

**JOHNNY'S LADDER**  
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They say that just before you die, your whole life flashes before your eyes. But if you're Johnny Smith, psychic, and you're touching another person in that moment, whose life do you see?

In this episode, Johnny is looking for a missing woman and her daughter. However, while on the case, he is troubled by increasingly stranger blackouts, sort of disorienting "visions".

Johnny is wondering why his reality is fragmenting, but is desperate to continue his search for the missing woman, with whom it seems he has a personal relationship. It is not until act four that we discover that the whole episode leading up to this moment has been a *VISION*, triggered when Johnny found the missing woman, but was at the same instant himself grabbed and choked by her attacker, who was in turn pulled off Johnny by the woman's boyfriend. In that one moment, a human chain forms, and, as Johnny's brain is deprived of oxygen, his life flashes before his eyes. But so do the lives of a mother, her dear friend, and their attacker, because all of them are touching Johnny. For a moment, he IS the woman, the ex, and the boyfriend. We join the story as Johnny is struggling for his life. In this lucid dream-like state, the Johnny's survival instinct is called forth and manifests in the form of those who mean the most to him, essentially the people in his life who give him the will to live: JJ, Sarah, Bruce, even Purdy. They ultimately provide the key piece of information Johnny needs to fend off his attacker.

Because Johnny's brain is processing the woman's, the attacker's, and her old friend's visions (as well as his own life) into one coherent narrative (as if it all happened to Johnny), the episode will feel like a linear story. The casual viewer will think Johnny is battling his own inner problems as he looks for the woman, and will feel caught up in that story. But, to reward dedicated DZ fans, we will leave a trail of storytelling clues so that the clever watcher will be able to solve the "what's a vision/what's reality?" mystery and not feel "tricked."

It's an exciting new way to tell a uniquely Dead Zone story: an emotional, high-stakes episode full of misleads, twists and turns; a Dead Zone that only in Act Four is it revealed that, just as in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," has taken place during the seconds the hero of our story is fighting for his life.

**Teaser**

Johnny and a woman, Maiya, are in her house. From their familiar way with each other, we discover that Maiya is an old childhood friend. She and her young daughter Marianne have recently moved back to Cleaves Mills to escape an abusive relationship with Maiya's ex. But Maiya had a hangup call in the middle of the night, got scared, called Johnny for protection, he came over and slept on the couch. Now she's trying to shuttle Marianne off to school. On their way out, Marianne picks up Johnny's cell, takes a picture phone photo of her mom and him that we don't see. As Maiya winds a scarf around her neck and Johnny says goodbye, he

is overcome by a choking sensation—which he assumes is a vision. He looks in the mirror and sees *strange marks on his neck*. That’s weird. Off a supernatural feeling, Johnny and us wondering what the hell it’s all about…?

### Act One

A little later, Johnny’s getting ready to leave, opens the door to find a stranger standing there, looking for Maiya. When Johnny tells the stranger that Maiya’s not home, he asks Johnny if he’s Maiya’s boyfriend. Johnny, taken aback, wants to know who’s asking? The man, an edge to his voice, explains that he’s Maiya’s ex. Johnny tenses up, tells the man: “She moved three thousand miles to get away from you. Stay away from her.” To which the guy responds by hauling off and punching Johnny. Johnny grabs him, they wrestle to the ground, then the other guy CLOCKS Johnny…

As Johnny’s consciousness fades to black, fade back up on:

“Surprise!” Sarah, in a party hat, leads a group of friends who yell it in unison!

[NOTE: the blackouts are the transitions within the nearly episode-long vision when Johnny switches from the POV of one person who is touching him to another person who is touching him. The Sarah interlude is Johnny’s own life flashing before his eyes, and his will to live telling him to hang on. These interludes—here with Sarah, and later with JJ, Purdy and Bruce are the only moments in the episode when Johnny is aware that everything isn’t all right with him.]

Johnny comes to for a moment.

