

A THOUSAND CLOWNS

by

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INT. TV STUDIO - SATURDAY NIGHT 1 A.M. - SEVEN YEARS AGO

"Saturday Night Live"(or a copycat show) is ending the week's episode with CAST ON-STAGE saying good-night. MUSIC. HUGS. WAVES. APPLAUSE.

INT. BACKSTAGE

WRITERS, STAFF, CREW are enthused and energized, congratulating each other on a good week. Through this exuberance walks one of the show's Staff Writers, CHARLIE BURNS (mid-to-late 30s). Charlie is not fashionable. He's not "young" or "old" -- just unself-consciously Charlie. At the moment, his mood does not match the moment. He seems detached.

TWO YOUNG WRITERS, wearing Viking helmets they borrowed from one of that night's sketches pass Charlie.

SIMON
(exuberantly)
Charlie, where are you going?

CHARLIE
Home.

SIMON
Home? What about the after party?

AARON
Yeah. Don't you want to sleep with
the cast's leftovers?

CHARLIE
(taps his stomach)
I'm a little...

SIMON
Something you ate?

CHARLIE
Something I saw.

They all move on. Charlie sees the show's headwriter -- MARK -- talking to an ASSISTANT. Mark looks up and sees Charlie and for just an instant Mark glances around to see if there's any way he can avoid speaking to him. He accepts that it cannot be avoided and so decides to make it as pleasant as he can.

MARK
 (apologetically)
 Charlie, look, I'm sorry --

CHARLIE
 (friendly)
 No, hey everybody gets their
 sketches cut. Ninety minutes,
 there's only so many nuts you can
 fit in a can. So somebody's nuts
 have to be cut.

Mark SNICKERS appreciatively.

MARK
 It was nothing personal.

CHARLIE
 No! After all there was no
 possible way to trim that nine and-
 a-half minute sketch about Paris
 Hilton as President that, I
 believe,
 ("questioningly")
 you personally wrote?

Mark tries to stay calm.

MARK
 Look, I liked your sketch. All the
 writers liked it.
 (lowers his voice)
 But the cast performed it badly.
 Rule Number One. Protect the
 "Faces." You know that.

CHARLIE
 (sighs)
 Yeah, I guess. All right, thanks
 for talking to me about it.

MARK
 Okay, man.

Mark gives Charlie a perfunctory CLAP ON THE ARM. Charlie
 walks away. WE STAY with Mark.

CHARLIE (O.C.)
 Hey, Mark...

MARK
 (looks back)
 Yeah, Charlie?

Mark GETS HIT IN THE EYE with a thrown cupcake.

CHARLIE (O.C.)

Maggot.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - HALF-HOUR LATER

It's a studio apartment. Small, not stylish. We would think a TV writer could do better. It's cluttered. The furniture does not match. There is no decor. It feels like everything has been acquired accidentally. The bed is unmade. There are books, CDs, eccentric knickknacks. It looks like a yard sale.

Charlie enters and FLIPS ON THE LIGHT. He immediately goes to the PHONE and dials.

CHARLIE

Diane, it's me... I know it's late.
Are you only my agent in
daylight?... Look, I was wondering.
If I wanted to get out of my
contract on the show, do you think
they'd let me? -- Man, that was a
fast yes. I think I heard a sonic
boom.

He puts Diane ON SPEAKER so he can get a beer and a banana while they talk.

DIANE (V.O.)

Well to be honest Charlie, they've
already called several times the
last few weeks with the same
suggestion.

CHARLIE

What's their problem?!

DIANE (V.O.)

I believe I'm talking to it.

CHARLIE

(not seriously)

Gee. This is so out of the blue.

DIANE (V.O.)

Really? Because it happens on
every show you work on.

CHARLIE

A freakish coincidence.

DIANE (V.O.)
(drily)
Yeah that must be it.

CHARLIE
Look, it's just not a good fit for
me. I gotta get out of there.

DIANE (V.O.)
(giving up)
All right, just don't tell them you
want to leave, and maybe I can get
you a buy-out. Twelve cents on the
dollar.

CHARLIE
Whatever. As long as --

There's a BANG ON THE DOOR.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Hold on, Diane. Apparently, one of
my neighbors is scrounging for
methadone.
(to the door)
Yes?

ELAINE (O.C.)
Charlie, it's me, Elaine...

Charlie is surprised -- not pleasantly.

DIANE (V.O.)
(surprised)
Elaine?

ELAINE (O.C.)
Open the door.

CHARLIE
Why should I?

ELAINE (O.C.)
Because I'm your sister!

CHARLIE
Oh, you're gonna have to come up
with a better reason than that.

DIANE (V.O.)
Come on, Charlie don't be an ass.
She's our sister.

CHARLIE
Fine. I'll send her over to you.

Pause.

DIANE
Bye, Charlie.

Diane hangs up.

Charlie, pessimistically OPENS the door.

And there is ELAINE, a bit younger than Charlie, but with mileage. A CIGARETTE DANGLES from what is possibly a pretty face at a different day and at a different hour. Most frighteningly she is carrying LUGGAGE, plus a framed poster of an off-off-Broadway play she was once in. Plus... a five-year-old boy we'll call NICK. Nick is not actually named Nick yet. That comes later. He, in fact, at this point, has no name.

CHARLIE
Oh this looks promising.

Elaine bustles in.

ELAINE
Don't start, Charlie. I've had the worst night of my life.

CHARLIE
Where do you currently rank the night the Police shot beanbags at you?

She places her luggage on Charlie's bed. A big bag and a little bag.

ELAINE
God this place is a dump. I thought you were working on a big TV show.

CHARLIE
I like to live modestly. That way I always have "Fu --

He remembers Nick's presence.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
F.U. Money.

ELAINE

(to Nick)

You remember your Uncle Charlie.
He met us once at the Emergency
Room.

Nick nods.

CHARLIE

Nice to see you again...

(to Elaine)

Have you named him yet?

ELAINE

We call him Chubby.

CHARLIE

(sarcastically)

There won't be any blowback from
that. What are you doing here?

ELAINE

I had a fight with Pietro.

CHARLIE

All right just so I'm up to date.
Pietro is not any of your four ex-
husbands or Chubby's daddy.

ELAINE

Correct.

CHARLIE

And the fight was about what? He
insisted you take a bath?

ELAINE

(screams, insulted)

I've been working the last 12
hours!

CHARLIE

Okay. I'm sorry. Only, why did
you come here? Why didn't you...
go to Diane?

ELAINE

Our sister and I do not get along.

CHARLIE

Elaine, we don't get along.

ELAINE

Of the three of us you and I don't
get along the least.

CHARLIE

I'm touched.

She looks around at the tiny apartment.

ELAINE

How are we gonna work this out?

CHARLIE

We're not!

Charlie notices Nick staring at the half-eaten banana.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

I think he's hungry.

ELAINE

(angrily)

Did Pietro not feed you?! How
difficult is it for that lazy moron
to micro-wave a Hot Pocket?!

CHARLIE

There's an all-night deli
downstairs. They'll make anything.
For an extra three dollars they'll
name a sandwich after you.

ELAINE

He likes grilled cheese.

It's clear that she has no intention of getting it.

CHARLIE

I'll get it. You've had a rough
day imposing.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

A BUSY BODY NEIGHBOR in a bathrobe is PEEKING OUT OF his
apartment door as Charlie leaves his apartment.

CHARLIE

Mr. Campaneris, I spoke to the
neighbors. We're going to have a
block party and raise money to get
you something to close that robe.

INT. DELI - MINUTES LATER

Charlie is being HANDED A GREASY BAG. He takes it to the CASHIER. He sees something.

CHARLIE
Wait a minute.

Charlie tosses a CHOCOLATE BAR into the bag, then thinks.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Maybe the kid wants one too.

He tosses in a second Chocolate Bar.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - MINUTES LATER

Charlie enters. Nick is seated at the kitchen counter, waiting patiently. Clearly, this kid has been trained to stay where you leave him.

CHARLIE
One grilled cheese sandwich. And if you finish it -- and I'm guessing from your physique that won't be a problem -- there's a Hershey bar in there too.

NICK
(formally)
Thank you very much.

CHARLIE
Wow manners. You must get that from Pietro. No one in our family has any.

Charlie looks around.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Where's your mother?

NICK
(matter-of-factly)
She left.

CHARLIE
(unalarmed)
Where'd she --?

And now Charlie looks at his bed and sees that Elaine's luggage is gone. Only the small bag (Nick's) remains.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
(becoming alarmed)
Where's her suitcase?

NICK
She took it.

Charlie grabs Nick, who is still eating and carries him out of the apartment UNDER HIS ARM LIKE A BEDROLL.

EXT. BUILDING - MINUTES LATER

Charlie still carrying Nick dashes out on to the sidewalk. He looks around desperately. Nothing.

He DROPS Nick to his feet. Nick who is still eating.

NICK
This is an excellent grilled cheese sandwich. These people know what they're doing.

Charlie, IN SHOCK, wanders back into the building and Nick unquestioningly follows.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. ROOFTOP - MORNING

"Seven Years Later"

WE OPEN ON A KITE, flying in the breeze. WE FOLLOW THE STRING down to a fishing reel in the hands of Charlie (fortyish) who is on the roof, seated in a beach chair, wearing a sombrero. Charlie looks content. A DOOR OPENS BEHIND HIM and we meet 12-year-old NICK. He's a little small for his age and no longer noticeably chubby.

NICK
Charlie? Did you forget?

Charlie's concentration remains on the kite.

NICK (cont'd)
You have an appointment this morning at my school.

CHARLIE
(calmly)
We'd better re-schedule. Things
are a little hectic around here.

NICK
Hectic? Charlie you promised!

CHARLIE
(accusing)
Are you whining?

NICK
Yeah. And I'm not gonna stop.

EXT. BUS - A LITTLE LATER

Nick and Charlie are on a CROWDED Manhattan bus. Charlie has lost the sombrero, but has dressed in haste and his hair is uncombed.

NOTE: Charlie and Nick's conversation is not angry. It's just give-and-take. Banter between people who use words skillfully.

NICK
(straight-face)
Thanks for dressing up for this.

Charlie hears the sarcasm.

CHARLIE
You should've reminded me a little
sooner.

NICK
You haven't exactly been available
the last couple of nights.

CHARLIE
Come on, Nick. You know when I
have a lot of work you stay
upstairs at Mrs. Myers.

NICK
By the way. Your work left her
sunglasses in our kitchen.

Nick removes a pair of SUNGLASSES from his jacket pocket.

CHARLIE
Keep them. She's not coming back.

NICK

Very well.

And he puts them on.

Charlie refuses to be amused. He doesn't want to be an "easy laugh." They move towards the door to exit.

NICK (cont'd)

Listen, we should get our stories straight.

CHARLIE

Stories? Are you in some kind of trouble?

EXT. STREET - MINUTES LATER

Charlie and Nick get off the bus and walk.

NICK

See, because it's this special school for big brains they spend a lot of time with each of us trying to tap our potential.

CHARLIE

You poor kid.

NICK

No, I like it there. But I think they're worried about what they call my "domestic situation."

CHARLIE

Oh?

NICK

(carefully)

So when you meet Miss Markowitz, could you sort of maybe indicate that you're being considered for some kind of a job?

Charlie stops.

CHARLIE

Nick! Are you ashamed of me?

NICK

Completely.

Charlie LAUGHS. Then Nick laughs.

CHARLIE
Good rhythm.

NICK
Easy set-up. You know I actually
saw a job online that you'd be
great for.

CHARLIE
(not really interested)
Oh?

NICK
The Hollywood Writer's School is
opening a branch in Manhattan. You
could teach TV writing to young
writers.

CHARLIE
Why should they know what I know?

They arrive at the school. Nick seems a little irked.

NICK
Personally, I don't think you want
any kind of a job.

CHARLIE
I've just spent enough time in my
life working for cretins.

NICK
Yeah. You want to be your own
boss, but the trouble is you don't
pay yourself anything.

Nick decides that what he has just said is funny. He LAUGHS.

NICK (cont'd)
That's a pretty good line,
actually.

CHARLIE
(indicates the school)
Let's just get this over with.

NICK
Charlie, can I speak to you man to
man?

CHARLIE
Sure. Call me in ten yers.

NICK

(serious)

Charlie, I am upset. For me as an actual child the way we live in that house is a dangerous thing for my later life when I become an actual person. An unemployed person like you are for so many months -- sometimes years -- is bad for you as the person involved and is definitely bad for me who he lives with in the same house where the rent isn't paid for months sometimes and I wish you would get a job, Charlie. Please.

Charlie tries to control himself, but cannot hide his laughter. He sees that Nick is offended by this and tries to stop. Nick walks away from him, towards the school doors.

CHARLIE

(goes after him)

No, kid, you're right. I know. I'm sorry. You're right. I'll find something. Hey, Nick, you know what tomorrow is?

NICK

No.

CHARLIE

It's Albanian Day in Queens. Come on, what do you say? We'll get some Albanian dancing skirts...

NICK

(laughing)

We're not Albanian.

CHARLIE

Well, first of all, we don't know what you are.

The SCHOOL BELL RINGS.

NICK

Late bell!

He runs. Charlie walks.

INT. STUDENT ADVISER'S OUTER OFFICE

Several SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS are at desks in an open floor space -- no cubicles. Charlie is waiting -- not patiently. He gets up and goes right up to one of the FEMALE ASSISTANTS.

CHARLIE

Two years ago, I had a sharp pain
in my right testicle.

He stops, offering no elaboration.

ASSISTANT

Yes?...

CHARLIE

My point is the doctor kept me
waiting this long for my diagnosis
and I left. So if I wasn't going
to wait to find out why my balls
hurt, I'm certainly not going to
wait for this.

An OFFICE DOOR OPENS and SANDRA MARKOWITZ appears. She is the school psychologist, about 30 and personable.

SANDRA

Mr. Burns, come on in.

CHARLIE

Sure.

(as he goes)

This place is due for another coat
of drab.

INT. SANDRA MARKOWITZ'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Sandra and Charlie enter.

