

BENJI

by

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FADE IN:

INT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - BOARD ROOM - DAY

Polished mahogany, glistening silver. Chalice, ribbons.
Paintings of champion dogs through the years.

Engraved plaques: *DUKE III, GERMAN SHEPHERD. SIR ARCHIBALD
HAUSER, LABRADOR. WRIGLEY DINMONT JR., COLLIE.*

A woman's voice awakens. Effervescent without effort:

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*This is a tail, of the wagging
variety, about a little canine
that was none the wiser about the
rather special club he had been
born into...*

White-gloved hands open a leather case. Measuring a bare
space on the wall. Dusting. Just so.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*His mother gave him entrance into
a world that most could never
even fathom...*

Hanging a painting, that we aren't privy to see.

REVEAL a white-gloved WORKMAN eyeing his handiwork.
Content, he packs up. WE GENTLY FLOAT BACKWARD, submerging
into the painting...

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*A world that simply couldn't get
any...darker.*

WITHDRAWING INTO DARK SWIRLS OF PAINT.

DARKNESS:

EXT. WAREHOUSE - DUSK

A foreboding cement wall. Barbed wire, industrial abandon.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*After all, one can't get lower
than the bottom rung of a ladder.*

Following a RAY OF SUN, THROUGH A BARRED WINDOW...

INT. WAREHOUSE - DUSK

Rusted decay, endless rows of cages, WHIMPERS in shadows.

WE FIND a puppy, weeks old. Big brown eyes amidst tangles of fur. BENJI. Although he doesn't know it yet.

His snout finds the sliver of light. Warmth.

NARRATOR

*And yet, this gentle soul had a
nose for sniffing out light in
the most gloomy of circumstances.*

BENJI

Mom?

MOTHER

Yes, dear?

His MOTHER, curled in straw. Once dignified, now disheveled. Snoring BROTHERS and SISTERS piled atop her.

BENJI

What's it like outside? Why
can't we go outside?

MOTHER

It's better not to ask questions,
love.

BENJI

Yes, mom.
(then)
How come?

MOTHER

Sleep, little one.

BENJI

Why?

MOTHER

Because you're tired.

BENJI

I am?

MOTHER

Yes, you are.

BENJI

Oh, okay.
(rests; then)
Do you think we'll ever get to go
outside?

MOTHER
You are curious, love. Stay that way.

She smiles, folds him in. He nuzzles her. Relaxes.

DOORS SLAM OPEN -- work boots charge forth -- TWO HUMANS -- stampeding for the cage --

Benji peers out eagerly, yips.

HUMAN #1
See for yourself. Mutts.
Worthless. Get rid of them
before I get rid of you. Ship
'em all to New York.

BENJI
What's worthless, mom?

Hands snap on gloves. Mother steps forth, growls --

MOTHER
Get behind me -- all of you --

The cage flings open -- a metal prod pins her back --

BENJI
Mom!

Each tossed into cages, carted off. The door SLAMS!

INT./EXT. SUNNYVALE CARGO TRUCK - TRAVELING - NIGHT

"We love windshield bugs!" says the *SUNNYVALE CARGO TRUCK* cutting through rain. Gargantuan tires gnaw at the highway.

The DRIVER eats SupraSized fries, sings along with the radio, texts on his cell, kinda-sorta drives.

ANGLE - CARGO AREA

Benji, mother, and siblings in cages. Bone-jarring.

SIBLINGS
--I'm scared, mommy!

BENJI
What's a New York, mom?

MOTHER
Nothing to fear -- I'm sure it's
a place where you'll all find
homes with families to love.

SISTER
But we already are a family??

MOTHER
We're dogs, love. We have but
one purpose in life. To be a
best friend. Man's best friend.

BENJI
Man doesn't seem very friendly at
all to me...

MOTHER
Not always. Which is why they
need us. We teach them what they
easily forget, no nobler cause.
You'll understand one day.

BENJI
How -- how will we understand??

MOTHER
Even in the darkest hour, there's
always light. You just have to
keep your eyes open, and help
them do the same.

SISTER
So we're not going to be together
anymore?

That hangs in air. Mom diverts --

MOTHER
Rest, darlings. I fear this
journey may be a long one.

ANGLE - CAB

70 MPH. The Driver texting along --

DRIVER
...LOL, so KWL...

Headlights sweep over an ARMADILLO in the road -- it shrieks --

ARMADILLO
Hey, I'm walking here!

The Driver sees -- brakes SCREECH -- the truck jackknifes --

Cages tumble -- dogs yelp --

Slamming to a stop in a ditch. HISSING STEAM.

Popping out of his shivering shell --

ARMADILLO (O.S.)
Ever heard of hands-free?!

ANGLE - CARGO AREA

Upturned hell. Benji's prison mangled. He squeezes free --

MOTHER
No, free your brothers and
sisters first --

He bolts to his sister's cage, gnaws the latch --

SISTER
Hurry!

The cargo door slams open -- the Driver --

Benji hides in shadows, works the latch -- but it's stuck --

WHAM! Benji yanked by the neck --

TRUCK DRIVER
Gotcha, furbag!

Benji flails, terror --

Mother bites the man in the ankle -- he yells, flings Benji --
who sliiides to the floor -- claws cling to the gate outside --

MOTHER
Go, save yourself!

BENJI
Mommy -- no!

MOTHER
Remember. I will always be with
you, even when I'm not.

He sliiiiiiiips -- faaaaalling -- crashing into mud --

TRUCK DRIVER
Like you'll be missed anyhow --

The door slams --

Tires spin mud --

Benji's mother howls with loss --

Benji chases his family's ECHOING CRIES down the road --

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*It has been said that the more
 one gets to know people, the more
 one will like dogs...*

Racing after the STATUE OF LIBERTY on the New York license plate -- everything in him --

But his legs give out. Tail lights vanish. Black rain.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*And this little dog no longer
 wondered what it was like
 outside. In fact, he wished he'd
 never asked in the first place.*

Whimpering tears matched by those descending from sky...

BEGIN TITLE SEQUENCE:

EXT. RURAL ROAD - DAWN

A weary Benji trudges down a country lane. On a wire above, a gaggle of CROWS caw, caw, caw.

BENJI
 Excuse me, do you happen to know
 how far the New York place is?

CROWS
 Fah fah fah!

BENJI
 Oh, that far? Do you know how to
 get there?

CROWS
 Cah cah cah!

BENJI
 But I don't even know how to
 drive.

Overwhelmed. A tear. A crow plops down, gentle:

CROW
 Mah? Mah?

BENJI
 She's gone. She said she'd
 always be with me. But...she's
not.

Downcast hiccups. The crow nuzzles his neck --

CROW

Pah pah pah!

Nudging his feet.

BENJI

I understand. I have to get
there by my own four paws. But
it's so...fah.

CROW

Nah...nah. Nah nah nah nah...

Nudging him. The others join, cheering him on -- to the
tune of NA NA HEY HEY GOODBYE --

CROWS

Nah nah nah nah nah nah --

A cacophony of cawing. One foot after other -- A CRESCENDO
OF CAWING. His grimace turns to a grin. Faster, faster...

SNOW TRANSITIONS INTO DESERT TUMBLEWEEDS...

...INTO SWIRLING SPRING LEAVES. Benji AGING A FEW WEEKS
along the way...

INT./EXT. ROADSIDE TRUCKER'S DINER - DAWN

Benji's paws a mite bigger...stepping into a back alley.

An ajar door: A FRYCOOK slathering sausages on a grill.
Benji sneaks inside, times it, nabs a dangling chain of
wieners from the table --

FRYCOOK

Hey, get back here!

Benji bolts outside -- lightning fast --

Scrambles under a bench -- through a truck spare tire --

Balance-beams over a disjointed gutter -- launches himself
over a fence...

The Frycook stops, wheezing. Can't help but chuckle.

NEW ANGLE - ALLEY

Benji plops down, about to dig in. Pauses --

TINY MICE crawl from a sewer, a MOTHER in tow. Weak
SQUEAKS, trembling. Hm. Benji drops the sausages, offers.

MOTHER MOUSE
How ever can I repay you?

BENJI
Don't happen to have a car do
you? I'm headed to New York.

MOTHER MOUSE
Afraid not. But I know you have
to go east, young man, go east.

She points. The baby mice copy, pointing. He trudges on.

EXT. RURAL TRAIN DEPOT - DAY

A weary Benji traverses train tracks, EVEN OLDER. Balances
on rails, trots through an air conditioner duct...

Sneaks beneath the office window -- a WORKER on the radio --

TRAIN WORKER
...eastbounder loading out now...

BENJI
(to self)
Eastbound...

Hm, he hops into an empty cattle car as the engine roars.

Inside, he yawns, exhausted. Settles in for a nap. The
engine chugs to life as his big, brown eyes close.

EXT. RURAL RAILROAD - DUSK

The locomotive churns into auburn countryside...

END CREDITS.

EXT. LINCOLN VALLEY TRAIN YARD - DAWN

The train rolls to a stop. A scruffy head peeks out, yawns.

TRAIN WORKER #2
Hey -- no freeloading!

A WORKER seeing him -- Benji skedaddles, chased out --

EXT. LINCOLN VALLEY TRAIN YARD - KNOLL - A FEW LATER

Benji pops up from tall grass. Sniffs. Below, a pastoral
hamlet nestled in orchards. Trots on.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

Golden rays over emerald lawns. Green-suited OFFICIALS unspool red carpets, raise flags...

TURBHILL (PRE-LAP)

There is no void of verbiage to describe the valiancy in this valley. Today we are nestled in the highlands of heroism where man and dog are bonded in battle --

TV cameras roll on TOBEY TURBHILL. Fabulously fashionable in a three piece tux, ivory spectacles, a peacock wave of hair. A British accent dripping with crumpets:

TURBHILL

Hallo hallo, I'm Tobey Turbhill, your host for the grueling, drooling unspooling here at the all bite-no bark pre-qualifying Lincoln Valley Dog Show.

NEW ANGLE

Benji arrives, watches dogs warm up on an agility course...

TURBHILL

The winner here heads to New York for the Nottingham Championships and a chance at 25,000 dog bones -- that's cash money, my couch kumquats.

BENJI

New York! Dog show...?

Dogs leaping over jumps, under planks, through tunnels. Catching Frisbees, sprinting, practicing agility routines.

BENJI

I can do that!

He heads into the throng of well-heeled dogs at the REGISTRATION BOOTH. Dares to step in line.

RAOUL (O.S.)

Pardon. You're stepping on my fur. Do you have any idea what my groomer charges?

A trio of dogs turns: a haute couture Afghan: RAOUL. A deep-voiced Chinese Crested, CHENG. And LUCY, a ginormous, anxiety-prone mop of a Komondor with a bow in her hair.

BENJI

Oh, very sorry, it's lovely fur.

RAOUL

And just what might you be doing?

BENJI

I'm going to enter the dog show --
so I can go to New York!

LUCY

More competition?? Great, just
what we need. It's all about TV
ratings nowadays.

RAOUL

Where are your tags?

BENJI

Tags? I must've lost them?

RAOUL

And your master?

BENJI

I -- guess I misplaced him, too?

CHENG

Sensei say you a fortune cooking
without a fortune.

BENJI

I beg your pardon!

LUCY

(suspicious)

What obedience school did you go
to? Who's your personal trainer?
How many wins under your collar?

BENJI

I -- wins...? I don't really--

LUCY

Ohhh, playing coy? Uh-huh,
sizing us up now to try and beat
us later? Yeah, look at him,
staring us down with those cold,
calculating eyes.

Benji blinks -- most innocent eyes ever.

RAOUL

I'm more concerned with his
smell.

(MORE)

RAOUL (CONT'D)

(sniffs)

The stench of leftover pizza.

BENJI

Last night's dinner! Yum!

RAOUL

Ew. I do hope he's not contagious.

BENJI

Excuse me?

HAUGHTY DOGS

--Contagious?! --Oh my!

Other haughty DOGS turn -- concerned murmurs. Benji sinks.

LION (O.S.)

What's all this fuss about?

A domineering Belgian Sheepdog arrives. LION. Collective fear from all, subservience to an Alpha.

CHENG

1,000 apologies, Lion -- he's the one -- we had nothing to do with nothing --

BENJI

I'm just waiting here in line.

LION

Hm, I'm afraid your sort doesn't belong in this line.

BENJI

My...sort? What sort am I?

LION

By the scent of you, no sort. A stray. And strays have fleas.

CHENG

The F word!

RAOUL

My groomer's going to lose his curlers...

BENJI

I don't have fleas!

LION
What about a name? Has a human
even bestowed you with a name?

BENJI
It's...not something I share with
strangers who think I have fleas.

Benji, ashamed. Lucy feels for him.

LION
Look scamp, the two-leggers get
skittish about strays. And as
the three time National Champion,
it's my responsibility to keep
order. So, I'm asking nicely --
kindly run along.

BENJI
But I have to get to New York!

Lion chuckles. The others also. Benji shrinks, humiliated.

BENJI
I'm -- sorry for disturbing you.

He heads on amidst the gossiping.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - A FEW LATER

Hangdog, Benji trudges through human legs. Tussled, bumped.
Flops beneath a bench, distraught.

BENJI
(to self)
I guess mutts are worthless, mom.
(then)
I'll find you. Somehow.

Flops his head down, heavy.

A passing TOT tosses a pudding cup, misses the trash can.
Benji licks at it, starving. Meanders on.

A BEEHIVED owner screams! Her BEEHIVED BICHON screams!

BEEHIVE
Rabies!

BICHON
Rabies!

BENJI
Rabies! What are rabies??

Benji's mouth covered in white pudding. Group hysteria. A hand scoops him up: a woman eyeing him --

CJ
It's pudding, people. Sugar free
even -- now that's gross.

Oh, the horde returns to their mobile phones. CJ: thirties, playful spark despite the official green jacket.

BEEHIVE
Even so, keep it quarantined.

CJ
Not to worry, Mrs. Rothenkale,
we'll call in Seal Team Six.

Beehive huffs on. The Bichon huffs on. Benji snortles.

CJ
Hey, if you could smell you,
you'd be concerned, too.

INT. FAIRGROUNDS - TENT - BACKSTAGE - DAY

CJ sets Benji down before a cage, examines him --

CJ
No tags, no press pass. Lookyloo,
what's this? Were you sent from
the stars, little guy?

Under his ear, a tiny star shaped birthmark. He woofs,
licks her cheek.

CJ
Cut that out, I don't kiss on the
first date.
(he keeps on)
Ladies man, are ya?
(puts him in cage)
Trust me, you're safer in here --
some of these dog people? Fur-
reaky. City Services'll be here
soon, Casanova.

She heads on. He attempts to claw his way out. Sighs.
Takes in the fanfare from behind bars.

ANGLE - BROADCAST BOOTH

Graphics, stats and Turbhill in a sequined tux --

TURBHILL

Hold onto your love handles, it's
the opening ceremonies and our
canine competitors are cruising
the catwalk -- don't drop your
remotes, but the champion cometh --
the mighty Lion LeRoux --

The crowd goes wild as Team LeRoux enters: SECURITY,
ASSISTANTS, FLAG BEARERS, Lion, and GERARD LEROUX (20's):
Sunglasses, scarf, Napoleonic hand in coat.

