

# Shift (2023)



Shifted from his own world,  
Kevin dines with the Devil,  
a.k.a. The Benefactor. (c)  
Angel Studios

What an incredible combination of sci-fi, faith and romance writer/director Brock Heasley serves up in this utterly engrossing film! Lay aside, dear reader, all my earlier perorations against faith-based films as predictable, poorly made projects. If you enjoyed *Everything, Everywhere All at Once*, you will not just enjoy this multiverse story from Angel Studios but be inspired as well—it is loosely based on the Book of Job, with its various segments introduced by a verse from the Biblical book.

The film begins with a splash—we see a tree-lined lake and hear a man’s voice. Suddenly an arm shoots up out of the water, then a man’s head wearing glasses and a wool-knit cap. The voice says, “This is not my world. I have never seen this lake before. Never walked its shores...” He swims toward the shore. As he crawls s onto land, we see his hands grasping the grass, blood oozing onto his wrists and hands. He stands up, repeating, “This is not my world, but I will find my way home and I will find my way back to her.” As he walks along a road, he fiddles with something on his wrist—and vanishes!

After the credits, the man is in a stockbrokers’ office where we hear a TV report of the 2008 market crash, and our man is staring at the TV set with its dire news of the firings at his firm. Jump to a bar where, as the bartender serves him a glass

of beer, the voice over says, "When we first met, I had lost most everything, and I was about to throw away everything that was left."

Just before he sips from his glass a beautiful woman joins him, saying that he is about the saddest man she has ever seen. She soon reveals that her three friends back at a booth dared her to go over to him. Pointing to the bar TV's, he points to a man that's lost his job, "That's me." They flirt and speak of their possible future—we see a series of shots of them dating, kissing, shopping in a market, and attending his AA meeting together. They exchange their names—she is Molly (Elizabeth Tabish) and he is Kevin Garner (Kristoffer Polaha)—engage in some banter, with each becoming so attracted to the other—shots of going to her church, presenting her with a necklace with a religious pendant, more talk, then an engagement ring, more talk...Molly adds, "and then there's the bad thing that happens... life will happen and we'll be tested... can we weather a storm together, Kevin? (A good question, we soon discover!) This is one of the most charming boy meets girl through to boy and girl marry sequences that I have seen, combining shots of the present and the future telescoped together.

They do marry, and when Molly's words "the bad thing that happens" come true, the two are at odds with one another. Their young son has disappeared (been shifted), his loss creating a rift between them. Kevin has some kind of trouble at work. His boss gives him the day off, and he is driving home as he apologizes to Molly on the phone. Suddenly a vehicle crashes into his side of the car. Cut to black screen.

A bruised and bandaged Kevin is brought to consciousness by a man's words assuring him that he is all right and introducing himself as The Benefactor. They are in an alley. No sign of the car. The unsteady Kevin, helped up by the Benefactor, wobbles to the street but can find no sign of an accident." It never happened," the Benefactor tells him. Bewildered because

he does not recognize his surroundings, Kevin angrily grabs at the man, then, calmed, accepts his invitation to dinner.

At a café they are served by a nervous waitress named Tina while his host explains matters. His voice matches his title, soft and gentle, seeking to soothe his guest's fried nerves. Tina brings their order—the Benefactor has ordered steak and eggs for himself and, after Kevin has turned down food, is given a glass of beer. The latter is a bit jarring because we know that Kevin has been a faithful member of AA, which the Benefactor must know about. He tells (not 'invites") Tina to sit with them, and when she resists, his voice suddenly becomes authoritarian. he points his steak knife at her menacingly, and then feeds her a bite of his meat as if she were a truculent pet.