SANDRA

Thank you so much for coming in.
My name is Sandra Markowitz. I'm
the school psychologist for the
Revere School. Please sit down.

CHARLIE

Since you asked so nicely.

They both sit.

SANDRA

Mr. Burns, have you not received any of the school's previous communications? Mail, e-mail, phone messages --?

CHARLIE

Well, I make it a rule to discourage any organization from trying to get in touch with me.

SANDRA

Uh-huh...

She quickly jots a little note.

CHARLIE

Shall we talk about Nick?

SANDRA

(sincerely)

Nick is a wonderful kid.

CHARLIE

(stands as if to leave)

Okay, then. See you next year.

SANDRA

There's a little more I'd like to cover.

CHARLIE

Zealot.

SANDRA

Nick is... unique.

CHARLIE

We're not getting into a fist fight over that.

SANDRA

He is doing well in his classes and he's started to make friends.

CHARLIE

Any of them rich?

SANDRA

(amused)

Nick warned me about you.

CHARLIE

Did he? That rascal.

SANDRA
Nick seems reluctant to join any...

CHARLIE
Hate groups? I'll talk to him.

She laughs.

SANDRA
No. Teams. Clubs. Activities.

CHARLIE
Oh. Well, he's not an athlete. He was eight before he could get his key in the door. But he plays a wicked harmonica.

SANDRA
Oh?

CHARLIE
I assume that a top-class school like this has a thriving Harmonica Department.

SANDRA
Sadly, the funding went elsewhere.

Charlie nods in appreciation of her joke.

SANDRA (cont'd)
To return to reality for a moment --

CHARLIE
I will only go as a tourist.

Sandra appreciates Charlie's wit, but she is about to open a more difficult subject.

SANDRA
Mr. Burns --

CHARLIE
Charlie.

SANDRA
There are a couple of issues we need to deal with. Such as four unexplained absences.

CHARLIE
My fault. I sometimes take Nick on what we might call field trips.
(MORE)

CHARLIE (cont'd)
See, I believe that education does
not only take place in the
classroom.

SANDRA
Can you give me a for instance?

CHARLIE
Sure. Uh... Okay. One night we
were watching the Mets game and
discussing various aspects and one
question led to another and next
thing you know we were on a bus to
Delaware to visit the place where
they rub the mud in to take the
shine off new baseballs.

SANDRA
(dubiously)
That... must have been interesting.

CHARLIE
I wouldn't know. They were closed.
But from now on I'll make sure
Nick's here every day even if he's
got Monkey Flu. Is that it?

SANDRA
(carefully)
One more... issue. And please
understand this is not an
accusation. A few weeks ago, Nick
came to school... bruised. And he
was unwilling to discuss it with
me.

CHARLIE
Is that a big crime around here?
Someone being unwilling to discuss
something?

SANDRA
No, it's --

CHARLIE
Okay, he didn't want to discuss it
because he felt it would reflect
poorly on me.

SANDRA
(alarmed)
Oh?

CHARLIE

Relax, lady. I only hit people who can ruin my career. No, what Nick's trying to keep secret is that sometimes -- not often -- I don't come home at night.

SANDRA

Work-related?

CHARLIE

Well, there's certainly work involved. I'm not in the best condition.

SANDRA

I see. And Nick is left alone?

CHARLIE

No, ma'am. There's our upstairs neighbor, Mrs. Myers. Nick sleeps on her couch when I'm not home. She's crazy about Nick. They play Scrabble together. Anyway, Mrs. Myers is an older woman. She helped buy Manhattan.

Sandra laughs.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

And then one night when Nick was staying up there, she forgot to take her medication and freaked. She started screaming at Nick "My bunny slippers are eating my feet!" Well, I mean, what do you say to that? But Nick doesn't panic. He's just getting her calmed down when Mrs. Myers' brother, Otto, who lives with her rushes out of his bedroom. Otto is a former boxer whose head is now in the shape of everyone's fist.

Sandra is now laughing continuously although trying not to.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

He comes out, sees Nick in his robe, then the bell on the microwave rings because the popcorn is ready and Otto thinks it's 1947, he's in Long Island City and he's about to fight for the New York State bantam weight title.

(MORE)

CHARLIE (cont'd)
 He attacks Nick! Now as we both know, Nick is no athlete, but he is the only one in the fight under 85 and not dragging a portable oxygen tank.

Sandra is now laughing hard.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
 So he hits Otto with a snack table and Otto goes down like the Hindenburg -- which he took a ride on as a child.

Sandra is now pantomiming for Charlie to stop. But Charlie's got a good audience and he continues.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
 Mrs. Myers sees Otto on the floor and screams (German accent) "Vut you do to my baby brudder?" So Nick had to take her out, too. She goes down like the Bismarck.

Sandra is doubled over. Finally, Charlie stops. Sandra fights to catch her breath and wipes her eyes.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
 So somewhere in there Nick got clipped. But he was great. He called an ambulance, he stayed with both of them in the Emergency Room and they're fine.

Pause.

SANDRA
 Wow.

CHARLIE
 All true.

SANDRA
 (sincerely)
 Well, Charlie, this has actually been a pleasure.

She stands indicating the meeting is over. Charlie stands. He gets a thought.

CHARLIE
 Listen, my sister is a big theatrical agent.

SANDRA
(surprised)
Nick's mother is --?

CHARLIE
No. My other sister, Diane. In fact, she's also my agent. And sometimes she gives me tickets to Broadway shows her clients are in. Is there anything you'd like to see?

SANDRA
(surprised)
Oh, uh --

CHARLIE
Understand, I mean see with me. As opposed to you go in and I wait outside.

SANDRA
Oh. Like... a date?

CHARLIE
Not like a date. A date.

SANDRA
I'm in a relationship.

CHARLIE
No harm. No foul.

He exits.

EXT. QUEENS - NEXT DAY

WE HEAR lively ethnic music and PAN DOWN FROM A SIGN in foreign letters to an exuberant street festival. MUSICIANS, dancing, eating, drinking. In the midst of it we find Charlie and Nick wearing outlandish peasant costumes (including hats) and dancing chaotically at a furious tempo.

A LITTLE LATER

Charlie and Nick are doing a lively harmonica duet of "This Land is Your Land." The Albanians love it.

EXT. CHARLIE'S NEIGHBORHOOD - LATER

Charlie and Nick are coming home. They're tired. They no longer wear the costumes but they still wear the hats.

CHARLIE
I don't see what you have to be
upset about.

NICK
You made an arranged marriage for
me.

CHARLIE
Tulka seemed like a very nice young
lady.

NICK
She's 4!

CHARLIE
Talking to her you'd think she was
6.

INT. CHARLIE'S BUILDING

Charlie and Nick climb the stairs. Charlie RUBS HIS STOMACH.

CHARLIE
Too much klushvitz.

NICK
You made that name up.

CHARLIE
Prove it.

They reach their floor. Suddenly.

SANDRA
Hello, Mr. Burns. Nick.

They stop, SHOCKED and bewildered. Sandra is there with
ALBERT AMUNDSON. Albert is in his early 30s. He's neat, all
business and here for a purpose. Sandra is a little ill at
ease.

SANDRA (cont'd)
(introducing Albert)
This is my... this is Mr. Amundson.
Albert. He's...

CHARLIE
I believed you had a boyfriend.
You didn't have to bring him here
to prove it to me.

ALBERT
(offers his hand)
Mr. Burns.

They shake. Charlie is still confused.

SANDRA
No, he's not -- well, actually he
is my boyfr -- but that's --

ALBERT
I am a Social Service Investigator
for the Child Welfare Bureau. May
we come in?

Charlie is thrown by this. Nick is concerned.

CHARLIE
Um... yeah. I...

Charlie UNLOCKS the door and opens it.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT

It's the same apartment Charlie was in when Nick arrived seven years ago. At the moment, it's a horrible mess. They all enter. Sandra and Albert react.

CHARLIE
Oh my God. Nick, we had burglars.
They ransacked the place.

SANDRA
Oh my --

CHARLIE
Truth is we rushed out this morning
in kind of a hurry.
(pointedly)
We weren't expecting visitors.

SANDRA
(a little nervously)
Yes, I apologize. See, Albert is --
well he told you -- In the past
he's "looked into" some cases for
the CWB at the Revere School.
That's... how we met.

CHARLIE
(getting it clear)
So he is your boyfriend.

SANDRA
Yes we have an...
(glances at Albert)
unspoken engagement.

CHARLIE
Well uncongratulations.

SANDRA
(uncomfortably)
The other night I happened to
mention Nick and you and that story
you told me and...

Meanwhile Albert is quietly SNOOPING AROUND the apartment.

CHARLIE
So what is that? Like "pillow
talk" for you two?

SANDRA
Um --

CHARLIE
Just for my own edification. Was
that pre, post, or during?

ALBERT
Mr. Burns, where does Nicholas
sleep?

CHARLIE
I got a hook for him. Nick, run
get your hook.

NICK
I sleep on a futon in the alcove.

He points. Albert nods, but not reassuringly. Albert discovers grime in the sink and a large, cloth dummy, sitting in a chair, wearing an old-fashioned golfing outfit -- knickers, pompom hat -- and reading a Jewish newspaper. Charlie watches as Albert takes pictures with his phone.

CHARLIE
Now let's get one of all of us
together. We'll use it as a
holiday card.

ALBERT
Perhaps, I should explain why we're
here.

CHARLIE
That'd be nice.

Nick is trying to keep things pleasant.

NICK
Would anyone like some coffee?

ALBERT
Why thank you, Nicholas.

SANDRA
Yes thank you.

Nick crosses to the kitchen. He passes Charlie.

NICK
(whispers to Charlie)
Watch it.

ALBERT
You see, Mr. Burns now that San --
now that Miss Markowitz has made me
aware of your case --

CHARLIE
Wow. I had no idea we were a
"case."

Sandra SQUIRMS.

ALBERT
That's actually a good point.
Officially, you are not, as yet, a
case. This is all, at this point,
informal.

CHARLIE
Yes. Everything about you, Albert
says "informal."

ALBERT
(ignores the jibe)
Let me just acquaint myself with
some basics...

CHARLIE
I have a thirty-two inch inseam.

Albert looks confused. There is a moment of uncomfortable
silence. Then:

ALBERT

Yes... Now, apparently you've never legally adopted Nicholas.

CHARLIE

Well, no. Of course, I've never illegally adopted him either.

No laughs.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Gee, this is usually my room.
Pray, continue.

ALBERT

What exactly are the circumstances of your guardianship? How long has Nick been here?

CHARLIE

Seven years.

ALBERT

And where are the boy's parents?

CHARLIE

Well, regarding Nick's father, that's not a where question, that's a who question.

ALBERT

(lowers his voice)
Oh. So...

CHARLIE

Yes, you might call Nick a bastard. Or a "little bastard" depending on how whimsical you feel at the time.

ALBERT

And Nick's mother. She is living?

CHARLIE

My sister Elaine is definitely alive.

ALBERT

And she takes no responsibility for the child?

CHARLIE

Cute story. Six years after Elaine left him with me, she returned.

(MORE)

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Our father had died and Elaine didn't want to miss the celebration. She loves fireworks. She was accompanied by a tattoo festival named Spider who made his living carving totem poles and who began a conversation with me in a language that I don't think even the U.N. recognizes. I took the occasion to remind my sister of the child she had left here six years earlier and I suggested that this was perhaps a practical joke that had run its course. My sister, then, proceeded to explain to me her theory of life, a philosophy somewhere to the left of Whoopee. I took exception to her rather cavalier attitude toward motherhood and I am ashamed to admit, I slapped her. She cried... Then Spider kneed me in the scrotum and I cried. Then Spider handed me his business card and they left. That was a year ago. I've still got Nick. Oh!

(points to Albert's file)

And by the way, his name is not actually Nick.

ALBERT

Oh? What is his name?

CHARLIE

Hard to say. My sister, not having given him a last name, felt reticent about assigning him a first one. This created a difficulty. Nick only knew I was calling him when there was no one else in the room. So I made a deal with him when he was six. He could try out any name he wished, for however long he liked, until his thirteenth birthday, at which point he would have to decide on a name he liked permanently. He went through a long periods of dogs' names when he was still little, "King" and "Buddy" having a real vogue for a while.

(MORE)

CHARLIE (cont'd)

For three months he referred to himself as 'Big Sam' then there was Little Ernie, Mike, Marty, D'Brickshaw, Chevrolet, Wyatt, Yancey, Fred, Phil, Woodrow, Lefty, The Phantom. He received his library card under the name of Raphael Sabatini, his Cub Scout membership lists him as Dr. Morris Fishbein and only last week a friend of his called asking if "LeBron" could come over to his house for dinner. "Nick" seems to be the one that'll stick, though.

NICK (O.C.)

(calls out)

Cream and sugar?

ALBERT/SANDRA

Yes, please.

CHARLIE

Look, why now? Why after seven years are you making a thing out of this?

ALBERT

Because we had no knowledge that this situation even existed until Sandra mentioned it to me.

Sandra is EMBARRASSED and GUILTY.

CHARLIE

What situation? He walks, he talks, he doesn't have fleas. So I didn't legally adopt him. So what? Are you worried about him missing out on the inheritance?

ALBERT

That raises another point. Your financial situation. You write comedy skits for television?

CHARLIE

Gee, you make it sound so impressive.

Nick returns with four COFFEE MUGS on a tray.

ALBERT

When was the last time you worked?

CHARLIE

When was the last time you smiled?

Nick is eager to put Charlie in a good light.

NICK

Charlie's worked on many of your more popular and respected television comedy programs. Saturday Night Live, Conan O'Brian, David Letterman --

CHARLIE

Nick --

NICK

He has an unframed certificate from when he was nominated for a highly prestigious Emmy Award.

CHARLIE

Yes it's highly prestigious. I think that year only nineteen thousand people were nominated.

NICK

And he helped create "Kookieville."

CHARLIE

(somewhat bitterly)
Not officially.

Sandra is impressed.

SANDRA

Oh my God!
(to Albert)
You remember "Kookieville."