TURBHILL

Pundits posit this is purely
practice for Lion and his owner,
Gerard LeRoux. Three years the
victor at this pre-qualifier,
Lion, a Belgian Sheepdog of
unparalleled pedigree is again
our favorite. Monsieur LeRoux, a
few words s'il vous plaît?

LeRoux pauses, feigned disinterest. French. Very French:

LEROUX

I speak only on zee battlefield.
(yanks mic)
However. I am a selfliz man. So
it eez with great sadniz that I
see so many loozertz in my eyes.
Eh, our cross to bear.

TURBHILL

Oui oui, and Master Lion,
anything you'd like to offer?

Lion bites the mic, chews it to pieces, swallows it down.

TURBHILL

If that's not an appetite to win,
I don't know what is. Good luck
to you both!

LEROUX

Luck is for zee meek. And zee
meek inherit nozing.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

An aged Grumman truck coughs to a stop. A pair of weary
eyes in the rear-view mirror. Staring at the tent.

The CROWD ECHOING in the man's head like winds of war.

The door squeaks open -- the side mirror tumbles off. Accustomed, he sticks it back on with duct tape.

INT. FAIRGROUNDS - TENT - A MOMENT LATER

The man enters the tent, searches. Hunched in his own shoulders. Sees Benji's cage, heads for it.

Reaches in -- Benji backsteps, fear -- the man's hand stills. Gently upturns. Calming. Benji dares to sniff it.

The hand gently eases him by the nape, carries him for the door as fast as his boots allow.

ANGLE - STAGE

CJ arrives on stage --

CJ
Ladies and Gentleman, I'm Cynthia Jones, Press Secretary for the Nottingham Club in New York. Thank you for welcoming us to Lincoln Valley! I'm proud to present, on behalf of the Judges, this year's Champion's Chalice.

She raises a trophy. Spotlights, cheers.

The man pauses. Hypnotized by the chalice. Our first real glimpse of him. HENRY BARNES (40's). Bereft eyes.

Benji notes Henry's surrendered gaze. Absorbing.

CJ
Shiny, right? This year's canine with the most points goes back to his or her doghouse with a purse of \$10,000! Can you say, Neiman Barkus?

The BOARD OF GREEN COATS not laughing. Ahem.

CJ
Second and third place runners-up receive invitations to the International Championship next week at our very own Nottingham Club in New York, where the purse is worth \$25,000! Can you say --
(off the Board)
-- nevermind. The games begin tomorrow, may the best dog win!

Henry's eyes on the chalice...

Benji's eyes on the monitors: *the Statue of Liberty, New York tourism imagery...*

ANGLE - LEROUX

LEROUX

Just hand eet over now, save
these imbéciles ze trouble.

Lion growls in agreement.

ANGLE - HENRY

Weary bygones, Henry heads on. Benji fights to escape --

HENRY

Easy, little guy. This isn't
where you belong...

CJ (O.S.)

You must be with City Services?

CJ arriving. He begrudgingly pauses, head low.

HENRY

Yes. Sign here, please.

Offers a clipboard. But she eyes him. Piqued.

CJ

You...look familiar?

HENRY

(shrinks)

Just the dog catcher. Sign there.

CJ

I'm CJ...

(off his silence)

This is the part where you tell
me your name...

HENRY

Right there, on that line.

CJ

Ouch, leave a girl hanging...

So be it, she signs. He hurries on. Until --

REPORTER

--Henry Barnes?! Can it be?!

Caught, he walks faster. REPORTERS' heads turn --

REPORTERS

--The Henry Barnes?! Impossible!

A flurry of activity -- reporters swarm from the likes of *Modern Poodle, Dogue* -- Henry blocked --

REPORTERS

--What's it been, five years?

--You're a dog catcher now?!

Firing questions -- a mob --

HENRY

Leave me alone --

Swarming -- CAMERA FLASHES -- deer in headlights --

LEROUX

Silence! Henry Barnes es un une inspiration. I for one know a certain boy zat watched him from afar, dreaming of one day reaching his glory...and zhen surpassing it. Alors, if this old, old, old great asks us to leave him be, we leave him be, oui? Oui.

Awkward. Benji absorbing Henry's masked shame. They exit.

REPORTERS

LeRoux, how does it feel to be face to face with the man whose record you're trying to beat next week in New York?

LEROUX

Non, I am too emotional. Au revoir.

He and scarf exit. CJ watches Henry go. Troubled.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - PARKING LOT - DAY

Henry trudges to his truck, grum-grumbling in disgrace -- 'old, old, old...' Places Benji in the back --

Benji scratches to escape -- the door closes on him.

The truck coughs to a start. Behind the barred window, Benji watches his opportunity slip away. Hangdog.

EXT. RURAL OUTSKIRTS - DUSK

Countryside. Driving by a HEIFER COW along a fence. A dejected Benji stares out the window.

BENJI

Moo...

HEIFER

Woof!

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DUSK

Sprawling oaks, pastoral. A rusted mailbox, weathered flowery script: *BONE SWEET BONE*. A dirt drive, old farmhouse. Once quaint, now cobwebbed.

The Grumman screeches to a stop. Beyond, an apprehensive young man waits: ROB (30's), Boy Scout, suit and tie.

Henry guns it -- Rob dives behind a trash can.

ROB

Missed...again.

HENRY

Third time's the charm.

A basket appears from behind the trash can --

ROB

Brought you some of my wife's
butterscotch cookies -- share an
afternoon snack?

HENRY

Only thing we're gonna share is a
toast at your funeral. Now get
off my property, Bank.

Henry unlocks and leashes Benji.

ROB

Mr. Barnes. Sorry to say it's
not really going to be your
property. We both know you
haven't kept up your payments --
I've stalled, but my boss is
unwilling to wait any longer.

(sees Benji)

Cute by the way.

HENRY

Take him.

ROB

Hands are a little full. Brought another sign...

He hangs a *FOR SALE* sign on a post.

HENRY

No idea what happened to the others. Been windy.

ROB

There's some hot air, alright. Look, you realize we'll have to evict if you can't pay at least a portion of the debt in the next few days. You understand what evict means, right?

HENRY

You understand what closed-casket means?

ROB

Alright, well. I am sorry about all of this.

(no answer)

Have a nice day, Mr. Barnes.

HENRY

Have a crummy one.

Rob leaves the basket on a stump...beside two other emptied baskets. Drives off.

Henry slumps. Just stands there, beside the aged *BONE SWEET BONE* mailbox. His gaze on the feminine cursive. Lingerin.

Benji glued, at his side, absorbing. Henry shakes it off, locks him into a rusted kennel. Heads inside.

Benji barks. Nudges the kennel door. Trapped.

FRANCO (O.S.)

Their canine noses, 1,000 times more sensitive than their animal brethren, are on full alert as they hunt their prey...

A trio of furry heads surface from holes in the dirt. Prairie Dogs: FRANCO, narrating their every sniff as he guides BRUTO, a brawny one and MARLO, a fat one.

BENJI

Excuse me down there, hello --

Franco ignores -- on hyper-alert, sneaking and skulking --

FRANCO

The pack stalks with a prowess
honed by thousands of years of
feral instinct...

MARLO

I could go for a nap. Or some
Thai food.

BENJI

Please, I need your help!

FRANCO

They fearlessly forge past the
deadly weapon used by the human
to bury captives...

Passing a shovel against the stump.

BENJI

He does??

BRUTO

Bring it, human -- you got
nothin' on these guns.

Punches the shovel -- ouch -- it tumbles into Rob's basket --
cookies spill. Marlo dives in --

MARLO

Bang, buttascotch in da house!

FRANCO

The canines devour their kill
without remorse.

They dig in -- gobbling, chewing, burping. Benji barks --
loud -- again, again --

BRUTO

Yo, we look deaf to you?! If we
helped every one a you jailbirds,
we'd be...real busy.

MARLO

(mouth full)

'Sides, it's lunch hour -- hands
are tied, union thing.

FRANCO

The dog pack must ever trade
friendship for survival...

BENJI

Dogs?? What kind of dogs are
you?

BRUTO

Dogs-dogs. Just like you.
Nothin' you can do that we can't --
we chase our tails, we bark, we
even lick our --

BENJI

But you're Prairie Dogs. Not
real dogs.

Bruto freezes, ire. Bruto gulps, wide-eyed.

FRANCO

A diabolical hush deafened the
plains...

BRUTO

(to Benji)

What did you just say??

BENJI

Real dogs stick together, real
dogs are loyal, even on lunch
hour.

MARLO

(mouth full)

Oh? Fwaybe we're cats then.

Bruto turns in a huff, ire. Hm, Benji gets an idea.

BENJI

Nevermind -- I don't need the
help of a bunch of rodents anyway --

BRUTO

Oh no you didn't.

BENJI

Isn't there a hamster wheel you
should be spinning?

BRUTO

That's it -- wanna take this
outside, fleabag?

MARLO

Um, we are outside, Bruto.

Bruto scurries up the cage, flips the latch, dukes up --

BRUTO

Whatever -- prepare to meet Pain
and his brother, Agony.

But Benji gives him a lick, runs free --

BENJI

You win, didn't mean anything I
said -- thank you kindly, bye,
have a lovely day --

MARLO

Oh, he's good.

ANGLE - BENJI

Racing free, bolting around the house --

Smacks right into...Henry. Looming.

HENRY

Going somewhere?

Henry grabs him by the nape, leashes him. Grabs the shovel.

EXT. FIELD - DUSK

Henry carts Benji toward the forest behind his house.
Mounds of fresh graves dot the landscape.

HENRY

No way some mangy muttsack like
you ever gets adopted. So might
as well get this over with.

Arriving at a fresh hole. Drops Benji to the ground.

Benji quivers. Henry raises the shovel...

The blade glimmering against sun...

Thrusts down with a THUD!

Ethereal SILENCE.

An eyeball pops open. Benji. Alive? Alive!

HENRY

The heck's the matter with you?
(MORE)

HENRY (CONT'D)

(realizes)

You thought I was going to bury
you...?!

(exhales)

These are trees, mutt. Forest
there used to be forest here.
Paper mill cut it down.

(then)

Look, some townie calls,
complaining about you, maybe you
will end up in a hole. We clear?
So go on -- run free. Get!

A last look and Benji trudges into thicket.

Henry scatters a pocketful of...seeds into the hole.
Carefully sprays water from a nearby canteen. Treks back.

Benji hiding in weeds. Peeks out. Sees...

The field. Filled with saplings. Dozens sprouted from
earth. New life dotting the landscape.

Benji glances back at the man, surrounded by a halo of back-
light. A VOICE WHISPERS IN HIS HEAD:

MOTHER (V.O.)

*Remember, even in the darkest
hour, there's always light. You
just have to keep your eyes open,
and help them do the same.*

Benji eyes the man. A new...light.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Henry heads back inside.

The Prairies peeking out from their holes --

FRANCO

And so the barbarian returns from
his murderous rampage.

MARLO

(sings)

*And it seems to me you lived your life
Like a candle in the wind
Your candle burned out long before
Your legend ever did...*

They sink into their individual holes -- PLOP, PLOP, OOMPH --
Marlo struggling -- stuck. Sighs, used to it.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Henry at a tidy table. Eating soup. Alone. Directly opposite him, a place setting laid out perfectly.

Weathered feminine touches dot the kitchen -- frilly knickknacks, homemade *HIS* and *HER* place mats.

Beneath the table, an old dog bed kept neatly.

A series of old photographs on the wall: a *sprightly woman, JESS (30's), blowing dandelions toward a younger Henry.*

A pair of brown eyes at the window takes it all in. Benji.

Another photo. *Henry holding a Pointer (JACKO) and a trophy. Smiling, like we have yet to see.*

Benji shuffles back toward the yard. Against the storage shed, a weathered *BONE SWEET BONE TRAINING & BOARDING* sign.

Benji edges inside. Aged tools, crates. A box of dog show trophies. Dozens. Benji absorbs. Rests his tired head.

EXT. LINCOLN VALLEY - DAWN

Golden glow over rolling green.

A NEWSPAPER BOY tosses a paper. It bounces against the shed. Benji yawns, shakes awake. Steps out, blinks --

A front page photo of CJ, the chalice, the dog show, the Statue of Liberty.

Wheels spin. He turns -- Marlo screaming --

MARLO

It's alive!

Hides behind a crate with the others. Still screaming.

FRANCO

Impossibly, the zombie returns, seeking brains to suck out.

BENJI

Does he always talk like that?

MARLO

Franco's our nature show narrator. Um, for when we get a nature show. I'm Marlo, that's Bruto.

BRUTO
 (dukes up)
 Prepare to meet Shock and Awe --

Right. Benji gives him a big lick. Tickled, he giggles -- only to catch himself -- fists back at the ready.

BENJI
 Oh, by the way, he doesn't bury dogs. He lets them go.

MARLO
 Lets them go? Clearly, the worst dog catcher ever.

Benji trots on --

BENJI
 Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get to New York.

BRUTO
 I mark my territory in your general direction!

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - A FEW LATER

Henry retrieves his overalls from the dryer, turns --

Benji. Calmly seated beneath the ajar window. One of the trophies from the shed in his mouth.

HENRY
 How in Hades...? We had an understanding, mutt. Not too late to bury you for real.

Benji drops the trophy. Henry eyes it. A hint of memory. But grabs him, heads for the window --

HENRY
Mutts aren't allowed to compete, if that's what you're on about. Your filthy coat is mutt, your smell is mutt, your whole darn mutt is mutt.

Drops him outside. The trophy, too.

HENRY (O.S.)
 And put that back.

Benji sighs. The Prairies watch from the fence, laughing.

FRANCO

Rebuffed with tail betwixt his
legs, the musky stench of failure
wafts through the plains.

BENJI

Not helping.

Franco goes quiet. Benji eyes the house. Hm, an idea.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - A FEW LATER

A CLANKING in the stove pipe. A sooty Benji tumbles out of the oven door with the newspaper. Sneezes. Tiptoes down the counter. Nudges the faucet, topples dish soap.

The Prairies appear at the window -- Marlo croons Bobby Darin's *SPLISH SPLASH*. Benji bites foam, dog paddles, boogies in bubbles.

MARLO

Belt the chorus with me, Bruto!

BRUTO

How 'bout I just belt you. I
don't sing.

Benji pops out, revealing a huge white afro. Slip-slides along the counter, leaps into a pile of laundry. Shivers. Sees the open dryer. Hm.

Hops inside with warm towels. Cozy. Just as...

Henry enters. Unaware, closes the dryer. Starts it. A THUMPING from inside. He sees soapy paw prints, sighs.

HENRY

What. A. Dingbat.

Opens the dryer. A dizzy, fuzzball topples out. Bumps into the wall. Nudges the newspaper toward the man.

HENRY

Show Dogs are born with something
you don't have and never will.
It's breed. 'Sides, takes years
to learn how to compete. Can't
fake training with a shampoo
bottle.

