

CALIBRATION

Episode 1 – "MODIFICATION"

Written by

Jeremy Salsburg

calibration.ThresholdFiction.com |
info@ThresholdFiction.com

(561) 247-3842

COLD OPEN

INT. DANNER GARAGE LABORATORY – NIGHT

A single-car garage converted into a laboratory. Not a movie lab – a real garage with a real workbench, a centrifuge balanced on plywood, a PCR thermocycler next to a toolbox. Handwritten labels on everything. The overhead fluorescent buzzes.

SUPER: ESTES PARK, COLORADO – NOVEMBER 2001

ABEDNEGO DANNER (39, tall, thin, wire-frame glasses, the intense focus of a man who has spent years thinking about one thing) stands at the workbench. Before him: a syringe. A vial. A notebook open to a page dense with handwritten protocol.

No dialogue. No score. The sound design is intimate: the hum of the fluorescent, the scratch of Abednego's sleeve on the bench, the click of the vial as he picks it up.

He draws the liquid into the syringe. His hands are steady. The needle is 30-gauge – hair-thin. He holds it up to the light and flicks the barrel. A single air bubble rises and escapes.

He looks at the notebook. Then at the syringe. Then at the ceiling – above which his pregnant wife is sleeping.

CLOSE ON ABEDNEGO'S FACE. This is not a man acting on impulse. This is a man who has been arguing with himself for months and has lost. The decision is already made. What we're watching is the last moment before execution.

He opens a drawer and removes a small adhesive bandage and an alcohol swab. He puts them in his shirt pocket.

He turns off the fluorescent. The garage goes dark.

INT. DANNER HOME – STAIRCASE – CONTINUOUS

Abednego climbs the stairs. Each step is deliberate. He carries the syringe pointed down, capped, the way a nurse

would. He knows the technique because he's practiced it – on the cat, on himself, on a pillow shaped like a sleeping body.

INT. DANNER HOME – MASTER BEDROOM – CONTINUOUS

ANNA KOENIG DANNER (36, registered nurse, the practical face of a woman who married a brilliant man and understands what that costs) sleeps on her left side, one arm beneath the pillow, her pregnant belly visible under the sheet. She is eleven weeks along.

Abednego stands in the doorway. He watches her breathe.

He crosses the room. Kneels beside the bed. Uncaps the syringe. Swabs a small area on her upper arm – the alcohol scent mixes with the smell of sheets and sleep.

CLOSE ON THE INJECTION. The needle enters. Abednego depresses the plunger with the slow, steady pressure of a man who has done this before (he has – on the cat). The injection takes four seconds.

Anna stirs. Does not wake.

Abednego applies the adhesive bandage over the puncture site. It will look like a spider bite by morning.

He stands. Caps the syringe. Walks to the bedroom doorway.

He turns back and looks at his sleeping wife. His face holds everything: love, guilt, scientific triumph, and the absolute certainty that what he has done cannot be undone.

He leaves the room.

The camera holds on Anna sleeping. Her hand moves unconsciously to her belly.

> TITLE CARD: CALIBRATION

ACT ONE

EXT. DANNER HOME – DAY – SPRING 2002

The Danner house in daylight. A modest two-story wood-frame house at the end of a mountain road. Pine trees. A view of the Continental Divide. Beautiful and isolated – the kind of place where a family can keep secrets.

SUPER: SIX MONTHS LATER

INT. DANNER HOME – MASTER BEDROOM – DAY

Anna lies in bed, propped on pillows. She's just given birth – exhausted, hair damp, the afterglow of labor on her face. A MIDWIFE finishes notes on a clipboard. Abednego stands at the foot of the bed, watching.

The midwife hands the baby to Anna.

MIDWIFE

Eleven pounds four ounces. Biggest baby I've delivered at home.

Anna takes the baby – HUGO – and the midwife helps position him at her breast.

ANNA

He feels solid. Like holding a –

She stops. Searches for the word.

ANNA (CONT'D)

Like holding a brick wrapped in skin.

The midwife laughs. Abednego does not.

CLOSE ON ANNA'S HAND. Hugo grips her index finger. Anna's expression shifts – a flicker of discomfort she suppresses immediately.

ANNA (CONT'D)

Strong grip.

ABEDNEGO

(too quickly)

That's normal. Palmar reflex.