ALBERT

No.

SANDRA

It was on Saturday mornings. It was supposedly for kids, but the college crowd discovered it. It was... "sly."

Charlie salutes as a way of acknowledging the compliment.

SANDRA (cont'd)

(to Albert)
It was a sensation. I can't believe you don't remember it.
(MORE)

SANDRA (cont'd)
(sings)
"I'm Kookie, you're Kookie..."

Albert stares at her, making her self-conscious. There's an embarrassed lull.

NICK
Coffee any good?

ALBERT
Yes actually. Thank you.

SANDRA
Are you drinking coffee, Nick?

NICK
No it's milk. I just like to drink
it from a cup.

CHARLIE
(to Sandra)
Now aren't you ashamed?

ALBERT
Mr. Burns, what is your current
source of income?

CHARLIE
I charge for tours of this
apartment. You know you're pretty
nosey, buddy.

NICK
Charlie sometimes sells humor
pieces to various high-class
periodicals.

CHARLIE
I currently have a big think piece
in "Soap Opera Digest."

We can't tell if he's kidding.

Suddenly, the DOOR BURSTS OPEN and Charlie's sister, Diane, enters. DIANE is very attractive and dressed smartly. She is carrying a LARGE GIFT BOX. She is moving quickly -- no time to spare. She takes no notice of Sandra and Albert.

DIANE
Charlie, sign this card.

NICK
Hi, Aunt Diane.

DIANE
Hi, Nick. How are you?

NICK
Good.

CHARLIE
What card?

DIANE
It's Mom's birthday. Did you forget?

CHARLIE
Did the Japanese forget Hiroshima?
(signing)
What did you get her?

DIANE
A hungry jackal.

CHARLIE
Well, one of 'em's getting eaten.

Diane grabs the signed card.

DIANE
You need any cash?

CHARLIE
We still haven't spent what you gave us last week.

DIANE
I thought maybe you'd want to buy the cockroaches some toys. I gotta go.

And she hurries out, briefly acknowledging Sandra and Albert.

DIANE (cont'd)
Nice meeting you two.

And she's gone.

CHARLIE
That was my semi-normal sister, Diane. They take her urine and turn it into Red Bull.

Albert consults his notes.

ALBERT
Where were we...?

CHARLIE
You were saying goodbye and
leaving. (rises)

Albert ignores Charlie's remark and finds his place again.

ALBERT
We were discussing your employment
situation.

CHARLIE
Aw Christ.
(reluctantly)
Look, I saved money from when I was
working and there's all the alimony
I've saved from not getting married
and Diane helps and our needs are
few and it's just been a little
tight lately, that's all.

NICK
Yeah. But there's a teaching job
Charlie's probably gonna get.

CHARLIE
(firmly)
Never.

SANDRA
(professionally)
Nick, would you say you've been
happy here these last seven years?

NICK
I would say that. In fact, I don't
think you folks realize how happy I
am. Boy, if you think I'm happy
now, you should see me when I'm
really happy.

SANDRA
And you and your uncle have fun
together?

NICK
Sure. But also Charlie helps me
develop my natural inquiring mind.

CHARLIE
(disgusted by Nick's
pandering)
Oh my God.

ALBERT
(suspiciously)
What sort of things does your uncle
teach you?

NICK
Well, he's always pointing out to
me who's full of shit. I mean...

SANDRA
(helpfully)
He develops your critical facility.

NICK
(gratefully)
Yeah. Thanks.

ALBERT
(to Nick)
Do you discuss --?

NICK
(enthused)
He taught me to do imitations!

ALBERT
That's not --

Nick begins a very spooky imitation of Anthony Hopkins in
"Silence of the Lambs." He does this right to Albert as if
he were Jodie Foster.

NICK
Hello, Clarice...

ALBERT
(impatiently)
Yes. Fine.

NICK
A census taker once tried to test
me...

ALBERT
That's not what I meant --

NICK
I ate his liver with some fava
beans and a nice Chianti...

ALBERT
(more firmly)
Nick --

NICK
(right in Albert's face)
You fly back to school now, little
Starling. Fly, fly, fly.

ALBERT
For God sakes, somebody do
something!

CHARLIE
(to Albert)
What's the trouble? That happens
to be a very good impression!

ALBERT
Perhaps. But --

NICK
How about this?
(as Daniel Day-Lewis)
"I've abandoned my child!!"

ALBERT
(cracks)
Nick please! Concentrate!

SANDRA
Albert!

Albert is thrown off. He realizes that he embarrassed
himself.

ALBERT
Excuse me. I'm --

NICK
(to Sandra)
Oh! And Charlie signed me up for
Swim Team at the Y. 'Cause he said
it looks good on a college
application. Makes me more well-
rounded.

SANDRA
Wonderful.

CHARLIE
And Nick's become interested in
astronomy. My sister bought him a
telescope.

Charlie indicates a pretty nice kid's TELESCOPE POINTED OUT
THE WINDOW.

SANDRA
Albert is an astronomy buff.

ALBERT
(softening)
I am actually. Nick, were you able
to observe Saturn last night?

NICK
I think so.

By this point Albert has gone to the telescope and peered
into it.

ALBERT
Oh, this is a fine instrument. You
could --

ALBERT'S P.O.V.

The telescope is aimed at an apartment window across the
street where TWO WOMEN in their twenties are in their
bedroom. One is in her underwear and the other is getting
out of her Flight Attendant's Outfit.

BACK TO SCENE

ALBERT (cont'd)
Mr. Burns, this is totally
inappropriate.

CHARLIE
Huh? What --
(realizes)
Nick, Nick, Nick, Nick, Nick.
Again?

NICK
I told you. They're two flight
attendants living alone. I'm
deeply concerned for their safety.
So I keep an eye on them.

Sandra peers into the telescope.

SANDRA
Oh.

ALBERT
Nick, could you excuse us for a
while? Run outside and play or
something?

NICK

Uh, sure. You know what? I think I'll take this opportunity to go to a library or an opera. That's the kind of thing Charlie encourages me to do. Nice meeting everyone. Au revoir.

Nick exits.

CHARLIE

Look, this (the telescope) is nothing. I mean it would be abnormal at his age if he didn't do it.

(to Sandra)

Am I right?

SANDRA

In a way...

CHARLIE

(to Albert)

Come on, Albie. What were you like when you were twelve? You weren't inquisitive? You didn't... inquisitate a couple of times a day?

Charlie POKES Albert playfully in the ribs.

ALBERT

I'm not --

SANDRA

(to Albert)

Didn't you tell me that at sleepaway camp you and the other boys peeked into the girls' cabin at night?

ALBERT

They forced me!

SANDRA

(amused)

Oh, I'm sure.

ALBERT

We are so off the path...

SANDRA

And by the way, I don't see why the boy had to leave. I was still talking to him.

ALBERT

Sandra, do you know how many of these cases I do a week? I --

SANDRA

I only told you about Nick and the black eye and the old lady and her brother because I thought it was a cute story.

ALBERT

Yes. I've got hundreds of those cute stories back at my office. There's one cute story about an "uncle" who left a ten-year-old in an apartment alone for a month chained to a radiator!

SANDRA

This child is not chained to a radiator!

CHARLIE

All right, I see the problem here.

ALBERT

Do you?

CHARLIE

I think it's time you two got officially engaged.

ALBERT

Oh for --

SANDRA

That's --

CHARLIE

No. If we accomplish nothing else here today let's accomplish that. Come on, this will be a great story to tell your children.

(to Albert)

Assuming you're capable of having children. You need a push? You want me to get you started?

Charlie gets down on ONE KNEE before Sandra and holds her hand.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Sandra, I know we're both being cautious and we're both afraid to make a mistake. But I think the biggest mistake I could make would be to risk losing you.
(gets up)
Okay, Albert, I got her to third base, just knock her in.

ALBERT
(fed up)
Mr. Burns, this entire interview has --

SANDRA
Mr. Burns --

ALBERT
(to Sandra, angrily)
May I finish a sentence?!

SANDRA
(to Albert, angrily)
Okay, just... control yourself.

ALBERT
Are you seriously talking to me about control?

SANDRA
Why? Are you saying I'm out of control?

ALBERT
I'm just --

SANDRA
(angry at herself)
I should have had enough confidence in my own opinion to say "we don't have to come up here."

Albert calms himself.

ALBERT
All right. I understand what has happened here. We've allowed this man to disturb us and we've both gotten a bit upset.

He turns to Charlie.

ALBERT (cont'd)
(formally)
Mr. Burns, it would be a
dereliction of my responsibility if
I did not satisfy myself that the
child was living in a safe
environment. Now, I assure you --

CHARLIE
You don't assure me of anything,
buddy. In fact, you make me damn
nervous.

Pause. Albert CLOSES HIS FILE and begins to leave.

ALBERT
Mr. Burns, however it has happened
this interview has taken on an
unfortunately personal quality
which I regret. In fairness to
you, I'm going to report my
findings and remove myself from
this case.

CHARLIE
Oh! So now we are a case!

ALBERT
Yes, Mr. Burns, now you are, most
definitely, a case.

Albert turns to Sandra. He's feeling a little insecure.

ALBERT (cont'd)
I have several more appointments
today, so... are we still on for
dinner?

SANDRA
Why not?

ALBERT
Good. I'm... sorry about...

SANDRA
It's okay.

They indicate that they might kiss each other goodbye, and,
finally, they connect with a small peck.

ALBERT
(with dignity)
Good afternoon, Mr. Burns.

Albert exits. Charlie and Sandra are left alone.

CHARLIE
Revenge sex?

She stares at him COLDLY.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Sorry.

SANDRA
No. I'm sorry. I told Albert that story you told me because I thought he'd find it funny.

CHARLIE
Why would you think he'd find anything funny?

Sandra resents this.

SANDRA
Don't judge him! He dwells in a world where there's very little to laugh at. He sees horrible things. He prevents horrible things! He does not afford himself the luxury of ironic detachment.

She heads for the door.

CHARLIE
For me it's not a luxury, it's a necessity.

Nick bursts in, carrying an armload of books.

NICK
Sadly, the opera was closed. But here are all my favorite books I had loaned to a neighbor.. "Indoor Gardening" "The Young Railroader" "Great Philosophers" "Science for Youth" and a Spanish dictionary.

CHARLIE
Nick, you just killed a month's allowance for nothing.

NICK

Huh?

Nick looks around.

NICK (cont'd)

(concerned)

Where's the guy?

SANDRA

See you at school, Nick.

She exits.

NICK

(to Charlie, accusingly)

What did you do?

CHARLIE

(re: the books)

Look at this. A dollar a piece.
You didn't even take off the price
tags.

NICK

You pissed the guy off didn't you?
I'll bet you made jokes and you
teased him and you got him mad.

CHARLIE

So?

NICK

So now we're in trouble, aren't
we?!

CHARLIE

No we're not.

NICK

Sure, you're not the one they're
gonna stick in a foster home.
That's gonna be me.

CHARLIE

(entering his closet)

Over my dead body.

And Charlie emerges wearing absurdly over-sized red boxing
gloves, stolen years ago from some comedy sketch.

NICK

(appalled)

Prop comedy?!

Nick storms out.

CHARLIE
(shouts)
The bigger the funnier!

INT. YMCA - ANOTHER DAY

A Swim Meet.

WE PAN the STARTERS' BLOCKS. Twelve-to-thirteen year old BOYS -- all lean -- wearing Speedos are awaiting The gun.

Among them is Nick (not as lean) wearing what a previous generation referred to as Bathing Trunks. Nick looks just as intense and determined as the others. The Gun is Fired. They all dive in. It's a Breaststroke race. (This is a tough stroke). Nick quickly falls behind. Halfway through the first lap, he disappears below the surface -- and doesn't return. A moment later, COACHES and OFFICIALS dive in. They grab him and pull him to the surface. He's SPUTTERING and FLAILING HIS ARMS.

INT. YMCA - LATER

A little distance from the pool (as the meet continues) Nick is sitting on the deck, back leaning against a wall, towel draped around him.

Charlie appears.

CHARLIE
Good news. They found your trunks.

And he tosses them to Nick.

NICK
(complaining)
That's what happened! I felt them starting to slip off, so I tried to pull them up and swim at the same time.

CHARLIE
You said you didn't want them tight. "Nothing revealing" I think was the phrase. Ironic, considering...

And he points to the pool.

NICK
Let's leave this off my college
application.

Nick has put his trunks back on. They get up and leave.

INT. CHARLIE'S BUILDING - LOBBY - LATER

They arrive home from the Swim Meet. Charlie gets his mail from the box. Without a glance, he throws it all in the trash. Nick peeks into the barrel.

NICK
Hey.

Nick retrieves a letter.

CHARLIE
What are you doing?

NICK
(reads)
"Child Welfare Bureau."

Reluctantly, Charlie opens it. He reads. Then...

CHARLIE
It's nothing!

Nick grabs it and reads.

NICK
It's not nothing!

CHARLIE
It's nothing.

NICK
(agitated)
If it was nothing, they'd have sent you a letter "Dear Mr. Burns, your presence is not requested at a meeting of the Board in three weeks, to discuss whether your nephew will be allowed to remain in your care. Please don't inform us if you will attend". But that's not what it says! It says your presence is requested --

CHARLIE
I know what it says.
(new idea)
(MORE)

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Hey! The circus is in town.
Today's the day they bathe the
elephants on 34th Street. What do
you say?

NICK
I'm not in the mood.

Nick heads upstairs. Charlie thinks.

EXT. MANHATTAN - DAY

Sandra is walking alone. Charlie falls into step with her.

CHARLIE
I'm not going to pretend this is a
chance meeting.

She is surprised.

SANDRA
Oh. Hi.

CHARLIE
I was waiting for you outside the
school, hoping you'd leave for
lunch.

SANDRA
Why were you doing that?

Charlie hands her the letter.

She reads it.

CHARLIE
What do you think? Is that
serious?

SANDRA
It's very serious. Does Nick know?

CHARLIE
Yeah. I mean, what can they do?
Can they actually --?