Plops him out the window. Benji sighs.

BRUTO

Fail.

They snicker. Benji sneezes gruffly.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Henry cleaning up. Benji barks from the yard --

Balancing on a board, hopping through a spare tire, over a trash can, up a ladder with a paint can, standing on two legs. Just as show dogs did on the field.

Henry chews his lip. Impressed. Hm. But denies --

HENRY
Sit. Roll over.
(Benji obliges)
Play dead.

Benji does. Henry slams the window closed.

A familiar photograph falls to the floor -- *Jessie blowing dandelions toward camera*. He reaches for it as...

WINDCHIMES jangle. Wind billows inexplicably. The newspaper flaps, MORNING SUN spreads from the window...

Jessie seemingly staring directly up at him. Angelic sun spreading over them both.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
It has been said. That the best thing about a man...is his dog. To be sure, there is no creature more tolerant of his foibles and mishaps -- women notwithstanding.

The paper billows ethereally in wind: \$10,000 PRIZE.

Outside rays momentarily reflecting upon the metallic FOR SALE sign...

The WIND EDDYING, LEAVES CIRCLING -- Rob's cookie basket spills open -- napkins and paper plates fly about...

NARRATOR (V.O.)
In fact, one wonders how a man would get anywhere in life without a little nudge from a trusted companion...

Benji leaps -- grabs a plate in his jowls. Chases the next --

Taking down plate after plate...like Frisbees. SLOW MOTION SOARING. One after another.

He then calmly sits in a HALO OF SUN. A neat pile of plates stacked in the grass.

Henry staring out the window. Stultified.

Eyes another photo on the wall: Jacko, trophy, Frisbee.

Benji and Henry lock eyes. Lingerling. The wind HOWLING.

Henry turns to the window -- it's closed?! He stares at *Jessie and the dandelions*. Unnerved.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAY

Benji and the Prairies on the fence. Their heads volley left, then right...tennis match spectators.

Henry inside the house, pacing, arguing with himself.

FRANCO

The human argues with no one in particular, further proving that opposable thumbs are no indicator of intelligence whatsoever...

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAY

The Prairies skedaddle as Henry marches out to Benji:

HENRY

Dumbest idea I never had. Get in.

He opens up the back of the truck. Benji howls, giddy.

EXT. RURAL ROAD - DAY

The cows watch as Henry's truck chugs past.

HEIFER

Woof!

Benji pops his head up from the back window.

BENJI

Moo!

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - REGISTRATION TABLE - DAY

A nervous Henry and Benji before a PERSNICKETY REGISTRAR:

HENRY

Henry Barnes. New registration.

She surfaces from her shell of self-importance. Shock.

PERSNICKETY

Henry Barnes?? The Henry Barnes?
Oh my. And the canine's breed?

HENRY

Terrier.
(off her)
Of the Cesky non-sporting group,
from the soft-coated miniature
Cairns of Poolingford. Yeah.

PERSNICKETY

So...you have his paperwork?

HENRY

Please, I'm Henry Barnes.

PERSNICKETY

Section II of our bylaws states
that no canine may enter without
purebred certification.

He squirms. Until --

CJ (O.S.)

Lookyloo who it is.

CJ passing. Henry gulps.

PERSNICKETY

Ms. Jones, this man, Henry Barnes --
you know, the old Henry Barnes --
would like to register but he has
failed to--

CJ

Register? To compete?

HENRY

That's right. And I'm not old.

CJ

Mr. Barnes, a word?
(aside)
Now granted, my brain noodles are
a little al dente, but you're
going to compete again? With a
stray that you picked up here,
yesterday?

HENRY

No -- he's mine -- he ran here a little early, real excited.
(off her)
He's my good boy. Best friends.
Love him so.

Benji hops into his arms, kisses him. Henry grits teeth.

CJ

Then you have his papers?

HENRY

I have...papers.

CJ

Mr. Barnes. As much as I hate rules -- and I hate them -- credit card due dates, speed limits -- not good at those, dress codes -- green, gag -- there are rules. The Board --

HENRY

-- allows any contestant to enter, according to Ordinance 11.4, should his paperwork be inaccessible due to natural events such as earthquake, floods...

CJ

Floods?

HENRY

I happen to live near a river.

He blinks, matter of fact. Benji blinks, matter of fact.

CJ

Uh-huh. That rule also says that the contestant must provide a copy of the breed's certification within 24 hours.

HENRY

And that's 23 hours and 59 minutes from now. We good here?

He heads back to Persnickety. CJ exhales, heads on.

PERSNICKETY

\$100 hundred dollar entrance fee.

Henry removes his wallet. Empty. Digs into a flap, a brittle \$100 bill. She stares.

HENRY
Just because it's 'old' doesn't
mean it's not good.

PERSNICKETY
The animal's name, please?

HENRY
His name?

The bill in his hand. Ben Franklin staring forth.

HENRY
'Penny saved is a penny earned.'
His name's...Benjamin.

Persnickety perniscks. Benji beams. A name.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - TUNNEL - DAY

They pass through the gates. Benji trotting giddily.

HENRY
Wait here, mutt -- I'll check in.

BENJI
(to self)
Ben-ja-min, Ben-ja-min I could
say it again and again!

Raoul, Cheng and Lucy arrive --

CHENG
So, not a stray after all?

LUCY
I knew it -- it was all a ruse!

BENJI
(proud)
My name's Benjamin, by the way --
please wear it out.

RAOUL
Raoul Jameson Ragenfeld III, son
of World Champion Baron Henckley
Ragenfeld, Jr.

CHENG

Cheng, Jianguo Cheng. Descendant
of the 17th century Chinese
Imperial Dog Palace.

LUCY

Lucy Rothschild Davidoff, sired
by a long lineage of Gold
Medalists...
(gulps)
...who expect the same from me.

BENJI

Goodness. That all sounds very
impressive.

RAOUL

We have been coached by the
world's finest trainers to be the
absolute best.

BENJI

Sounds like a lot of pressure.

LUCY

(anxious)
Pressure?! Who's pressured?!
I'm not pressured -- about
winning, or worse, losing?!
Please, it's not like I have some
compulsive, uncontrollable,
burning desire to bite my paws or
lick hot spots. Ha, I'm totally
one hundred percent in control.

Gritted teeth, frantic tail. Accustomed, Cheng soothes:

CHENG

Lucy, relax your tail and your
mind will calmly follow.

She freezes her tail. Beat. Her entire body then quakes.

LUCY

(struggling)
Yup. All better.

BENJI

Well it's very nice to meet you
all. I'm Benjamin, in case you
forgot.

RAOUL

Yes, so you said.

BENJI

But you can call me Benjamin for short. Or if you like, Benjamin. I'm also good with...

CHENG

Let me guess, Benjamin?

BENJI

Benjamingo!

He skips on happily, toward Henry down the way.

LUCY

Hey, what was his name again?

NEW ANGLE - INTERCUTTING BROADCAST

Turbhill waltzing down the field, tossing discs:

TURBHILL

Hallo hallo, we're back from 60 seconds of pharmaceuticals and weight loss contraptions. We're in the throws of the Disc Throw and the favorite is flying onto the field -- Lion LeRoux, last year's World Champion...

LeRoux, flanked by girls in LeRoux's K9 Kruncheez cartons, waves to the adoring crowd. Pauses at Henry --

LEROUX

Ah, c'est bon, the little people's rumors are truth? It will be an honor to share ze battlefield with you.

(sees Benji)

Is that your...canine? With baited breath, I wait to zee his skills.

HENRY

(sotto)

You and me both.

LeRoux and Lion take the field. A BUZZER. LeRoux fires Frisbees Velcro'd to his suit --

Lion launches from his master's knees, over his back -- LeRoux spins -- ninja nimble. A stunning spectacle.

Lion twists in mid-air, catching multiple discs --

They spin, they twist, they fly with synchronous perfection.

Big finish, LeRoux flings four Frisbees -- Lion leaps off his shoulders, nabs every one.

BUZZER. Henry and Benji stare, open-jawed.

BENJI

I have to poo.

TURBHILL

Don't choke on your double-chin,
that was a quadruple catch -- a
stunning spectacle of supremacy
that firmly fixes Lion in first
with 32 catches!

The Judges respond: 10, 10, 10, 10, 10. Applause. Turbhill listens to his earpiece -- *BROADCAST B-ROLL FOOTAGE: Henry and Jacko past victories.*

TURBHILL

Bangers and mash, another
surprise in store, my
Barcalounger Brethren -- word
just in that former champion,
Henry Barnes, has risen from
retirement to roust his rivals.
I've chills in places I haven't
felt in years.

LeRoux steps off the field, sly smugness.

LEROUX

I humbly submit zee field.

REFEREE

Henry Barnes.

The audience cheers. Henry tentatively strides onto the field. Benji tentatively follows.

HENRY

I'll cue each next throw with
'again'. Don't make me regret
this.

Benji feels the audience's eyes. Swallows. Stage fright.

The starting BUZZER -- Henry tosses a disc --

Nervous, Benji leaps for it, trips. The audience tremors.

HENRY

I already regret this. Again.

Henry tosses another -- Benji spastically kerplunks --

HENRY

Again.

Another -- Benji grabs it, but runs into a cone, tumbles --

HENRY

Again.

Another -- Benji distracted by jeering -- it bonks his nose.

The crowd in stitches.

LEROUX

C'est magnifique...

Benji shrinks under the HOWLS AND BOOS.

The TIMER BUZZES. 0 catches. The crowd murmuring.

TURBHILL

I am woefully without words.

The Judges' scores: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. Benji trudges on, tears.

HENRY

Again.

(off Benji)

They think you can't do this.

I've seen you do it. Put them
out of your head.

(demonstrates)

Hold up your chin. Plant your
feet. Stand straight.

Stifling tears, Benji raises his head. Plants feet.

Henry tosses it. Benji catches it.

HENRY

More like it.

CJ watching, admiring.

They head off the field as the audience points and gossips.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - PARKING LOT - DAY

Henry traipses for the truck. Opens the back --

HENRY

Don't know what I was thinking.

Go on, get in. It's over.

But Benji doesn't budge.

HENRY

Fine, suit yourself. Go back to
the streets where you belong.

He stomps off, starts the engine, drives off.

Benji, alone. Whimpers. Meanders on. Head low.

Until his eyes go wide -- on the two-laner down the way -- a
truck's siding states: *WE LOVE WINDSHIELD BUGS!*

The SUNNYVALE CARGO truck -- the truck he was tossed from --

ANGLE - HENRY'S TRUCK - TRAVELING

Henry grumbling as the Sunnyvale truck passes. Oblivious
to...the little dog in his side view mirror. Running past.

HENRY

What in...?

15 MPH...20MPH...25MPH. Henry shocked...impressed even.

HENRY

Gotta be kidding me...

Benji focused on the STATUE OF LIBERTY LICENSE PLATE --

But loses ground as the semi barrels over a hill. Huffing.

Henry's truck coughs up. Out the window --

HENRY

Nothing about you do I
understand. What gives with the
Sunnyvale Farms?

Benji scoffs, woof off. Turns back the way he came.

Henry reverses, pulls ahead. Parks, climbs out --

HENRY

Listen. About leaving you back
there. I'm, ya know. Okay?

Benji harrumphs, keeps walking, vanishes behind the truck.

HENRY

Fine, I'm sorry.

(then)

You always run that fast? Can
you do it again, on the field?

Benji woofs, emerging behind him. Yes.

HENRY
Don't know who's crazier, you or
me. Get in.

Opens the back. Benji doesn't move, paws the driver's door.

HENRY
Look, you -- I make the rules
around here.

Benji barks, starts walking. Henry grumbles --

HENRY
Fine. My way or the highway!

INT./EXT. HENRY'S TRUCK - TRAVELING - DAY

Benji in the passenger seat, catching air out the window.

Henry driving, grum-grumbling.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - FIELD - DAY

Turbhill in a tight track suit, racing through an obstacle
course of seesaws, tunnels, hurdles and pools --

TURBHILL
Hallo hallo, we're back -- how
many Ginsu knives did you order?
Next up, the Obstacle Trials
where speed, stamina and strength
are the stuff of success. Five
dogs battle in the first heat and
I imagine it will get...

He dives through a hoop, caught by two muscle-clad women.

TURBHILL
...hot.

NEW ANGLE

Benji arrives at the start line. Five snarling DOGS await.

BENJI
Good luck to you all!

BULLDOG
I will crush your spine.

Benji shrinks. Above, Henry notices --

HENRY
Tune everything out this time.
Focus on you, nothing else.

Places two cotton balls in the mutt's ears. SILENCE.

A green coated official arrives (POMPIDOU). CJ in tow.

POMPIDOU
Mr. Barnes. Laurel Pompidou,
Executive Board. I gather you
wish to remain in competition?

HENRY
Not a wish. A fact.

POMPIDOU
You realize with your current
score, or lack thereof, you have
little chance of --

HENRY
Excuse me one sec?

Henry places two cotton balls in his ears. SILENCE.

HENRY
You were saying?

CJ stifles a smile. Pompidou steamed.

The referee arrives with a starter's pistol. Fires --

The canines bolt for a see-saw board -- up, down --

Benji trails -- racing for the crawl bars -- blasts under --

Gaining -- leaps, clears a jump -- rockets through the
slalom poles, passing a SCHNAUZER --

The tire next -- Benji jumps -- edges past a Terrier --

Gaining on the Bulldog -- the pool ahead --

Benji leaps -- clears it -- free-sprint on the track -- neck
and neck with the Bulldog -- growling --

But Benji hears only HEARTBEAT -- PAWS POUNDING INTO TRACK --

His vision laser focused -- SEEING THE SUNNYVALE NEW YORK
LICENSE PLATE BEFORE HIM --

Benji stretches -- bests him at the tape --

TURBHILL
 What a rallying rebound! Barnes'
 Benjamin bounds back!

Benji races to Henry, leaps into his arms. Ecstatic licks
 and tail wags.

HENRY
 Calm down, it's not like you won.
 Was just the first heat -- final
 is tomorrow.
 (off his bark)
 Yeah yeah, good job.

Henry masks a hint of pride. Passes Pompidou --

HENRY
 How you like it cooked?

POMPIDOU
 Beg your pardon?

HENRY
Your crow.

CJ stifles a laugh.

Benji passes Lucy, Raoul and Cheng --

LUCY
 That was quite a comeback!

BENJI
 Thank you, guess I just needed to
 warm up!

He rolls on the grass, giddy.

RAOUL
 What on earth are you doing?

BENJI
 Um, being a dog. Care to join me --
 feels nice on the bottom!

RAOUL
 Not now. Not ever.

LUCY
 If my master caught me doing
 that, he'd send me straight to
 the kennel.

No master, Benji wiggles about. They ogle, intrigued.

Lion passes. Unamused.

LION
What kind of lineage could you
possibly come from?

BENJI
Oh, I'm a terrier -- of the Cesky --
puddingsteingarten group clan.

LION
Your scent isn't Terrier.

BENJI
That's dish soap. Had a bath
earlier. It was lovely.

LION
No, it smells fishy to me. You
don't honestly believe you have a
shot a winning, do you?