The midwife gathers her things. Chats about follow-up visits, pediatrician referrals, the usual post-birth checklist. Abednego walks her out.

ANNA alone with Hugo. She lifts her hand from his grip and looks at her finger.

CLOSE ON ANNA'S FINGER. A bruise is already forming. Deep purple, the shape of a newborn's grip. This should not be possible.

Anna stares at the bruise. Then at her son. Then at the doorway where Abednego disappeared.

She pulls Hugo closer. Her face is not afraid – not yet. It is the face of a nurse who has just seen a symptom she cannot explain.

INT. DANNER HOME – KITCHEN – THREE DAYS LATER

Abednego sits at the kitchen table. Coffee. His notebook open. He's writing in it – measurements, observations, the clinical shorthand of a researcher documenting results.

Anna enters. She's holding Hugo in one arm. In the other hand, she holds a wooden cabinet handle – broken. The wood is splintered where it was gripped.

She sets the handle on the table in front of Abednego. Sits down across from him.

Silence.

ANNA

That's the third one this week. He grabs them when I carry him past the cabinets.

Abednego looks at the handle. At his notebook. At Anna.

ANNA (CONT'D)

He's three days old, Ned.

Beat.

ANNA (CONT'D)

What did you do?

The question hangs. Abednego's face goes through a rapid series of calculations – the face of a man deciding whether to lie to the one person who will know he's lying.

ABEDNEGO

I modified him.

Anna stares.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

In utero. A genetic modification.
Fourteen genes. A cascade that –

ANNA

When?

ABEDNEGO

November. Week eleven. While you were sleeping.

The silence that follows is not dramatic. It is the silence of a marriage absorbing a blow it may not survive. Anna looks at the broken cabinet handle. At Hugo in her arms. At Abednego.

ANNA

You injected me.

ABEDNEGO

An AAV vector. Through –

ANNA

You injected me while I was sleeping.

Abednego nods.

Anna stands. She walks out of the kitchen. We hear her footsteps on the stairs. A door closes.

Abednego sits alone at the table with the broken handle and his notebook.

INT. DANNER HOME – VARIOUS – TIME LAPSE

A montage of four days. Anna does not speak to Abednego. She feeds Hugo. She changes Hugo. She moves through the house with the practiced efficiency of a nurse managing a patient. She does not look at her husband.

Abednego sleeps on the couch. He writes in his notebook. He watches Anna carry Hugo with the focused attention of a researcher watching his subject – which is exactly what Hugo is, and exactly what Anna cannot forgive.

On the fourth day, Anna sits down at the kitchen table.

ANNA

Tell me everything.

INT. DANNER GARAGE LABORATORY – DAY

Abednego shows Anna the lab. The centrifuge. The PCR machine. The notebooks – five of them, spanning two years of work.

ABEDNEGO

The principle is myostatin knockout – MSTN. Mice without myostatin grow double the muscle mass. That's the foundation.

Anna listens. Her arms are crossed.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

But muscle alone is useless if the skeleton can't support it. So – BMP2, SOST modification. Bone density four to five times normal. Then the connective tissue has to match – COL1A1, COL3A1. Skin density, tendon strength. Everything has to scale together.

He opens a notebook. Pages of gene names, dosing calculations, vector design schematics.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

Fourteen genes in total. Each edit is achievable – individually, any CRISPR

lab could do them. The advance is the cascade. Making all fourteen work simultaneously without -

ANNA
Without killing him.

Beat.

ABEDNEGO
Yes.

ANNA
How do you know it worked?

Abednego looks at her. He reaches into a desk drawer and pulls out the broken cabinet handles - he's been collecting them.

ABEDNEGO
He's three days old and he's breaking oak.

Anna picks up one of the handles. Examines the splinter pattern. The nurse in her reads the evidence: this wood was shattered by compression, not impact. Grip strength.

ANNA
The cat.

Abednego is silent.

ANNA (CONT'D)
The cat fell off the roof last spring. Two stories onto the driveway. It was fine.

ABEDNEGO
Yes.

ANNA
That was you.

ABEDNEGO
The cat was the proof of concept. Individual mammalian organism, full

cascade, no adverse effects.

Anna puts the handle down. She looks at the laboratory – this cramped, obsessive space where her husband rewrote their son's genome between dinner and bedtime.

