly and how her father hasn't changed. He is willing to kill Derek to go away with Annie, saving her and himself.

ANNIE MAKES THE CHOICE: She knows what she has to do, she tells his father she loves him and leaves out the door, leaving him tied waiting of the police to come.

James and Aiden get to the torture house, with the money they've been saving, they are leaving town - Aiden can't go back home, and James is going with him as his brother.

Annie, now without the loving father she thought she had, decides to join them and create a new family.

FINAL IMAGE: At the bus station, Annie looks at herself in the mirror. She puts on Pete's black sunglasses (a piece of him she's carrying forward). She steps out to join James and Aiden.

They buy three tickets to North Carolina.

Cut to: A moth flying toward a light bulb in the bathroom, landing on it - free.

Annie has left the jar. She's flying toward the light, and even if some lights are dangerous, she'd rather risk the burn than stay trapped forever.

THEMATIC RESOLUTION: Annie has completed her journey from a sheltered, obedient girl who follows her father's rules to an independent young woman who makes her own choices and creates her own family. She's grown up, left the nest, and chosen freedom over safety - exactly what every teenager must do, but in the most extreme circumstances possible.

Pete, who thought he was protecting her by controlling the world around her, has lost her entirely because he wouldn't let her go.

The moth is finally free.

Characters

Annie - A 16-year-old skateboarder who just moved to a new town with her father after her great-grandmother's death. She's isolated, obedient, and has spent her whole life following her father's rules and moving from place to place with him. But when she meets James and Aiden, she starts to want independence for the first time - friends her own age, adventures without her father's permission, and a chance to prove she can do things on her own. She's smart, observant, and becomes the leader of the investigation to find the missing bully, not knowing the person she's hunting is the one she loves most.

Pete - Annie's father and a loving, overprotective single parent who has raised Annie alone since she was a baby. He works hard to provide for her, cooks her meals, and genuinely believes he's protecting her from the dangerous world. But beneath this caring exterior is a deeply damaged man shaped by childhood trauma - witnessing domestic violence, his father's death, and his controlling grandmother. In his twisted mind, he's making the world better by kidnapping and "reforming" bad people, never

realizing that his protection has become a prison and his love has turned into control.

James - A 16-year-old skater and Annie's closest friend in the new town. He's loyal, kind, and the first person to make Annie feel like she belongs somewhere. James is a foster kid and sees Aiden as his brother. He's the one who brings the group together and ultimately offers Annie an escape - a chance to run away to North Carolina and build a new life together. He represents the chosen family that Annie needs.

Aiden - A 14-year-old skater and the youngest of the group. He's dealing with serious problems at home that eventually make it impossible for him to stay. Aiden is scrappy, brave despite his age, and deeply loyal to James and Annie. His situation shows that all three kids are trying to escape difficult family dynamics in their own ways, and together they create the family they actually need.

Derek - The town bully and the son of the richest man in town. He's mean, entitled, and makes life difficult for Annie and her friends at school and the skate park. When he goes missing, he becomes the key to everything - both the reward money the kids need for the competition and the dark secret that will destroy Annie's world. Derek is Pete's victim, the person Pete believes needs to be "reformed" to protect Annie from bullies like him. But as Pete asks more and more questions to Derek, we start to see who Derek really is. He is not just an entitled, rich asshole, but he is also a person, with his own fears, insecurities, and problems. He just needed someone to understand him.

Visual style and Tone

POSITIVE PHOTOTAXIS blends two distinct visual worlds reflecting Annie's journey between childhood safety and adult reality.

Scenes with Annie, James, and Aiden draw from 80s coming-of-age classics like *The Goonies*, *Stand By Me*, and *Stranger Things* - warm, vibrant, full of youthful energy. Golden hour skateboarding, kids huddled planning, freedom of riding bikes through small-town streets. Warmer color palette with natural lighting capturing innocence and hope of teenage friendship.

Pete's world - particularly torture house scenes - takes inspiration from *The Silence of the Lambs*. Cold, clinical, unsettling. Harsh fluorescent lighting, muted colors, tight

framing creating claustrophobia. Pete and Derek's conversations mirror Hannibal and Clarice - intellectual, tense, with respect and horror coexisting.

