

GRUMPY OLD MEN

By

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FADE IN

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

It is an old Lutheran church, stout in construction and long in tradition. Despite the crisp blue sky and brilliant sunshine, snow blankets the courtyard. Healthy Minnesota pine trees surround the brick entrance. It has the look and feel of a small town; a small town named Wabasha.

NEW ANGLE

as we see a few people walk up to the church dressed in heavy winter clothing. These are hearty, small-town folk and most sport a good coat of fat tucked under layers of thick wool jackets. We notice an attractive young man wearing a long black coat and scarf, standing alone and staring at the church; his silhouette framed against the white snow.

JACOB GOLDMAN

The perennial "nice Jewish boy" that's now turning middle-aged. He has a melancholic air about him yet thinks of something that makes him smile. He exhales deeply and we see his breath, visible on this cold Easter day. A fair-skinned, pretty woman dressed in a sensible coat sees him from behind. MELANIE GUSTAFSON.

MELANIE

Jacob?

Jacob turns around and breaks into a big smile.

JACOB

Mel! Hey!

They hug for a moment, then awkwardly stand back to look one another over.

JACOB

You look great.

MELANIE

Thanks, so do you.

JACOB

No...I mean you really look great. People always try to be nice by saying 'you look great' when they haven't seen someone for a long time, but you really do look great.

MELANIE

I feel good.

JACOB

So how are you?

MELANIE

I'm good Jacob.

JACOB

Hey, I'm sorry about the, uh I heard about the--

MELANIE

Divorce? Yeah, thanks. I'm just glad that it's over and done with. Mike was really civil about it. It turned out best for both of us.

AUNT AIDA, an enormous old woman that resembles Aunt Bea from the old "Andy Griffith Show", walks toward them with an equally large female companion. They look like offensive linemen for the Minnesota Vikings.

AUNT AIDA

Melanie! Jakie!

MELANIE

Hi Aunt Aida!

She grabs Melanie in a bear hug and plants a big, red kiss on her cheek. Aunt Aida immediately rubs at the lipstick imprint she created with her handkerchief, then hugs Jacob and repeats the same kiss and clean.

JACOB

Hi Aida! You look great. Have you lost weight?

AUNT AIDA

(proudly)

Six pounds.

JACOB

No kidding? Well it shows. You look wonderful.

AUNT AIDA

But my back's been killing me Jakey. I think it's my lower lumbar again. Ever since I broke my hip last winter...

She bends over (as best she can) wincing as Jacob prods her lower back.

JACOB
I'll take a look at it later.

AUNT AIDA
You're such a dear.

She kisses him once again, wipes at his cheek, then turns back for the church. Her smile begins to fade and she turns to Jacob and Melanie one final time.

AUNT AIDA
Oh sweetie...I can't believe it. Your father...

Her eyes begin to brim with tears but she laughs them off, fanning her face with a large but delicate hand. She turns with her companion and walks for the church.

MELANIE
Aunt Aida...

They smile as they watch her step inside; then their smiles slowly fade to a look of gentle apprehension.

MELANIE
You ready for this?

JACOB
Not really.

MELANIE
Things will be different now.

They look knowingly to one another for an awkward BEAT. We slowly PULL BACK on the two as beautiful snowflakes begin to fall like miniature stars around them.

MELANIE
Our fathers...

JACOB
God. They were something, weren't they?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - MORNING

CU GARBAGE CANS

as an old Buick skids over a patch of ice and CRASHES into the cans. From the look of these sorry bins, it's not the first time this has happened. The engine shuts off and we see two old fishing boots step out. We TILT UP SLOWLY to reveal JOHN GUSTAFSON glaring down at us.

JOHN
Seventy-five? Crime-in-Italy,
I asked for worms not caviar!

CHUCK
Ya go through this every time,
John Gustafson. Now where do
ya think you're gonna find
worms this time of year? It's
supply and demand, fool.

John slaps the quarters down onto the table.

JOHN
Here. Go retire in Florida for
sellin' me worms, ya crook.

CHUCK
Anything else?

JOHN
Six-pack. Schmidt. Gimme a
jerky while you're at it...

Chuck reaches past the beef jerky into the refrigerator.

CHUCK
Three bucks. And you know your
old gut can't handle no jerky.

John grumbles as Chuck bags the goodies.

JOHN
What about **him**?

CHUCK
Who?

JOHN
The asshole. He around?

Chuck smiles, used to this jabbing.

CHUCK
There's a whole river out there
Gustafson. Should be enough
room for the both of ya.

John mumbles in disagreement as he grabs his things off
of the counter. Chuck lifts a heavy box and moves it
around the corner. We see him slowly straighten back up
after setting it down, his chest heaving.

JOHN
Take it easy there old man.

JOHN

Shit.

He is 70 years old, but with his rounded shoulders and exaggerated frown, he can appear even older. He is dressed in an old, grey snowmobile suit and carries a fishing pole and tackle box.

NEW ANGLE

The words "Chuck's Bait!" peel off in faded red letters. It looks cold, breezy and miserable. The words "FALL" burn on and off. A BEAT. "MINNESOTA" burns on and off.

INT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - MORNING

CHUCK, an elderly black man, stands behind the crowded shop stacking boxes of fishing lures. His shop has a kind of organized messiness to it which makes us feel comfortable from the start. He looks sleepy and hums to himself as the Vikings football game is broadcast over an AM-radio. Chuck checks his watch and smiles to himself--Gustafson's right on time. He walks into the back as John steps in and sets his gear on the counter.

JOHN

I hit the Goddamn cans again
Chuck.

CHUCK (O.S.)

Yah, I heard.

Chuck comes out from the back room carrying a load of boxes. John plops down on a stool, grimacing.

CHUCK

How's the Grinch today?

JOHN

I don't got a bucket to piss in
or a window to throw it out of.

Chuck snickers and shakes his head.

CHUCK

Willowcats or nightcrawlers?

JOHN

Nightcrawlers. I can't afford
those damn willowcats anymore.

Chuck pulls out a container of worms.

CHUCK

Seventy-five.

Chuck waves him off as he leans back against a counter.

CHUCK

Yah yah...get goin'. That
river ain't gonna be flowin'
much longer.

JOHN

They say shanties are already
goin' up near Indian Slough.

Chuck nods as John turns for the door. An old hound
dog, LUCKY, steps slowly across the floor. As it allows
John to pat its head, we see it's missing one eye.

JOHN

Hi Lucky...good boy.

John turns for the door, then stops and gestures back.

JOHN

One eye and no nuts...and you
call him "Lucky."

He grins as Chuck shakes his head.

CHUCK

Take it easy.

John replies automatically:

JOHN

I'll take it like the French
man.

CHUCK

(knowing)
How's that John?

JOHN

Any way I can get it.

Chuck smiles and shakes his head as John steps outside.

EXT. RIVER - MORNING

John kills his boat motor and glides silently into a
placid, foggy spot in the marsh. The boat slowly comes
to a calm. He gently lowers his anchor, hand over hand,
into the water until it sits on bottom. He reaches
behind him and pulls up his tackle box. Everything is
choreographed in this perfect routine; he knows where
everything is and the exact order in which he needs it.

John opens the tackle box, showing his many lures and bobbers aligned in their respective containers. We hear a loon cry in the b.g. John smiles as takes a deep breath of the lake's morning air. But then...

SCREAMS

shatter the moment of revery. John whirls around in the rocking boat, knocking his tackle box to the floor and scattering sinkers and lures everywhere. The screams in the distance are joined by whistles and the voices of announcers as we now recognize the sounds of a football game being broadcast. John peers into the marsh, but can't see who's responsible. His face is pinched and red as he tries to yell "quietly."

JOHN

Hey hey...shut the hell up.
You're scarin' the fish away.

The radio is turned up LOUDER. Whoever the culprit is, he's obviously trying to aggravate John. It's working.

JOHN

(loudly now)
Turn it down, shithead!

From out of the marsh a fishing boat is rowed. As the light fog parts above the water, we see him:

MAX GOLDMAN

Max is a curmudgeonly old Jewish man about the same age as John. His boat floats through the fog towards us with the eerie effect of an old monster movie. By the reaction of John, a monster would be more welcome.

MAX

Get away from my spot ya ol' bastard!

JOHN

Your spot? I was practically born here ya thief!

MAX

Ya got bad luck. I don't want ya infecting my spot.

JOHN

Turn down that radio!

Max turns it up louder still. He then grabs an oar in one hand and begins banging it on the side of the boat.

MAX
(singing)
Fish! Fish! Go away! Come
again some other day--when John
Gustafson the sad schmuck is
dead and gone!

John angrily pulls on the motor to his boat as it
sputters to a start, then dies. Max starts up his own
motor and revs it heartily.

MAX
Listen to that!

JOHN
Shut up!

MAX
Ya should have bought that
Bearcat from Charlie Bauer when
he offered it to ya!

JOHN
Quiet!

John grabs one of his oars and swings it at Max's boat,
hitting it on its side with a CLANG. Max's radio slides
across the boat and bangs to the floor. The channel
suddenly changes to a classical music station. Max
steers his boat out of harm's way then turns it back
around, nudging its nose into John's boat, literally
pushing him out of the fishing spot. John pulls
desperately on his boat motor.

MAX
Ya could've had Danny Shumacher
fix the gasket and you would've
been up thirty bucks!