[NOTE: As he comes out of it, he is having a first person vision as the abusive ex.]

For a second, he looks over at the other person on the ground next to him and it’s a different guy from the one who punched him out, but before that can register, Johnny blacks out again.

When he comes to [back in the POV of the boyfriend, shaking off being hit by the ex], he sees a car careening at top speed, abusive ex at the wheel, peeling out of the driveway. Johnny races off after the car, but loses him.

Johnny tries to reach Maiya to warn her, but her cell doesn’t pick up.

PU mid-scene at the Sheriff’s station as Johnny talks to Walt, explaining that Maiya can’t be reached, and her ex has a violent streak. Johnny wants to get to Maiya before the ex does, he’s experienced what this angry guy’s capable of firsthand. As Walt agrees to put out an A.P.B. on the ex for assault, Johnny suddenly starts to black out again.

[NOTE: this is the transition from boyfriend’s POV to Johnny’s own POV]

When Johnny comes to, he's sitting in a different chair in Walt's office [NOTE: Because this is Johnny's memory of what happened when he saw Walt earlier that day, we can have Walt call him "Johnny" and all will seem as per usual]

Walt asks Johnny if he knows where the abusive ex is. "No," Johnny tells Walt. He picks up a woman's scarf lying on Walt's desk, and suddenly finds himself falling off a CLIFF!

## **Act Two**

Out of the vision, Johnny turns to Walt, the woman's scarf still in his hand "This case you're working on, whoever this belongs to, is in danger."

But as Walt asks Johnny for details of the vision, Johnny blacks out again.

Out of the haze, he can make out the dim light of candles flickering, then with a sudden gust, as though someone's blowing them out, the screen goes black again.

When Johnny comes to [NOTE: this is Johnny back in the boyfriend's POV], Walt is asking him if he's all right, and Johnny says yes, but his head's just hurting from the punch he took from Maiya's ex. Walt is concerned, tells him should go to the emergency room, but Johnny says: "I have to find Maiya." Walt assures him he'll do everything he can to help.

Johnny's on edge, driving around the neighborhood, searching for Maiya. He starts to again BLACK OUT, HEARS SEAGULLS for a moment, loses his grip on the steering wheel, comes out of it as he's about to crash his car.

[NOTE: this is the transition from boyfriend's POV to abusive ex's POV. The seagulls are the reality bleeding through for a moment. Because Johnny is transitioning from one first person vision to another, he doesn't register any change as he comes out of it]

He swerves to avoid an accident, stopping in front of a house. He stares at it, something about it seems familiar. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a torn PHOTO, the edge of the house he's parked in front of visible in the frame. Johnny gets out of the car, moves up to the house, is about to knock on the front door when a nice-looking, affable guy (attentive viewers will recognize him as the man who, for a split-second, was lying next to Johnny after the fist fight in act one) opens it. Johnny asks "Where's Maiya?" The man immediately gets his back up, is evasive. Johnny presses harder, the man looks him in the eye "She moved three thousand miles to get away from you..." Sound familiar? We begin to realize that this is the exact moment from act one replayed with Johnny as the man at the door. Which means we know what will happen next...

Johnny hauls off and hits the guy, they struggle to the ground, and Johnny gets in the big punch that knocks the guy unconscious. As Johnny sits up, holds his head in pain, starts to black out [for a split-second the guy on the ground is the abusive ex],

A FLASH as Purdy leads the charge of friends in party hats singing “For he’s a jolly good fella...!” It turns strangely ominous as Purdy mysteriously disappears around a corner in Johnny’s house. Johnny, feeling weirded-out, tries to go after him, but looks down to feel his legs suddenly trapped by deep sand and water, a swirling surf... As his friends continue the disturbing chorus,

He turns and sees Greg Stillson—the devil incarnate--lying on a lounge chair in Johnny’s back yard, Hawaiian shirt slung open, holding an umbrella drink. Tauntingly, he pats the empty lounge chair next to him, tells Johnny to relax, take a load off. Stop taking everything so seriously...