BENJI
Yes, I do!

Lion snickers. Cheng snickers in fear. Lucy nudges him, he
stops.

LION
Scrappy aren't you.

BENJI
I'm going to New York! Don't
care what any of you say!

Feeling the fool, he heads back to Henry.

LUCY
(to Lion)
That wasn't very nice.

LION
Lucy, there are winners in life.
And there are losers like you,
high-strung shoe eaters that
perform tricks for treats. I
don't play 'nice', I play to win.

He heads on. Lucy seethes.

LUCY
Oh he burns my tail.
(distraught)
But I really could go for a shoe.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAY

The truck pulls in. Henry brakes -- Rob touring the property with a HUSBAND and WIFE.

HENRY

Stay.

Benji watches him put in park, cut the engine.

ROB

Afternoon, Mr. Barnes. Tried to phone you -- potential buyers in town, wanted to take a look at the property.

HENRY

Uh-huh. You tell 'em about the snakes? Not an issue really, long as you like snakes...in the drains, faucets, toilets -- yow.

WIFE

Snakes?!

Meanwhile, Benji sneaks out of the truck, behind a trash can. Edges onto his tiptoes in order to watch.

ROB

There are no snakes --

HENRY

Really, I'm looking at one now.

Benji's weight against the can topples it -- he scurries as the can rolls across the yard --

HENRY

Oh yeah -- place is also haunted. You folks like ghosts?

WIFE

Ghosts? As in...

HENRY

Shrieking, moaning, ectoplasm. Lots of ectoplasm.

ROB

The property is not haunted --

Henry catches a glimpse of a wagging tail behind a bush.

HENRY

Well, all I know is *something*
keeps scaring the cheese and
crackers outta me...again. And
again.

Hint, hint. Benji cocks his head. Understanding.

ROB

I can assure you that --

The ladder suddenly topples over -- and with it, the
canister of paint. Landing smack down atop Rob. Doused.

HENRY

Yup, things like that just keep
happening again...

On it, Benji eases into the truck. Bites at the key -- the
engine starts. Nudges the stick shift -- clicks to neutral.

And the truck starts rolling right toward them --

From their perspective, it's driving on its own?! The wife
screams -- they run as it plows into a pile of trash bags,
stops. Leaves explode into air.

HENRY

But you get used to it in time.
Right, Bank?

REVEAL ROB: covered in leaves. Tarred and feathered.

HUSBAND

We'll be looking elsewhere.

The couple scurries for the car. Rob steps past Henry:

ROB

Do you think I enjoy this, Mr.
Barnes?

HENRY

I do. Bye bye.

Rob marches off. Drives away with the couple.

Henry shuts off the truck, Benji hops up from the
floorboards, tail wagging.

HENRY

Boo. Now let's get to work.

A woof. A smile. They head on.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - SERIES

Henry beside a ladder. The pile of leaves beyond.

HENRY
The diving competition, tomorrow
it's real water. Form and
distance count. Go on, nothing
to fear but fear itself.

Benji runs -- races up the ladder like an old pro --
launches...all the way past the leaves.

HENRY
(impressed)
You been on the run or what?

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - SERIES

Henry with a remote control.

HENRY
Herding. Race against the clock.
Go --

A remote control duck zigzags in grass. Benji races after.

Benji zigs, the duck zags.

Finally corrals it into a crate. Henry clicks his watch.

HENRY
I'm a year older. Again.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - SERIES

Henry seated behind a newspaper. Not even watching Benji on
the stump, performing every command --

HENRY
Sit. Stand. Left turn. Right.

Benji pauses, spent.

HENRY
Digging. Grave. Shovel.

Okay okay, starts back.

HENRY

You're clomping around like a giraffe. Think of the Freestyle Agility like a dance routine where dog and owner show off everything they've got. It's the final event, worth three times as many points. No no -- too sloppy, tighten it up.

Benji loses his balance, tumbles to the ground.

HENRY

(sigh)
Yeah, like that.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Henry marches outside with a boom box, CLASSICAL MUSIC.

HENRY

Tchaikovsky. Perfectly orchestrated -- just like your every move needs to be. Sit, left, right, stay.

Benji yawns, sleepy.

HENRY

What, can't appreciate one of the greatest composers of all time?
(changes tape)
Fine, Beethoven's final masterpiece, Ode to Joy. A triumphant call to action.

Benji yawns again. Or not. Henry grumbles, looks through the tapes. Sees Jessie's cursive: *SHAKEBOOTY MIX*.

A moment. Hits play. The BeeGees' *YOU SHOULD BE DANCING*.

Hm, Benji perks up. Sits, stays, rolls to the beat.

HENRY

Kill me now.

Benji spinning happily. Shakes his booty.

HENRY

Unbelievable. Fine, if you're gonna do it, do it right --

Henry kneels to the ground, demonstrates -- sits, stands --

HENRY
Faster -- up, down, right, left --
crisp, by the book -- understand?

Benji stares quizzically. Henry repeats, now on all fours.

NEW ANGLE

The Prairies pop up from their holes --

FRANCO
The human and his companion have
engaged in some form of mating
dance...

MARLO
What you doin' on your back?
You should be dancin' yeah!

Wiggling against Bruto.

BRUTO
Disco is dead. Wanna join it?

RESUME HENRY

On the ground, acting quite the dog --

HENRY
Each beat is your cue -- no room
for error. Understand?

Benji shakes, no, clearly egging him on. Both oblivious to --

CJ parking her car. Ogles -- Henry on all fours.

Until he sees her -- topples over himself --

HENRY
Ever heard of knocking?

CJ
Who knew, Henry Barnes got moves.
Can you b-boy? Robot? Pop, lock?

She demonstrates. He stares. Benji, too. Prairies, three.
Marlo pops and locks himself.

HENRY
We're working here. Can I help
you with something?

CJ

The Board. They're concerned -- they're always concerned -- but currently about all the attention you're drawing.

HENRY

The Board's called the Board because they walk around like one's stuck up their rear end.

CJ

Agreed, but they sign my paychecks and I have a thing for shoes -- Miu Mius, love. They don't think Frenchie can be beat, that it's worth all the hoohah.

HENRY

The Board can kiss my derriere.

CJ

Henry. I just want you to know. I understand how difficult it must be, for you to come back. I read about what happened. Your wife, dog. The car accident.

He tightens up. History.

HENRY

Not your concern.

CJ

No, guess not. But. Can I ask why you're doing this? Is it because LeRoux might beat your record --

HENRY

Don't care about records.

CJ

Then why?

He hides his eyes. Benji steps to his side, protective.

CJ

The Board's going to ask about his papers. Do you have his papers? I mean I can tell that 'flood' really wiped you out.

HENRY

Thanks for stopping by.

He turns his back on her. Sour.

CJ

Well. I hope the Board's wrong.

She climbs into her car. Eyes fall to print-outs on the seat -- *Tragedy befalls Champion, Wife and Champion Dog Killed in Accident. Barnes Gone, Forgotten.*

She eyes the downed *FOR SALE* sign. The neglected house. The neglected man. Feels for him. Drives on.

Motivation drained, Henry throws in the towel. Trudges in. Benji woofs. A slammed door in response.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Henry in darkness but for the TV. An old HOME VIDEO --

Jessie painting the side of the house. Jacko helps out, a brush in his mouth. She laughs, smooches the camera.

JESSIE (ON TV)

Three years in the making, I think she's finally done.

HENRY (O.S.)

Home at last.

JESSIE (ON TV)

I could live in a yurt with you, Mr. Barnes and I'd be happy as a clam. We aren't any place, any object, any thing. We, are right there.

Points beneath the camera, his chest. Then hers. A smile.

Henry stares into the screen.

Outside the window, a pair of big brown eyes absorb. HOLD.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Henry snoring. TV still on, static.

The window pries open. Benji's snout at work.

He tiptoes inside. Pushes the ottoman over. Hops on top, bites at Henry's pants, drags one foot up, then the other.

Drags a blanket over him with his teeth. Tucks him in.

Then a couch pillow behind his head. The man snores. Loud.
Rises on his back legs, pops off the TV with his nose.
Nudges the window closed behind him.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAWN

Orange sun. Henry stirs. Sees his sleeping arrangements.
How on earth...? Hm.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAWN

Henry exits. Benji just stirring with a yawn.

HENRY
Morning, dog cat burglar.

He pours kibble into a bowl. Benji woofs.

EXT. RURAL OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Benji in the front seat. Passing by the pasture of cows.

HEIFER
Mooooooooooooo!

BENJI
Wooooooooooooof!

Henry eyes him. Weird.

INT. FAIRGROUNDS - OFFICIALS' TRAILER - DAY

CJ tiptoes in, checks her back. A snarling Bichon awaits --

CJ
You creep me out, dead Poopsy.

A stuffed Bichon on Pompidou's desk beside framed romantic photos of man and dog.

She rifles through *INCOMPLETE REGISTRATION* files. Finds Henry's. Checks the empty box next to *BREED PAPERWORK*.

Files it in the *COMPLETE* pile. Dead Poopsy staring at her.

CJ
So I'm not good with rules.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - REGISTRATION TABLE - DAY

Henry and Benji entering, nervously passing by Persnickety. She checks her list, sees the checked box, waves.

Befuddled, Henry waves back. They veer inside --

HENRY
I'll check in, don't get into any
trouble.

Benji woofs. Sees Lucy beyond. Hunched against a tree, crying -- in a gargantuan cone-collar. He hurries to her --

BENJI
Lucy? Are you alright??

LUCY
Leave me alone. Go away!

She walks on. Weeps. Until...

Benji trots past on his two hind legs. Howling, hamming it up. She turns the other way, unamused.

He tries again, handstanding on his two front legs. Nope.

Next, riding a tricycle. (A grumpy toddler chases after.) Lucy cracks, giggles.

BENJI
That's more like it. Tails are
for wagging after all.

LUCY
I didn't qualify for the final
round this time. The judges said
I was dog years away from being
perfect. Oh, I really really
want to gnaw my left paw right
now. Why my Master makes me wear
this silly thing.

BENJI
I'm sorry, Lucy. But what's so
great about being perfect anyway?

LUCY
Only everything. It means you
don't have any flaws, nothing's
wrong with you.

BENJI

How can anybody really be perfect?

LUCY

By winning. At least that's what my master says. Isn't that why you're here?

BENJI

I'm here because I have to get to New York. I just have to.

(then)

Lucy, you're best in my show. And I believe that you won't gnaw on your paw.

He bites at her collar, removing it. Her eyes worried.

LUCY

You're very kind, Benjamin. I must say, you're different than the rest of us.

BENJI

I don't want to be different...

LUCY

I didn't mean it in a bad way. You're just not as serious.

BENJI

I've had a lot of serious in my life. I prefer...carefreeza-licious.

LUCY

(aside)

I don't think that's a word.

BENJI

(equally aside)

I disapudding.

LUCY

(giggles; sees owner)

I better go. Thank you, Benjamin. You're very sweet.

BENJI

Goodbyfarnoogole!

She scampers off, lighter. He, too. Our score, three:

BEGIN SERIES:

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - FIELD - SERIES - DAY

...**THE LEADERBOARD:** Benji in 16th place with 145 points.
Lion in 1st with 234.

...**BENJI RUNNING** -- tracking, digging up a hidden flyball from a hole. Benji dodges one dog, then another to drop the ball in a stack. The BUZZER ends it -- he finishes with a worthy stack. The Judges impressed.

...**REVEAL LION**, having finished with an equal stack. Beside another stack, and another stack. LeRoux gloats.

...**REVEAL CHENG** chewing and swallowing a ball. Oops.

...**BENJI** at the end of a diving board, a sparkling pool beneath. Henry tosses the ball -- Benji runs, leaps -- soaring -- catches it at the surface!

Judges' numbers up: 8, 9, 9, 7, 8.

...**TEAM LEROUX** takes the stage. The whistle blows. LeRoux tosses the flyball limply -- and then a second ball --

Lion leaps, bites the first into smithereens -- then the second -- clearing Benji's distance by ten feet.

Judges laud: 10, 10, 10, 10, 10.

LEROUX

You are too kind. We are humbled
by your love of wonderfulnezz.

...**CHENG AT THE BOARD** -- quaking in fear. From below:

BENJI

Are you...nervous, Cheng?

CHENG

Nervous?! Ha! I am Zen master
of serenity and peace.

Benji eyes the yellow puddle beneath him. Ahem.

CHENG

Oh. More peace than I thought.

BENJI

I had to close my eyes and
pretend the water was something I
wanted to dive into. But that's
just me. Good luck!

Hm, Cheng thinks on that, closes his eyes. Then opens, runs --

CHENG

Hot dog!

Dives happily into...A POOL OF HOT DOGS! He surfaces above water, reality restored.

CHENG

Needs ketchup.

Bows, thankful to Benji. Benji bows back.

...**BENJI** herding ducks into a pen. Finishes, 2:16.

...**LION** finishes, 1:38.

...**BEHIND THE PEN**, duck feathers scatter. Lucy pops up, a feather in her mouth, oops.

...**LEADERBOARD CHANGE**: Lion in 1st, 325 points. Benji in 7th...6th...5th, 310 points. LeRoux's eyes narrow, concern.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - HOLDING AREA - DAY

An exhausted Henry giving an exhausted Benji water.

HENRY

Obstacle course final is next.
Top three score points, but we
have to be first to have a prayer
in the Freestyle tomorrow. We
don't make up ground, we're done.

Both feeling the weight of it.

INT. FAIRGROUNDS - LEROUX'S TENT - SAME

Lavish furniture, French military paraphernalia, painting of Napoleon. Lion and LeRoux on treadmills. Two identical-twin Winklevoss EXECUTIVES parade before PowerPoints --

EXECUTIVE #1

...MediaCom International
Syndicated Incorporated and its
74 subsidiaries are prepared to
offer you a contract for your own
national talk show, e-books,
toys, food, and line of clothes --
take a looksee -- 'Lion's Well
Heeled Dog', a designer line for
you and your pet.

THREE MODELS enter with DOGS in matching clothes and shoes.

LEROUX

Love it. Let's lawyer up.

EXECUTIVE #2

Of course, all of this is
contingent upon you winning
here...and at the Championship
next week.

LEROUX

(quivering lip)

Contingent? Contingent?

EXECUTIVE #1

Are you worried at all about
Henry Barnes?

LeRoux cackles. And cackles. And cackles. Stops. Removes
one of the military swords from the wall.

LEROUX

I have heard zhat when one twin
experiences excruciating, blood-
curdling pain, zee other feels
it, too? I wonder if theez is
true?

(then)

There is nozing that will stop me
from winning. Do we understand
each other?

He places the sword on #1's shoulder. But #2 states:

EXECUTIVE #2

I feel that. Totally. Crystal.

LEROUX

Now get out -- I must find my Zen
center.

His eyes locked on Henry beyond. Venom. Slices at a
stuffed Lion merchandise doll. Looks to the real Lion --

LEROUX

In case you need reminding, zhere
are plenty more little Lionz
where you came from. In fact, la
laboratoire just sent me zee
latest litter. Mama says hi.