JOHN
It had bad valves ya dink!

John's motor finally catches and he drives back against
Max's boat. The two are at a standstill, with neither
one able to gain an advantage.

MUSIC UP: "DANCE OF THE HOURS"

The two boats slowly begin to turn in a strange ballet
as their engines wail.

MAX

his face pinched and red.

JOHN

his face steely with determination.

AERIAL VIEW

as the two boats gracefully turn to the classical music.

NEW ANGLE

MAX

I was here first!

Max throws a fishing bobber at John, but John only laughs as it bounces harmlessly off of his shoulder. Furious, Max grabs an empty beer can and tosses that as well, but John ducks and the can falls into the water. John's ducking causes his boat to rock, then slide off of Max's boat, leaving Max in the center of the spot.

MUSIC OUT. The dance is over.

John angrily turns around for open water.

JOHN

Take it ya baby! There ain't
no fish here anyways!

Max, today's "king of the hill," smiles triumphantly as John steers his boat away.

CUT TO:

ANOTHER MARSH

John drives by a Sheriff's patrol boat. John waves him over and the DEPUTY driving the boat obliges.

JOHN

Hey!

DEPUTY

Howdy.

As he nears him, John can see that this is a new deputy.

JOHN

Where's Walt?

DEPUTY

Walt retired. Moved back up to
Duluth to live with his son.

John nods, thinking. A smile creeps over his thin lips.

JOHN

There's a strange man back by the dam...he's throwing all his garbage into the river.

DEPUTY

By the dam?

JOHN

Yah! Beer cans, all kinds of stuff. Ugly old Jewish guy in the marsh...can't miss him.

The Deputy nods and turns his boat around towards Max. John hoots out loud as he sails off to another marsh.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - LATE MORNING

John drives up in his old Buick. He gets out of the car holding a stringer of two fish. Max drives up in his Chevy, deliberately plowing into John's garbage cans.

MAX

Clumsy me.

Max walks into his house. John calmly sets his garbage cans back up. He then casually takes a fish off of his stringer and walks over to Max's car, opens the rear car door and tosses it into the back seat. John starts for his front porch when we hear the sound of a truck pull up from behind. He turns around.

JOHN'S POV

Across the street a moving van pulls up to an old, two-story home. The house is empty and dark and more than a little mysterious. The van sits still, almost as if it knows it's being watched. John shrugs and trots inside.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - LATE MORNING

John throws the one remaining fish into the sink. ACEY, a fat grey cat, sits expectantly on a short cabinet. John clicks on the radio as we hear the ANNOUNCER:

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

So at the end of three quarters, it's the San Francisco 49'ers 33, the Minnesota Vikings three.

JOHN

Goddamn Vikings.

He reaches down to where the cat sits. We think that he's going to pet it, but instead flings it off and opens the cabinet. He takes out a filet knife and fork.

EXT. JOHN'S YARD - LATE MORNING

John throws the fish down onto an old, green picnic table in the backyard. He begins gutting and cleaning the fish; his tired, old hands suddenly coming to life.

MAX (O.S.)

It didn't work.

John doesn't look up. We PULL BACK to reveal Max, his arms draped over the fence that separates their yards.

MAX

That new deputy. He didn't
fine me.

JOHN

Too bad.

MAX

Did you see Clickner's place?
Someone's movin' in.

Max points to the fish John's cleaning.

MAX

Pick that up at the market?

John glares at him, then goes back to his work.

MAX

Only got one huh?

JOHN

(a little smile)

No. Two.

MAX

(not catching on)

Oh...Holly Krause says Mike and
Melanie are getting a divorce.

Now *this* gets John's attention. He shoots Max an angry glance but Max is unheeding.

MAX

Just as well. Mike was never
good for her. Everyone said so.

JOHN

Them's family matters.

MAX
Always travelin', see him
drinkin' down at Slippery's
nearly every time I--

JOHN
Family matters!

Max looks like he's about to prod some more, but thinks better of it and changes the subject.

MAX
My boy's comin' down next
Wednesday night.

JOHN
Jacob's comin'?

MAX
For Thanksgiving.

JOHN
Jews do Thanksgiving?

Max shakes his head at John's ignorance.

MAX
Your cat crapped on my steps
again.

JOHN
Yah. Who says ya can't train
cats?

John puts the filet into a plastic freezer bag, then walks around the corner to a side door along his house.

IN THE CELLAR

John clicks on a light bulb. As the cellar illuminates, we see a huge, old freezer which dominates the floor. John opens it wide.

THE FREEZER

is completely stocked with thousands of frozen fish filets exactly like the one he's holding. He starts to place it in one spot, then another, but there's absolutely no more room. He sighs as we hear a "MEOW".

ACEY

looks up at us expectantly.

JOHN
Alright...

The fish is dropped at the cat's feet.

EXT. MAX'S HOUSE - SAME

The license plate on the moving van states "California." Max watches as the movers carry an impossibly large collection of things down the ramp: a trampoline, an old-fashioned love seat with a heart-shaped back, unpainted canvasses, a tanning bed which is shut tightly and looks vaguely like some burial tomb or casket.

ANGLE ON MAX

MAX
(suddenly)
Holy moly...

NEW ANGLE

John strolls over to his mailbox but stops when he sees it as well--the movers struggle with an enormous object covered with a sheet. But as the men attempt to move it down the ramp, the sheet falls and we see a six-foot, anatomically correct sculpture of a naked, bearded man. The man looks old yet powerful; his Zeus-like eyes glare down at Max and John, warning them to keep away.

The movers hastily begin pulling it into the house. Two umbrella reflectors like those used in photography studios are next. Scottish bagpipes. A surfboard.

JOHN
Jesus Christ...

True to the word, we see one mover carry a painting of Jesus on the cross under one arm, a black stone statue of Buddha under the other.

NEW ANGLE

John turns and sees Max watching the same show from his mailbox. They scowl, dump their junk mail into their adjoining garbage cans and retreat to their homes.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

John sits down into his favorite chair. As always, the television is on in the b.g. However, there's also a chessboard off to John's side and we can see that a strategic match with himself is in progress. He studies the board for a moment, then moves his pawn.

NEW ANGLE

Graduation and wedding photos of Melanie line a bookcase next to his chair. Next to snapshots of Allie sits a picture of he and what must have been his wife.

THE PICTURE

is one of the two in their 30's, laughing and clowning for the camera. The grandfather clock's TICKING is all that we hear as he finally turns his gaze back to the television; a hollow look comes back to his eyes.

CU TELEVISION

HOST

Today we'll be broadcasting
"Eye on Duluth" from this--

We PULL BACK to reveal a second television, playing noiselessly on a cable sports channel.

HOST

--an authentic Alaskan Eskimo
igloo created especially for us
by the St. Paul Jaycees!

As we PULL BACK further, we see we're now in Max's living room. Off to the side we see a gutted, **third** television. A picture tube and parts are strewn about; a project that he's been tinkering with for some time.

HOST (O.S.)

(continuing)

Igloos keep the Eskimos warm
and out of the harsh elements--

MAX

Eskimos...hmmph!

Max clicks the channel to a weather station. The METEOROLOGIST is a chunky blonde man trying his best to become Minnesota's Willard Scott.

METEOROLOGIST

Cold enough for ya?

MAX

Up yer ass, Duffing.

CUT BACK TO:

JOHN

as he slowly opens a can of Spam while the TV plays on in the b.g.

METEOROLOGIST (O.S.)
 Temperatures will plummet below
 freezing for the first time
 this fall. And the best part
 is, it isn't even winter yet!
 With travel advisories for
 Wabasha and Goodhue counties,
 you'd be better off staying
 home with a hot, home-cooked
 meal to keep you warm inside!

John dumps the Spam into a pan. It keeps its shape.

CUT BACK TO:

Max eating a horrible bowl of pea soup in the kitchen as
 the Meteorologist continues on a *kitchen* television.

METEOROLOGIST
 Or do what I do! Skip the meal
 and go straight for dessert!

MAX
 That's why yer a fat bastard.

CUT BACK TO:

John in the bathroom. He opens the medicine cabinet
 where we see a potpourri of arthritis creams, denture
 cleaners, eye drops, aspirin and laxatives. He nudges
 some cold tablets out of the way to grab a bottle of
 Pepto Bismol.

CUT BACK TO:

Max as he sits on the toilet, unbelievably, watching the
last television in the house. This one sits mounted on
 the bathroom counter, just for this "quality time."

TELEVISION

The channel flips to a gyrating, leather-clad metal-head
 who grinds his guitar to a screeching fervor. The
 channel switches immediately to a CU of a fish's face.

FISHING BEN
 Now that's a keeper!

FISHING BEN, the host of the show, holds up the tail.

MAX
 Ya didn't catch that bass,
 Fishing Ben ya liar.

CUT BACK TO:

John who finally shuts his television off.

JOHN
58 damn cable channels and
still nothing on.

He gets up from the chair and walks across the living room. He looks out the window across the street.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DUSK

We see John and Max in their windows now; two lonely, grey faces watching from the safe boredom of their homes. Snowflakes begin to sprinkle down from above.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - MORNING

A snow shovel is jammed into the snow and as we PULL BACK we see John's car tires packed in from last night's heavy snowfall. Like magic, the roofs and trees and grounds are covered with a thick blanket of white. A BEAT. Suddenly, a city street plow careens along the road and buries his car in a freshly fluffed snowbank. He pauses for a moment, then calmly begins to dig again.