The man lying on the ground groans a little, Johnny looks down at him, then blacks out for a second, comes to [now back in the abusive ex’s POV] looks around in fear and takes off.

CAMERA HOLDS on the man lying on the ground, his cell/picture phone (the same one Marianne used in the teaser), which has fallen out of his pocket, next to him. On the picture phone photo of Maiya and--not Johnny, but--the out-cold childhood friend...

[NOTE: this is of course the replaying from a different POV of the encounter between the Maiya’s old friend and the abusive ex. The picture on the cell phone is the clue that the earlier scene was a first person vision, not a scene from Johnny’s own life.]

DISSOLVE TO:

Later, police cars pull up alongside Johnny. [NOTE: he’s still in the abusive ex’s POV, which suits our story well as that man’s emotions are a good double-entendre for Johnny’s own in this moment: fear, anxiety, and a desire to find Maiya]. As an officer cuffs Johnny,

FLASH! Johnny blinks as his photo is taken at the police station. Walt, (treating Johnny as a stranger, though we’ll write it off as a response to Johnny’s odd behavior) spears the still-developing Polaroid with a thumbtack and sticks it to the evidence board, tells an agitated Johnny that Maiya doesn’t want to see him.

[NOTE: this dialogue will all play because Johnny, as the abusive ex, would say similar things to what real Johnny with his psyche unraveling would say in this moment].

Johnny, upset, presses, asks about seeing Marianne. Walt is immovable, Johnny almost explodes. “You’re just not getting it.” snaps Walt, “She’s got a restraining order.” Johnny protests, “That’s for her ex, not for me.” Walt’s called out of the interrogation room for a moment to deal with an urgent police matter.

Johnny sees that no one is watching him, takes off.

Walt comes back in to find the interrogation room now empty. As he shouts for his deputy, he pulls the Polaroid off the evidence board. That’s when we see it’s not of Johnny, but of the man who hit him in act one, Maiya’s abusive ex.

### Act Three

Johnny's car pulls quickly into a beach parking lot. As he cruises along, he spies Maiya's car parked a few spaces away. As he gets out and walks towards it, the sun blazes down from overhead and he starts to BLACK OUT...

Suddenly Johnny hears "Time for presents!" Then JJ comes into view and passes him a small package, obviously carefully wrapped by JJ (in comics or something kid-like). As Johnny starts to open it (before we can see what it is)...

He SNAPS back to consciousness and he's standing next to Maiya's car. [Note: this is now Johnny's own POV from earlier that day when, working with Walt, he started his search at the beach for the missing woman.] He touches the car, which triggers a vision we don't see.

Johnny walks along the dunes, looking for Maiya and Marianne. He starts to black out again, rounds a sandy hill, and finds himself...

in a COURT PROCEEDING, although it's taking place on the beach.

[Note: as Johnny gets closer to death, the "reality" he's living is starting to break apart, and the visions are starting to merge. This is a vision of what happened to the abusive ex merged with what happened to Johnny as he searched for Maiya.]

A weird, nightmarish scene in which Johnny is before a judge (who's sitting atop his bench on the sand), accused of abusive behavior towards Maiya, and her daughter, Marianne. Johnny protests, barely keeping his cool: he's trying to protect Maiya, not hurt her. He would never do anything to endanger Marianne. The judge issues a restraining order. As Johnny flares, is dragged from the "courtroom" shouting threats, the judge turns to his bailiff, names the defendant as "Mr. Axelrod." On Johnny, trying to tell them that's not his name, he suddenly sputters, coughs, begins to choke and black out.

He comes out of it as he's climbing over the dunes, moving quickly up a rocky path leading towards a cliff overlooking the ocean. [NOTE: he is now having a first person vision from Maiya's POV, though we assume it's just a continuation of Johnny's search for Maiya.]