On an iPad, photos of scared PUPPIES in a laboratory.
LION'S MOTHER in a cage, numb eyes.

Lion winces. A hint of sadness.

LEROUX
Win, lose, or...die.

He blows on the Lion doll -- the head tumbles to the floor.
He and scarf waltz out.

Lion's eyes on his mother. Ache.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - BROADCAST BOOTH - DAY

Turbhill in a sequined track suit --

TURBHILL
Hear ye hear ye, here we are at
the final heat of the Obstacle
Course. Top dog dealt double
digit points -- Lion surely a
lock, Benjamin needing to place
in the top three or there'll be
no-no New York.

A devilish Doberman (LUTHER) snarls at the starting line.

LION (O.S.)
Afternoon, Luther.

Luther whimpers, trembling submission.

LUTHER
Lion, so nice to see you --
you're looking handsome as
always.

LION
We both know you can't beat me.
We do both know that, don't we?

LUTHER
I am a three-time winner--
(off Lion's snarl)
I'm a loser in every way.

LION
Quite. So, you can either be a
loser in my good graces, or a
loser without teeth. You choose.

LUTHER
Just had my pearly whites
cleaned, how can I be of service?

Lion leans in, whispers in his ear.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - FIELD - DAY

Determined, Benji walks toward the starting line. Beside, a furious GERMAN SPITZ, (Randolph) --

GERMAN SPITZ
Du wirst in Flammen umkommen!

BENJI
Um. Gesundheit?

Luther steps forth. Growls at Benji.

BENJI
Best of luck to you, too!

Lion backs up toward Benji, into his lane --

LION
Enjoy the view. It's all you're
going to see this race.

Henry presses cotton in Benji's ears. But Benji shakes them free, not this time. Ready to rumble.

The dogs line up. The starter pistol fires --

The beasts charge, Benji dropped -- races for the seesaw --

Following the Spitz ahead -- races up, down --

Lion crushing the field -- no one near him --

Benji veers for the slalom poles, passing a SCHNAUZER --

Sails over a series of jumps --

Through the tire -- races to the water, leaps --

The Spitz stops -- Benji smacks into him --

GERMAN SPITZ
Verboten.

Soaked, Benji shakes it off -- racing, faster --

Racing into the covered tunnel -- out of spectator view --

ANGLE - INSIDE TUNNEL

Benji rounds a corner -- right into Luther's awaiting fangs --

LUTHER
Be a good boy...

Luther attacks -- pins him down --

LUTHER
...and stay!

Luther backsteps, eyes on him, teeth bared. Then races on.

Benji trembling, fear. But dares to get up -- grits teeth --

Runs on -- out onto the track --

TURBHILL
Lion a fix on first -- Benjamin
bounds out, last lap -- only the
top three pooches pick up points --

Luther a turn ahead --

Benji sprints -- spraying dirt --

TURBHILL
Lion a turn away from victory,
Randolph Jr. four lengths behind
for second, but third is a
battle, Luther and Benjamin --

At the official's table, CJ explodes --

CJ
Go, Benjamin!
(off Pompidou)
And go all the rest of you, too.

TURBHILL
Lion crosses for first!
Randolph, second -- but who's it
going to be around the turn --

Luther rounds the last turn in A CLOUD OF DUST --

HENRY
Now, mutt, now --

Henry squints -- can't see --

An eternity, THE WORLD SLOWS...

Finally, Benji emerges from THE OVERCRANKED CLOUD OF DUST!

Right on Luther -- catching him --

Plowing past him -- crossing the line, wins by a nose!

TURBHILL

It's Benjamin placing third,
securing 50 painfully pined-for
points! What a turnaround for
this tail-wagger....

The crowd on their feet -- Lucy yips happily --

Lion bites into a chair leg -- seated, Pompidou crashes to
his butt --

Henry arrives at an exhausted Benji.

HENRY

Know what I like about third
place? Gives us somewhere to go.
Well done, mutt.

Shakes Benji's paw. Sees the blood. Eyes narrow.

CJ (O.S.)

That was -- that was --

Bounding up -- hugs Henry -- oops, composes herself --

CJ

-- uh, fine I guess -- I mean
impartially, of course.

HENRY

Thank you. Impartially.

Their gazes hold for a moment. She smiles, backsteps.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

Henry and Benji headed for the parking lot.

ROB (O.S.)

Mr. Barnes?

Rob, easing up. Envelope in hand. Empathetic.

ROB

Looked good out there today. You
and your ghost.

HENRY

Benjamin, attack. Go for the
groin.

Benji growls. Rob retreats. Benji woofs, just kidding.

ROB

Hate to do this -- but afraid
time has run out. My boss says
he'll call the police if need be.
I'm really sorry.

Henry stares at his boots. Quiet. Finally:

HENRY

That boss of yours... He's got a
Dalmatian named Pixie. She'd
been left for dead in a warehouse
before I rescued her. And you,
you have a Jack Russell named
Bilbo.

ROB

How'd you know that...?

HENRY

'Cause I found him. In a
dumpster, half-starved to death.
Kept him in my kennel for three
months until your Laura laid eyes
on him, decided to take him home.
After she met you, she tried to
give him back -- didn't think you
were a dog person, was afraid he
might stop you from proposing. I
told her if you weren't a dog
person, you weren't good enough
to marry.

Rob surprised. Impacted.

HENRY

I'm not asking for charity.
Just...a stay of execution. Like
Pixie got. And Bilbo.

ROB

Mr. Barnes. I don't know what to
say. I mean. My boss. If I
don't see this through... I've
got a house, too.

Quiet. Henry understands.

HENRY

What if I win that prize money
tomorrow?
(off him)
I've done it before, Bank.

ROB
That was a long time ag--

HENRY
Wasn't that long ago.

Henry sighs. Rob sighs.

ROB
I'll -- see if I can stall --
until tomorrow. But if you don't
win...they will evict you.

HENRY
Thank you, Bank.

ROB
You can call me Rob, ya know.

HENRY
Sure thing, at your wake.

Henry heads for the car. REVEAL a pair of sinister eyes
watching from afar. LeRoux, near the exit. Wheels turning.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAY

Parking. Henry lets Benji out, heads to the porch -- a
looming red sticker: FORECLOSURE. Insult to injury.

Opens up the door. Pauses.

HENRY
Whatcha waiting for, an invite?
(off him)
Not a big deal -- probably my
last night in the joint anyway.

Benji nuzzles him. Waltzes in proudly.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Benji watches as Henry ladles soup into bowls on the table.

HENRY
Go on, before it gets cold.

Oh. Benji eases onto the chair. Uncertain.

Henry slurps his soup. Okay, Benji slurps his.

Henry dabs his mouth with his napkin. Benji presses his
nose into his.

Henry pauses. Benji pauses. Henry chuckles. Benji snorts.

Pressed against the windowpane, a pair of eyes watch.
Marlo, standing atop Franco, who's standing atop Bruto.

MARLO
Will work for food??

BRUTO
Last thing you need is food --
Caves under the weight -- they tumble to the ground.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Henry tucking Benji into Jacko's bed.

HENRY
Don't get any big ideas -- this
is still strictly business. Just
need you rested for tomorrow.

Benji gives him a lick on the cheek.

HENRY
Don't get fresh with me.

He fights a smile, heads upstairs. Benji settles in.

Distant THUNDER. Lightning.

A SCRATCHING at the window. AGAIN. AGAIN.

BENJI
Guys, cut it out! There's no way
I can steal food for you --

He hops up to the counter -- nobody at the window?

WHAM -- lightning -- fangs at the glass!

Benji tumbles to the floor -- shakes out stars --

The window suddenly open!

BENJI
Hello?? Who's there...?

THUNDER. A SCAMPERING. Benji searching --

LIGHTNING -- Lion revealed -- Benji yelps --

BENJI
You?? How did you get here?

LION
Everyone in town knows where the
dog murderer lives...

BENJI
He's not a murderer!

LION
If you say so. Benjamin, I think
we got off on the wrong paw. I'd
like to put an end to our
rivalry.

Benji backstepping, wary. Lion ever so friendly:

LION
Look, I'm an Alpha -- it's in my
nature to dominate. And you,
you're clearly talented, but I'm
not sure that's what you're
trying to prove? It seems
more...personal? Like there's
something that you need...in New
York? Am I right?

Benji turns away, hiding his eyes. Lion, aware.

LION
What is it? Perhaps it's about
someone close to you? A female?
Family member?

BENJI
None of your business!

LION
Hm, getting warmer? Your father?
Mummy dearest?

BENJI
Leave my family out of this!

LION
(keen; soft)
I see. You know. I was taken
from my mother when I was two
weeks old to begin training...

LION
(sigh)
The honest truth is... I can't
even remember her scent anymore.

His head lowers. Tortured. Benji uncertain.

LION
 I'm sorry, it's not your concern.
 I suppose I really came here
 because I sensed we had something
 in common. I've never had anyone
 to talk to about this. I'm
 lonely, Benjamin.

He exhales a whimper. Benji uncertain, guilty.

BENJI
 I...was separated from my mother,
 too. She's somewhere called
 Sunnyvale Farms, in New York.

Lion's eyes narrow. Bingo.

LION
 Ah, and so that's why you want to
 win?
 (then)
 Sunnyvale you say...? Oh dear.

BENJI
 What?

LION
 No, nevermind...

BENJI
 What -- tell me?

LION
 I hate to be the one to break it
 to you. Sunnyvale is where dogs
 are taken to be exterminated.
 It's not a farm -- it's an
 incinerator where our kind are
 turned to ashes --

BENJI
No! That's not true -- they
 wouldn't do that --

LION
 Humans' dirty little secret is
 that they kill dogs every single
 day -- because they think there
 are too many of us.

BEN
 We're their best friends --

LION
 We're. Their. Slaves.

BENJI
You're lying!

Benji, meek. Rattled emotion.

LION
My mother is no exception.
Sunnyvale is where she will be
taken when she's no longer of use
to them. And do you know how I
feel about that?
(sinister turn)
I couldn't care less, you idiot.
Why would I miss something I
don't even remember. You are
weak, and all your effort? A
fool's errand with a fool for a
trainer.

Benji silent. Sniffling tears.

LION
So, I suppose we can call this
all off without things getting
ugly?
(no answer)
Good then. I guess I won't be
seeing you around. Hold onto the
sweet memories of your mother.
They're all that's left of her.

Satisfied, Lion heads on.

BENJI
Memories don't go away just
because you pretend they're not
there.

Lion's back to Benji. His eyes wince. Truth.

BENJI
And for your information, Henry
Barnes isn't a fool. Where he
goes, I go. So you will be
seeing me around.

LION
Why does everyone do it the hard
way....

Lion spins -- rabid -- pounces -- Benji scrambles -- the
trash can topples --

Benji blasts up a chair, onto the table -- GLASSES CRASH --

Leaps to the counter -- Lion on his heels -- JARS BREAK --
 Benji scrambles up flour boxes -- leaps for a shelf --
 The light blasts on -- Henry --
 Unseen, Lion dashes out the window --

HENRY
 What in...?!

Henry eyes the destruction -- the photograph of *Jessie*
blowing dandelions covered in trash --

HENRY
How dare you!

Grabs Benji off the shelf, marches him straight --

OUTSIDE

Pissing rain. Ties him to a rope on a stake -- Benji
 struggling, whining -- fear in his eyes --

HENRY
 Can take the stray out of the
 streets, but can't take the
 streets out of the stray.

Stomps back. Benji panicked, looking every which way --

LION
 Now, where were we?

He spins -- right into...Lion. THUNDER, LIGHTNING!

Benji runs -- out of rope -- choked -- pulling --

BENJI
 Please -- no --

LION
 Time to end this conversation.

Lion leaps -- Benji puuuuullllls -- the rope writhes free --

Benji bolts -- Lion tumbles into mud --

Shakes out stars -- searches through pitch black rain --

LION
 You're merely prolonging this!

REVEAL: Benji above, on the ladder -- trembling --

IT CREAKS -- Lion spins -- fangs --

Benji leaps for the roof -- clings to the gutter -- hanging --

Lion's teeth chomps at his tail -- Benji scrambles up --

Lion barrels up -- chases along the roof -- death defying --

Benji slips -- wet shingles -- slides, hangs for dear life --

Lion pounces onto him -- they tumble down the roof --

Crashing into leaves -- tangled fur --

Benji scampers up, runs --

Lion gets to his feet, searches -- THE SHED DOOR CREAKING -- barrels after, dives inside --

Benji appears from behind the door, slams it closed with his hind legs -- budes the shovel -- latching it --

He runs -- to the living room window -- inside, Henry asleep -- barks -- again, again --

Lion claws at the shed door -- hinges giving way --

Benji flees -- races for the field --

ANGLE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Henry asleep on the couch. A BOLT OF LIGHTNING, THUNDER --

He stirs awake. Considers. Thinks better of himself.
Rises for the door...

ANGLE - OUTSIDE

Lion pounds at the shed -- the shovel gives way --

Seeing Henry opening the door -- he races off --

HENRY
Mutt? ... Mutt??

He sees the stake, missing rope? Drops of blood. Worry.

EXT. FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Benji running -- rain, mud, thorns --

Stops -- heaving -- shivering -- trembling -- tears --

BENJI
Mom... I'm so sorry...

THUNDER BOOMS! He scampers -- terror --

EXT. FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Henry races through trees, flashlight tracking paw prints --

HENRY
Mutt! ... Mutt!

THUNDER drowning him out -- LIGHTNING --

SERIES --

...SEARCHING through gnarled trees --

...WADING through swamp slop --

...FIGHTING torrential downpour --

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Henry exhausted. Sinks to a stump. Forlorn.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

The roadside heifer snoring. THUNDER wakes her. Focuses --

HEIFER
Oh moo goodness!

Benji trembling in weeds. Scraped up, shivering. Weak --

BENJI
Moo...

HEIFER
Woof!

She belts a MOO into the sky --

EXT. FIELD - SAME

Henry on the stump. A distant MOO.

Then, a CLOSER MOO.

A cow runs right up to him, belts a giant effing MOO!

HENRY
 Alright, I heard you!

The cow nudges him...toward a cow MOOING on the horizon.

HENRY
 I'm going, I'm going -- what the
 heck's in the hay around here...?

Addled, he heads on.

EXT. FIELD - A FEW LATER

Henry arrives...at the second cow -- who MOOS toward a third
 cow...to a fourth...to a fifth.

HENRY
 Holy ... cow.

Finally arriving at our heifer. An angry moo and she
 reveals...Benji nestled between two calves.

A weak woof. Scoops him up, runs. Turns back --

HENRY
 I... Thank you.

They all moo back urgently.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A soaked Henry barrels in, races Benji upstairs --

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Henry sets Benji down -- listens to his chest -- WHEEZING --

HENRY
 Pneumonia... Hang on, mutt.

The pup's eyes barely crack open. Last legs.