MAX (O.S.)
I think he moved in last night.

He turns to see Max holding an armful of grocery bags.

MAX
I saw him go into the side door
about midnight.

JOHN
Ya nosy son of a bitch...what'd
he look like?

MAX
Little guy. Skinny. Hard to
see in the dark, ya know..

They stare at the house, waiting for some sign of life.

JOHN
(suddenly)
Holly Bauer's sister died
yesterday.

MAX
Yah?

JOHN

Al from Slippery's said she had a stroke playing bingo at the Pepin Elk's Club.

MAX

Yah. That ain't so bad.

John turns to him incredulously.

JOHN

Whataya mean 'ain't so bad'?

MAX

Heart attack. No long suffering. No waiting. Just one jolt and you're gone. Beats the hell outta cancer.

John considers this, then looks back across the street.

JOHN

Old Eddie Hicks was down at Chuck's buying new sinkers and he told me his doctor says he got bone cancer.

MAX

Ya know Bill Spicer's cousin Mike Shutt? Doctor told him three to six years and he'd be dead from bone cancer and--

JOHN

He lived 12 more years, yah.

They turn and watch the house for a BEAT.

MAX

(thoughtfully)

Yah. Bone cancer ain't so bad.

JOHN

Yah, hell, I'll be happy to go that way!

MAX

Jacob's friend from St. Paul was killed in a car accident last August. Head on collision with a freight truck on Highway 316. Cleared his car right outta the lane and over the bridge into the Mississippi.

A BEAT.

MAX & JOHN

Lucky bastard.

We hear a scurrying from above and both look up to see a grey squirrel searching for twigs to build a nest.

JOHN

So how is he anyhow?

MAX

Dead. Died on impact, lucky--

JOHN

No, Jacob ya dumbshit.

MAX

Oh...he'll be in tomorrow.
When's Melanie comin' over?

John gives a look of warning to Max, then turns and begins shoveling the snow from his tires.

MAX

(continuing)

She gonna be livin' with you
after the divorce?

JOHN

Them's family matters.

MAX

Charlie Hicks says Mike got a
job up near Fargo with a ship
building company and that he
ain't takin' Melanie and Allie-

JOHN

Family matters! Ya wouldn't
know 'cuz your kid's never been
married, got no grandkids-

MAX

At least I had a wife for 40
years! She didn't leave me.
Only death kept us apart.

JOHN

(furious, hurt)

Well that shows how bad she
wanted to get away from ya!

MAX

Bah! Amy married me because
she wanted to. Not like you
and May--

JOHN
Shut up Goldman!

MAX
If you hadn't gotten her in
trouble outta high school--

JOHN
I said shut up! Get off of my
property!

MAX
I'm goin'!

Max walks next door, up the steps and fumbles with the door. John throws his shovel down and marches back to his house. He's angry, but hurt more than anything.

NEW ANGLE

John glances over and sees Max watching him, so his hurt expression is deftly replaced by anger.

JOHN
Whataya starin' at...

Fighting is a way of life for them, but the boundaries are known and rarely crossed. His mouth opens slightly to say something, but John shuts his door behind him.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - DAY

Max closes the door behind him. He stands there for a BEAT, then sets his groceries down on the kitchen table. He begins unpacking the bags and one of the items we see him take out is a grip for his fishing pole.

MAX
Got one of them fancy cork
grips for my pole honey...the
one that May gave to me for my
18th birthday. (teasing) I
bet you're still jealous that
I've kept it all these years...

He stops short when he admits what's really on his mind.

MAX
Oh Amy...Amy...I wasn't so nice
today. I think I was very mean
to John...but you know me. I
can't stop when I get started.

He crosses the room and looks at a large framed picture of AMY, his late wife.

MAX

You forgive me though, don't
you dear? You always do.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

In John's messy bedroom we see shelves of history books and magazines, fishing poles and photographs. An old, leather bound book is still in John's hand but it must be as boring as it looks--he's snoring loudly, his reading glasses tilted to one side. It's a quiet little town made quieter still with the night. A BEAT. There is a far off rumbling. Faint, but growing steadily.

NEW ANGLE

as we see through John's window that a distant light is approaching with the sound. The rumbling is slowly beginning to turn into a ROAR, and John finally blinks in confusion. The light is now bathing his whole bedroom in an eerie, pale shadow as it barrels down on us, like a freight train splitting the night...

VVVRRRRROOOOM!

He ducks his head as it zooms by, then uncovers and lunges for the window. He turns and runs downstairs.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Max is already up at the window, exasperated as well, but with a firm grip on his trusty binoculars.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

A shiny black snowmobile screams down the street at an incredible speed. It whips around in a vacant lot then does a small jump over a snowbank before circling back to the yard of...**the new neighbor.**

The stranger turns off the machine and walks up to the porch which is lighted dimly from above. He unfastens his chin strap and begins to pull the helmet off...slowly off.

JOHN

squints through the window, too fascinated to be cussing at being woken from his slumber.

MAX

still peering through the binoculars, dying to get his first look at the new neighbor.

BACK TO THE PORCH

MUSIC UP (in what will become "Ariel's Theme"). The helmet is pulled off, and a woman turns towards us. The dim light dances off of her long, silver mane as she shakes her head free of any snow. The warm glow of the porch basks her in a sexy, ethereal shimmer. This is ARIEL TRUAX. She is a small woman, but walks and stands with a powerful and charismatic force. She is--quite simply--the sexiest senior citizen that we've ever seen.

JOHN

is still silent. His mouth agape.

JOHN

Uhhnnng...

MAX

lowers the binoculars. He blinks hard, clearing his eyes, then grunts and raises them for another look.

ARIEL

stretches like a cat in the crisp night air. She then elegantly steps back into her new house, closing the door behind her. The porch light is snuffed out.

MUSIC OUT. End of show.

NEW ANGLE

as the light goes off at Ariel's house. We see the shadows of Max and John in their windows. John's shadow slowly walks away, back to bed. Max's shadow stays for a moment, takes another look through the binoculars, then finally retreats back to bed as well.

MAX (O.S.)

Holy moly...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. STREET - MORNING

John is outside in the street digging the snow out from his tires. He stops to catch his breath and looks across the street at the new neighbor's house.

NEW ANGLE

as Max walks out of his house dressed in his old snowmobile suit and carrying his tackle box and favorite fishing pole. He stops and looks at John. John stares at him then goes back to his digging.

MAX

Did ya see her?

John ignores him as he goes about his business.

MAX

Drives pretty fast on that snowmobile. Pretty damn fast.

Unable to get a response from John, Max holds up his fishing pole, waving it in front of John's face.

MAX

New grip on this baby. Won't be any fish left for you.

JOHN

That'll be the day.

We get the feeling that Max feels better; he got John to talk to him and in Max's way, this is an apology. Max steps into his car as John takes notice.

JOHN

Plow came by ya moron. Gotta dig yer tires out, ya know.

Max starts the car up, lets it warm for a second, then puts it into reverse. John smiles smugly as the car rocks back and forth, but then it breaks through the snow and into John's space. Its rear bumper **pushes** the pile of snow back onto John's freshly shoveled front tires. Max honks twice and waves before driving off.

MAX

Have fun Gustafson!

John dutifully goes back to his digging, quietly weaving a string of obscenities through the air.

MAX

smiles in victory. His face contorts as he wrinkles up his nose. He sniffs the air, then his underarm.

MAX

What the hell is that?

He drives on through a stop sign as we catch a glimpse of the dead fish still lying in the back seat of his car courtesy of John Gustafson.

ESTABLISHING

as Max runs another stop sign, causing a car to slam on its brakes and slide off the icy road into a snowbank.

MAX (V.O.)
Watch out ya idiot!

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - LATE MORNING

Although John's got the tires dug out of the snow, the car's too cold to start and we see he's plugged the engine's heater into an extension cord that runs up into the house. Melanie drives up and climbs out of an old model Chevy carrying a baby girl, ALLIE.

MELANIE
Hi Pop.

JOHN
Hi sweetheart.

John gives a rare smile as his daughter kisses him on the cheek. He pats Melanie's arm then immediately begins doting on the baby.

JOHN
There she is! Grandpa's little girl.

Allie smiles and pulls at John's nose as he scoops her out of Melanie's arms. His rough, old hands show a surprising gentleness in their handling of the child.

JOHN
Grandpa's gotta treat in the house for you sweet pea--

MELANIE
Dad--

JOHN
Just a little c-a-n-d-y. It ain't gonna kill her.

Melanie shakes her head, telling us that they've been through this before. She looks at the car.

MELANIE
You goin' somewhere?

JOHN

Fishin' once I get this son of a bit--er, once I get the car to turn over.

MELANIE

Can we talk for a minute?

JOHN

Sure! Come with me. I've already got my ice shanty up at Indian Slough--

MELANIE

Dad--

JOHN

I haven't had the shanty up so early since 1958! Remember when I first took ya there? You loved it so much I had to drag ya off the ice to get ya--

MELANIE

Dad, can we talk inside?

John looks at her knowingly. He nods.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

John and Mel sit on a swing inside the porch as Allie crawls across the floor, a sucker clenched in one fist.

JOHN

People been askin' about ya Mel.

MELANIE

I know.