ANNA

What is he going to be?

ABEDNEGO

I don't know. Something that's never existed.

ANNA

And what are we supposed to do with that?

Abednego has no answer. He stands in his garage laboratory and for the first time, the scope of what he's done – not the science, which he understands, but the parenthood, which he does not – lands on him.

ACT TWO

INT. DANNER HOME – VARIOUS – TIME PROGRESSION (2003-2007)

SUPER: HUGO – AGE 18 MONTHS

A wooden toy truck. Hugo picks it up. The wood CRACKS in his grip. He looks at the pieces with the bewilderment of a toddler who doesn't understand why the world keeps breaking.

SUPER: HUGO – AGE 3

Hugo (3, large for his age, brown hair, brown eyes, unremarkably handsome face) reaches for the bathroom faucet. The chrome handle bends under his grip. Water sprays. Anna rushes in, mops the floor, replaces the handle. This is not the first time.

A montage of broken things: a door frame splintered by a casual push. A glass shattered mid-drink. A wooden railing pulled clean from its posts. Each object tells the same

story: this child does not know his own strength, because his strength has no precedent.

SUPER: HUGO – AGE 5

EXT. DANNER PROPERTY – DAY

Hugo (5, big for five, the kind of big that adults notice and comment on) plays in the yard with TYLER REEVES (6, a neighbor's kid, skinny, confident, the casual cruelty of a child who doesn't know he's cruel).

They're playing. Tyler grabs Hugo's arm. Hugo pulls back – a reflex, the automatic response of a child being grabbed.

Tyler SCREAMS.

CLOSE ON TYLER'S ARM. The forearm is bent at a wrong angle. Broken. Hugo pulled free with perhaps five percent of his capability, and five percent was enough to snap a six-year-old's radius.

Hugo stares at Tyler's arm. He does not understand what happened. He does not understand that what happened is what will always happen if he forgets – for one second – what he is.

Anna rushes out. She sees Tyler. She sees Hugo's face – not guilt, not yet. Bewilderment. The face of a child who has just learned that he is dangerous.

Anna kneels beside Tyler. Immobilizes the arm. Calls for help. Her nursing instincts are automatic, professional, efficient.

Her eyes never leave Hugo.

INT. DANNER HOME – KITCHEN – NIGHT

Hugo is in bed. Anna and Abednego sit at the kitchen table. The same table, the same configuration as the confession scene. This table is where the Danner family processes its crises.

ANNA

He broke a child's arm.

ABEDNEGO

He didn't mean to. He doesn't understand the differential yet.

ANNA

The differential.

ABEDNEGO

Between what he can do and what other people can absorb.

Anna stares at him.

ANNA

He's five, Ned. He doesn't know what "differential" means. He knows he hurt Tyler and Tyler screamed and now Tyler's in a cast and Tyler's mother won't return my calls.

Beat.

ANNA (CONT'D)

Fix this. Teach him to control it. Or I tell them everything.

"Them" is unspecified. The doctors. The authorities. The world. The threat is genuine and Abednego knows it.

ABEDNEGO

I'll teach him.

ANNA

You'll teach a five-year-old to control something you don't fully understand.

ABEDNEGO

I understand the science.

ANNA

You don't understand the child.

She's right. Abednego knows she's right.

INT. DANNER HOME - KITCHEN - THE NEXT MORNING

Hugo sits at the table. Abednego sits across from him. Between them: a raw egg.

ABEDNEGO

Pick it up.

Hugo reaches for the egg. He picks it up.

The egg SHATTERS.

Hugo looks at the yolk running down his fingers with an expression of complete resignation. He already knows this will happen. He's five, and he's already tired of breaking things.

Abednego sets another egg on the table.

ABEDNEGO

Again.

MONTAGE - THE CALIBRATION CURRICULUM

The next eighteen months, compressed.

Eggs. Hugo picks up eggs. Dozens of eggs. Hundreds of eggs. They break. They break. They break. And then - one doesn't. Hugo holds an intact egg in his palm and his face shows something we haven't seen: pride. He did something ordinary, and it was the hardest thing he's ever done.

Glass. Abednego hands Hugo a glass jar. Hugo holds it. The glass CRACKS. Another jar. CRACKS. Another. Hugo concentrates - his jaw tightens, his breathing changes, every muscle in his small body engaged in the act of not crushing. The jar holds.