WHIRLWIND OF SHOTS --

Henry cranks the shower on -- steam billowing --

Fires up the stove -- pot on the burner -- pours turpentine
 oil, pepper, a tea bag, lime juice --

Rifles through a closet -- finds a plastic tarp --

Rubs the homemade ointment over Benji's chest, wraps him like a mummy in towels --

Spoon-feeds him licorice extract --

Pours eucalyptus oil in a ceramic garlic jar -- sets it over a candle -- billowing steam --

Holds Benji in his lap, fashions the tarp over him like a tent. Strokes his fur. Benji's eyes crack open.

HENRY

Stay. You stay, mutt. You stay right with me. Don't you dare go anywhere, you hear?

(then)

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Burying himself in Benji's fur. Wet eyes.

Benji's eyes close. DARKNESS. Opening to reveal...

A SURREALISTIC VISION --

The Sunnyvale truck -- Benji and his mother in cages --

BENJI

Mom. Is it true?

MOTHER

Shhh. I fear your journey is a long one.

BENJI

It's my fault -- I couldn't get to you --

MOTHER

Remember, little one. I will always be with you. Even when I'm not. March to your own beat. Now sleep. Sleep...

BLACKNESS.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - LATER

Henry opens the door. CJ.

CJ

Got your message. How is he?

HENRY

Can't tell yet.

CJ
What happened exactly?

HENRY
Exactly, not sure. I nearly got
him killed.
(then)
Sorry for calling you. I --
didn't know who else to.

CJ
I'm offended. And flattered.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - LATER

CJ kneels to Benji, nestled in the bed of blankets.

HENRY
Lungs are filled with fluid, risk
of hypothermia, heart failure.

CJ
No. He's gonna be just fine.
He's got you.

Henry trudges into the hall. Ashamed.

HENRY
You asked why I was doing this.
Wasn't for him.
(then)
I'm about to lose my house.

CJ
I know...

Comforting. He sinks down the wall, lands on his rear end.

HENRY
I'm a mess, CJ.

CJ
Yeah, you are. You're ornery,
you grumble, you're terrible at
apologies, need dance lessons...

HENRY
And now regretting that call.

CJ
Here's the thing. I eat french
fries for breakfast. With
Tabasco sauce. And mustard.

HENRY

Okay...?

CJ

I have to drive back to my house at least once a day to make sure I didn't leave my coffee maker plugged in. Even when I didn't make coffee. I wear footsie pajamas. I don't use public bathrooms, ever.

HENRY

Yeah, you win.

CJ

I'm a mess, too. Shylara says friends should be on the same level.

(off him)

Life Advisor.

HENRY

Friends.

She slides down on her rear end, beside him.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAWN

Sun peeks over the horizon.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAWN

CJ asleep, leaning against Henry's shoulder. His eyes wide open, tense. Staring at a photograph on the wall. Jessie.

She stirs, waking. Awkward.

HENRY

Morning --

CJ

Breath --

Covers her mouth. Distant, he rises, leaves her.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAWN

Henry listening to Benji's chest.

HENRY

I think he's out of the woods.

CJ
Thanks to you.

HENRY
But won't be competing today.

CJ
I'm sorry, Henry.

Her hand on his shoulder. He tenses, heads past.

HENRY
Should get him some food, new
towels.

CJ
How can I help?

HENRY
Can handle it on my own. Thanks.

CJ
Oh. Okay.

HENRY
Look, CJ. I made a mistake. I
shouldn't've called you.

She masks the hurt, nervously gathers her things --

CJ
Hey, no, yeah -- have to run
anyway -- busy morning -- gotta
go put on my face, fresh undies,
pluck eyebrows -- gonna stop
talking now -- okay, yeah -- bye.

HENRY
CJ, look --

CJ
No -- it's fine -- I get it.
(heads on; pauses)
I know it might not seem like it
right now -- but you're gonna be
okay. Both of you. Eventually.

She closes the door behind her. He sighs. Regret.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAWN

CJ heads for her car. Pauses, upturned brow --

The entire herd of cows peeking over the fence, expectant.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAWN

Henry tucks Benji into his bed, pillows and blankets. Pours a teaspoon of passionflower oil. Benji woofs.

HENRY
Shhh. This'll make you sleepy --
but you need your rest. Be back
after while.

Benji places his paw on Henry's hand. Eyes on eyes. Kerplunks asleep. Henry smiles.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAWN

Henry in his truck, conversing out the window --

HENRY
Fever broke, needs to take it
easy, but he's on the mend.

The herd of cows listening intently. He puts it in gear --

HENRY
The heck am I doing? Shoo, go
on, moo.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - HANDLERS' AREA - DAWN

Worn hands stuff a duffel. Henry packing up their supplies. Leaves Benji's competition number on the bench.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - COMPETITION FIELD - DAWN

Orange mist over crisp lawn as workers ready the prize podium. Henry staring out. ECHOES OF COMPETITION in his ears. ANNOUNCER, APPLAUSE, VICTORY.

In the stands far beyond, CJ sees him. Feels for him as he trudges on...

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Bruto leaning over us, barking angrily --

BRUTO
Get up you lazy sack of kibbles
and bits! Are you a man or you a
mouse?

Benji wakes, groggy. Bruto sitting atop his chest.

BENJI
Um, neither? Why are you
yelling?

BRUTO
Because you're lying around like
some kind of lap dog. Rise and
shine!

MARLO
Hey guys, anybody know what V-I-C-
K-S spells?

In the bathroom, Marlo opening Vicks VapoRub, about to eat --

BENJI
Uh, don't eat that, Marlo.

MARLO
But it smells minty delicious!

He digs in. Eyes go big. Really big.

MARLO
Love it!

Eats more.

Franco pops on the TV: A NATURE SHOW FEATURING WOODCHUCKS --

TV NARRATOR
*...on the bottom of the food
chain, rodents are a delectable
food source for hawks, ferrets,
owls, snakes, bobcats, weasels...*

AND ON AND ON. A hawk sweeps down for a furry guy --

Franco screams, slams it off, trembles under the bed.

BRUTO
(to Benji)
On your feet, lazy bones, you've
got to win your way to New York,
remember?

BENJI
No, I don't. I was wrong. My
mother's... Gone. For good.

He pauses. Downcast. Quaking from under the bed --

FRANCO (O.S.)
The animal kingdom is a cold,
heartless place.

MARLO
Don't be thad, Benthamin -- you
thill got usth. Uh, I than't
theel my twongue. But boy, my
sinuthes feel fanthastic!

BRUTO
Think about your master! He
saved your life.

BENJI
I've let him down, too. The
final event is this morning.

BRUTO
Then hop to, find your fight!

Dukes up, ready to rumble.

BENJI
I don't think I have any fight
left...

Benji looks away, shame. Sees below. A water bowl. Hm,
edges around it: *BENJAMIN* written in marker across it.

FRANCO
A chink in the otherwise
heartless human's armor...

MARLO
He thayed up all night for thyou.
He loves thyou, Benjamin.

BRUTO
You have become that man's best
friend...

Benji thinks on that. Welling.

BENJI
Just like my mother said. You're
right. I have a master! You're
all right!

He hops to his feet. Howls. They howl with him -- ear-
piercing heinous rodent screeches.

BENJI
Yeah, we'll need to work on that,
dog pack.

MARLO
Thog pack? He called us thogs!

BENJI
You are dogs. The most loyal
canines I've ever met.

Gives them all big, sloppy licks. Bruto giggles, ticklish.

BRUTO
That was all wrong.
(then)
Do it again.

Benji bolts for the door.

BENJI
Thank you! Thank you all!

Bruto watches him go. Suddenly wide-eyed and gooey.

BRUTO
I love that little guy.

MARLO
I love dessert!

Squeezes a tube of Preparation H into his mouth.

EXT. RURAL OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Benji running beside cows scampering along the fence --

BENJI
Thank moo very much!

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - BROADCAST BOOTH - DAY

Turbhill in tails --

TURBHILL
Hallo hallo, we've bounced back
from the break -- finishing his
final Freestyle Routine is Cheng --
who had a bit of a mishap with
the pyrotechnics...

Firemen douse flaming hoops on the field. Cheng exits --

CHENG
That did not go as planned.

Reveal his body: his hair scorched off.

TURBHILL

Next up, the championne, Lion.
LeRoux has stated he'll settle
for nothing less than a perfect
ten. My, I guess we have
something in common.

Lion and LeRoux hit the field.

At the entrance, Henry exits with his belongings. Hears the
ROARING CROWD. Grum-grumbles on.

LeRoux readies himself, figure skater style. An ERUPTION OF
DRUMS from the speakers --

The pair 'Michael Flatley' to an AGGRESSIVE FRENCH
PERCUSSIVE TRACK -- synchronous springboarding perfection --

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - SAME

Benji rounds a corner, sprints for a work truck at a light --
Leaps for the flat bed -- claws his way up, hitching a ride --

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - COMPETITION FIELD - SAME

The pair flips off balance beams -- DRUMS POUND --

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - PARKING LOT - SAME

The crowd OOHS. Packing his truck, Henry blows a raspberry.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS ROAD - SAME

Benji leaps off the moving truck -- tumbles into brush --

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - COMPETITION FIELD - SAME

Lion and LeRoux flip off springboards -- big finish.

LEROUX

Viva la France!

The crowd wild, the Suits ecstatic. Judges: 9, 10, 9, 9, 9.

LEROUX

Merci, merci beaucoup.

(gritted teeth)

I spit on your nines. Merci!

TURBHILL

The Frenchman has filleted the field, Lion firmly in first! Henry Barnes will have to score perfect tens in order to claim victory by a single point.

REFEREE (OVER P.A.)

Henry Barnes. ... Henry Barnes.

TURBHILL

Has Barnes fled in fear? Has the Cinderella story ceased with a shattered slipper??

In the officials' area, CJ despondent.

On the sidelines, Lucy, Raoul and Cheng concerned. Lion arrives --

LION

Goodness, wherever could he be?

LUCY

I hope everything's alright.

LION

Oh, me too.

ANGLE - PARKING LOT

Henry driving out -- slams on the brakes. Stunned.

Middle of the road, a breathless Benji. Howls.

REFEREE (O.S.)

Final call. Henry Barnes.

ANGLE - FIELD

The Ref at the Judges' table, about to call it --

But Benji bolts onto on the field.

LEROUX

Sacré bleu!

LION

Impossible!

(off them)

To believe he nearly missed it.

TURBHILL

The canine has arrived! But where oh where is Oh Henry?

Benji closes his eyes. Digs deep. Opens them. Trots backward. Forward. Spins.

TURBHILL

Goodness goats, it seems Benjamin has begun a routine without his handler or music?? What a daring doggie display!

Benji shakes his little bottom, two-stepping. Dancing.

ANGLE - BENJI

WE PUSH INTO HIS EYES -- HEARING WHAT HE'S HEARING -- THE BEE GEES' YOU SHOULD BE DANCING.

SCENE

The crowd hearing nothing as he sashays about.

The Ref about to pull the plug -- but paused by... CLAPPING. Rob. In the audience, enthusiastic.

Then, CJ. Then Lucy, barking to the beat. Raoul. Cheng.

The audience catches on, hands together.

As does...Henry Barnes. Edge of the field.

Walks out to Benji. Stiff.

HENRY

You're breaking every rule in the book.

(then)

So why stop now. If you're gonna do it -- then do it!

His foot starts tapping. Hips start grooving.

REVEAL: BARRY GIBB LOUD IN HIS EARS AS WELL.

Butt shaking, letting loose. Follows Benji's lead -- to the left, right...

The crowd watches the silent routine. Enraptured.

CJ realizes -- a light bulb. She runs --

Henry's hips on fire.

CJ hands her iPhone to the sound TECH, whispers to him.

TECH

For real?

CJ
Right on, baby!

Benji and Henry spinning in silence. Until --

BARRY GIBB'S FALSETTO SCREAMS FROM SPEAKERS!

Henry sees CJ. He and dog let it all fly --

The crowd dancing -- Turbhill dirty dancing -- Raoul shaking his booty on the sideline --

RAOUL
I dare say he's rubbing off on me. Work it, darling!

CHENG
Sensei say move that milkshake!

Dog and Master in seamless unison. They weave, they roll, they rock it!

Benji races up Henry's leg...over his shoulder...back-flips. Gibb out.

The crowd springs up. Lucy cheers. CJ claps her heart out.

Henry kneels to Benji. Glass-eyed. Forever in a look.

HENRY
Without question, you are the strangest dog I have ever had the displeasure of meeting.

A wink and a smile. Benji woofs. Nuzzles him.

A Judge's card flips: 10. The crowd goes wild.

LEROUX
Merde.

An eternity. The other cards fall: 7, 9, 9, 8.

Collective devastation. Henry exhales. Stoic.

HENRY
Head high, mutt. Head high.

TURBHILL
Afraid it's a mite short for Barnes and Benjamin, who place third overall, qualifying for the Championship, but go home empty-handed -- it's Leroux and Lion winning the big bones, \$10,000!

LEROUX

Love me, America, love me!

Beyond, CJ arrives at Henry:

CJ

I felt the funk! New York, here we come!

HENRY

No. This was our shot. I just can't beat him, and it's ten times harder at Nationals.

CJ

You can! You're just getting warmed up --

Henry's eyes beyond: Rob. Apologetic gaze.

HENRY

Doesn't matter anymore. I lost what I was trying to save.

CJ

Henry. I get it, I do. But don't you see?

(re: Benji)

You saved...him. You can't give up now -- that dog deserves his day. So do you.

Henry's eyes at his feet. Decision made.

HENRY

Thank you for everything. Goodbye, CJ.

He heads on. Benji follows. She shouts after:

CJ

Hey! Friends don't let friends sleep next to them and drool on their shoulder and see their crusty eye boogers the next morning and then just poof, give up!

People stare. Henry keeps on, trudging through reporters.

REPORTERS

--Mr. Barnes, is it true you're not going to New York? --Any comment on the loss?

LEROUX

Tais-toi! 'Twas a valiant battle
for a man of oh zo many years.

Henry refrains. Moves past.

Lucy, Raoul and Cheng (in a sweater) arrive at Benji --

LUCY

We won't see you in New York?!

BENJI

Guess not.

LUCY

But you qualified -- like we all
have before -- you're part of the
club now.

Beyond, Lion being lavished with attention, press.

BENJI

Not really. I guess some of us
aren't born to be 'perfect' no
matter how hard we try.

CHENG

Benjamin. Ancient Xinjiang
proverb says 'The temptation to
quit will be greatest before you
succeed.'

RAOUL

Don't stop dancing, darling.

BENJI

Good luck to you all.

Downcast, he heads on. Trudging through a sea of legs.

Passing Lion, who chuckles --

LION

I'll make sure and send
condolences to Sunnyvale Farms.

Benji freezes. A deep, bitter growl.

HENRY

Benjamin.

Benji pulls himself away. Lion snickers.

INT./EXT. HENRY'S TRUCK/RURAL OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Henry driving in silence. Brakes. Pulls over. Steps outside. Benji dares to follow.

The cow pasture overlooking the valley. Henry's house below. The familiar heifer eases up, moos curiously.

Henry stares at his house. An ache.