JOHN

Askin' about yer marriage. Ya know how people are.

MELANIE

Nosy son of a bitches.

JOHN

Yah.

They swing together for a BEAT in silence.

MELANIE

I guess...Mike and I are gonna separate for a while--

JOHN

Melanie...

MELANIE

It's not a divorce Dad, we just need to think things out alone.

JOHN

Divorce is no good honey. Look at Allie. She needs a father.

MELANIE

Mike's never around anyway and when he is it's not so great.

JOHN

He makes a good living at that drywall--

MELANIE

Dad.

JOHN

I know! Your mother and I were married for 20 years. 20 years. Then one day she says 'Ya don't care about my needs.'

Melanie looks down, picking at her fingers.

JOHN

Don't pick yer fingers.

John stands up, pacing the room.

JOHN

(continuing)

She didn't understand...everything I did was for my family.

MELANIE

I know. I know Dad.

JOHN

Do you?

She nods and takes his hand. He sits back down and they swing together, slowly moving back and forth.

JOHN

I just don't want ya to be lonely.

The two sit in silence, thinking about things. Suddenly we hear a WHOOP from across the street.

NEW ANGLE

Ariel runs out of her house dressed only in a florescent, one-piece bathing suit. She dives into a snow bank, and screams in exhilaration.

MELANIE

Who is that?

John looks at Ariel as if in a trance.

JOHN

I...I...dunno...

MELANIE

Does she always do that?

JOHN

I dunno...

Melanie gives her father a concerned look.

MELANIE

Dad, are you okay?

JOHN

I dunno...

Ariel turns and sees them watching her, but rather than being embarrassed, she only smiles warmly and waves.

JOHN

She sees us!

He whirls out of the way, his back flat against the wall of the porch. Melanie smiles awkwardly and waves back. John grabs her and pulls her out of the window.

JOHN

Don't encourage her!

NEW ANGLE

Max pulls up the street. He double-takes when he sees Ariel and careens right into a snowbank. He slinks down into his seat, then cautiously peeks over the dash.

BACK TO JOHN & MELANIE

They watch as Ariel strolls back into her house.

MELANIE

What's the matter with you?

He blushes and smooths out his sweatshirt nervously. What did get into him? He doesn't know himself.

JOHN
Uh, new neighbor...

He turns and walks inside. Melanie watches him go, then breaks into a knowing grin. She scoops up Allie in her arms and follows him in as we STAY on the rocking swing.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

We STAY on Ariel's door. Waiting. But nothing happens.

JOHN & MAX

Both watch from behind the safety of their windows, wondering if there will be another show tonight. Max looks as if he's going to give up for the night when:

NEW ANGLE

Two brilliant flashes erupt in one of Ariel's rooms. The lights then quickly dissolve back into darkness as Max and John watch with wide eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

John sleeps soundly. We HEAR a noise in the distance. A BEAT. The noise--a KNOCKING--comes again. John stirs.

JOHN
What the hell...

He sits up. He checks the clock. It's 2:35 a.m.

NEW ANGLE

as John comes down the stairs. He turns on the porch light then peeks through the door's peephole.

ITS HER

He gasps and whirls back against the wall. She's here, at his door! A BEAT. She KNOCKS again. John finally reaches for the doorknob and timidly opens the door...

NEW ANGLE

Ariel is looking radiant in a beautiful coat, scarf and earmuffs. The two stand looking at one another--she smiling and he looking like he just dumped his drawers.

ARIEL
May I use your toilet?

John stares in a stunned silence. Finally:

JOHN
You-your toilet is broken...?

ARIEL
No! Thank goodness. But I do love bathrooms. I think they're the best room in the house and it occurred to me that I was going to urinate in my bathroom once again, and I thought it would be exciting to visit a new one. You can tell an awful lot about a person from their bathroom, did you know that?

John shakes his head dumbly as Ariel brushes past him:

ARIEL
It's better than having your palm read. Give me 30 seconds in a person's bathroom and I'll give you a complete and accurate profile. Once I introduced two of my friends to one another, based solely on the compatibility of their tissue paper. They married a week later.

John follows her slowly, and as we go we get our first real tour throughout John's house.

ARIEL
Divorced a year after that. But 'tis better to have loved and lost, isn't that right?

JOHN
There's a guest bathroom--

ARIEL
Ah, there it is! I can hardly wait to see what I find.

She begins walking up the stairs towards John's bedroom and private bathroom. John begins fidgeting nervously.

JOHN
There's a guest bath--

We STAY ON JOHN as we hear the door shut. Nervous and a little groggy, he looks like he's awaiting test results. The toilet flushes. Ariel walks back down the stairs with a very peculiar smile on her face.

JOHN

So...

Ariel saunters over to where John's chessboard sits. We can see John begin to tense as she casually picks up a piece and waves it in her hand while she speaks:

ARIEL

Fascinating.

JOHN

What'd...ya find in there?

ARIEL

Answers. Don't you think it's time you introduced yourself?

He falters, stumbling before Ariel saves him.

ARIEL

John Gustafson right?

He nods. Ariel stretches seductively in front of him.

ARIEL

I took some of your mail yesterday to find out who you were. But you don't get much and what you do get doesn't paint much of a picture.

She finally places the piece back where it was on the board and we see John give a little sigh in relief.

JOHN

Ya took my mail? That's a federal offense.

ARIEL

I know. But sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of their way to come back a short distance correctly, don't you find that true?

Ariel meanders towards the kitchen as John follows.

ARIEL

I love that line, though I confess it isn't mine. It's from "A Zoo Story" by Edward Albee. I teach American Literature at Winona State University. Or rather I will, beginning in the Spring. I love the classics, don't you?

JOHN
I read "Field and Stream."

ARIEL
Indeed. You have the whole
library from what I could see.
Never miss an issue.

John nods.

ARIEL
There is something quite...
rugged...virile about the
outdoors, isn't there?

JOHN
Sure.

ARIEL
Ariel Truax.

She extends her hand and John cautiously accepts it.

JOHN
John Gus--well I guess ya know.
So...uh, when did ya move into
the Clickner's place?

ARIEL
Surely you know when, John.
You and Max Goldman have been
stuck up against the window
watching me since I first came
to town. Why, the two of you
looked like a couple of those
Garfield things that people
stick to their car windows.
Have you seen them? Little...
suction cups that they, well,
attach to their limbs and...

JOHN
Yah, yah. I've seen 'em. I
was probably watching the
squirrels. One's building a
nest in the front--

Ariel opens the refrigerator door as she turns around.

ARIEL
Now John Gustafson we've only
known one other for a few
seconds and already you're
lying to me. Is that anyway to
begin a relationship?

John shakes his head awkwardly as Ariel pokes her head into the refrigerator.

ARIEL
...apples, muffins, Metamucil--
do you have colon problems? Or
do you normally eat a high-
fiber diet?

John can hardly take this assault on his senses any longer. Ariel shuts the door and turns back to him.

ARIEL
Well now. Isn't this better?
I'm so glad that we had this
talk, aren't you?

John nods, not so sure. Ariel pulls a couple envelopes out from her coat.

ARIEL
Well...here's your mail. There
was nothing addressed to a Mrs.
Gustafson and from the state of
your bathroom I assume that
you're a bachelor...

John nods.

ARIEL
Gay or straight?

JOHN
Huh?

ARIEL
Are you heterosexual or
homosexual?

JOHN
Geez Louise! I ain't no turd
burglar, lady!

ARIEL
What are you so riled up about?
It's a perfectly legitimate
question.

JOHN
Maybe where you come from. But
we don't go for that in
Minnesota!

ARIEL
I've upset you. Perhaps you'd
like me to leave?

She asks innocently enough, but her smile and arched eyebrow tell us she'd most certainly rather stay.

JOHN

I think it would be best.

Disappointed, Ariel walks towards the front door. John stiffly shuffles after her, but when she reaches the entrance she suddenly whirls around and steps only inches away, her lips dancing just in front of his.

ARIEL

It was very nice to meet you
John Gustafson.

Ariel takes his limp hand and shakes it.

ARIEL

Now that we know one another,
don't be a stranger, neighbor.

Ariel steps out, then turns around one final time.

ARIEL

And John? I'm afraid that your
white knight is in very great
danger...

She shuts the door behind her.

JOHN

His eyes are as big as quarters. Something snaps and he runs into the living room where he looks over the chess board. He then looks down at the mail in his hand where the face of Ed McMahon is shouting "JOHN GUSTAFSON COME COLLECT YOUR \$10 MILLION DOLLARS!" He looks back to the door, an uncommon smile beginning to form on his lips.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - THANKSGIVING MORNING

Tears are welling up in Max's eyes as he laughs hysterically, finishing his tale of the bizarre new neighbor. Chuck is laughing as well, but more due to Max's telling of the story rather than the story itself.

MAX

--so she's playing in the
snowbank, damn near naked as a
jaybird, when the meshuganah
looks up and sees us watchin'.
So what's she do? Get
this...She waves!

Max begins waving like Ariel, then breaks up again as he sips from his can of Schmidt beer.

CHUCK
So, is she alone?

MAX
Nah. (begins laughing again)
Gotta six-foot naked statue
livin' with her!

Max breaks up but stops when he sees John walking inside the shop. John has a rather peculiar smile on his face. A definite lightness in his step that we've never seen.