Abednego's hand. Abednego extends his hand. Hugo takes it.

ABEDNEGO

Squeeze.

Hugo squeezes. Abednego's face tightens - the pain is real, the hand is being compressed by a five-year-old with

the grip strength of an industrial press.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

Less.

Hugo adjusts. Abednego's face eases slightly.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

Less.

Another adjustment. Abednego nods.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

That's a handshake. That's what normal feels like. Remember this pressure. This exact pressure. This is your baseline for every human being you will ever touch.

Hugo nods. He is five years old and he is learning to calibrate his existence to a world that cannot survive his carelessness.

ANNA watches from the doorway. CLOSE ON HER FACE. A mother watching her son learn not to break people.

The rules. Abednego kneels in front of Hugo.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

Three rules. Always. Forever.

Hugo listens with the seriousness of a child who understands that this is important even if he doesn't understand why.

ABEDNEGO (CONT'D)

Never grip at full strength. Never run as fast as you can. Every touch is a choice.

HUGO

(small voice)

What if I forget?

ABEDNEGO

You can't forget. This is the most important thing you'll ever learn. More important than reading, more important than math, more important than anything they'll ever teach you in school. You have to choose – every second of every day – how much of yourself to use.

Hugo absorbs this. He is five. He does not fully understand. But he understands enough.

HUGO

Will I always have to choose?

ABEDNEGO

Yes.

EXT. ROCKY MOUNTAIN FOREST – DAY

Hugo in the woods. Alone. The trees are enormous, the mountains vast, and Hugo – for the first time – is not managing himself.

He RUNS. Not at human speed – at his speed. The camera cannot keep up. Trees blur past. He is six years old and he is moving faster than any human being has ever moved.

He STOPS at a boulder. Three tons of granite. He puts his hands on it and PUSHES. The boulder moves. Tips. Rolls down the slope, crashing through undergrowth, snapping small trees.

Hugo watches it go with an expression of pure joy. This is the only place where he can be himself. Not the calibrated version, not the careful child who holds eggs and practices handshakes – but the thing his father made.

He uproots a tree. A pine, forty feet tall, root ball and all. He lifts it over his head and throws it. It sails end over end and crashes into the forest a hundred yards away. Birds explode from the canopy.

Hugo laughs. He is six years old, alone in the mountains, and he is happy in a way he cannot be anywhere else. This is what it feels like to not pretend.

The mountains do not care what he is. The boulders do not break. The trees can take it. Out here, Hugo is not dangerous. He is free.

ACT THREE

SUPER: HUGO – AGE 10

INT. ESTES PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL – CLASSROOM – DAY

Hugo (10, large, awkward, the careful body language of a child who has been taught to hold back) sits at a desk slightly too small for him. He's in fifth grade. He writes with a mechanical pencil, pressing lightly – calibrating even his handwriting.

The other kids give him space. Not because he's threatening – because he's odd. He moves too carefully. He's too aware of his own body. The instinctive social radar of children has flagged him as different.

At recess, Hugo stands alone at the edge of the playground. He watches other kids play tag, throw balls, roughhouse. He does not participate. He cannot.

A boy approaches. DANNY REEVES (10, small, shy, the kind of kid who befriends the other lonely kid because loneliness recognizes loneliness).

DANNY

You're Hugo, right? Tyler's brother said you broke Tyler's arm when you were little.

Hugo tenses.

HUGO

It was an accident.

DANNY

Tyler's an idiot. He probably deserved it.

Hugo looks at Danny with surprise. Danny grins. The friendship begins with the simplicity of lonely children finding each other.

EXT. WOODED AREA BEHIND SCHOOL – AFTER SCHOOL

Hugo and Danny walk through woods behind the school. Danny has been coming here for weeks – he's found an old fort built by seventh graders. Plywood walls, a tarp roof, the territorial architecture of adolescent boys.

DANNY

The Whitfield kids built it. They don't let anyone else use it. Cam Whitfield beat up a fourth grader last week for going near it.

Hugo looks at the fort. It's crude but solid – plywood screwed to two-by-four framing, a padlocked door.

HUGO

Do they bother you?

DANNY

Sometimes. They took my backpack once. Threw it in the creek.

Hugo files this information. He does not respond. He is ten years old and he has spent five years learning not to react.