SANDRA
They can decide that you're unfit
to be Nick's guardian and they can
remove him from your home and the
"deprivation you cause him."

CHARLIE
Don't sugarcoat it.

SANDRA
I won't. They will find a more
stable, permanent home for Nick. A
more "wholesome, normal --"
(a new idea)
What about your sister? The agent.
She seemed... wealthy.

CHARLIE
Diane? Take Nick? She works 84
hours a week. She sleeps on her
treadmill.

She stops walking.

SANDRA
Look, is there any way you could...
alter your circumstances in the
next three weeks? Before the
hearing?

CHARLIE
Well, I am up for that Nobel
Prize...

SANDRA
You know what I meant. Look, I'm
meeting a friend.

CHARLIE
Okay, um... you know what? It's
probably all for the best. I mean,
if he goes he goes. My life stays
about the same, right? In fact
it's probably better. He's like a
middle-aged kid. Last time I
worked on a TV show he sat up all
night reading my contract. And he
makes lists. Lists of everything.
Subway stops, how many different
kinds of soups he's eaten... Pretty
soon he'll be making lists of what
he's gonna do. Next year. The
next ten years. They'll probably
put him in with a whole family of
list makers. He'll learn to know
everything before it happens.
He'll learn to...
(with distaste)
... plan.

SANDRA

In other words, you would prefer him to be like you.

CHARLIE

One of me is enough. I just want to make sure he knows when he's chickening out on himself. I want him to know the exact special thing he is or else he won't notice when it starts to go. I want to be sure he sees all the wild possibilities. I want him to know it's worth all the trouble just to give the world a little goosing when you get the chance. And I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason he was born a human being and not a chair.

(pause)

I will be very sorry to see him go. That kid is the best straight-man I've ever had. And he's a good laugh. Good laughs are rare. I mean, you tell that kid something funny -- not just any piece of shit, but something funny and you get your money's worth. And not just funny stuff he reads or I tell him... he sees street jokes and subway farce and bus humor and all the cartoons people make just by being alive. He has a good eye. And he... we... Goddammit, I don't want him to go! I like having him around! What should I do? Please... tell me what to do.

INT. DIANE'S OFFICE - DAY

OPEN ON a framed photo of 3 children -- two girls and a boy -- all between 6 and 8 years old, arms over each other's shoulders. (Charlie, Diane and Elaine) We hear:

CHARLIE (O.C.)

Wow! Where did you get this?!

REVEAL a nice office on a high floor. Charlie places the photo back on his sister's desk.

DIANE

Mom sent it to me. She found it in her apartment and she said "Here, I don't want it."

CHARLIE

(ironically)

It's amazing the three of us turned out so normal.

DIANE

(amused)

Yeah.

Charlie looks out the window.

CHARLIE

Every time I come here, they've got you on a higher floor. I swear, next time you'll be up in a balloon.

DIANE

Well, I owe it all to you, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Oh bullshit.

DIANE

If you hadn't been the hot young writer the Agency wanted to sign I might still be in the mail room. You rammed me down their throats.

CHARLIE

And from what I heard, vice versa.

She laughs, knowing it's just a joke.

DIANE

So are we gonna do this? Are we gonna put you back to work?

CHARLIE

(a little agitated)

Yeah, yeah, that's why I'm here.

DIANE

Okay. Good. Now let me bring up what I hope is not a sore subject...

(braces herself)

NBC is bringing back "Kookieville."

CHARLIE
 (as if horrified)
 That can't be true! Does the FCC
 know?!

DIANE
 The DVDs of the old show are a huge
 hit. So they're bringing it back.

CHARLIE
 (in disbelief)
 With Artie?! How old is he? He
 must be 50!

DIANE
 What's the difference. He's in
 make-up. He's in that Runty
 Mc Boomp-Boomp character you
 created for him.

CHARLIE
 That's gonna keep me out of heaven.

DIANE
 They start taping next week in L.A.
 He already called me to see if
 you'd go out there and write for
 him again. He's willing to forgive
 and forget.

CHARLIE
 (angrily)
 What has he got to forgive?! He's
 a fucking nut!

FLASHBACK

INT. TV STUDIO - KOOKIEVILLE SET - TEN YEARS AGO

The show has elements of Pee Wee's Playhouse, the old Soupy
 Sales show, and the ancient Andy's Gang. ARTIE STORM, an old
 second rate comic who hit it semi-big as Runty Mc Boomp-Boomp
 is doing a cooking bit in front of a live studio audience
 composed, almost exclusively, of children.

Artie is in a stylized kitchen. He is surrounded by puppets
 and a pair of legs apparently belonging to a partially-seen
 GIANT. Artie -- as Rusty -- is playing "agitated." He hangs
 up a GIANT PHONE.

ARTIE
 (Runty voice)
 Oh my-yi!
 (MORE)

ARTIE (cont'd)
 My girlfriend Corva is coming over
 for dinner and she thinks I'm a
 gourmet chef!

PUPPY PUPPET
 (falsetto)
 This is why you should never lie.

Artie turns on the Puppy, brandishing a big carving knife.

ARTIE
 Not now!!
 (calming himself)
 All right. How hard can it be to
 cook an eight-course meal? Is this
 a stove? Okay, I told her I was
 making chicken.

He grabs one of his Puppet Pals -- a chicken -- and throws it
 in the pot.

CHICKEN PUPPET
 Wait! No!

Artie presses down on the lid as the Chicken fights to get
 out. Artie violently turns up the heat.

ARTIE
 I better make a salad.

He rips leaves off plants. The plants yell "Ow!" And Artie
 throws the leaves in a bowl. Suddenly there is POLKA MUSIC
 PLAYED BY AN ACCORDION.

ARTIE (cont'd)
 The doorbell!

GIANT (O.C.)
 (stupid voice)
 It's your girlfriend, Runty.

ARTIE
 Oh! She's early! Come in...

In rushes a hyper-active, CHIMPANZEE in a mini-skirt,
 carrying a purse. She instantly goes wild, leaping around
 the set.

ARTIE (cont'd)
 (still in character)
 What's the matter with her? Has
 she been in that secret box in my
 dressing room.

The CREW CRACK UP.

ARTIE (cont'd)
 (out of character)
 Hold it! Cut! Cut! I'm not
 saying that! Who put that on the
 card?!

Charlie presents himself. He's TEN YEARS YOUNGER.

CHARLIE
 I did.

ARTIE
 It's not funny!
 (to the audience)
 And it's not true, kids. Uncle
 Runty does not keep a secret box in
 his dressing room.

CHARLIE
 Artie, we're trying to do a hip
 show. I'm trying to take the curse
 off the fact that we're pandering
 here.

ARTIE
 (indicates the set)
 How are we pandering?

The Chimpanzee lifts her skirt. The Kids ROAR.

CHARLIE
 Monkeys, Artie?

ARTIE
 (belligerently)
 Monkeys are funny! Monkeys have
 always been funny! People stopped
 being funny when they stopped being
 monkeys! Now I don't like that
 "Secret box" line. My character
 wouldn't say it!

CHARLIE
 (angrily)
 I created your character!

ARTIE
 No I created the character.
 You "developed" the character.

CHARLIE

Yeah. A distinction which is costing me ten thousand dollars an episode!

ARTIE

Oh that is so you! You come on like this poor put-upon artist dragged down into the TV muck but at the end it's all about money. You want more money? Write more funny.

Pause. Charlie PUNCHES Artie in the stomach, doubling him over.

CHARLIE

Is that funny?

ARTIE

(gasping)

No.

Charlie puts Artie in a headlock.

CHARLIE

Maybe this then.

He smacks him on top of the head like a bongo.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Is this funny?

ARTIE

(in pain)

No.

Artie knees Charlie in the gut.

ARTIE (cont'd)

That's funny.

Charlie grabs Artie's hair and lowers Artie's head to Charlie's ass. Charlie farts.

CHARLIE

Is that funny?

ARTIE

(agreeing)

Yes. That's funny.

Artie viciously punches Charlie in the kidney. Charlie gasps. He wrenches Artie's head and they both go down and start rolling on the floor, punching and kicking.

PRESENT

INT. DIANE'S OFFICE - WHERE WE LEFT OFF

CHARLIE

(pulls up his sleeve)
I still have his bite marks. One of the grips had to knock him out to get him to unclench his jaw.

DIANE

Nevertheless, he wants you back. You don't have a million options. You have a terrible reputation for causing trouble and quitting jobs.

Charlie is in a bind.

CHARLIE

(painfully)
Call him.

DIANE

(delighted)
Yeah?

Charlie nods.

DIANE (cont'd)

(into phone)
Tookie, get me Artie Storm.
(to Charlie)
I spoke to one of the Agency's lawyers. He looked into this Child Welfare Board situation for me. They're not kidding around, they could easily decide to take Nick away from you.

CHARLIE

I know.

DIANE

In fact, probably the best you'll get is probation. That means they'll be checking every week to --

TOOKIE (V.O.)

Artie Storm.

DIANE

Artie, how are you, congrats on the show.

Artie is on SPEAKER PHONE.

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. MOVIE STUDIO - DAY

ARTIE STORM is driving his personalized Studio Golf Cart. The roof of the cart resembles the Trusty Rusty Wig Hat. (Rusty's hat and silly hair-do) Artie drives carelessly causing people to scramble out of his way.

ARTIE

Thanks. I'm working my chachongas off. Directing. Writing. Performing. The whole Chaplin thing. Is Charlie there?

DIANE

He's right here, Artie.

ARTIE

Charlie, how are you, you pain in the ass?

CHARLIE

(good-natured)

About the same, Artie.

ARTIE

Diane, did your lunatic brother tell you what happened when I came to see him a few months ago?

CHARLIE

We don't need to --

DIANE

No. You came to see him?

Artie parks his cart.

ARTIE

Yeah. I went up to that fly farm he's got on the Lower East Side. The one that makes you long to live in Afghanistan.

Diane is looking at Charlie with some concern. Where is this story going?

DIANE

And...?

ARTIE

I told him, the show's coming back,
let's do the whole bygone thing and
make with forgive and forget.

DIANE

(tensely)

And what happened?

ARTIE

He and the kid -- that kid -- right
while I'm talking? -- of course,
when am I not talking? -- they each
take out a harmonica and start
playing "Toot-Toot-Tootsie
Goodbye."

Diane glares at Charlie.

ARTIE (cont'd)

Just their impish way of saying
"Get the fuck out of here."

CHARLIE

Honestly, Artie, I thought you'd
laugh.

ARTIE

Well, I'll tell you what. I'm
going to be the bigger man. We're
gonna wipe the slate and your ass
clean.

Diane exhales, relieved. Charlie nods, reassured.

ARTIE (cont'd)

(cheerfully)

So, Charlie? Are you gonna come
out here and write for me?

CHARLIE

(leans in towards the
phone)

Nooo.

And then he CUTS OFF THE PHONE.

Diane is in SHOCK.

INT. ELEVATOR LOBBY - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Charlie waits for an elevator. Diane appears.

DIANE

Charlie!

Charlie pushes the elevator button rapidly, hoping to escape.

She walks right up to him. And then... she snickers... then laughs. Charlie smiles hopefully.

DIANE (cont'd)

You had me call him just to say
"no."

CHARLIE

Yeah. Why should I give you the
pleasure?

They both laugh.

DIANE

It took me a second but then I
pictured Artie -- that miserable
subhuman -- on the other end. Just
holding the phone after you said
"no" and hung up on him.

CHARLIE

I'm hard to stay mad at.

DIANE

No you're not. The whole world's
mad at you.

CHARLIE

Screw 'em all.

Diane begins to wrestle with a decision. She is clearly
reluctant to do something she is about to do.

DIANE

All right. And I know I'm going to
regret this. But someone owes me a
monstro favor. I've been saving
this up for eight years. I will
call it in for you, Big Brother.

CHARLIE

(intrigued)
What is it?

INT. JON STEWART'S OFFICE - DAY

It is Jon Stewart's office at "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart."

NOTE: Obviously, we can change this to a fictitious show if we need to.

JON STEWART rises to greet Charlie.

JON STEWART
Hey, it's our new old writer.

They shake hands.

JON STEWART (cont'd)
Sit.

They do.

JON STEWART (cont'd)
Every place I worked in TV someone had a Charlie Burns story. Usually ending in the words "and then he was fired."

CHARLIE
Well maybe in a few weeks you'll have one of those stories.

JON STEWART
I'm counting on it. So what's the deal? Your agent once pulled my executive producer's balls out of a bear trap?

CHARLIE
I didn't ask for details.

JON STEWART
No, no, that's what happened. I saw them. They're all mangled.

Charlie chuckles.

JON STEWART (cont'd)
(to himself)
I'm the star. Why do I have to prove to each new writer I'm funny?

CHARLIE
It's an occupational illness. It's the comedian's version of Black Lung.

JON STEWART

Listen, I like having someone over forty on the staff. The other writers think I'm ancient since they found out I once opened for Kansas. Remember them?

CHARLIE

Nope.

JON STEWART

(joking)

And then he was fired.

INT. WRITERS' ROOM - LATER

Charlie is the oldest writer in the room. He seems like the only adult. The other writers look, dress and behave like college kids. They all sit behind laptops. They are in the middle of riffing on a news item.

WRITER #1

How about this? We show one of the cable networks doing the straight report about them finding another tunnel under the border wall then Jon says "This one was more elaborate than the others" and then we put up a picture of the Lincoln Tunnel.

WRITER #2

From inside. With traffic.

WRITER #3

Or the toll booths. Which is funnier?

Charlie decides to contribute.

CHARLIE

(getting attention)

What if...

They all look at him and wait for his contribution. He bails out.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

No... Sorry.

The others go back to riffing.

WRITER #1
The traffic I think.

Charlie looks intimidated.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Charlie is trying to write (using a word processor).

Nick is quietly doing his homework. The PHONE RINGS.
Charlie grabs it impatiently.

CHARLIE
Is this someone with good news or
money? No? Good-bye.

He HANGS UP and goes back to work. He's agitated.

NICK
Are you okay?