JOHN
Mornin' Chuck. Hey asshole.

CHUCK
Hiya John.

MAX
(nodding)
Dickhead.

CHUCK
Max was just tellin' me 'bout
the new woman.

JOHN
Oh, you mean Ariel?

Max stops smiling and searches John's face worriedly.

MAX
How do you know her name?

JOHN
She came over last night.

John casually plops down on a stool at the counter.

MAX
Why the hell would a woman like
that come to your place?

JOHN
Why do ya think, bonehead?
Schmidt, Chuck.

Chuck begins bagging a six-pack.

MAX
Ha! Fish and women Gustafson,
you could never catch either
one. Gimme the grubs Chuck.

JOHN

I've laid more pipe in this town than Wabasha plumbing.

MAX

Ya expect me to believe that this is your woman now?

JOHN

Hell no! She's too, too... disturbed for me. But for you-

MAX

I don't want anything to do with her. See, women they... fall too hard for me.

JOHN

Ha!

MAX

She might get obsessed with me and it'd be one of those "Fatal Attraction" things like they showed on "Donahue."

JOHN

"Women Who Love Too Much?"

Max shakes his head.

MAX

Uh uh. "Loving Him To Death." Last Tuesday's show. Anyways, I know ya didn't touch her.

JOHN

Do I need this on video tape? Go find out for yourself--

MAX

I said I ain't interested!

CHUCK

I think both of ya are lyin' like rugs.

They stop and look at Chuck, then to each other. A BEAT.

MAX

Listen to the black Casanova.

JOHN

Yeah, a real Don Juan. The ladies 'Don Juan' anything to do with him.

Chuck holds up his hands. He knows better than to get into this with these two.

CHUCK
Okay, okay! I'm out!

They two men grab their goods and nod, satisfied.

CHUCK
Be sure and say "hi" to Jake for me Max.

MAX
Why don't ya come by the house later? There's always plenty of bird with just Jacob and me-

JOHN
Nah, ya wanna come over to my place. Melanie cooks a feast--

CHUCK
Thanks fellahs. But you know those old boys at the VFW expect me every Thanksgiving.

Max and John both shrug as they start for the door. Chuck stops and looks out the window to the lake.

CHUCK
I've never seen the shanties up this early. They say it's the coldest Thanksgiving ever.

MAX
Thanksgiving in 1958 was colder than this.

JOHN
No it wasn't.

MAX
What the hell do you know?

CHUCK
He's the old history teacher.

MAX
Bah!

CHUCK
All I know is, I want some more of that fall weather before this winter business begins. I ain't...ain't ready yet.

Chuck looks off as he speaks. He looks old and his breathing is still a little heavier than it should be.

MAX

Well, ya know what my Grandpa used to say...ya can want in one hand and ya can shit in the other... and see which one gets filled first.

Chuck, always the easy laugher, does just that.

JOHN

I'm goin' to Dad's.

CHUCK

Kumer says they're catching walleye down by the slough.

JOHN

Kumer is a big damned liar.

John walks outside as Max eagerly whispers to Chuck:

MAX

North or south end?

CHUCK

North.

Now that John's gone, Max looks to Chuck anxiously.

MAX

Do I stink?

JOHN (O.S.)

YAH!

MAX

Not you smartass!

Max shakes his head and turns back for Chuck.

MAX

I could smell this stink in the car. Is it me?

CHUCK

Yup.

Max smells his shirt.

MAX

Damn...

He turns and goes back outside. Chuck shakes his head and chuckles to himself. He slowly stops sweeping and rests against the counter, thinking deep thoughts.

EXT. LAKE - MORNING

Indian Slough, a marshy backwater of the Mississippi, is frozen over. Across its surface, a spectacular makeshift village has arisen. Rickety old shanties of all shapes and sizes litter the ice, with curled wisps of smoke emitting from their tiny aluminum chimneys. Old men greet one another along the plowed "streets" which are labeled with wooden signs, sporting names such as "Ed Ave." and "Bob & Stu's Street." More than a few mutts run about, looking for handouts (which they usually get) and at least one man pushes a cart down the street selling wood, coffee or hot bratwurst.

NEW ANGLE

Max walks onto the ice and knocks on one particular ice shanty. The shanty door opens and a burly old man, SCHMIDTY, squints out at us like a grizzly bear rudely woken from hibernation.

MAX

Schmidty, lemme your power
auger will ya?

Schmidty sizes him up, waiting. Max reaches into his bag and hands him a can of Schmidt beer. Schmidty grunts and snatches it, then turns back into his hut. A BEAT. He turns back towards us holding a power auger (a heavy, cork-screw type of power tool).

SCHMIDTY

Don't throw it damnit.

MAX

I won't, come on.

He hands him the auger.

SCHMIDTY

When ya gonna get a 'tip-up'
like everybody else? That damn
pole hardly fits in yer shanty.

Max ignores the comment and trots off with the auger.

INT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

Max immediately turns to the small stove where crumpled newspaper awaits, tucked under driftwood shavings.

He lights a match and starts the fire. Max then calmly puts the auger down, turns it on and begins drilling. Ice shavings fly frantically all over the room, into his eyes, and onto his hair but he doesn't flinch. He pulls the auger away to reveal a perfect fishing hole.

EXT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

Max takes a few steps, then tosses the auger over to Schmidty's shanty, hitting the ice with a loud CLANG.

MAX
Thanks Schmidty!

SCHMIDTY (O.S.)
Asshole!

INT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

The hockey game broadcasts over Max's hi-fi radio.

MAX
Damn North Stars. Like a bunch
of left-handed girls!

Max quickly baits his line and drops it into the fishing hole. He sets down his pole, resting it against the bench next to him and begins opening his thermos.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Chicago gets possession as they
pass the puck and--they score!
Oh boy! The red-hot Blackhawks
score on their very first
possession of the third period.

EXT. LAKE - SAME

There is a simultaneous, group GROAN from all of the old men in their respective shanties.

INT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

Max shakes his head in disgust.

MAX
See? See what happens?

Max pours the coffee into a mug. As he does, we see the fishing pole's tip begin to bend. It jerks lightly a few times but Max doesn't notice--his back is turned.

MAX

It's a damn disgrace the way
they coach that team.

The pole begins to make a low THUD against the edge of the bench. Max looks about disinterested, muttering to himself. Suddenly, the pole is yanked up from the bench and over the side, pulled down into the fishing hole.

MAX

whirls around to watch it go. His eyes big as saucers.

MAX

What--?

Max's favorite fishing pole, his most prized possession, is gone. He tries to call out, but only manages to give a strangled cry as he runs out from the shanty.

EXT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

Max searches the ice fervently, hoping to see it somewhere; a glimpse of its beautiful steel reel. Light reflecting off its sweet green pole. Suddenly, we see--

THE POLE

It's visible beneath the ice. He runs over and falls to his knees, but it dances away beneath the frozen water. He crawls after it, gasping, eyes bulging in terror.

CUT TO:

John walking across a "street" to one particularly crusty, tiny ice shanty. The hinges to the door are rusted and loose and the wood is knotted and dark. He opens the door just as GRANDPA steps out.

GRANDPA

John's father is a 94 year-old miniature version of his son. He sips from a Pfeiffer's beer, the kind in the old longneck, returnable bottles. His other hand holds a filterless Camel cigarette.

JOHN

Hi Dad.

Grandpa nods.

JOHN

Any luck today?

GRANDPA
How the hell should I know? I
just got here. Come on.

NEW ANGLE

as father and son walk together.

JOHN
Someone moved into Clickner's
place.

GRANDPA
Aye?

JOHN
A woman.

GRANDPA
Did ya mount her?

John looks shocked. Grandpa grins back in response.

JOHN
Dad!

GRANDPA
She got big thighs?

JOHN
No!

GRANDPA
Then what's the problem? If I
was a young fellah like you,
I'd be mountin' every woman in
Wabasha.

JOHN
I'm not so young.

Grandpa looks at him and shakes his head slowly. His breathing is rather labored from their brisk walk, but they've finally reached their destination. A weathered-looking old woman, PUNKY, sits in the back of a pickup truck. Bundles of wood and other supplies surround her.

GRANDPA
Hiya Punky. Gimme a pack a
Camels and two bundles.

JOHN
Yer 'sposed to be smokin' those
filter cigarettes.

GRANDPA
I'm 94-years-old. What the
hell do I care?

John shrugs and grabs two bundles of wood off of the truck while Grandpa pays. As they turn back, we see a small crowd forming in the b.g. They step over to look.

IT'S MAX

He's screaming in both rage and terror as he holds an axe above his head, jumping and chopping at the ice with little or no regard to his own personal safety.

JOHN & GRANDPA

watch with little interest.

GRANDPA
Max is here.

JOHN
Yah.

They walk off to their shanty.

BACK TO MAX

The fishing pole has popped up into an open ice fishing hole. Someone must have used the spot recently, then moved their shanty to a more successful location. Whatever the reason, Max's pole floats tauntingly on open, icy water only a heartbeat away.

He crawls over on his knees, inching closer, closer until he's very...nearly...SNAP! It's yanked out of reach and disappears down deep into the water. It's more than Max can take.

MAX
AAAHHHHH!

NEW ANGLE

as he finally sits back and sees the crowd of faces that watch him. He slowly stands and gives a sheepish smile before slinking back to his shanty.