As Johnny looks down below, he sees the man who hit him in the first scene in act one, the abusive ex, trailing him. As Johnny moves quickly to escape...

Johnny hears a child's laughter echoing with the sounds of surf and seagulls. Concerned, he moves inside a sea cave, where he catches a glimpse of Marianne playing inside. He calls out to her. Johnny tells her everything's going to be all right. She should stay inside the cave, he's going to come back for her, he promises. The little girl, now scared by his serious tone, asks what she should do while he's gone? Eyeing her backpack, he reaches for it, pulls out a pad and a pack of crayons. "Draw a picture of me," he tells her soothingly.

Johnny emerges from the cave, and starts to black out. Johnny comes out of it [now he's in the abusive ex's POV] to find he's running along the edge of a low cliff overlooking the ocean. He sees someone in the distance, then runs towards them. Maiya turns to see Johnny coming at her, screams for him to "Get away!" Johnny pauses, then... LUNGES for her. She jolts back, loses her footing. As Maiya slips off the edge...

FLASH FRAME; blackness. (BIRTHDAY IMAGE INSTEAD OF THIS? OR SINGING FROM THE BIRTHDAY? EERIE, FELLINIESQUE?)

Johnny falls off the cliff (as he did in act one in Walt's office). [This is Maiya's POV]

FLASH FRAME: blackness. Sounds of sea gulls.

Johnny's running towards the cliff's edge. Then looks over the edge...

SMASH CUT TO:

Johnny runs down towards the beach and sees someone lying face-down on the sand. He rushes over, turns the lifeless body over to see... himself, unconscious. At the same moment, he hears a voice in the distance calling "Maiya! Maiya!" As he glances up to hear his own voice...

[NOTE: now it's all coming apart for Johnny, the multiple first person visions conflating into one]

#### **Act Four**

Pick up with Johnny, leaning over his own lifeless body. At that moment, he feels hands snake tightly around his neck, choking the life out of him. As he turns to see who his attacker is, he comes face-to-face with... himself! Johnny is both the attacked and the attacker. Suddenly the attacker is jolted by a blow from behind and Johnny whips his head back to see himself trying to pull the attacker off of himself. The camera pulls back to see four versions of Johnny (ala "Being John Malkovich"): an unconscious victim laying on the ground as he tries to revive himself while being choked by himself as he himself tries to pull the choker off of himself...

As Johnny struggles, starts to pass out, then gives in to the darkness...

FLASH (back) to: The birthday party (picking up from the moment where we last left off), Johnny opening JJ's gift. It's a cool vintage-looking pocketknife. As Johnny starts to pick it up, A HAND suddenly darts into the frame and snatches it away from him: "That's NOT a toy! You could hurt someone with that!" Johnny looks up into the face of his father. As everyone from the party suddenly disappears from the scene, Johnny asks his father, "I'm dying, aren't I?" His father says "You can't let go, son. Our work isn't done." Johnny asks him what he means. His father repeats that he and Johnny must work together to save the people. Johnny says "I did, thanks to you, I saved the people in the building." But his father

says no, not the building. “Everyone, Johnny. We must save everyone.”

As he locks eyes with his father, his father nods, and Johnny is catapulted back into reality.

And we arrive at the “Jacob’s Ladder” moment of the episode where everything is finally made clear:

#### FREEZE FRAME

As Johnny now fights for his life, POP! The other “Johnnies” revert to their true selves. While everyone remains motionless, CAMERA PANS around to examine the unconscious victim—Maiya. As we go close on her, and on Johnny’s hands on her, FLASH! We see a RAPID REPLAY of the events of the day, this time with all the players in their correct identities: As Maiya and Marianne head out the door, Maiya kisses her boyfriend goodbye. She’s then walking near the beach and sees her ex. She races to find Marianne, tells her to stay in the cave. She’s going for help when the ex surprises her on the cliff. She plunges over the edge. As Maiya’s falling...