The low soundtrack music is now very ominous as it undergirds the Benefactor's explanation that life is a matter of the choices that we make, and that *every* choice has its result in another multiverse. There are as many universes as there are choices. He, the Benefactor, has the power to shift a person from one world to another. God is mentioned, and the Benefactor sneers, declaring that God is a liar, that he does not care for Kevin and his troubles. Kevin, of course, does not believe him, though he cannot help but notice how anxiously the other patrons look at the Benefactor. The restaurant owners, Tina's parents also look on from the doorway to the kitchen, their faces filled with fear of what might happen.

The scoffing Kevin says, "Prove it!" The Benefactor works what looks like an extra-large wristwatch with buttons. He asks "Who?" and Kevin chooses Tina. Suddenly she disappears into thin air, to the horror of her parents and the surprise of Kevin. Having proven his point, the Benefactor invites Kevin to join him, to become one of his agents shifting from world to world to sign up others. He promises him great rewards—"I can make you a king!"

In response Kevin starts to pray, indicating that the devout Molly has deeply impacted him. "Heavenly Father, I'm in trouble, and I can't handle this alone..." Now it is the Benefactor who is surprised. Upset, he suddenly departs (shifts). Kevin leaves the café, apologizing profusely to the grief-stricken father and mother.

We see Kevin in a dystopian world, a drab city where most everyone lives in poverty and drudgery, the streets patrolled by police with helmets that have white face shields that prevent anyone from seeing their faces. They are armed and more than willing to shoot down demonstrators or shift them out of this world.

For five years Kevin has been working with his friend Gabriel (Sean Astin) on a crew that uses sledgehammers, to break up rocks and bricks from demolished buildings. His name, though not his face, is known far and wide as the one man who said "No" to the Benefactor. The latter is absent, apparently away seducing victims in other worlds.

Kevin spends much of his spare time alone in a dingy room with an old portable typewriter, writing stories and (apparently) Scripture passages that he remembers. It is ambiguous to me whether or not Gabriel, to whom he periodically gives his papers in a manilla envelope, distributes them for a network of people to keep their hope alive for a better world." Kevin never gives up on the hope that he will find his way back to his beloved Molly. He and his friend at one point talk about their desperate situation, with Gabriel responding to the question "What do you believe" rather abstractly.

Kevin keeps his hope that God has not forgotten him. He sports a tattoo of the same symbol attached to the necklace he had given Molly in his original world. It is a round object attached to a shiny ring. When Gabriel asks about it, Kevin says that the ring is a "tomb." We have seen the pendant given Molly, that on the opposite side of the solid disk that

obviously represents the rolled away stone, there was inscribed, "He Lives." I don't have to tell you who the "He" is, though his name is never mentioned..

We see that Kevin's kind heart, fueled by his faith, has remained intact—everywhere he goes he hands out coins or bills to those in need. He in turn is on the receiving end when the neighbors a few doors down, Rajit and Priya Nadir, invite him to share an evening with them and their two adorable daughters. They sing a song you will recognize. On another night he enjoys watching an old couple dancing together in the street, their love making them oblivious to their bleak environment. Also, occasionally we see scenes of Kevin's past life with Molly, starting with a shot of their wedding. Added to her daughter before the two of them wed is the baby boy they conceive. The lad grows older, and then suddenly disappears, shifted to an unknown world. Like with many parents who lose a child, there is bickering. Which must be what that phone call was about when Kevin's car was rammed.

Another of Kevin's friends is Russo (John Billingsley), who has been looking for his cat that strayed away four years earlier. Russo owns a small cinema, but, like the larger complexes, no longer shows old style movies. Instead, the theater has been converted by special equipment to allow patrons to track their alternate selves in the multiverse, these "films" called Vicas. Kevin takes the device and starts viewing his other selves—he watches "himself" for just a few seconds before switching to a new world. He does not like to see himself acting as an agent for the Benefactor, especially in one world in which he is an assassin. Then, despite Russo assuring him he had a zero chance of seeing Molly, he does come across her, and of course is ecstatic. In his eagerness to see her closer, he steps out of the machine's field and contact is cut off.