INT. GRANDPA'S SHANTY

Grandpa sits down, lighting his cigarette as John drops the wood and begins filling the furnace.

JOHN
So...think I should call her?

GRANDPA

What?

They're still for a moment; John isn't even sure if his father remembers what they was talking about.

GRANDPA

(suddenly)

Lemme tell ya somethin' Johnny.
The first 90 years or so...they
go by pretty fast...

Grandpa takes a drag off of his cigarette as John sits down next to him, waiting. A BEAT.

JOHN

Yah?

GRANDPA

What?

JOHN

The first 90 years go by fast.

GRANDPA

How would you know? Yer just a
damn kid.

JOHN

You said it, not me.

GRANDPA

Well they do. They go by fast.

He rubs his neck slowly, thinking. We're not sure if he's going to continue or not.

GRANDPA

(finally)

Then one day ya wake up and
realize yer not 81 anymore. Ya
begin to count the minutes
rather than the days.

John takes a beer from the cooler and opens it.

GRANDPA

(continuing)

Ya realize that soon you'll be
gone. And that all you'll have
is the experiences of your past
life. That's all there is
Johnny. The experiences.

John thinks about it for a while. He nods, thinking of these words of wisdom from his father.

GRANDPA
Mount the woman, son.

John looks at his father with a cocked eyebrow as Grandpa begins to snicker.

GRANDPA
Or send her out to me.

EXT. LAKE - SAME

ESTABLISHING

We hear their chuckling from inside the shanty as we

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Melanie is cleaning the kitchen for her father when she glances out the window to see Jacob pull up next door.

MELANIE
I didn't know Jake was in town.

JOHN (O.S.)
What?

She watches as Jacob knocks, then lets himself in.

MELANIE
Max's son, Jacob is home.

John walks into the kitchen, a delighted smile unexpectedly crossing his lips.

JOHN
Hey! Let's go say 'hi' before
Max gets back.

She quickly checks her hair in the window's reflection.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - SAME

Jacob sets the groceries down on the kitchen table.

JACOB
Pop? Hey Pop? You around?

There's a KNOCK on the door and Jacob takes off his coat as he goes to answer it.

NEW ANGLE

Jacob opens the door to see John and Melanie grinning.

JACOB

Hey gang! Happy Thanksgiving.

John walks into the entry way and grasps Jacob's outstretched hand, slapping him on the back.

JOHN

Jacob son! How's city life?

JACOB

Fine, fine. Hi Mel.

Melanie steps in. We notice how attractive she is, perhaps seeing her through Jacob's eyes.

MELANIE

Hi Jacob.

JACOB

How's little Allie? And Mike?

MELANIE

Allie's great, she's playing in her pen right now. I better get back. Nice to see you.

JACOB

I'll see ya later.

She smiles and walks back out the door. John watches Jacob's gaze as it follows her out the door.

JOHN

She's gettin' a divorce, ya know.

JACOB

Huh?

JOHN

Melanie and Mike. They call it a separation but they mean a divorce.

JACOB

Sorry to hear that.

JOHN

You still seein' that little Chinese girl from Milwaukee?

JACOB

Japanese.

JOHN

Yah.

JACOB

Nah, we broke it off.

JOHN

(unconvincingly)

Too bad. Seein' anyone new?

JACOB

No one special.

JOHN

Uh huh. Well...

Jacob smiles and looks out the window across the street.

JACOB

Somebody moved into the
Clickner house.

John's scheming train of thought is momentarily snapped.

JOHN

Huh? Oh, yah! Damndest thing
too. A crazy woman moved in.

JACOB

Crazy woman?

JOHN

Hasn't been out since 11:20.

John checks his watch.

JACOB

You clockin' her?

JOHN

She keeps odd hours.

JACOB

How's your Dad?

JOHN

Still alive. I'm goin' over to
the shanty to pick him up for
Thanksgiving dinner.

JACOB

How's Pop?

John frowns and shakes his head in an exaggerated display of pity as he walks into the living room.

JOHN

God love ya Jakey, but yer pop
is one sorry son of a bitch.

Jacob begins laughing, walking after him.

JACOB

John...

JOHN

Don't tell me son, isn't me.

JACOB

Oh, never is. I'm sure dad's
started every fight since 1940-

JOHN

1938.

JACOB

Right.

John is looking through the window across the street as
Jacob sits up on the table.

JACOB

Remember the Ali-Liston fight?
For months it was all the kids
talked about at school. The
whole country was glued to
their TV's, watching Ali's jabs
strike like lightning to the
dazed champ's face...(pauses)
But me? I got bored. I went
outside to watch you and dad
fight over a lawn sprinkler.

JOHN

He still points the damn thing
into my yard. If I want my
grass watered I'll do it
myself.

Jacob shakes his head. John gazes back out the window.

JACOB

Ever wonder how many years
you're shaving off your life by
all this bickering? Maybe you
could...take a step in the
right direction...see if you
two can't behave like friends
and neighbors. I mean, let's
face it, as much as you wanna
deny it, you don't have a damn
thing to do without each other.

Jacob stops and examines John, who hasn't stopped looking out the window the entire time.

JACOB

Well?

JOHN

Wonder if she's married...

Jacob looks at John and slowly shakes his head. He hasn't heard a word, or at least *pretends* not to.

JACOB

(sighing)

Go find out.

John snaps out of his reverie and scowls.

JOHN

I don't care. Why should I care?

Jacob throws up his hands in feigned bewilderment.

JACOB

Good point, why should you?
C'mon, I'll walk ya back.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - SAME

Jacob rubs his hands together to keep warm as they stop to look across the street. A BEAT.

JACOB

She's getting a divorce huh?

JOHN

She's married?

JACOB

Melanie.

JOHN

Oh...(realizing) yah! Yah. A divorce.

JACOB

Too bad.

They stand there together for a moment, both thinking deeply about things private to themselves. A LONG BEAT.

JOHN

I haven't had sex in 15 years.

Jacob turns to him, looking mildly amused at this sudden confession. John shrugs. They turn back to the house.

INT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - DAY

A despondent Max is telling his sad tale to Chuck.

CHUCK
Yanked it right down the hole?

MAX
It must have been one hell of a northern, or maybe a muskgee.

CHUCK
Time to get a new one anyway. You've had that old Zebco ever since I can remember.

MAX
It was a gift. My 18th birthday. From her.

CHUCK
Who?

MAX
May.

CHUCK
John's ex-wife?

Max nods.

MAX
Before he stole her from me.

Chuck smiles, now beginning to understand the real importance of the pole. He begins to chuckle.

MAX
Chuck, you can't tell him. I'll never hear the end of it.

Chuck keeps laughing, getting a real kick out of this.

MAX
What? Damnit, ya know I wouldn't have told ya if I didn't need the new set-up.

CHUCK
I won't say anything old man.

MAX

Really?

Chuck gives a solemn look of honesty.

CHUCK

Really.

Max sighs in relief. A BEAT. Chuck can't help it and breaks up laughing again. Max rubs his tired face as we

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

John and Grandpa sit around the table eating the turkey dinner Melanie has prepared. Allie sits in a high chair eating lime green jello with her fingers.

GRANDPA

Nice spread.

MELANIE

Thanks Grandpa.

JOHN

Ya should send some of the leftovers home with Jacob.

MELANIE

He'll have his own leftovers.

JOHN

Ah, that pre-cooked junk his dad buys tastes like cardboard.

Melanie smiles and shakes her head.

JOHN

Jacob was...uh...asking about ya Mel.

MELANIE

Hmm?

John gives Grandpa a wink.

MELANIE

Asking what?

JOHN

Just askin'.

Both old men grin mischievously.

MELANIE

You didn't tell him that Mike
and I are separating did you?

JOHN

'Course not.

They go back to eating. A BEAT.

MELANIE

...shithead.

John and Grandpa snicker while Melanie shakes her head
as she sips her wine. A BEAT. Grandpa looks up.

GRANDPA

What?

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jacob and Max stand in the kitchen, each taking turns at
setting the table for their modest feast. As they talk,
Max turns off the microwave and we see the turkey
inside, he rotates it a quarter turn, then strips off a
piece and eats it before closing the door.

JACOB

Hey!

Jacob points at his father who quickly swallows the bite
as they continue setting the table.

MAX

Remember the turkey your mom
used to make?

Jacob nods, smiling at the memory.

MAX

Damn she was a good cook.

JACOB

The dressing...

Jacob stops the microwave and brushes some more butter
over the bird while Max sets the napkins. He strips a
piece of turkey for himself, but not before Max notices.

MAX

Hey!

Just as Max moves across the kitchen, we can make out
headlights pulling up out in the street.

JACOB

I thought you said Chuck was
going to the VFW.

MAX

He is.

Max turns around to see what Jacob is looking at.

CHUCK

is dressed in his Sunday best, carrying a red rose and a
bag of groceries.

MAX

drops the plate he's carrying.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

John is smiling, he and Grandpa still teasing Melanie
when suddenly--he sees Chuck. For a brief second he
chokes on his turkey, then goes into a coughing fit as
he jumps up from the table.

MELANIE

Dad, do you want some water?

Melanie goes to grab some water but John is over his
spell and heading for the living room for a better look.

JOHN

What the hell's he doing?

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

Horror is creeping into Max's face.

MAX

Holy moly!

JACOB

What?