As Annie gets closer to truth, these visual worlds bleed together. The warm safety of childhood becomes contaminated by cold reality of her father's actions. By the end, when she confronts Pete in the torture house, she's physically in his dark world but has emotionally chosen the light - the warmth of her friends waiting outside.

Comparable Films

- *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) - Complex protagonist/antagonist relationship where understanding and horror coexist
- *Mid90s* (2018) - Authentic skate culture and search for belonging outside family
- *Stand By Me* (1986) - Kids on an adventure forced to grow up faster than expected

What sets **POSITIVE PHOTOTAXIS** apart: the only film combining authentic skate culture with a serial killer father-daughter psychological thriller, told entirely from a teenage girl's perspective. Annie isn't a victim waiting to be saved - she's the detective, the moral compass, and the one making the impossible choice. The film doesn't demonize Pete as pure evil, but shows him as a tragic figure whose love became twisted by trauma.

Why this story and why now?

This movie tells the story of Annie's transformation from an isolated, obedient girl who follows her father's every rule to an independent young woman who chooses her own path - a journey every teenager must make, but shown in a very dramatic and extreme way. Annie's arc mirrors what all teenagers experience: the painful realization that the people who raised you are flawed, the need to separate and become your own person, and the courage it takes to leave everything familiar behind. This heightened reality allows us to explore universal teenage struggles through a psychological thriller lens.

Skateboarding isn't just a backdrop - it's central to the film's DNA and themes. Skate culture is about finding your tribe, earning respect through skill rather than status, and creating family with the people who understand you. This is shown in the

kids' relationship and the way they bond and trust each other. It happens a lot in skateboarding, it doesn't matter where you come from, your age, race, gender, or the money you have, if you skate and have a good attitude, these people become your family. Even Milton, who starts as a poser and an asshole, demonstrates skate culture's code of honor - after Annie beats him in S.K.A.T.E, he keeps his word and helps them, because respect is earned and promises matter. This is the family structure Annie needs: one based on mutual respect, shared passion, and keeping your word, not control and suffocation.

The film also speaks to the urgent reality that all three kids come from broken or toxic family situations. James is a foster kid. Aiden's home life is so terrible he's been planning his escape for months. Annie's father loves her but that love has become dangerous. These aren't kids running away from good homes - they're survivors finding each other and recognizing they can build something better together.

There's also hunger for psychological thrillers with fresh perspectives. By making this about a daughter discovering her father's crimes and choosing between loyalty and morality, we offer something genuinely new to the genre - a serial killer story told through the eyes of someone who loves the killer, and must choose to walk away.

Ultimately, this is a story about love and toxicity, and the hard truth that you can't keep someone locked away their whole life just because you're trying to save and protect them. Pete genuinely loves Annie - that's what makes this tragic rather than simple. But his love has become control, his protection has become a prison, and Annie must break free or be suffocated.

The moth metaphor

Phototaxis is a biological term for when insects or plants move toward light - we've all seen moths fly toward a light bulb, haven't we? This metaphor runs through the entire film because it captures perfectly what Pete has done to Annie and why she must escape.

When Pete is young, he keeps moths in a jar, thinking he's saving them from the bug zapper's light. But by trapping them, he's not doing the right thing - he's suffocating them. Later, he does the same thing with Annie, trying to protect her by changing or removing "bad people" from the world, but really

just keeping her from experiencing life, and again doing it the wrong way.

Throughout the movie, through small visual hints, we see the connection between moths and Annie building. In their final confrontation, Annie makes Pete see this clearly when she says, "I'm just like a moth, and that light was just a flame that eventually would burn me." She understands that her father's love, however real, was also a cage. And as the voice of reason, she makes her father see that what he was doing, even with the best intentions, was wrong - and that by doing this, he was becoming exactly like the people he was trying so hard to change.

At the end, when Annie and her new friends leave for North Carolina, we see a moth flying freely toward a light bulb, landing on it safely. This final image shows that the best thing Pete could have done was let her fly, even if it meant flying toward a light - the same thing he should have done with the real moths when he was a kid. Because even though some lights are flames or bug zappers that can hurt you, many more are not. The risk of getting burned is still better than being trapped in a jar forever. Annie would rather take her chances with the world, with all its dangers, than stay suffocated in her father's protection. She's finally free.