CHARLIE
(typing again)
Yeah, great. It's been two weeks
I'd like to contribute one idea.

Nick's CELL PHONE RINGS.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Is that gonna ring all night?

NICK
It's the first call I've had in a
month.
(into phone)
Hello... Oh, hi... Oh was that
you?... Yeah, he likes to kid
around... uh-huh... I'll ask him.
(to Charlie)
It's Miss Markowitz.

CHARLIE
Who?

NICK
(wise to him)
You know who. It's about the
hearing. She wants to know if you
own a suit.

CHARLIE
Oh that's not insulting. Tell her
I'll buy something this weekend.

NICK

(into phone)

He's got it covered... Me?... Not really. Charlie usually buys me factory seconds. I have a shirt with three sleeves...

(to Charlie)

She has a great laugh.

(into phone)

Oh, that would be great!... Yes, I find myself free that afternoon... Great. Thanks a lot.

(hangs up)

She says since you're busy she'll take me to buy something. She's really nice.

CHARLIE

She's feeling guilt because she sicced that bulldog of a boyfriend on us.

NICK

I know I'm just a kid, but why is he her boyfriend?

CHARLIE

Nick... The most unexplainable thing in the world is how people pair up. Combinations that make no sense to anyone but themselves. Oh, this stinks!

He hits "Delete." He looks worried.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Every job I ever had, I thought was beneath me. Now...

NICK

No, you're just like a pitcher who didn't pitch for a while. You've gotta build up your arm strength... Either that or you're just not funny anymore.

Charlie laughs.

INT. BARNEY'S BOYS DEPARTMENT - DAY

Sandra is paying for clothing at the CASHIER.

SANDRA
Could you print me out two
receipts, please?

NICK (O.C.)
Hey, lady?

Busy, she doesn't turn around.

SANDRA
Yes, Nick?

NICK
Could we add this outfit?

She turns to look. She laughs.

ANGLE ON NICK,

in an appropriately-sized yachting jacket and cap. He poses with one hand rakishly placed in a pocket. Nick is pleased that he made her laugh. He continues the joke.

NICK (cont'd)
Because I think it would impress
them at the Child Welfare hearing
if they think I have a yacht.

SANDRA
(still amused)
I'm sure it would. Come on, get
that off. I've got to go.

As Nick peels off the yachting outfit, his phone rings. He answers it.

NICK
Hello... Oh, hi, Charlie. Hey, I'm
at Barney's. You should see the
stuff we got. A shirt and a tie
and -- Yeah, I could stop talking
for a minute... Oh that's great!
That is exceptional! ... way to go,
Charlie.
(hangs up.)

SANDRA
Something good?

NICK
No. Something great. He wrote
something they loved! It's gonna
be in tonight's show.
(MORE)

NICK (cont'd)
A big long piece and Charlie said
it just killed at the dress.

SANDRA
Killed at the --? Oh, I see.

NICK
It's on after the first commercial.

SANDRA
Well, I will be sure to watch that.

CLOSE-UP ON A TV SCREEN

A segment of "The Daily Show" is ending.

CORRESPONDENT
(accusingly)
Jon, are you saying you want POWs
to receive better health care than
our own soldiers?

JON STEWART
No, of course not! I'm saying that
our soldiers should receive the
same quality of medical care as...
the President or Bill Gates or
Donald Trump!

CORRESPONDENT
Oh... Well that's not gonna happen.

The bit is over.

REVEAL

INT. ALBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sandra and Albert are in bed watching the show. Sandra is
laughing at the last joke. She is clearly delighted by what
she saw.

SANDRA
That was great! Maybe I should
call Nick. I'll bet he's up.
Didn't you think that was great?

ALBERT
I'm sorry, I don't see what's funny
about wounded servicemen.

SANDRA
(taken aback)
No he wasn't making fun of the
servicemen. It was the system, the
hypocrisy. That's what was funny.

ALBERT
Shattered lives are never funny.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - LATER

Nick is re-winding the Daily Show piece to the beginning, so
he can watch it again. Charlie is on the phone.

CHARLIE
He said "Nice job, see you Monday,
finally we saw the Charlie Burns
we've all heard about"... No he
meant it as a compliment. Hey,
look, Diane, it's one AM. I gotta
get Nick to bed. Not all of us can
exist on 12 minutes sleep. 'Bye.
(hangs up)
Come on, I'm tired. Adoration is
exhausting.

Nick turns off the TV.

There's a tentative KNOCK ON THE DOOR. They're both
surprised.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Maybe it's your mother with another
kid.
(to the door)
Yes?

SANDRA (O.C.)
It's me. Sandra Markowitz.

Now they are even more surprised. Nick is in pajamas. He
grabs a robe. Charlie opens the door. Sandra looks upset --
fragile.

SANDRA (cont'd)
I'm sorry, I know it's late, but I
was in a cab and I purposely had
him drive by to see if you were up
and I saw your lights were on. Can
I come in?

CHARLIE
Yeah. Sure. What's wrong?

She enters. Charlie shuts the door.

SANDRA
Hi, Nick.

NICK
Hi.

SANDRA
I did something bad.

CHARLIE
Nick, go upstairs.

SANDRA
No this concerns you and Nick.

CHARLIE
Lady, you're kind of freaking me
out here.

SANDRA
Okay... Today after three years of
dating, I moved in with Albert. I
gave up my place and I took the
leap. And I had certain qualms. I
mean his bedroom furniture used to
belong to his parents. Anyway,
tonight we watched your show...

NICK
Wasn't it great?

SANDRA
(sincerely)
It was. It was really funny. And
smart.

CHARLIE
Thank you.

SANDRA
But Albert... didn't care for it.

CHARLIE
(to Nick)
Gee, I didn't see that coming.

SANDRA
And we started to discuss it. And
we discussed it. And we discussed
it.
(in wonder)
(MORE)

SANDRA (cont'd)

And suddenly I found myself saying out loud "Why am I with you, Albert? What low self-esteem issues am I struggling to resolve?"

CHARLIE

Not that we're uninterested in any of this but where's the part where it concerns us?

SANDRA

Well, while Albert and I were fighting and just before I left he pointed out that we'd never argued before until that day we came here and then again over your show and now I think he really hates you and I don't think he's going to be impartial at that hearing. Well... good-night.

CHARLIE

Whoa. Hang on. Where are you going?

SANDRA

Bayside. To my mother's. Oh, God, I'm going home to my mother.

She starts to CRY. Nick PANTOMIMES "Hold her."

Charlie pantomimes "You hold her." Finally, Charlie holds her.

CHARLIE

Look... don't worry about us. I've got a job and a... suit and... we'll be fine.

NICK

Sure lady. We're gonna knock that board on their ass.

CHARLIE

Sure we are.

SANDRA

(sniffling)

I should go. I've got a cab downstairs.

Charlie hands Nick money.

CHARLIE

Nick, run down and pay the cab.

SANDRA

What? No, I --

Nick runs out, leaving the door slightly ajar.

CHARLIE

You never want to show up at your mother's house at 2 A.M. in Bayside after a break-up. Besides, Queens is closed at this hour.

SANDRA

But --

CHARLIE

There's a hotel right around the corner. Would you like a little wine? Hm?

He gets a mini-bottle, unscrews the cap and hands it to her -- no glass.

SANDRA

Thanks.

She takes a swig.

SANDRA (cont'd)

I've had three long-term relationships. One in college and two since. That's nine years pissed away! I'm always so determined to make it work that it takes me three years to ask myself "Why?!"

CHARLIE

Well, I never met the first two, but as far as your break-up with Albert is concerned, why not think of yourself as someone who managed to walk away from a plane crash?

She almost laughs.

SANDRA

There were things about our relationship that I liked. I liked that every Sunday morning, Albert and I went somewhere for brunch.

(MORE)

SANDRA (cont'd)
I liked that we'd go to an art gallery, then we'd go to the park and do the Crossword Puzzle. I liked all of that.

CHARLIE
Sandra --may I call you Sandra? -- that's not a relationship. It's a routine.

SANDRA
Maybe I just like routines.

CHARLIE
But without the routine you'll get to meet all these other Sandra's you've never met before. It'll be exciting. It's like, those little cars in the circus that come out and putter around and then the doors open and out come a thousand clowns all screaming and scurrying around and spritzing the audience with seltzer...

She laughs.

UNSEEN by them, Nick returns. He has Sandra's luggage. He sees them on the couch and stops. He doesn't fully enter.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
(sincerely)
Listen -- seriously -- do yourself a favor. Don't rush into the next three-year mistake.

SANDRA
M-hm.

CHARLIE
You really are a fabulous person. You're lovely and smart and caring and fun and you should just wait for someone worthy of you no matter how long it takes.

And she KISSES him.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Yeah, that's long enough.

They kiss again, more deeply.

While they make out, Nick enters, gently places Sandra's luggage down, grabs his school books, and some clothes and exits again, closing the door.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - NEXT MORNING

Charlie wakes up and discovers that he's alone in bed.

CHARLIE
(quickly)
Sandy?

Alarmed, he glances around his apartment, all of which he can see from his bed. He is definitely alone. He is clearly disappointed -- even hurt. There is a SOFT KNOCKING on the door. Charlie becomes excited. Hopeful

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Coming.

Dressed in his underwear, he springs to the door and opens it revealing... Nick. Charlie is disappointed.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Oh.

NICK
(whispers)
I forgot my bus pass.

Nick PEEKS IN warily.

CHARLIE
It's okay. Come in.

Nick enters, dressed for school and carrying his books. He quickly finds his bus pass.

NICK
Is she...?

CHARLIE
Gone.

NICK
(confused)
Oh. Well --

CHARLIE
(ruefully)
I guess she came to her senses.

NICK
That's too bad.

CHARLIE
It sure is. See you later, kid.

Nick exits, shutting the door. WE HEAR

SANDRA (O.C.)
(cheerfully)
Hi, Nick.

NICK (O.C.)
Oh, hi.

Charlie is surprised. His mood brightens. He JUMPS INTO a pair of pants and tries to quickly groom his "sleep hair."

SANDRA (O.C.)
Off to school?

NICK (O.C.)
Yep.

SANDRA (O.C.)
See you later.

Sandra uses a key to open the door and enter. She is dressed nicely and is full of pep. She carries a small bag of groceries.

SANDRA (cont'd)
Good morning.

She gives him a kiss which he definitely appreciates.

CHARLIE
(confused)
What...?

SANDRA
I borrowed your key. It's a beautiful day out!

CHARLIE
When did you get up?

SANDRA
Six. I do a Spin Class at six-thirty, followed by a twenty-minute yoga class.

CHARLIE
(horrificed)
Good God!

But he's smiling, clearly glad that she's still there.

SANDRA
(unbagging)
I got four different kinds of
bagels because I don't know what
you like. One is gluten-free just
in case. And you were out of
orange juice so I took care of
that. And I got some cleanser for
the sink 'cause it's "uch." Come
on, let's have breakfast. I really
like that, you know, after.

She's SETTING THE TABLE. He stands nearby and watches.

SANDRA (cont'd)
(cheerfully)
Sit down.

CHARLIE
Hey...

She looks at him.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
(softly)
Next time leave me a note... so I
know you're coming back.

She realizes how romantic this is and how much Charlie has
chosen to reveal by saying that. She sees, in fact, that he
is in love. She moves into his arms and they kiss. Not
passionately like the night before -- lovingly, like two
people who have found each other.

There's a KNOCK ON the door. They both stop.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
Um...

SANDRA
(very happy)
Go ahead, answer it. I have no
reason to hide from anybody.

ALBERT (O.C.)
Mr. Burns, it's me, Albert
Amundsen.

Sandra SPRINGS UP as if on fire and runs into Charlie's CLOSET and shuts the door. Charlie opens the Front Door, admitting Albert. Albert is clearly uncomfortable.

CHARLIE

Come in.

ALBERT

I'm sorry to intrude. This is a little embarrassing. Sandra -- Miss -- well, she and I -- we --

(begins again)

Last night she phoned her mother in Bayside to say she was coming over there and she never arrived and she had -- that is Sandra -- mentioned before she left me -- left my apartment -- that she was perhaps going to speak to you. Anyway, did she stop by here last night?

CHARLIE

Yeah. Bagel?

ALBERT

No thank you. What time was she here?

CHARLIE

(thinks)

Well she got here about twelve-thirty and we chatted briefly and right now she's in that closet.

ALBERT

We're really quite anxious to know where she is.

CHARLIE

I'm not kidding. She's in the closet.

Albert decides to indulge Charlie, goes to the closet and opens the door. He stares inside for a moment, then closes the door.

ALBERT

She is in the closet.

CHARLIE

I wouldn't lie to you Albert.

ALBERT

What's she doing there?

CHARLIE

I don't know. You're the one who looked.

Albert reaches for the closet doorknob again, then thinks better of it. That can only lead to humiliation for everyone.

Albert stands there for a moment trying to gauge the magnitude of what he's just seen. He can't help glancing at the unmade bed. It is now clear to him. Sandra has taken an enormous step away from him.

ALBERT

You are not a person, Mr. Burns, you are an experience.

CHARLIE

That's pretty good, Albert. Thank you.

Albert starts to exit, then stops.

ALBERT

Some things were said last night between myself and Miss Markowitz that may have indicated a personal animosity towards you. The context was one that was not conducive to rational discourse.

CHARLIE

You know, you speak like you write everything down before you say it.

ALBERT

Yes, I do speak that way, Mr. Burns. I wish that I spoke more spontaneously. I will always appear foolish in a conversation with someone possessing your imagination. Please understand, there is no vengeance in my activities here. I love my work, Mr. Burns. I believe that eventually -- sooner rather than later -- you will lose or quit your current writing position, because it is in your nature to do so. And I further believe that this type of behavior represents a serious danger to the child.

(MORE)

ALBERT (cont'd)

I wish this were not true because it is obvious that you have a considerable affection for your nephew. It is in your face, this feeling. I admire you for your warmth, Mr. Burns, and for the affection the child feels for you. I admire this because I am one for whom children do not easily feel affection. I am not one of the warm people. But your feeling for the child does not mollify the genuinely dangerous emotional climate you have made for him. I wish you could understand this, I would so much rather you understood, could really hear what I have to say. For yours is, I believe, a distorted picture of this world.