EXT. WOODED AREA BEHIND SCHOOL – THREE WEEKS LATER – DAY

Danny runs through the trees. His lip is bleeding. His jacket is torn. He reaches Hugo, who is sitting on a log, reading.

DANNY

(out of breath)

Cam. And his friends. They –

Hugo sees the blood. The torn jacket. He stands.

HUGO

Where?

DANNY

The fort. They said if I came back -

Hugo walks toward the fort. Danny follows, half-running to keep up with Hugo's stride.

HUGO

Stay here.

DANNY

What are you going to -

HUGO

Stay here.

Danny stops. Something in Hugo's voice - a flatness, a control - stops him.

EXT. THE FORT - CONTINUOUS

Hugo reaches the fort. It's empty - the seventh graders have left. Just the structure: plywood walls, two-by-four framing, the padlocked door.

Hugo looks at the fort. He thinks about Danny's bloody lip. He thinks about Tyler's broken arm. He thinks about every glass he's shattered, every door handle he's crushed, every moment of his life spent being less than he is.

He puts his hand on the plywood wall. And pushes.

The wall EXPLODES inward. Not breaks - explodes. The plywood shatters along the grain. The two-by-fours snap like kindling. Hugo walks into the structure and takes it apart. Methodically. Completely. Each wall, each beam, each piece of the roof - torn down, broken, reduced to splinters.

It takes thirty seconds.

Hugo stands in the wreckage. Around him: a pile of shattered wood and bent screws that was, thirty seconds ago, a structure three seventh graders spent a month building.

Behind him, a PHONE SCREEN lights up. CAM WHITFIELD (13, arrived late, frozen at the tree line) is recording.

Hugo turns. Sees the phone. Sees Cam's face – not angry. Terrified.

CLOSE ON HUGO. He looks at the camera with an expression that is not threatening. It is the expression of an animal encountering something it doesn't understand. Something that will change everything.

The silence is more frightening than any violence.

INT. DANNER HOME – KITCHEN – NIGHT

Abednego's laptop is open on the kitchen table. On screen: a YouTube video. "KID DESTROYS FORT WITH BARE HANDS wtf." The view counter is climbing. 14,000 views. 15,000. 16,000.

The video shows Hugo – face visible, identifiable – dismantling the fort in thirty seconds. The comment section is a mix of amazement, disbelief, and the word "fake" repeated by people who want it to be fake.

Abednego closes the laptop. Sits with his hands flat on the table.

Anna stands at the counter. Hugo sits at the table across from his father, staring at his hands.

ANNA

We have to move.

ABEDNEGO

I'll pull him from school. We'll homeschool. We can –

ANNA

We have to move, Ned. The Reeves family already called. The school called. Someone is going to ask questions that we can't answer.

Silence. Hugo has not looked up from his hands.

HUGO

I'm sorry.

ANNA

(kneeling beside him)

You don't have to be sorry.

HUGO

Danny was hurt. They hurt him. I wanted to -

He stops.

ANNA

I know.

HUGO

(looking at his mother)

Will I always have to pretend?

Anna looks at Abednego. The question hangs between them - the question their son is asking them to answer, the question neither of them can.

ABEDNEGO

We'll figure it out.

Hugo looks at his father. He is ten years old, and he already knows that "we'll figure it out" is not an answer. It is the absence of an answer. The pretending will not end. It will define the rest of his life.

EXT. ROCKY MOUNTAIN MEADOW - GOLDEN HOUR

Hugo sits on a boulder in a mountain meadow at 9,200 feet. The sun is setting. The Continental Divide stretches in every direction - peaks, ridges, the vast indifference of geology.

Hugo is alone. The meadow is his place – the gymnasium of his childhood, the one environment where his full capability has consequences only for the landscape.

He looks at the mountains. The light is gold. The wind moves through the grass. A hawk circles overhead.

HUGO

(quietly, to no one)

What am I for?

The mountains do not answer.

The camera pulls back. Hugo gets smaller. The meadow gets larger. The mountains get larger still. A boy on a rock, asking a question that has no answer, in a landscape that does not care.

HOLD. The gold light fades. Hugo becomes a silhouette.

> SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

> NEXT: "CALIBRATION"

> END OF EPISODE

END OF EPISODE 1

Runtime estimate: ~58-62 minutes