MAX

He's goin' over there! The
crazy ass...

Max runs into *his* living room for a better look as well.

JACOB

What's gotten into you?

NEW ANGLE

They watch together in the living room as Chuck adjusts his hat and knocks on the front door. The door opens and SHE stands there smiling, looking more lovely than ever. Max watches, a lump in his throat.

Chuck says a few polite words we cannot hear. She laughs as she accepts the flowers and allows him to kiss her hand. She opens the door and Chuck walks inside.

MAX

He's in. That black bastard's
in.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

We see both Max's and John's families pressed up against their windows watching.

NEW ANGLE

Grandpa leans over and whispers into his son's ear.

GRANDPA

Looks like Chuck's takin' the
skin boat to tuna town...

John turns and gives his father a horrified look.

JOHN

Dad, geez...

Grandpa snickers and walks back to the kitchen table. Melanie follows.

NEW ANGLE

as Jacob leaves as well. Only John and Max remain in their windows, watching as snow begins to sprinkle down.

ICYCLES

Thin but strong hang from the roof of Ariel Truax's house. One suddenly snaps and falls to the ground.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NEXT MORNING

Chuck walks out of the house of Ariel Truax, whistling to himself. He gets into his car and drives off. Max watches from his porch, shoveling snow off of the steps.

MAX

Holy moly...

JOHN

scraping the frost from his windshield.

JOHN

The black guy got her first.
He spoiled her.

EXT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - DAY

John and Max drive up to the parking lot behind the little shop almost simultaneously. Both knock over garbage cans before coming to a belated stop.

INT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - DAY

John and Max elbow each other in the front door like children trying to get inside first. They finally do.

NEW ANGLE

Chuck is nowhere to be found. The shop, however, is spotless. The boxes and fishing lures which we've seen litter the store in the past are now all stored in neat rows with great care. Max and John look in awe at the sparkling counter and spotless white floor.

JOHN

Chuck?

MAX

Chuck? Where are ya?

A BEAT. Chuck walks out from the back storage room. John and Max watch with fascination at what they see.

CHUCK

smiles lazily, comfortably. His stance is willowy, dreamy. His eyes sparkle and his hands hold his old broom as if it were the hand of a princess.

CHUCK

Hello fellahs.

NEW ANGLE

John and Max inch closer. No longer are they alarmed at the prospect of what happened last night. Now they are only enthralled that it actually took place.

MAX

Chuck...you...you...

JOHN

Had your way with her?

Chuck sets the broom and dust pan down on the counter gently. He places a big hand on each man's shoulder.

CHUCK

Some experiences in life are too rich...too beautiful to try and put into words. To do that would be to tarnish it, and would not do it justice.

John and Max look at one another, confused.

MAX

What the hell are ya talkin' about? Did ya do her or not?

JOHN

Yeah!

Chuck walks them to the door of the store, his arms now around their shoulders.

CHUCK

It wasn't sex boys...it was an awakening. Ariel Truax reminded me that I was alive. That I was a man full of love and energy and life. She made me remember what it is to be a child, to be a young man, to be in love if only for a moment.

John and Max look at one another for A BEAT. Max slowly begins to smile and soon John catches on.

JOHN

Ya couldn't get it up, could ya Chuck?

Chuck shakes his head, giving up on trying to explain.

MAX

It was more of a **hold-up** than a **stick-up**, eh Chuck?

John laughs heartily as the two old men walk out the door together, confident that Chuck was a failure with the new woman. Lucky strolls out from the back as John bends down and pats him on the head.

JOHN

Lucky's neutered and he's got a better sex life than you do.

MAX
Good try chuckles.

Chuck watches them go, a bittersweet smile on his lips.

CHUCK
Boys...

They stop in the doorway and look back. A BEAT.

CHUCK
See ya, huh?

John and Max shrug and give a little wave.

MAX
Sure.

JOHN
Take it like the French man.

We STAY with Chuck as he stands all alone, smiling as he watches them leave.

EXT. CHUCK'S BAIT - SAME

John and Max stroll confidently out of the shop. They look like the best of friends; sharing in their relief over Chuck's failure with the new woman in town.

JOHN
I knew it.

MAX
Yah. I knew it too.

John stops as he sees an old man approaching them. LARS wears Coke bottle-thick spectacles and walks with a stiff right leg. His face appears grey and clammy.

JOHN
Mornin' Lars.

Lars hacks a loud loogie and spits to the ground as he passes by--his way of saying "hello."

JOHN
I thought ya said ol' Lars died.

MAX
He did.

JOHN
Better check yer sources...

They turn for their cars as we see Lars hack up another goober while tossing his tackle box into his boat.

CUT TO:

Max getting into his car. He inhales, wrinkling up his face in disgust at the smell.

MAX

What the hell **is** that?

The AM radio comes on as the car is started and driven out of Chuck's driveway .

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

At the end of the second period, it's the Calgary Flames seven, the North Stars one.

MAX

Damn North Stars! Take out that rookie goalie ya bum!

Max grabs his fishing hat and puts it on, but it slips off into the back seat. He curses and stops the car, turning around to fetch it.

MAX'S POV

the rotting fish on the floor of the back seat.

MAX

Schmuck Gustafson!

John drives by seeing that Max has finally found it. He honks his horn, laughing as he passes.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - DAY

It's quiet now; Melanie and Allie have left and there's no background television noise. John walks past the living room, then stops at the chessboard.

JOHN

So...my white knight's in danger huh...?

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Max sits at the kitchen table with a bowl of soup; the lonely Campbell's "Soup For One" can off to the side. The kitchen television is only inches before him but he isn't watching...glancing through the window instead.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

John is cleaning his bathroom. If she comes by again, he'll be ready for her. He carries stack after stack of Field & Stream magazines out from the bathroom.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

Max sits in an antique bathtub, scrubbing with vigor.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

The night is cold and dark and all house lights are off up and down the street.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - SAME

John lies in bed, dressed in a clean pair of pajamas. He lies there staring at the ceiling, wondering if she'll come again tonight...

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - SAME

Max sits on the edge of his bed, staring out his bedroom window; hoping she'll choose his house tonight.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - MORNING

John is still lying in bed staring up at the ceiling. He hasn't slept all night. But he doesn't appear tired. In fact, this is a man who's just decided his own fate.

JOHN
Alright damnit!

MUSIC UP:

CUT TO:

John shaving. He finishes the last stroke and inspects it, pleased with his looks.

CUT TO:

John combing his hair in the bathroom. He fills his hands with a blob of Brylcreem and begins slicking it through his hair with a black comb.

JOHN

A little dab will do ya...

CUT TO:

John in his Sunday best. He picks up a bottle of "Old Spice" and splashes some on his cheeks (a bit too heavily) while whistling the Old Spice theme.

MUSIC OUT

EXT. JOHN'S HOUSE - SAME

John continues whistling the jaunty tune as he walks down the stairs. He inhales deeply, sticks out his chest and opens the door to the outside world.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - SAME

John exhales, his paunch filling back out. He looks as if he's just been socked in the stomach. Across the street, Max is offering a handful of purple lilacs to the beautiful Ariel Truax. Like John, we've never seen Max looking so "snappy".

ARIEL

Oh Max, why these are just beautiful. How sweet of you!

MAX

Down by the slough in the summer them lilacs grow like Goddamn wildfire--whoops!

Max feigns embarrassment.

MAX

Pardon my language. I don't know what came over me.

ARIEL

How about some coffee? I have a gourmet vanilla bean that'll just knock you on your ass.

Max smiles, surprised.

MAX

Shit yeah!

BACK TO JOHN

watching the two profane lovebirds from across the street. In the distance we can see Ariel handing Max his mail as they step inside her house.

INT. ARIEL'S HOUSE - MORNING

The inside of the home is like a grown-up's playhouse. There are strange antiques, knick knacks and huge canvasses of artwork leaning against the walls. Paint brushes and paints are everywhere.

MAX

Holy moly! Look at all the
crap ya got in here!

ARIEL

It's my inspiration.

MAX

You're an artist?

Ariel walks into the kitchen to prepare the coffee. Max wanders around the room as we hear her speak:

ARIEL (O.S.)

I used to teach courses in
expressionism at Berkeley. But
now I'm back to the classics of
literature.

MAX

(sotto)

Berkeley--that explains it...

Max walks around the paintings, looking at them, puzzled. But something takes his attention away. It's a big, antique 1950's Philco television. A real classic. But as we look closely, we see the picture tube and all the inside components have been removed; in its place sits a beautiful flower pot.

MAX

Your T.V.'s got no guts. I
could put in a tube for ya.
That's what I used to do...fix
televisions.

He swells a little with importance but Ariel only gives a gracious smile from the kitchen.

ARIEL

Thank you. But I think it
works rather well as is.

Max shakes his head. Not understanding and not altogether trusting anybody who would do such a thing to their television. He meanders around the corner and nearly runs smack dab into

HIM

The statue. Max gasps as he steps back. We hear the coffee being ground in the b.g as Max and the statue size each other up. Ariel steps up behind Max.

ARIEL

So I--

MAX

WHA?

He jumps around, startled. Ariel giggles.

ARIEL

I see you've met Ernest.

MAX

Who...?

ARIEL

The model was my husband. He wasn't too pleased about modeling nude. Took quite a bit of prompting, I must say.

MAX

He's...?