CHARLIE

Then why don't you send me to a foster home?

ALBERT

(sadly)

I was right. You really can't listen to me. Your villains and heroes are all so terribly clear to you, and I am obviously one of the villains. God save you from your vision, Mr. Burns. Good-bye.

Albert leaves. Sandra comes out of the closet.

CHARLIE

Did you hear all that?

She nods. She strokes his hair to show she's on his side.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

(resentfully)

I'll "quit or be fired because it's in my nature." I know what's at stake here.

SANDRA

Of course you do. Hey, you know what else would help.

CHARLIE

What?

SANDRA
If we fixed this place up.

CHARLIE
The apartment?

SANDRA
So the members of the Board could
see that it didn't still look so
much like... this.

CHARLIE
(nervously)
Uh-huh...

SANDRA
We could change the whole
environment. You know, get rid of
all this... clutter.

He looks around. This "clutter" is his stuff.

SANDRA (cont'd)
Or better yet, there's an apartment
in my building -- two bedrooms --
twenty-six hundred a month.

CHARLIE
Your building?

SANDRA
Where I was living before I almost
moved in with Albert which thank
God my lease wasn't up so I can
move back in.

CHARLIE
(warily)
Uh-huh.

SANDRA
If you want it, though, you should
move quickly. I'm late for work.
What time are you gonna be home
tonight?

And she waits for an answer.

Charlie reacts, startled by how domestic this all sounds.

INT. DAILY SHOW - WRITERS' ROOM - DAY

The WRITERS are gathered.

HEADWRITER

We need a caption under the picture of Chavez.

WRITER #1

Hugo Boss?

HEADWRITER

(negatively)

Obvious.

Jon Stewart enters.

JON STEWART

What film piece have we run not too recently that we should run again?

WRITER #2

How come?

JON STEWART

We're pulling the tornado story.

HEADWRITER

Charlie's tornado story? About the trailer park?

JON STEWART

Yeah.

HEADWRITER

How come? It was funny.

WRITER #2

Yeah. "I live in a Tornado Area so I'd like a home that's not bolted to the ground."

Everyone chuckles.

JON STEWART

The network pointed out that over the weekend a guy was killed in a tornado.

CHARLIE

That's why I wrote it.

JON STEWART

I know. I know. They just felt like it was a little too fresh.

CHARLIE

What did you think?

JON STEWART
I thought it was fine.

CHARLIE
(challengingly)
Then...?

JON STEWART
They never bother us. They
question something like two, three
times a year. You know, you pick
your fights.
(to the others)
So how about that --

CHARLIE
And you're not picking this one.

Now Jon Stewart becomes a little irritated.

JON STEWART
Look, I stick up for the writing
all the time --

CHARLIE
Apparently not all the time.

It's becoming uncomfortable.

JON STEWART
Hey, we are always pushing the
envelope --

CHARLIE
No one here wants to push the
envelope. You know why? Because
there's a big check in it!

INT. HALLWAY - LATER

Nick is coming home from school. He is surprised to find all
of Charlie's "clutter" piled up in the hallway outside their
apartment. The apartment door is AJAR. Warily, Nick enters.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT

It has been remade. All the eccentric junk is gone. The
pieces that remain are now covered in brightly-colored
cloths. Everything else that remains (books, CDs, DVDs) are
neatly arranged and organized. There are flowers and plants.
Everything is clean.

In the midst of this revelation is Sandra, wearing jeans, her sleeves rolled up and a bandana on her hair. The radio is playing.

SANDRA
(cheerfully)
Hi, Nick. How was school?

NICK
Fine... When did you do all this?

SANDRA
I left work early. Once I decide to do something I have to do it. I'm mildly OCD. Do you like it?

NICK
I think it's superb. I mean, imagine my surprise upon seeing it.

SANDRA
Oh -- and Charlie called. He's got another skit on the show tonight. Something about a tornado. I'll bet you're really proud of him.

NICK
More like relieved. See what was happening was, he was developing into a bum. I mean for a while, he'd work a few months, then quit, then work a few months, then quit... But then he just stopped working at all. You don't want to see somebody you like developing into a bum. Plus, he'd do these nutty things.

SANDRA
(concerned)
Nutty?

NICK
Like if we were in a crowded elevator someplace, he'd turn to me and yell "Irwin, there'll be no more of this self pity! You're forty, you're a dwarf, get used to it!"
(laughs)
Actually, that was pretty funny.
(MORE)

NICK (cont'd)
You know a very nice quality you
have is that you're a good
listener, which is important to me
because of how much I talk.

She chuckles. He smiles. They're both happy.

SANDRA
I was trying to talk your Uncle
Charlie into moving, but I saw in
his eyes a certain panic.

NICK
Oh, he won't move. He really likes
the deli downstairs. Charlie
divides people into two categories.
People who like delicatessen and
people who don't. And he will not
associate himself with non-deli
people.

SANDRA
(amused)
I see.

Charlie enters, carrying his briefcase. He reacts to the NEW
LOOK of his apartment.

CHARLIE
(in wonder)
How long have I been gone?

SANDRA
Do you like it? I mean, so far.

CHARLIE
It's growing on me.

SANDRA
What are you doing home?

CHARLIE
Oh, well the hours down there are
fluid. Hey, Nick. I'm hungry.
How about you?

NICK
Yeah.

Charlie gives him money.

CHARLIE

Be a good lad and run down to the
deli and get us all some
sandwiches.

SANDRA

Won't it spoil his dinner?

NICK

No, I'll have half now and half for
dinner. We always do that.

Nick runs out.

SANDRA

Are you home for the rest of the
day or do you have to go back?

CHARLIE

Sandra, the most amazing thing
happened to me today.

SANDRA

(cheerfully)

What?

She continues to work.

CHARLIE

I was trying to compose the
absolutely perfect apology.

SANDRA

For what?

CHARLIE

For anything. For being late,
early, stupid, asleep... and you
know how sometimes when you're
talking to yourself in the street,
you accidentally say a couple of
words out loud? Well --

SANDRA

(interrupting)

Can you help me carry some of this
stuff out to the trash?

She hands him a BOX.

CHARLIE

I'm in the middle of --

SANDRA
(cheerfully)
I'm listening.

She also grabs a box and exits. Charlie, carrying a box, follows.

INT. HALLWAY AND STAIRCASE - CONTINUOUS

They carry their boxes down the stairs.

CHARLIE
Okay, so, I was saying. I
accidentally said out loud, right
on the street "I'm sorry"...

SANDRA
Uh-huh...

CHARLIE
And a guy passing said "It's okay,
no problem." You see? He thought
I was apologizing to him. And he
forgave me. So I tried it all
afternoon. I stood on the street
and as people passed, I said "I'm
sorry." And almost everyone
forgave me! Isn't that remarkable?

EXT. BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

They exit and Charlie follows Sandra to the DUMPSTER in the alley right along side the building. Charlie continues his story.

CHARLIE
What I think is, something had
happened to all of them for which
they felt someone should apologize.
I could run up to the roof right
now and scream "I'm sorry" and half
a million people would holler back,
"that's O.K., jackass, just see
that you don't do it again."

Sandra, only partially listening, dumps her box and Charlie's box into the Dumpster. Suddenly, she stops. Mentally, she plays back what Charlie has been telling her. A LIGHT DAWNS.

SANDRA
You lost your job.

CHARLIE

(quietly)

Sandra, I took whatever this is,
gave it a shower and a haircut and
it did the best it could. Sandra,
I'm sorry. I'm really very sorry.

She stares at him in disbelief. He takes her hand, warmly.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Damn it, lady, that was a beautiful
apology. You gotta love a guy who
can apologize so nice.

She still stares.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

That's the most you should expect
from life, Sandra. A really good
apology for all the things you
won't get.

SANDRA

You said you knew what was at
stake.

He has no real answer.

CHARLIE

I --

SANDRA

I mean the welfare Board is meeting
in two days!

CHARLIE

I know...

SANDRA

Then go back and get your job!

CHARLIE

It's hard after you spit in Jon
Stewart's mouth.

She just stares at him, stunned. Then she turns and walks
back into the building. He chases.

INT. STAIRCASE

They go up. Sandra is UPSET.

SANDRA
And what happens to Nick?!

CHARLIE
(in pain)
He's a wonderful kid. Amazing.
But he brought the world in on me!
Don't you understand? I'd be a
prisoner. I'd have to do whatever
people told me. Plus, they'd be
checking up on me every week...
people I don't know judging me! I
wouldn't know myself anymore! I
wouldn't be of any use to Nick or
you or anybody.

They enter the apartment.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

SANDRA
(wearily)
You know what, Charlie? You have
"intrusion" issues.

CHARLIE
You're the one with the diploma...

SANDRA
Because I'm also an intrusion.

CHARLIE
No --

SANDRA
What is it, a coincidence that you
quit your job the day after we
(indicates the bed). It's a
perfect way to get rid of me! Get
rid of this woman who clutches, who
grabs on. I should be named Ivy
'cause I cling.

CHARLIE
I'm not trying to get rid of you!
Hey, I checked the paper. There's
a sailing tomorrow morning.

SANDRA
A what?

CHARLIE

A sailing. A Swedish ocean-liner.
Let's go see it off. It's always
wonderful. You stand there on the
dock with all the well-wishers and
you throw confetti... Nick and I do
it all the time.

SANDRA

Well you and Nick aren't going to
do it anymore.

She gathers her stuff.

SANDRA (cont'd)

No, Charlie, I have to have enough
sense to leave you. Now. Instead
of three years from now. I can see
why Nick liked it here. I would
like it here too if I were twelve.

And she exits.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - LATER

Charlie is back at the Dumpster. He is dumping the new
curtains et al into it. Then he rescues his "golfer" dummy.
He wipes his hands clean and turns towards the street. As he
does, Diane is going by on the sidewalk. She stops and sees
Charlie at the same instant that he sees her. They're about
forty feet apart. Charlie can tell that Diane is angry.
After a moment's pause, Charlie drops the dummy and takes off
running towards the opposite end of the alley.

DIANE

(angrily)

Charlie!

CHARLIE

(running)

Oh shit.

He emerges on to the street and keeps running. He reaches
the corner, just as Diane turns the corner coming at him.
Again, he pauses, and again he turns and runs. Again she
chases.

DIANE

You're just making it harder on
yourself!

WE FOLLOW Charlie as he runs for about five blocks at which
point he begins to cramp up.

He comes to a stop, red-faced, and panting, his lungs on fire. Diane, casually, saunters up to him, not even winded. Charlie can't talk.

CHARLIE
How did... how did...

DIANE
I keep in shape, you lazy turd. I
don't eat corned beef sandwiches
for breakfast.

CHARLIE
(panting)
Need... to sit.

Behind them is a recently abandoned Asian Restaurant. REPO GUYS are carrying out fixtures. Diane indicates that she and Charlie should go inside.

INT. ASIAN RESTAURANT

It's small. Charlie FLOPS INTO A CHAIR.

CHARLIE
Or would you like a booth.

DIANE
(remains standing)
You're something you know that?
You come into my office like George
God -- everybody's supposed to
audition for Human Being in front
of you. Do you know how important
favors are in my business. And you
had me waste one on you?! I may
want to work with those people
again! I called them. I tried to
patch it up. I told them you were
on medication and for financial
reasons you went generic. I
figured maybe if you went back and
apologized and I fucked everyone at
Comedy Central, they'd give you
another chance. But you've
apparently rendered me unfuckable!

Now, finally, Diane sits across from Charlie.

DIANE (cont'd)
(more quietly)
Let me call Artie in L.A. I'll
tell him you were just joking --

CHARLIE

You never give up, do you?

DIANE

Charlie -- if you love Nick -- or whatever he's calling himself this week -- you can't be this independent. I even thought maybe I would take the kid. But...

CHARLIE

Are you kidding?! That dog you had, that... golden doodle? He committed suicide from neglect. He left that heart-breaking note "Why doesn't she ever come home? Trevor."

DIANE

Well, what's your plan?

CHARLIE

My plan is, I'm gonna tell him. I've got two days and... Look, don't underestimate Nick. He'll understand better than you think he will.

Silence. They both know that he is rationalizing.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Boy, the service here stinks. No wonder they're closing.

DIANE

Not funny. Not now. You know, Charlie, I finally figured out your problem.

CHARLIE

Have you?

DIANE

Yep. There's only one thing in life that bothers you... Other people. If it wasn't for them everything would be great, right? All these Other People, disagreeing with you, not seeing everything the way you see it. It's annoying isn't it? Well watch out Charlie, because they're everywhere.

CHARLIE

Go ahead, Diane. Give me advice.
At half-a-million a year, you can
afford it.

DIANE

Oh, I get it. If I'm so smart why
aren't I poor? And it's six-fifty.
Listen, you better get a damn good
act of your own before you start
pissing on mine.

(stands)

It's time for you to Shape Up!

CHARLIE

(stands)

Shape up?! Diane, what happened to
you. You were crazier than Elaine.
Pearl Jam had to get a restraining
order against you. You had that
tee-shirt "I take crap from
nobody." So you wound up in a
business where you take crap from
everybody. Eventually you'll start
to drag and stumble under the
rotten weight of all the people you
should've told off, all the things
you should've said, all the rules
that aren't yours. And all the
days that don't belong to you. You
have to own your own days -- all of
them -- or else the years go right
by and none of them belong to you
either. And that ain't just for
weekends, Kiddo. That's 24/7.
I'll see you.

And he walks towards the door. A PORCELAIN TEA POT FLIES BY
HIS HEAD, smashing to bits on the door frame.

Charlie is SHOCKED. He turns back to look at Diane who is
also shocked at her own violence.

DIANE

Wow. I scared myself!

She gets control of herself.

DIANE (cont'd)

I have long been aware, Charlie,
that you don't respect me much.
Unlike you, I am willing to deal
with the available world.