HENRY

We were right here, driving past.
She said the land looked lonely.
Needed some people and dogs to
keep it company. She liked the
way it was close to town, but not
close enough for anyone to hear
her yell at me for leaving the
toilet seat up.

(then)

Every nail. Every board. We put
up together. Letting go. Can't
quite figure out how to do that.

(then)

I miss her.

Fighting emotion. Wetness in eyes.

A white flake gently lands on his shoulder...

Another billows in air...

Another. Dozens. White snow swirling.

Benji atop a fence post, delicately shaking flower stems in his teeth. Dandelions.

Henry, stunned. Eyes go glassy. Benji offers a tiny woof from the sprawling patch of dandelions.

HENRY

Don't know how you know half of
what you know, mutt...

Henry holds a white flake. Benji woofs, encourages. Let it go.

Benji woofs again. Henry stares at the flake. Releases it.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAY

Henry pulls up. But doesn't get out. Eyes on the house.

HENRY
 Lot of memories here. But you're
 right, mutt -- time to...let go.
 So, let's go!

He scrunches Benji's fur. Benji howls.

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DAY

Benji nuzzling the Prairies --

FRANCO
 The day arrives for every young
 pup when he must leave the pack
 and seek his own canine destiny.

BENJI
 You're right, Franco. And mine
 is inside that house. I can't
 let him down.

MARLO
 Go kick some tail, dawg!

REVEAL: Bruto sobbing. Wailing.

BENJI
 I'll miss you, too, Bruto.
 You're the best dogs I know.

Benji gives him a lick. He giggles. Then continues to sob.
 Henry exits. Benji nods and heads for the truck.

BRUTO
 (sings)
I will remember you!
Will you remember me?

SARAH MCLACHLAN. Franco and Marlo stare, askance. The
 truck drives off.

MARLO
 And...they're gone -- par-tay!

Franco and Marlo bolt for the house.

BRUTO
Remember the good times that we
had...
 (runs after)
 Dibs on the toilet water!

He barrels after them.

EXT. TOWN MOTEL - GUEST ROOM - DUSK

Henry knocks. Benji below, paper bag in his teeth. A sleepy CJ opens the door -- cucumber eyes, face mask --

CJ

Sign says Do Not Disturb --

Sees him -- screams bloody murder, slams the door.

CJ (O.S.)

You're not housekeeping! That wasn't me you just saw. That was my sister -- the wicked one from the east. Care for a cucumber?

Cracks open the door, offers one.

HENRY

Uh. Thank you. The thing is. I'm sorry. For being such a...

CJ

Grouch? Crank? Sourpuss. Thick--

HENRY

Yeah, all that. So, I was wondering if you could help me with directions. To New York.

She opens the door, hugs him. Goop now all over his face.

CJ

Oops. It's great for your pores.

HENRY

(abashed)

Alright. Just wanted you to know. 'Cause thought you might want to know. So, now you know.

CJ

Know what?

A smile. He just stands there. Nerves. Benji woofs.

HENRY

What?

Benji seems to sigh. Grabs the paper bag in his teeth, offers it CJ.

HENRY

Oh, right. That's for you. His
idea. Okay, yeah, uh, bye.

Awkward, skedaddles. Benji nuzzles her. She pets him.
Pauses. Notices in his ear...the star birthmark.

CJ

You really were sent from the
stars...

He woofs, runs to Henry. She peeks in the bag: french
fries, mustard, Tabasco. She gasps, overwhelmed. Smitten.

A fist-pumping, chart-topping CUE PRE-LAPS --

SERIES --

...OPEN ROAD, lights bleed past. Henry and Benji driving.
Crows on a wire CAW WITH THE CUE.

...REST STOP. Henry firing Frisbees at Benji, one after
another. Benji snorts, that all you got? A familiar
roadside Armadillo SINGS ALONG.

...A TOUR BUS christened *The Force Majeure*. Inside, Team
LeRoux. LeRoux and Lion on treadmills, fanned by BUTLERS.

...TRUCK STOP. Henry times Benji crawling under a line of
trucks, hopping through spare tires. Familiar diner mice in
a gutter SQUEAK TO THE BEAT.

...BROOKLYN BRIDGE. LeRoux's bus storms forth. Inside,
LeRoux reviews film of Henry. Leery eyes studying.

LEROUX

He eez smaller and more pathetic
in every way. And yet there eez
something about him. What eez
it?

...DRIVING INTO THE BIG APPLE. Dawn sun. Benji and Henry
peer out, anxious. WE RISE INTO the sprawling skyline.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Henry's Grumman chugs through gates, the endless drive.
Sprawling estate, manicured bushes shaped as purebreds.

HENRY

Relax, it's just money.

He parks next to an endless row of Ferraris and Bugattis.

HENRY

A lot of money...

They climb out. The side-view mirror falls off. An uppity green-coated ATTENDANT hands it back --

ATTENDANT

Mr. Barnes and Benjamin, yes?
Welcome back to Nottingham. We
have a new dress code -- entrance
requires a coat and tie.

HENRY

Don't own a tie. And he left his
at the cleaners.

The Attendant unamused.

ATTENDANT

Mm. Perhaps we can find
something in lost and found.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - PRESS TENT - DAY

Reporters, fanfare, opulence. Dogs weighing in. Henry arrives in a ridiculous 1970's coat and tie.

ANNOUNCER

...82.4 pounds. Luther Andelko
from Croatia --

A PIT TERRIER leaves the scales, seething ferocity.

Team LeRoux arrives -- bus, red carpet, French horns.

LEROUX

Bonjour! Je veux et j'exige du
jasmin et des jonquilles!

(sees)

Ah, très bon, Mr. Barnes! We had
heard you might not make it. So
thrilled you could.

REPORTERS

--LeRoux, is Henry Barnes your
biggest threat here?

LEROUX

What I love about this country is
that eeven a broken down dog
catcher can try to be part of
zomething that haz long passed
him by. Fantastique, oui? Henry

(MORE)

LEROUX (CONT'D)
 Barnes eez a fine champion. He
 eez history.

Henry humiliated. But summons strength:

HENRY
 Keep in mind. History has a way
 of repeating itself.

LEROUX
 Ooh la la, there eez still some
 fire in those old bones!

Lion arrives at Benji.

LION
 You're on my turf now. You won't
 get away this time.

He growls. Benji backsteps behind Henry.

OFFICIAL (O.S.)
 Next on the scales, our current
 champion, Lion!

Crowd ecstatic. Lion heads on with a snarl.

Henry's eyes take in upper-crusters gossiping. Enough, he
 barrels out --

HENRY
 Follow me, mutt.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - BROADCAST BOOTH - DAY

Turbhill in a lamé tuxedo --

TURBHILL
 Hallo hallo my pudgy potatoes,
 our Championship commenceth! This
 is an elimination event with
 \$25,000 up for grabs -- surrender
 a single match and you're tossed
 out like a bad lover. It's going
 to be dog eat dog -- I've got
 goosebumps in all my naughty
 bits.

Henry and Benji take the field. From the sidelines --

LUCY
 Good luck, Benjamin!

BENJI
Thankerloop!

Mutual smiles.

ANGLE - COACH'S AREA

CJ bounds to Henry --

CJ
Hey you -- just wanted to tell
you to break a leg. And an arm.
Some toes. Clavicle. Mandible.
Femur.

HENRY
I'll go for a full on body cast.

CJ
That's what I'm talking about.
Thanks again for breakfast the
other day. Very sweet.

She kisses his cheek, bounces off. He loses his faculties.

HENRY
Uh -- you're welcome.

CJ
Imagine what a SuperSize would've
gotten you...

He stares after, dazed. The Ref WHISTLES --

SERIES --

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Beethoven's *ODE TO JOY*. Lion catches 6, 7, 8 Frisbees
tossed by LeRoux. LION *ADVANCES* reads the scoreboard.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Benji catching 5, 6, 7 Frisbees with Henry. *ADVANCING*.

INTERCUT - HENRY'S HOUSE - SAME

FOUR DOZEN PRAIRIE DOGS dance to hip-hop, eating everything
in sight, partying *Gremlins*-style. Franco, Bruto and Marlo
watch the televised broadcast, high-fiving.

MARLO
Boom goes the dynamite!

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Benji tracks and digs flyballs against a PRESA CANARIO and a SCHNAUZER. Score tied 9 - 9 - 9.

HENRY
Benjamin --

Henry closes his eyes.

In turn, Benji closes his own, follows his nose blindly... finds a last flyball as the BUZZER CHIMES. Wins.

BENJI
(to competitors)
It was a very close match. Could have gone either way.

THE SCOREBOARD BRACKET: 8 dogs remain. Quarter-finals.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Lion shoves an opponent, digs a flyball. Score: 0 - 0 - 24.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Benji on a pedestal performing Henry's commands perfectly.

Judges' cards flip over: 9, 9, 10, 8, 9.

A PUG on a pedestal. Missteps, tumbles onto his back -- stuck. Benji nudges him. He gets up, huffs on.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Lion on a pedestal, attuned to LeRoux's every command. Judges: 9, 8, 10, 9, 9. *ADVANCING.*

THE BRACKET: 4 dogs remaining. Benji and Raoul share congratulatory looks.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Lion and LeRoux perform their Freestyle routine.

JUDGES: 9, 8, 8, 9, 9.

LEROUX
Coup de grâce!

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Benji and Henry perform freestyle to *ODE TO JOY*. Graceful, flowing. Crescendoing with the choir.

JUDGES: 9, 10, 9, 9, 9.

HENRY
Waterloo!

THE BRACKET: 2 ADVANCE, Benji and Lion. LeRoux simmers.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - LEROUX'S TENT - DAY

An assistant at a monitor, playing more film for LeRoux:
Benji racing through the obstacle course at Lincoln Valley.

LEROUX
There eez a rat in this dog, I
know it. I just must find zee
cheese.

Infuriated, he slams a button -- a collar on the table
vibrates with electricity. Lion backs up in horror.

LEROUX
Oh, theez won't hurt you...unless
you let him continue to make a
fool of uz!

Slips it around Lion's trembling neck. Pauses, the monitor --

LEROUX
Play that back maintenance! What
eez it he says there?

After the Freestyle, Henry kneeling to Benji...

Shuttles through footage, Henry's lips back and forth.

LEROUX
Le fromage!

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Henry and Benji readying. An OFFICIAL arrives:

OFFICIAL
Mr. Barnes? The Board requests
your presence if you would.

HENRY
I wouldn't.

OFFICIAL
They really would.

Henry and Benji share a look.

INT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - HALLWAY - DAY

The Official leads Henry and Benji. CJ arrives --

CJ
Henry! I don't know what's going
on, but it's not good --

LeRoux exits the board room, dancing giddily down the hall --

LEROUX
Ah, Monsieur Barnes, parting is
such sweet sorrow -- *adieu,*
adieu, to you and you and you!

Henry swallows, unease. They enter --

NOTTINGHAM BOARD ROOM

Where our tail began. Polished mahogany, glistening silver.
Walls of champion dog paintings. Taxidermy dogs on guard.

Half-a-dozen BOARD MEMBERS behind a table. Pompidou front
and center.

POMPIDOU
Mr. Barnes, I'm going to ask you
one question. I advise you to
answer truthfully, failure to do
so will only make matters worse.

HENRY
Worse than being in here?

POMPIDOU
Is that dog at your side...a
purebred?

Henry masks a flinch. Sinking silence.

HENRY
Hasn't he proven he's worthy of
being here?

POMPIDOU
What is it you call him?

HENRY
His name's Benjamin.

POMPIDOU
No, I believe you call him
something else...

Heads turn to a monitor. The footage LeRoux was watching --
ENLARGED, SOUND AMPLIFIED: Henry kneeling to Benji --

HENRY
Head high, mutt. Head high.

POMPIDOU
Mutt?

HENRY
Just a -- just a nickname.

Pompidou spills open a folder --

POMPIDOU
A curious one. Equally curious --
you never actually filed breed
paperwork with us. A box was
mysteriously checked without it.

Henry and CJ share a look. Sinking.

POMPIDOU
Do you have his paperwork? Has
there ever been paperwork on this
animal? Or, is he merely some
street creature with inbred
parents that you picked up during
your dog catching duties?
(then)
Do you have anything at all to
say in your defense?

HENRY
Just because you're born with a
silver spoon in your mouth
doesn't mean it can't be ripped
out by someone who actually
worked for it. You ask if this
dog is 'pure'? He's as pure as
(MORE)

HENRY (CONT'D)
 any dog or man I've ever met.
 And he was born with something
 that none of you dimwits have.
 It's called heart. So yeah.
 That's what I have to say.

POMPIDOU
 And we're done here.

Stilted. CJ ashen. He and dog trudge out.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

Pompidou takes the podium. LeRoux waits, Cheshire Cat.

POMPIDOU
 Ladies and Gentlemen. It has
 come to the attention of the
 Nottingham Board that we have
 been heinously misled by one of
 our contestants.

INTERCUT - LOCKER ROOM

Henry packing up their things. Benji beside.

POMPIDOU
 A mixed breed is among us.
 Staining an otherwise pristine
 history. The contestant in
 question is none other than...

LEROUX
 Wait for eet, rub his nose in
 eet...

POMPIDOU
 Henry Barnes' Benjamin.

Lucy in shock. Devastated. The other dogs mortified.

LUCY
 What? I don't understand...?

MURMURS, BOOS ECHO. Henry, slumped. Quiet.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - SAME

The four dozen Prairies at the TV, dead shock --

MARLO
 I knew it, he's not really a dog!

INT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - HALLWAY - DAY

Benji trails Henry as they trudge for the exit.

OUTSIDE - HANDLERS' AREA

Benji steps out as Henry heads on. Benji sees -- the entire mob of dogs waiting.

VARIOUS DOGS

-- cheater -- liar -- let's
string him up --

BENJI

The thing is. I didn't care what
breed any of you were or where
you came from. But I knew it
mattered to you. So, I'm sorry,
for not being honest.
Goodbyfarnoogle.

He trudges past Cheng, Raoul and Lucy. The dogs quiet.
Conflicted shame in the air. Lion emerges from the back --

LION

Oh, save the hangdog faces. He's
the leftover scraps of an animal
that shouldn't even be called a
dog.

LUCY

If that's so, how did he beat all
of us to get here?

LION

Pipe down, Lucy --

LUCY

You're not the boss of me.
Listen up. My breed is Komondor,
and I have been raised my entire
life to be...perfect. But the
dirty little secret is that my
great great grandparents were
Mastiffs and Danes, two different
breeds. So I guess, I'm a mutt,
too. I mean, Taylor -- look at
you, you Puggle, Pug-Beagle cute
thing -- I adore you either way.
And Raoul, darling, no offense,
but you're half Greyhound, you
know.

RAOUL
I am?! I feel faint.

LUCY
Carolyn, Joseph -- same goes for you. And Lion, you're clearly part Shepherd, part Sheepdog --

CHENG
And part horse's rear...

LION
Enough! If you accept him, you accept mediocrity. If you allow a stray amongst us, you will single-handedly be responsible for the downfall of dog. Vincent, you'll no longer be special or adored. Seamus, no more pawtographs in malls. Raoul, you'll be just as simple and pathetic as everyone else. Is that what you really want? All of you? To be normal?