PAN OVER to the ex, where his fingers grip Johnny’s neck. RAPID REPLAY of the hearing (this time in a real courtroom) before the judge in which Maiya filed a restraining order against him, of him in his car pulling over and recognizing Maiya’s house from the photo, then punching out the old friend. Walt takes him in, he escapes, follows Maiya to the beach, lunges for her. When she falls off the cliff, he rushes down to her, sees Johnny approaching, hides, then jumps out and chokes Johnny.

PAN OVER to the friend, who (having just been punched out by Maiya’s ex) tells Walt the ex is after Maiya and gives Walt Maiya’s scarf, Walt promising to put out an APB on the ex. FLASH FORWARD to the friend looking for Maiya at the beach, and coming upon Johnny being choked by the ex as Johnny’s trying to revive Maiya. As the friend goes to pull the ex off Johnny...

FINALLY, PAN BACK TO Johnny, in Walt’s office on another matter, picks up Maiya’s scarf and tells Walt whoever it belongs to is in danger, offers to help look for her. Goes to the beach, finds her car, goes in search of her, then comes upon Maiya lying on the sand, rushes over to her. As he’s jumped from behind by Maiya’s ex...

The human chain effect is now revealed—the catalyst for what has been a nearly-episode-long interconnected vision. What has happened in reality is that Johnny, while trying to revive an unconscious Maiya, is attacked by her attacker, and Maiya’s friend is now trying to pull the attacker off Johnny—this is the three seconds of real time in which the entire episode has taken place. As Johnny is choked nearly to death by Maiya’s ex, and his brain is deprived of oxygen, his life has mixed with the lives of all those touching him at that moment and everything we have seen in the episode up until this moment is what has flashed before his eyes.

With the “human chain” still motionless, Bruce, Purdy, Sarah, JJ and Johnny’s father in party

hats encircle the frozen Johnny, calling to him like an angry mob of schoolyard kids, their voices overlapping, entreating Johnny to “Fight! Fight!” We realize that they are manifestations of Johnny’s desire to live.

WHOOSH! We return to real time as Johnny finally comes out of the vision and calls upon the last bit of strength left within his fading consciousness to reach into his pocket and pull out the pocket knife and overpower Maiya’s ex.

But in a struggle that ensues between the old friend and Maiya’s ex, Johnny heroically saves the friend and grabs the ex in time for Walt to collar and arrest him. Walt jokes about what a difference a day makes. “Yesterday we threw you a surprise party for your birthday, today you’re hoping you live to see another one.” Johnny explains to Walt that the birthday present JJ gave him, the pen knife of Johnny’s father that JJ found and cleaned up for him, was the very thing that saved his life.

All is almost well, but Maiya is still unconscious, can’t tell them where Marianne is. Johnny FLASHES on seeing her in the sea cave (when he had a first person vision as Maiya in act three) and rushes to where Marianne is, followed by the others... Marianne is fine, sitting there finishing her drawing, which of course is not of Johnny, but of Maiya, who has, by this time, come to.

A victory moment for Johnny, as he wistfully looks at the mother and daughter he managed to reunite—and whose reality for a day he has lived--Maiya, Marianne and Maiya's old friend.

At episode’s end, Johnny, at home at the end of this long, trying day, looks in the mirror and sees strangulation marks on his neck, very real bruises left by his would-be killer. Our story comes full circle as Johnny FLASHES BACK TO: the very same image he saw in the teaser when he looked at himself in the mirror, the marks on his neck, a future vision which set this whole trippy Johnny’s Ladder episode in motion. Bruce is there, worried about how close he came to losing his friend. Johnny says that what gave him the strength to hang on were the people closest to him, including Bruce. He felt he couldn’t let him—or any other them—down. Johnny also tells him that, at the moment of death, his father came to him. “He knew, Bruce, he knew about Armageddon.” Bruce says “that was you, Johnny, finding the strength within yourself to live. Johnny: “Maybe. Or maybe I’m not in this alone after all.”

**THE END**