(MORE)

DIANE (cont'd)

There are people who spill things and people who get spilled on. I do not choose to notice the stains. It became clear to me at some point that I am not exceptional. And so it is possible for me to accept things as they are. I am gifted. I have a talent for surrender. You... are cursed. You don't have this gift and I see the torture of it. And I worry for you. But I will not worry for myself. I will not let you convince me that I'm one of the Bad Guys. I get up and get going, I sell a little, I lie a little -- I watch the rules! -- I talk the talk. I'm in that high office so I can catch the wind and go with it! But I will not apologize for it. I am the best possible Diane Burns. And some crap, I don't take!

And she heads for the door.

CHARLIE

Diane --

She puts her hand up to stop him.

DIANE

Please, Charlie. Allow me once to leave a room before you do.

EXT. ROOFTOP - DAY - A LITTLE LATER

We see the panoramic view, then we find Charlie. He begins playing his harmonica. A sad, rueful version of "Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye." The DOOR OPENS in the Roof and Nick appears.

NICK

Hey, Charlie.

Charlie turns, SURPRISED.

CHARLIE

Oh, Nick...

NICK

I saw you up here from the street.

He comes over to join Charlie.

NICK (cont'd)
Aunt Diane once said you like to
come up here on the roof so you can
look down on people.

CHARLIE
(wryly)
She's a firecracker.

NICK
Where's Miss Markowitz?

CHARLIE
She's... not here right now.

NICK
Oh.

Nick steps forward to make an announcement.

NICK (cont'd)
Charlie, since you took a big step
and got a job and everything --

CHARLIE
Um --

NICK
-- I made up my mind that it's time
for me also to finish a certain
matter I've been putting off.

CHARLIE
(distracted)
Oh yeah?...

NICK
The past couple of months, I have
been thinking about different names
and considering different names
because in four weeks I'm gonna be
thirteen and I gotta pick my
permanent name, like we said.

CHARLIE
I figured you'd already settled on
Nick.

NICK
Nick is a name for a short person.
And since I am a short person, I do
not believe I should put a lot of
attention on it.

CHARLIE

What are you talking about?
Where'd you get the idea you were
short?

NICK

From people who are taller than I
am.

CHARLIE

That's ridiculous.

NICK

Sure, standing up there it's
ridiculous, but from down here,
where I am, it's not so ridiculous.
Half the girls in my class are
taller than me. Especially Susan
Bookwalter. So for a couple of
months, I considered various "tall"
names, ruling out "Shaquille" or
"Kareem" as too desperate. For a
while I considered "Zachary" but I
figured that might turn into a
short, fat, bald name. Then I
thought about just picking any name
and putting "Captain" in front of
it, to sort of jack it up a little.
Then last week I finally, really,
decided and I took out a new
library card to see how it looks
and today I figured I would make it
definite and official.

He takes a library card out of his pocket and hands it to
Charlie. Charlie looks at it, confused --

CHARLIE

This is my library card.

NICK

No that's the whole thing -- it's
mine.

CHARLIE

But it says "Charles Burns."

NICK

Yeah. That's the name I picked.

Charlie is STUNNED. He can barely respond.

CHARLIE

I'm... that's very... I'm flattered
by... Why would... It's gonna be
very confusing with both...

Charlie has to stop and gather his thoughts.

NICK

I gotta ton of homework. I got a
paper I gotta turn in tomorrow
'cause I'm missing school Friday
for the Welfare Board Hearing.

And Nick goes back down through the trap door. Charlie
stares at Nick's new library card.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - LATE THAT NIGHT

It's about 4 A.M. Nick is awakened suddenly.

CHARLIE

Come on wake up.

NICK

(sleepily)

What...

CHARLIE

Get dressed.

EXT. JFK AIRPORT - DAWN

Charlie and Nick get out of a cab in front of a Terminal.

INT. DEPARTURE TERMINAL - A LITTLE LATER

Charlie and Nick are in a long line to present their tickets
and enter the jetway. Charlie looks impatient and Nick seems
anxious.

NICK

I still don't understand. Is the
"Kookieville" job set? Is it
definite?

CHARLIE

(evasively)

It's... I'll get the job, don't
worry. If I present myself and
talk to Artie, he'll... I mean I am
one of the creators.

NICK

Uncredited. What about the Board hearing?

CHARLIE

You want me to show up and announce I got fired from "The Daily Show?" You'll be living with Dorothy and Oscar Creamcheese out on Long Island. When I get the Kookieville job we'll call the Welfare Board and explain we had to move for my work and what can they say? They'll say "Good, now they're California's problem."

They're almost at the front of the line.

NICK

What about school? What about our stuff? What about Miss Markowitz? I thought you and she...

CHARLIE

Look,
(holds up a brown paper bag)
me and this corned beef sandwich are getting on this plane. I bought you a ticket, whether you come is up to you.

And with that, Charlie disappears down the jetway.

NICK

(shouts)

This is too much pressure to put on a twelve year old!

He hands in his ticket and enters the jetway.

INT. PLANE

Charlie and Nick have seats in the last row of Coach.

NICK

Do we know where we're gonna live?

CHARLIE

You know you're an enlarged prostate short of being a little old man... speaking of which...

Charlie goes to the Lavatory. Nick thinks for a moment, then secretly takes out his cell phone.

INT. SANDRA'S OFFICE - LATER THAT MORNING

Sandra enters her office to start her day. Albert is waiting for her. He stands, holding a bouquet. Sandra is touched but she does not really want him there right now.

ALBERT
(politely)
Good morning.

SANDRA
Hi.

It's awkward between them.

ALBERT
I thought you get here at 8.

SANDRA
Well it turns out I couldn't get my apartment back and I'm staying with my mother and it takes me longer to get here from Bayside.

ALBERT
Oh, I see.

They both try to talk at the same time.

Look --	SANDRA	I --	ALBERT
---------	--------	------	--------

They stop.

ALBERT (cont'd)
No, go ahead.

SANDRA
I'm sorry you found me in that closet. That must have been a horrible shock.

ALBERT
Are you and he...?

SANDRA
No. That was just an absurd mistake.

ALBERT

(pleased)

Oh. Well, then, perhaps if you have some free time you might want to come shopping with me? I'm going to get all new bedroom furniture. You know "out with the old."

Again, Sandra is somewhat touched.

SANDRA

Albert, you don't have to --

(interrupts herself)

My message light is on and every flash is boring a hole in my head. It's the OCD. Can I just...?

He nods, aiming to please.

ALBERT

Mm.

She pushes the button so it's on Speaker while she hangs up her coat.

MOTHER (V.O.)

Sandy it's Mom.

We HEAR A SMALL DOG YAPPING.

MOTHER (V.O.) (cont'd)

Mitzi, shut up, I'm talking to your sister. Don't have salmon croquettes for lunch. I'm making them for dinner. Okay goodbye.

SANDRA

I've never had salmon croquettes for lunch in my life.

The second message is played.

MOTHER (V.O.)

I'm in the market and I don't like the look of this salmon. Not one bit. I'll call you back.

Sandra reacts wearily. The third message comes on.

NICK (V.O.)

(urgently)

Miss Markowitz, it's me Nick. Nick Burns. I'm very worried.

(MORE)

NICK (V.O.) (cont'd)
Charlie and I are on a plane and
we're going to Los Angeles.

Albert reacts alarmed. Sandra doesn't know what to do. She lets the message play. Nick speaks rapidly.

NICK (V.O.) (cont'd)
Because he got fired from "The
Daily Show" he's going to try to
get a job from Artie Storm on
Kookieville, but we're not gonna be
at the hearing and I'm worried that
that wormy guy you came to our
house with will think Charlie
kidnapped me only he didn't make me
get on the plane he just made me
come to the airport and --
(frantically)
I gotta go! He's coming back!

Sandra nervously looks at Albert.

ALBERT
I have to go back to the office and
take care of this.

And he starts to go.

SANDRA
What are you gonna do?

ALBERT
S.O.P. We contact the proper
authorities in Los Angeles.

SANDRA
(upset)
Oh, can't you just let them --

ALBERT
No, Sandra... I can't.

He exits. Wearily, Sandra sits at her desk. Then she grabs her phone.

INT. LAX - ARRIVALS TERMINAL

Charlie and Nick, grubby from their flight, carrying their few bags head for the exit. TWO LAPD COPS are at the door. They seem to be staring at Charlie and Nick. But whatever the cops are doing there it has nothing to do with them.

Charlie and Nick exit the terminal without incident.

EXT. SOUND STAGE - DAY

We're on a film studio lot. Painted on the outside of a sound stage is a gigantic picture of Artie Storm as Runty Mc Boomp-Boomp looking particularly "antic."

INT. SOUND STAGE

A REHEARSAL is in progress. There is no audience. The bleacher seats are covered by drop cloths. Artie is on stage. There are no cameras or microphones. Just CAST, WRITERS, the DIRECTOR, a PROP GUY, a COUPLE OF A.D.s and ASSORTED STAFF. The Prop Guy is holding a six-foot pickle. Artie is carrying a script as he rehearses.

ARTIE
Okay, so where am I?

DIRECTOR
Grab the guitar...

ARTIE
Right. Okay.

Artie puts his script down and picks up a huge, silly guitar. He LEANS OVER his script, locating his next line.

ARTIE (cont'd)
(reading)
I don't have enough talent to be in
their garage band, huh? I'll show
them.

DIRECTOR
(cues)
Playback.

A GUITAR HERO video appears on "Mr. T.V." Artie begins to comically rock out. He bends down out of sight then pops back up wearing the Little Stevie Van Zandt bandana. The writers dutifully laugh.

DIRECTOR (cont'd)
Good!

Artie continues to rock. He yells over the noise.

ARTIE
How do we --? Cut the playback!

The playback stops. Artie ceases gyrating. He no longer needs to yell.

ARTIE (cont'd)
How do we end the bit?

One of the Writers steps forward.

WRITER
You step on the skateboard and roll
out the window.

Pause.

ARTIE
(to the Writer)
You do it.

WRITER
(taken aback)
Hm?

ARTIE
You do it, Harvard. Who am I,
Spiderman?! I'm a fifty-one year
old Jew with six stainless steel
pins in my back!

WRITER
(desperately)
Well, then... What if you got your
fingers caught in the strings?

ARTIE
Death. Dead, dying, doornail,
death, dead, dying.

A VOICE IS HEARD

CHARLIE (O.C.)
Put a fish tank in the set. A big
one. Huge.

Artie peers into the Darkness. Charlie steps into the light
as he "pitches" his idea. Nick is with him.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
You accidentally smash it with the
neck of the guitar. Water, water,
water, you get electrocuted. You
start to vibrate, you spaz out, now
you're playing great! You're Jimmy
Page. Cut to the fish on the
floor, frying. Later you have them
for dinner.

ARTIE
(in disbelief)
Charlie!

INT. ARTIE'S TRAILER

It's nice. The door opens. Charlie, Nick and Artie enter. Charlie is explaining something as they enter.

CHARLIE
... so, you know me, when Diane got you on the phone, I felt like I had to do a "bit." So I said "No" and hung up. Then I found out you took it seriously. So I thought, instead of calling you back, let me come out here so you can see I was kidding.

ARTIE
(making certain)
So you want the job.

CHARLIE
Of course. Naturally.

ARTIE
Let me think about this.

He stares distrustfully at Charlie who is trying to hide his nervousness. Suddenly, violently, Artie KISSES Charlie on the lips. Finally, he lets him go.

CHARLIE
(disgusted)
Oh, Artie...

ARTIE
Hey, that wasn't bad.

Artie turns to Nick.

ARTIE (cont'd)
And you. Look at you. When did I meet you? Couple months ago?

NICK
Yes sir.

ARTIE
Look how tall you haven't gotten. I'm kidding. Oh! I have something you're gonna love!

Artie dashes into the other room of the Trailer. He returns with a life-size cardboard stand-up of himself in costume and make-up.

ARTIE (cont'd)
These are gonna be in every
Wienerschnitzel in America. Mention
my name you get free sauerkraut.

NICK
(his best manners)
Thank you, Mr. Storm. Imagine how
pleased I am to receive this.

ARTIE
And I got a Trusty Rusty wig-hat
for you.

It's a one-piece fright wig/silly hat. He plops it down on Nick's head.

NICK
Thank you.

ARTIE
Come on. Now you gotta do the
Rusty salute.

NICK
The what?

ARTIE
The salute. Here.

Artie flaps his arms, turns, lifts one leg and makes a flatulent noise with his mouth.

NICK
Oh yeah. I knew it. I just
forgot.

Nick gamely does a mediocre version of the Salute.

ARTIE
Good. Good.

Then Artie indicates that it wasn't that good.

Artie turns back to Charlie and lowers his voice.

ARTIE (cont'd)
Bullshit.

CHARLIE

Hm?

ARTIE

The story that you hung up on me
for a "bit."

(shakes his head "no")

So what happened? You got in some
kind of trouble and now you need
the job?

Charlie is uncomfortable. Artie lets him off the hook.

ARTIE (cont'd)

You know what? It's all right. a
day doesn't go by, I wish I
couldn't hang up on me. Who can
even be around me? I'm disgusting!
I pushed too hard with the kid just
now, didn't I? Got to be loved!
I'm glad you're here. Now we're
gonna do good work.

CHARLIE

(gamely)

You bet.

ARTIE

You know what I got around me now?
Finks, dwarfs, phonies and frogs.
No Charlies. The show is (screams)
boring, boredom, bored, boring
coma! I'm in a coma! Pull the
plug and let me die!

CHARLIE

So should we --?

ARTIE

(obsessing)

When I came to see you, last time,
you walked into the kitchen playing
your harmonica. You made me feel
very foolish. All right, what the
hell. That's why it's called The
Past. We move on.

(a beat)

But I wouldn't have done that to
you.

Artie looks at the big cardboard stand-up.

ARTIE (cont'd)
Look at this! It's so immodest.
And I give this to a kid.
(to Nick)
Hungry?

NICK
Sure.