The dogs downcast. No. Lucy sighs, brick wall.

INT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - SAME

Turbhill broadcasting --

TURBHILL
And so the Board is disqualifying Benjamin, offering his spot to the third place runner up...

INTERCUT - HENRY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - SAME

The Prairies BOO, blow raspberries --

BRUTO
This stinks like domesticity!

BACK TO NOTTINGHAM

Pompidou at the podium --

POMPIDOU
Raoul Ragenfeld step forth.

Raoul shuffles out to his awaiting OWNER. Stops. Eyes on Benji, exiting with Henry.

RAOUL
 There's nothing wrong with being
 the best...
 (then)
 As long as it's earned. And you
 earned it, darling.

Raoul sits. Not budging.

POMPIDOU
Kindly have your canine join you!

His Owner attempts to drag him --

RAOUL'S OWNER
 Raoul, heel.

POMPIDOU
Final call!

Raoul won't move. Pompidou about to explode --

POMPIDOU
 Very well -- 4th Place, Seamus
O'Hanley come forth!

The Pug shuffles out --

PUG
 Been too many Troubles between us
 for too long. Time for a lasting
 Peace Process!

He sits.

QUICK CUTS --

POMPIDOU
 Vincent Bortellano!

GREYHOUND
 This is for all my Italiani
 brethren who been called Goombas
 and Guidos. No more, capisce?

The ITALIAN GREYHOUND sits.

POMPIDOU
 Xander Annenberg, Lito McAvoy...

A Collie. Dalmatian. Presa Canario. All sitting.

Cheng runs out --

CHENG
 I made it, I made it! The Big
 Show!
 (off others)
 What I mean is --

He sits.

Pompidou continues. But every single dog plops down. The entire dog show sitting on the field. A HUSH.

Benji welling.

Luther steps forth. Beyond, Lion growls. But the Doberman is undeterred --

LUTHER
 I humbly apologize. I am not
 worthy to take your place.

They march onto the field and sit.

INTERCUT - HENRY'S LIVING ROOM

All four dozen Prairies sit in solidarity.

BACK TO FIELD

POMPIDOU
 Next is...

No next. The entire roster crossed out on his list.

POMPIDOU
 Fine -- if no competitor is
 available, we announce this
 year's true-blood winner...

The crowds MURMURS. BOOS. Tide turning.

CJ
 Mr. Pompidou? A word?
 (aside)
 As your Press Secretary, I must
 warn you. I'm on your side here --
 but you're about to announce to
 the world that Best in Show
 really means Best in No Show.

POMPIDOU
 So be it --

CJ

Sir, I'm afraid -- for your sake --
that this won't go away. It will
stink. Like a fungus. In the
crevices of your toes, spreading
like gangrene, up your leg,
rotting, oozing yellow puss until
you have no choice but to cut off
your leg and replace it with a
wood stump. Just sayin'. Your
call.

Pompidou sweats. Crowd grumbling. Phones recording.

POMPIDOU

This year's winner... Is... To
be determined by the final race
between Lion and Benjamin.

The crowd cheers! Dogs stand! In the stands, MISHKA the
YouTube dog star says 'I Love You!'

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - FIELD - DAY

A sprawling obstacle course surrounded by a dirt track.

TURBHILL

Bubble and squeak, we're right
back where we began -- fate has
framed a final face-off between
the former favorite and the
infamous Frenchie...

ANGLE - LEROUX

Tightens Lion's collar. Lion yelps.

LEROUX

Does that hurt? Good.

Reveals the shock button in hand. Rises, sees Henry --

LEROUX

You're like a bad infection that
just refuses to go away.

HENRY

Oh we'll be long gone, soon as
that starting gun fires.

LEROUX

Cute. By zee way, guess where
I'm going after I ween? No, not
Disney World. 147 Glen Lane...

Henry turns, instantly pale.

LEROUX

Oui, my new home. A little birdie at the bank told me zee previous owner couldn't pay heez bills. It eez a tear-down -- I'm going to demoleesh the whole stinkeeng place. Bonne chance!

LeRoux leaves. Henry on full tilt.

REFEREE

The challenger, Benjamin Barnes!

The crowd goes wild. Dogs howl. Benji steps forth. Henry kneels to him, fire in his belly:

HENRY

Listen to me and listen to me good. There's a moment in every dog's life. In which he has to dig deep and focus on one thing, and one thing only.

(then)

Kicking butt. So go do that.

REFEREE

Lion LeRoux...

Applause, whistles. Lion arrives beside Benji --

LION

This stops now. I've had enough.

BENJI

You're about to get more than enough. By the way, your name fits you...

LION

Yes, the king of the jungle.

BENJI

You're named after a cat. You're nothing but a big, pussy, cat.

Lion volcanoes --

The Ref raises the gun. Finger on the trigger. Fires --

Lion burns past -- toward the first plank -- Benji in dust --

Lion leaps over the pool in a single bound --

Benji jumps -- crashes to the other side --

CJ and Henry chew nails --

CJ
I have to burp! Sorry, I burp
when I get nervous. TMI?

Lion blasts up a bridge, bounds over a balance beam --

Benji huffing in the rear -- through the canvas tunnel --

ANGLE - CANVAS TUNNEL

Twisting, turning through darkness -- losing ground --

TURBHILL
First lap, Benjamin half-a-length
lagging -- Lion a locomotive --

ANGLE - SIDELINES

Lucy, Raoul and Cheng --

LUCY
I can't watch, what's happening?

CHENG
It's like Chinese Water Torture.

ANGLE - OBSTACLE COURSE

Benji emerges -- dives through a hoop --

Onto the track -- heaving -- everything in him -- gaining --

LEROUX
Faster, crétin!

LeRoux slams the button -- Lion shocked, trips --

Benji catches up --

LION
Going to be done with you once
and for all --

Lion slams him into the fence -- splintering wood --

HENRY
Stay with it, mutt --

Benji won't give in -- racing on --

TURBHILL

Lion on his second and final lap --
Benji trailing --

Lion storms though the obstacles -- into the canvas tunnel --
Benji on his heels --

ANGLE - CANVAS TUNNEL

Benji rounds a blind corner -- into Lion's awaiting claws --
pinning Benji, teeth at his neck --

LION

You're going to lie here and stay
or so help me I will put you down --

ANGLE - HENRY AND CJ

CJ

What's taking them so long?

HENRY

About to crawl in there myself.

ANGLE - LEROUX

Impatiently slams the button --

ANGLE - CANVAS TUNNEL

Lion yelps, shocked -- tumbles to his side --

Benji bolts --

Lion coughing, wheezing --

Benji pauses -- turns back --

BENJI

Are you alright?

Coughing spastically -- convulsing --

Benji considers. The race his to lose. Eases back to Lion --
bites at the collar clasp, tosses it free. Lion breathes.

LION

Why... Why would you do that?

BENJI

I understand how much it hurts to
be taken from your mother.
There's no reason for you to hurt
even more.

Lion droops. The kindness of this little dog. Remorse.

LION
I am grateful. I mean that. But
Benjamin, I can't just let you
win. It's not in my nature.

BENJI
Good. I intend to beat you fair
and square.

LION
May the best, or worst, dog win.

Benji steps aside, making room. They share a look of
respect. A moment.

And Lion bolts --

Benji scrambles after -- on the track --

TURBHILL
And they emerge! Neck and neck,
final two turns -- Lion leading,
looks to lock it --

Benji huffing, behind -- dirt exploding -- gaining --

HENRY
C'mon --

TURBHILL
But wait, this little mutt has
some fight left --
(loses it)
Go you little blowzy bugger!

RAOUL
Hurry, mutt!

CHENG
Faster, mutt!

Neck and neck with Lion -- Lion presses him against the rail --

Fur against wood -- Benji undeterred --

Lion growls -- seething --

Henry's eyes praying --

Benji heaving -- losing ground -- the home stretch --

THE WORLD SLOWS, OVERCRANKED -- BREAKING AWAY IN HALCYON SLOW
MOTION...HIS HEARTBEAT, PAST ECHOING --

MOTHER (O.S.)
*Whatever happens, know that I
 will always be with you, even
 when I'm not...*

An inner strength -- gaining --

Neck and neck --

Passing --

Exploding past the finish line!

The crowd erupts -- Lucy, Cheng and Raoul howl --

TURBHILL
 Stone the crows, Benjamin tames
 the Lion! Uncanny, unbelievable,
 my underwear needs changing!

LEROUX
Non non non!

Slams the button -- the canvas tunnel catches on fire!

LEROUX
 Ooh la la...

INTERCUT - HENRY'S LIVING ROOM

Cheering! Marlo cranks up the tunes -- celebratory dancing!

BACK TO NOTTINGHAM

LeRoux on his knees, weeping. Doubly so as Pompidou arrives
 with Security Officers and the charred shock collar.

CJ and Henry bound into each other's arms. Oh, um, awkward.

A tired Lion passes by Benji. Nods, respect. Heads on.

As LeRoux is handcuffed by police and carted off past Henry:

HENRY
 Bon voyage.

Benji arrives before Lucy, Raoul and Cheng. Quiet eyes.

BENJI
 I'm sorry. For not being me.

LUCY
 Know what? I don't want to be
 perfect. Too stressful! I just
 want...to be a dog!

She plops down on the grass, rolls around. Cheng joins --

CHENG
Sensei say...what the hey!

RAOUL
My groomer's going to have a
conniption.
(joins)
Hmmm, it does feel rather nice on
the bottom.

BENJI
Save some for me!

Benji dives in. All four of them wiggling on their fannies.

Henry arrives, stiff. Benji hops up. A quiet moment.

HENRY
Know what I like about first
place?
(off him)
Everything!

Uncharacteristically giant smile as he lifts Benji to the sky. Hugs, licks, tail wags. Reporters and fans swarm, champagne sprays, a wreath bestowed. Henry spins Benji -- woofing happily AS WE ASCEND INTO HEAVENS...

TRANSITIONING TO:

EXT. NEW YORK COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

DESCENDING TO Henry's truck, chugging up a dirt drive.

HENRY
We're here.

Benji pops up. Not home? An unfamiliar building beyond. He woofs curiously. Follows Henry outside.

HENRY
Noticed something when you were sick. Your star, right there.
(under his ear)
Thought it was a birthmark at first. But it's a tattoo, how underground puppy mills mark dogs. Took a few phone calls to figure out what you already tried to tell me...

They round the building to reveal its painted side:
SUNNYVALE FARMS. DOG RESCUE AND ADOPTION.

Benji freezes. Shock.

HENRY
I think someone's been waiting
for you...

An ELDERLY WOMAN exits. A familiar dog at her feet.

BENJI
Mom!!

They race to each other. Nuzzles, licks, joyous elation.

MOTHER
My son!

BENJI
Thought I'd never see you again!

MOTHER
Me too, love -- oh, look at you!

BENJI
I was told this was a terrible
place --

MOTHER
Can't believe everything you
hear.

BENJI
Where are my brothers and
sisters?

MOTHER
They all found homes. Just as I
have, here with Martha. She's my
new master.

Benji yips in delight, spinning about. But freezes --

Henry with Martha, handing over a leash. Saying good-bye.

BENJI
I don't understand...?

Henry walks to him. Fighting emotion.

HENRY
Thing is. Your mother has a
family here. And I know this is
where you were trying to get to
the whole time. So. Just happy
to have met you along the way.

Benji woofs -- no. Paws at him. Henry pulls out a collar.

HENRY
Got ya something.

BENJI says the shiny tag.

HENRY
Not as stuffy. More you.
(weak)
CJ said that I saved you. She
was wrong. Other way around.
I'll miss you, mutt.

Benji buries into him. Lingerin'. Whining.

Henry finally heads on. Benji quaking. Aware, his mother joins him. Cracking voice:

BENJI
I traveled across the entire
country to find you...

MOTHER
And I love you for it. But
remember, son. I am always with
you.
(then)
The choice is yours, love.

Benji torn. Locks eyes with Henry, climbing into the truck. Ache. Putting it in gear, driving away. Benji lets him go.

INT. HENRY'S TRUCK - DAY - TRAVELING

Henry driving. Stoic.

But then cracking. A million pieces. A mess.

Oblivious to OUR SLOW PAN:

A little mutt in the background, running for his life.

Catching up. Side by side, barking. Henry startled, a disaster of tears and phlegm...that transforms into laughs.

Henry screeches to a stop, flings open the door -- Benji leeeaps into his arms. Whimpers of joy.

HENRY
I'm not crying, just so ya know.

Benji woo-woo-woofs! Henry's smile the biggest we've seen.

HENRY
Let's go home, Benji.

Benji barks in agreement. As they drive for the horizon...

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*And so it was that a little
canine brought an unexpected ray
of light...*

INT. NOTTINGHAM CLUB - BOARD ROOM - DAY

FOLLOWING WINDOW RAYS to white-gloved hands tapping a nail.
Engraved plaques: *GERMAN SHEPHERD...LABRADOR...COLLIE...*

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*...into the most unexpected of
places.*

...MUTT. Hanging a new painting...of Benji.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*Which is how sometimes it goes in
that thing called life...*

EXT. HENRY'S HOUSE - DUSK

WIDENING FROM *BONE SWEET BONE TRAINING AND BOARDING* in
bright script. A new sign beneath a freshly painted house.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*Fate often throwing a bone in the
most unpredictable of directions.*

A batch of new dog houses. *BENJI'S* beside *Jacko's*.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
*And it doesn't matter if you have
four legs, or a less fortunate
two, as long as you keep in mind
that --*

WE DRIFT INTO THE HOUSE WINDOW: the *Prairies* eating popcorn,
watching TV: *FAMILIAR HOME MOVIE OF JESSIE PAINTING:*

JESSIE (ON TV)
*-- we aren't any place, any object,
any thing. We, are right there.*

Yes, our Narrator and Jessie are one and the same.

*JESSIE (V.O.)
Because then just about anything
can happen. Even, a miracle.*

Out the window, CJ pulling up in her car. Her eyes beyond --

ANGLE - FIELD

Orange twilight. Man and dog practicing a new dance routine in COMPLETE SILENCE.

*JESSIE (V.O.)
Or, in this case, a pair of them.
Both of whom, despite all odds,
marched to their own beat.*

An auburn, QUIET MOMENT. Effortless flow.

Henry catches a glimpse of CJ. Mutual smiles. Lasting.

Benji and Henry in harmony as wind whistles through tall grass. A moment in time. **END CREDITS ROLLS AS:**

WE PUSH INTO BENJI'S EYES AND HEAR WHAT HE'S HEARING -- an of-the-moment chart-topper a la Rihanna's *WE FOUND LOVE*.

AND HENRY'S HEARING IT, TOO. Dancing in sync.

The Prairies, too -- rocking it on the fence-line.

Heck, the entire cast joins in. A doggone party.

And yes, Henry Barnes can b-boy, robot, pop and lock.

The heifer gives us a final:

*HEIFER
Woof!*

To be matched with...

*BENJI
Moo!*

FADE OUT.

THE END.