Will he be able to find her again? And if so, how can he shift to her world? In regard to the latter, he hopes somehow to

obtain the wrist gadget that he learns is called a Deviator. This is the device which one uses to shift to another world, or to send off someone else. There are a number of adventures awaiting Kevin, including chases by the police through the streets, a dangerous conflict with pistol-wielding Gabriel, and the return to Kevin's world of the Benefactor, with whom Kevin has a theological debate. He insists on believing that God still cares, appearances to the contrary and that he does what good he can in a darkened world. Satan, er, the Benefactor, gives Kevin a last chance to make a choice between saving Tina by restoring her to her parents (she currently is confined in a mental institution) or reconnecting with Molly. His choice and then the last scene in which there is again a flirtation in a bar make for a wonderful ending.

The film is at times confusing. Jumping around between different worlds or back and forth through time left me wondering at times just what has happened. This, however, is a minor quibble, with all the actors so convincing, especially Kristoffer Polaha and Elizabeth Tabish as the lovers. We believe him when he declares that he will find her, and Tabish is so charming that we can see why he wants to be with her so terribly. Neal McDonough is so charismatic and smooth that we too are taken in by him at first—until that restaurant scene when his brutal inner self breaks through his surface kindness, and he points his steak knife threateningly at Tina. The film's production values are top notch as is the musical score.

People of faith will appreciate the incorporation of so many themes from the Book of Job—each section of the film is introduced by a quotation from the book. One has to go back to 2009 to the Coen Brothers' [A Serious Man](#) to find a film whose makers dared to plumb Job for their story. Theirs was a black comedy; this one a science fiction adventure, or is it a timeless love story? The concept of parallel universes is intriguing in which every aspect of a choice results in a

different outcome in multiple universes. I can't help but think of Joshua challenging his people to "choose this day whom you will serve" and then imagining various worlds in which either the Israelites or Joshua chose differently.

The theme of light in the midst of darkness invites discussion, with the song often sung by Civil Rights activists—"This Little Light of Mine"—appearing several times in the film. The last time, when it is sung by Molly, left a lump in my throat! Another song that plays during the last, lengthy chase scene is the Jars of Clay "Oh My God," the words being so appropriate that you might want to look them up or listen to the song on YouTube (Click [here](#) to see the words and how appropriate they are for Kevin's story, and [here](#) to listen to the song. The way the song is attuned to Kevin's chase is a wonderful bit of editing!).

To the sneers of the Benefactor Kevin explains that he does what he can to bring light to the darkness, which reminded me of a great scene from Peter Weir's [The Year of Living Dangerously](#) when the dwarf photographer Billy Kwan answers skeptical Guy Hamilton's declaration that giving to the poor does no good because of the immensity of poverty, "Well, I support the view that you just don't think about the major issues. You do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. Add your light to the sum of the light."

This film will make my Top Ten list for the year, though probably not the lists of secular critics, many of whom become immediately hostile if they suspect a film has any tie with a faith-based group. Remember the furor in 1996 over [The Spitfire Grill](#)? Brock Heasley never preaches to us, though the theme of God's love and care—or seeming lack of it—is at the heart of this film. Heasley is too much of an artist to preach, unlike so many other Christian filmmakers. I hope this film is as successful as Angel Studio's *Sound of Freedom* so that we will see more Brock Heasley films. His is so superior to their earlier production in the inventiveness of its story

that it deserves to be.

One piece of advice before closing: When you go to the theater to watch this film, be sure to go with at least one other person. There is so much packed into the scenes that you cannot take in everything in one sitting. This is a film demanding discussion, lest you come up short in understanding it. I have seen the advance screener twice and hope to work in another viewing when I prepare the discussion guide for it. It opens tomorrow (Dec. 1). You will find this far more rewarding than any other film in your multiplex, including *Napoleon*—and will probably want to go back and see it again.

*This review will be in the December issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.*