Artie grabs a bag of potato chips and pretends to struggle to open it. He pretends that he's using as much muscle power as it would take to pull a railroad car. (Think Jerry Lewis at his worst) Finally, he rips the bag and causes the chips to fly everywhere. Then he pretends to cry. Nick doesn't laugh.

NICK (cont'd)
Wow. What a mess.

ARTIE
That's a bit from the pilot. I did it just for you.

NICK
Thank you.

ARTIE
It was funny, right?

NICK
Sure. I guess so.

ARTIE
You didn't think it was funny?

NICK
Yeah, it was pretty funny.

ARTIE
What's the matter? You don't laugh when you see something funny?

NICK
Oh sure. It just... took me by surprise. So I didn't get a chance.

ARTIE
See, the first funny part is when I can't get them open, then another funny part is when they all..
(indicates)

NICK

Uh-huh.

ARTIE

And then, I didn't want to do,
because it's a little cramped for
space, but I tag it with this.

And he does a BACKWARD DEADFALL.

NICK

(nods approvingly)
That's terrific, Mr. Storm.
(with admiration)
You just do that and they pay you
and everything.

ARTIE

But you didn't laugh.

NICK

I was waiting for the funny part.

ARTIE

That was it. That's...

NICK

Oh, when you fell down on the --

ARTIE

Yeah! When I fell!

NICK

Oh. Well, see, the thing is --

ARTIE

I know. You were waiting for the
funny part. You missed another
funny part.

NICK

Gee, I'm really sorry, Mr. Storm.
I --

ARTIE

Forget it. Fortunately I know this
bit is funny. We tested it.

He takes out a BOOKLET.

ARTIE (cont'd)

Here.

(shows Nick)

What does that say?

NICK

Potato chip bit. Eighty-five per cent of audience; outright, prolonged laughter.

ARTIE

That's from the preview audience. That routine I just did for you got eighty-five per cent outright, prolonged laughter.

NICK

I do some routines. I can imitate Alexander Hamilton.

ARTIE

(not interested)
Fine. Whatever.

NICK

And Charlie does Thomas Jefferson.
(to Charlie)
Come on.

Charlie moves over to Nick.

CHARLIE

Hello there, Alex, how are you?

NICK

Fine. You should have been in Congress today. There was quite a row. It was...

ARTIE

Wait a minute. Wait a minute. It's stupid. You can't imitate Alexander Hamilton. No one knows what he sounds like.

NICK

(triumphantly)
That's the funny part.

CHARLIE

You missed the funny part, Artie.

ARTIE

My balls are sweating! The bit I did was funny! He's an odd kid! Oddness, Charlie. Major oddness! Alexander Hamilton! Jaded jokes for old men.

(MORE)

ARTIE (cont'd)

It's a shame when a kid can't enjoy pure fun and merriment. It comes from you! You have this unhealthy, abnormal... sick way of --

NICK

Hey. Don't say that.

ARTIE

A freakish way of growing up --

NICK

(seriously)

Are you calling me a freak? 'Cause if you are, you'd better take it back.

ARTIE

On June third I'll be fifty-one years old and I'm arguing with a twelve-year-old kid.

Artie quiets himself down. He examines Nick. Then he speaks quietly to him.

ARTIE (cont'd)

Nick... comedy is a crazy, senseless wonderland. But simple and clear like the blue, blue sky. All I want is your simple, honest child's opinion of my routine -- for children are too honest to be wise.

NICK

(slowly and quietly)

My simple, child's reaction of what you did is that you are not funny. Funnier than you even, is my friend Stuart Shlossman who is eleven and puts walnuts in his mouth and makes noises. What is not funny is to call us names and what is mostly not funny is how sad you are that I would feel sorry for you if it wasn't for how dull you are and I wouldn't wear this hat to a Moron Convention and that's my honest opinion from the blue, blue sky.

Artie is stunned. Charlie laughs jubilantly.

Even though it's not in Charlie's interest to irritate Artie, he's just so damned proud of Nick , he can't help himself. Artie, of course, is offended. He snaps.

ARTIE
(to Charlie)
That was funny to you?! You
enjoyed that?!

Charlie tries to calm things down.

CHARLIE
Come on, Artie, you've heard worse
than that.

ARTIE
Yeah, but not --

Nick has taken out his harmonica and is playing a lively version of "Toot Toot Tootsie."

ARTIE (cont'd)
(distracted)
Stop that!

Nick doesn't stop. It's a cacophony. Very jarring.

ARTIE (cont'd)
(to Charlie)
I'm sick of your bullshit, Charlie!
You --
(to Nick)
Hey, I told you --!
(realizes)
That's the song! That's the same
song! You put him up to this!!

CHARLIE
No --

NICK
Come on, Charlie, get your
harmonica, let's both play.

CHARLIE
Nick, wait --

Nick goes back to playing, really loud and jarring.

The TRAILER DOOR OPENS. An A.D. leans in.

A.D.
Artie, they need you on the set.

ARTIE
I'm coming.

The A.D. exits.

ARTIE (cont'd)
(to Charlie)
We're done here.

Charlie, literally, grabs Artie to prevent him from leaving.

CHARLIE
Artie, hang on! Nick stop it!!

NICK
(surprised)
Why?!

CHARLIE
Nick, we can't -- just put that
down, please.

NICK
(agitatedly)
No, Charlie. Come on, let him go.
He called us names.
(grabs Charlie)
Let's get out of here.

CHARLIE
Nick, just be quiet for a minute!
(turns to Artie)
Artie --

NICK
(shouting)
Charlie, please, let him go!

Nick is now right next to the Rusty stand-up.

NICK (cont'd)
Look at this stupid cut-out! It's
stupid!

He THROWS IT DOWN on the floor and begins to kick it
fiercely. Nick is clearly out of control. Charlie tries to
grab him -- not in anger, but in love -- trying to help Nick
get control of himself. As he grabs Nick, Nick kicks the
stand-up out of the trailer. Charlie holds him tighter,
almost in tears himself.

CHARLIE
Oh, Nick, please, no more, please,
stop it --

Nick is starting to cry.

NICK

We don't need a-holes like that,
Charlie, we don't! Let's get out
of here, let's go.

Charlie hugs Nick lovingly.

CHARLIE

We can't Nick... I'm sorry... we
can't...

(turns)

Artie --

But Artie is gone. Charlie dashes out of the Trailer. Not
on purpose, he accidentally steps on the stand-up.

EXT. TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Charlie runs out. Artie is striding towards the sound stage.
Charlie pursues, then stops, suddenly. TWO LAPD OFFICERS and
a FEMALE CIVILIAN are talking to the A.D. The A.D. Points to
Charlie. Artie, stops, curious. They all turn to face
Charlie.

MISS HERNANDEZ

(the civilian)

Are you Mr. Burns?

CHARLIE

Um... yeah.

MISS HERNANDEZ

My name is Linda Hernandez. I'm
with the Los Angeles Child Welfare
Board. I'm acting in cooperation
with the New York Child Welfare
Board. Did you travel from New
York today accompanied by a minor?

CHARLIE

Yeah. My nephew. We -- I came out
here for a writing job...

By this time, Nick has come out of the Trailer.

MISS HERNANDEZ

I am authorized, at this time, to
take custody of the minor.

CHARLIE
No, you don't have to... it's...
give me one second.

Charlie approaches Artie. They speak privately at low volume.

ARTIE
What is this?

CHARLIE
They want to take Nick.

ARTIE
Fine with me.
(shouts)
Shoot to kill if you have to!

BACK IN LOW TONES:

CHARLIE
Artie, tell them I came out here
because I'm working for you.

ARTIE
That's a bubbling crock.

CHARLIE
Please, Artie. I promise... I
promise I'll work my ass off for
you.

Charlie is completely humbled. Artie looks in Charlie's eyes and sees a need he's never seen there before. Artie approaches Miss Hernandez.

ARTIE
Listen... whatever this guy
(Charlie)
told you is bullshit.

Charlie cringes.

ARTIE (cont'd)
I made him come out here. I
offered him a job and I told him
"If your ass isn't out here by
tomorrow, forget it." That's how I
am, I'm a lunatic. This is all
completely my fault from start to
finish. If you must take a kid,
take any of mine.

The Cops LAUGH.

ARTIE (cont'd)
Seriously, I take full
responsibility. They're my friends
and he does work for me. And if
there's anyone I need to call, I'll
be glad to do that, too. In fact
here.

He hands her his phone.

ARTIE (cont'd)
Get anybody you need to on the
phone right now.

Miss Hernandez considers the situation.

MISS HERNANDEZ
No, it's clearly just a
misunderstanding. The child was
gone and they assumed the worst.
I'm sure I can straighten it out.
(to Charlie)
You're lucky to have such a good
friend.

ARTIE
He sure is. Hey, Cathy, get the
officers a couple of those Trusty
Rusty wig-hats. They're good when
you break into a crackhouse,
they'll be laughing too hard to
shoot.
(to Miss Hernandez)
As for you, I'm looking for my
sixth wife.

She laughs. She and the Cops get into their vehicle and
drive away.

ARTIE (cont'd)
(to Charlie)
A fucking Emmy! Be here Monday 10
A.M. No. Nine.

CHARLIE
(docile)
Okay, Artie.

ARTIE
Oh, uh...
(indicates the stand-up)
Don't leave that on the ground,
huh?

CHARLIE
No, no. I'll pick it up.

ARTIE
You'll see. We'll have fun.

He PINCHES Charlie's cheek painfully.

CHARLIE
I'm sure.

Artie exits into the sound stage. Charlie gathers his thoughts and emotions. He walks back towards the Trailer, where Nick is seated, glumly, on the steps leading up to the door. Charlie picks up the stand-up and leans it against the trailer.

CHARLIE (cont'd)
You know they do have some decent delis out here. You feel like a pastrami?

Nick does not reply. Nick won't even look at Charlie. They are both silent for a moment.

NICK
(calmly)
Guy calls us names. Guy talks to us like that. You beg him for a job. Begged. We coulda fooled the Welfare people somehow. We coulda gone to Mexico or something.

CHARLIE
No good delis in Mexico. That's why Pancho Villa revolted.

NICK
Joke around. I'm gonna call myself Dudley... Why'd you go chickenshit on me, Charlie? Why'd you punk out like that?

CHARLIE
Because, Dudley, your routines give me outright prolonged laughter.

EXT. STUDIO GATE - MINUTES LATER

Charlie and Nick -- on foot -- exit the studio. Nick is still resentful. They are not speaking. As they reach the street, a CAB PULLS UP. Sandra gets out and, not seeing them, rushes right by them towards the Studio Gate.

Charlie and Nick are SHOCKED to see her. They exchange PUZZLED LOOKS.

CHARLIE

Sandy?

Sandra stops. She looks back and sees them. She reacts. It is clear that she has spent the day under considerable stress. She hurries back to them.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

What are you --?

SANDRA

(in a rush)

Wait. Listen. Nick called me from the plane and I picked up the message while Albert was there and he heard you were coming out here and he's getting the California authorities to find you and take Nick!

NICK

They --

CHARLIE

(interrupts; mock angry)

Well, they're not taking him. At least not alive! I'll take down as many of them as I have to! I can only be pushed so far!!

SANDRA

(alarmed)

Wait. No --

NICK

Lady, he's pulling your leg. They were here. They left.

SANDRA

(surprised)

They did?

CHARLIE

It's okay. I got a job on Kookieville.

NICK

(sourly)

Yeah, we gotta live out here now.

SANDRA

Oh.

CHARLIE

(to Sandra)

Why are you out here? What...?

EXHAUSTED, she flops down on a bus bench.

SANDRA

I just... felt responsible.

(confused)

And I thought if I came out here and lied and told them I was with you, it would look better or... I don't know. All I know is I'm three thousand miles away from my mother.

Charlie sits next to her.

CHARLIE

Listen, I just want you to know, those ten hours we were dating, I meant everything I said and... I'm sorry I messed it up.

They stare at each other. He wants to kiss her, but doesn't.

CHARLIE (cont'd)

Do you have to go right back?

SANDRA

(hopefully)

Why? Do you want me to stay?

CHARLIE

No. I just don't want you to leave.

She smiles. He smiles.

SANDRA

(deep in thought)

Hm...

CHARLIE

What?

SANDRA

It's interesting. Subconsciously, I think I came out here in order to change my life.

(MORE)

SANDRA (cont'd)
A month ago, one of my old
professors offered me a job
teaching in the Psychology
Department at UCLA. I couldn't say
"yes" because of Albert. But
now...

NICK
(enthusiastically)
You're moving out here too?

SANDRA
(decides)
Yes!
(stands)

NICK
That's great, lady. You could live
near us!

SANDRA
Where's that?

NICK
Nowhere.

SANDRA
Oh my God! I have a place for you!

CHARLIE
(nervously)
Well --

SANDRA
My Aunt and Uncle in Sherman Oaks
have a guest house. I have an open
invitation.

NICK
Yeah?

SANDRA
Oh, Nick, they have a pool and
fruit trees and there's a great
school nearby.

NICK
It sounds exquisite.

CHARLIE
(nervously)
Nick --

NICK
(with an attitude)
Wilbur. Wilbur Malcolm Burns.

Sandra and Nick start to walk away together. Charlie lamely follows.

CHARLIE
Sherman Oaks is pretty far from the studio.

SANDRA
(cheerfully)
You'll commute.

NICK
(laughing)
I don't think Charlie knows how to drive.

SANDRA
(cheerfully)
He'll learn.

WE PUSH IN ON Charlie. This is all gotten completely away from him. Other people are planning his life.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CAR - ANOTHER DAY - MORNING

CLOSE-UP ON Charlie, looking lost.

REVEAL, he is driving a car. He seems to be parked.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

Charlie is in a nightmarish L.A. Rush-hour traffic jam. Nothing is moving for miles. He looks oppressed. Then suddenly, he reaches into the backseat and hauls up his old-time GOLFER DUMMY. He places it next to himself in the front passenger seat and changes lanes. We now see that Charlie has gone into the CAR POOL LANE and is zipping along.

THE END