Ariel smiles up at the face of the man watching over her. She gives a slight nod.

ARIEL

Passed on. Five years ago one Easter morning. (turning to Max) Cream or sugar?

MAX

Yah.

She turns back for the kitchen to check on the coffee as Max carefully walks away from the statue. He turns around to see a nearly completed painting on an easel.

THE PAINTING

is of Max and John, their faces pressed up against the windows of their homes, exactly as they were when spying on her the other day.

MAX

Geez...

ARIEL

Do you like the painting of you
and your friend?

MAX

Yah. Ya might wanna touch it
up a little.

ARIEL

Where?

Max points to John's face on the right.

MAX

Paint over this whole right
side.

Ariel points up to a bulletin board where a photo of Max
and John, looking through their windows, is tacked.

ARIEL

I took a photograph and worked
from that. Do you paint?

MAX

The shed every spring. It's
very artistic.

ARIEL

I mean art.

MAX

Like this?

Ariel nods. Max looks back to the painting.

MAX

What for?

ARIEL

For self-expression! Everybody
needs some form of release.
Words can be so tired and
usually we hear one other, but
don't listen. Paints and
clays, dance and plays, they
have a language of their own.

MAX

I fish.

Ariel looks at Max curiously.

ARIEL
Fish? Fish? Fish...fish...

Max nods as she contemplates the act of fishing.

ARIEL
(continuing)
Fish...yes, I can certainly see
the beauty in that!

MAX
Yah?

ARIEL
Yes!

MAX
The sunfish are bitin' over at
Indian Slough.

ARIEL
Sunfish!

MAX
Willy Bauer got his limit of
walleye there yesterday.

ARIEL
His limit!

MAX
(excitement peaking)
Miss Truax, would you do me the
honor of accompanying me to my
ice shanty?

ARIEL
Take me!

We MOVE TO THE PAINTINGS and the brilliant colors and
seductive patterns that they reflect.

EXT. CHUCK'S BAIT SHOP - DAY

John pulls into the parking lot behind the store but,
for once, misses the garbage cans. He gets out and
glances at them for a moment, himself surprised that he
didn't hit them. He turns the corner and pulls on the
door to the shop. It's locked.

JOHN
Chuck! Hey Chuck!

John trots over to the side window and tries to peer
inside.

JOHN

Hey dummy, ya forgot to unlock
the front door!

No answer. John grumbles to himself as he turns around
and nearly walks right into

THE DEPUTY

The young fellow that we saw the other day on the river.

DEPUTY

The shop's closed today sir.

JOHN

Closed? Chuck don't close for
winter like the other shops for
cryin' out--

DEPUTY

Mr. Cooper passed away last
night.

John stands there for a moment, trying to understand.

JOHN

Passed away...

DEPUTY

In his sleep from what I hear.

John stares blankly for a LONG BEAT. It's finally
beginning to sink in.

JOHN

In his sleep...(sadly) lucky
bastard...

The Deputy watches as John turns and walks off, his dour
face heavy with sadness and confusion.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GRANDPA'S SHANTY - DAY

Grandpa sits on his bench watching ever faithfully with
his trusty ice fishing pole in hand as his bobber
bounces merrily in the water. It tilts back and forth
for a moment and he jerks in response. Too late again.
He pulls the line up and sees the hook is cleaned.

NEW ANGLE

There's a knock at the door. John steps in.

JOHN

Hi Dad.

Grandpa nods as he begins baiting his hook again.

JOHN

Still cleanin' the hook?

GRANDPA

Little shit. I don't care how small he is, when I catch 'em I'm skinnin' and eatin' 'em!

John picks up Grandpa's ladle and begins to scoop some of the floating ice from the fishing hole as he talks.

JOHN

I just stopped over at Chuck's. He died last night.

Grandpa nods expectantly. He isn't fazed.

JOHN

I'm gonna miss Chuck. He gave me sinkers for free when he'd order too many.

GRANDPA

Chuck was a good kid.

They sit like that together for a while. Both thinking.

JOHN

I decided not to see the woman.

GRANDPA

What woman?

JOHN

The woman that moved into Clickner's place.

GRANDPA

Someone moved in there?

John sighs, looking out to the water.

JOHN

I'm gonna go to my shanty.

GRANDPA

Go. Yer scarin' the fish away!

John stands up from the bench and walks out the door. Grandpa mutters and goes back to watching the bobber. Too late, he jerks and the hook is clean already.

GRANDPA

Shit...

EXT. LAKE - SAME

John walks across the ice. He steps by Schmidty's shanty and knocks. A BEAT. The door opens and Schmidty glares out. John reaches into his fishing bag and pulls out a beer. Schmidty takes it and hands him the power auger. Not a word is passed between the two during the exchange. But as John starts to walk off, he sees it. THE POLE. It rests against the corner of the shack.

JOHN

Schmidty! Hey Schmidty!

We hear Schmidty grumbling until he finally sticks his head back out of the shanty.

SCHMIDTY

What!

JOHN

Where'd ya get that pole?

SCHMIDTY

Green one? Snagged it about an hour ago. Only thing I caught all damn day. Want it? I'll sell it for five bucks.

CUT TO:

NEW ANGLE

John with Max's prized pole in hand. As he walks to Max's shanty, we hear a woman's laughter.

INT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

Ariel is trying to pull a good sized sunfish out from the fishing hole. It flops at her feet and she laughs and screams while Max offers encouragement.

ARIEL

How do I make him stop? I didn't know they kept swimming when you pulled them out!

EXT. LAKE - SAME

John stands there for a LONG BEAT. He looks down at the pole in his hand, then back to the shanty.

INT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

There's a noise outside the door and Max stops cold.

ARIEL

What is it?

MAX

Shh! Might be the game warden!
Quick! Fill your pockets!

As Max turns around we see the fish lying all throughout the shanty. He quickly begins stuffing them into his parka. Ariel begins laughing uproariously.

MAX

Shh! We're over our limit!
Hide 'em so we don't get fined!

Ariel gleefully complies and begins grabbing fish left and right like an Easter egg hunt. Max edges towards the door and cautiously opens it.

EXT. MAX'S SHANTY - SAME

No one's there. Puzzled, Max turns back inside but stops when something slides off of his shanty door.

THE POLE

Lies on the ice at his feet. Max steps out of his shanty and picks it up, holding it in utter fascination.

MAX

Holy moly! I don't believe it!

Ariel pokes her head out.

ARIEL

What? What is it?

MAX

My pole...

He can't begin to explain. Ariel sees something else:

IN THE DISTANCE

We see only the back of John pushing his shanty away from Max's. When he's a good 25 yards or so away, he stops and opens the door. He turns briefly and he and Ariel see each other. Max looks up and follows her gaze. Ariel looks down as John steps inside his shanty.

MAX

looks to Ariel, then back down to the pole in his hands.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

The sun is just beginning to set outside. We see John sitting in his favorite chair, reading "Field & Stream."

NEW ANGLE

John turns to look as we see Max's car pull up outside.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - LATE AFTERNOON

Max gets out of the car with Ariel. Both are laughing as Max holds up two buckets of sunfish and crappies.

MAX

Look at that! The most fish
I've caught this year!

ARIEL

Isn't it wonderful to try
something new? To have a
little adventure every day...

As they speak he feels his pockets for the occasional perch or sunfish that may be tucked away from earlier.

MAX

All I know is, you're a hell of
a fisherman Ariel.

ARIEL

I learned from the best.

John watches from the window, glowering.

JOHN

(mimicking)

I learned from the best.

Max escorts her across the street, pulling a small crappie from his coat as they go. They walk up the steps to the porch. Ariel touches Max's shoulder warmly as she turns around on the steps.

ARIEL

I think we're going to be great
friends, Max.

She kisses him on the cheek and Max's face flushes red. He wiggles his fingers nervously, wanting it to be more but afraid to overplay his hand so early on.

MAX

Friends...friends is good...

ARIEL

They're more than that.

MAX

Yah?

Ariel nods.

ARIEL

They give you things. Sacred things. Like you gave me today. (pauses) I hope that I can forget everything we did.

MAX

Me t--what?

ARIEL

If I forget, then I can do this again one day. And it will be as special and as fresh as it was the first time. It would never get routine. The sights and scents and sounds would always be so vibrant and new...

Max blinks, trying to let that one sink in. Finally, he nods and smiles.

MAX

I'll forget it too! But first, how about dinner tonight?

ARIEL

Oh dear...

MAX

I promise it'll be an adventure ya won't remember.

Ariel laughs, then shakes her head.

ARIEL

Thank you, but I already have plans.

MAX

Oh?

ARIEL
I'll take a rain check though.

MAX
Deal.

Max takes her hand and kisses it. Ariel accepts this chivalrous act by smiling and curtsying dramatically.

MAX
Until next time, my dear Ariel.

JOHN
shakes his head in disgust.

JOHN
Asskisser...eggsucker...

MAX
walks across the street. He suddenly stops and turns around, smiling gleefully to Ariel.

MAX
I'm already forgetting!
Ariel smiles warmly as he chuckles and walks off.

EXT. MAX'S HOUSE - SAME

In his backyard, Max throws the fish down onto a wooden bench, takes out a filet knife and begins gutting and skinning the fish. He doesn't acknowledge John but must know he's there as he grabs his prized fishing pole and waves it in the air, never acknowledging what took place between them today.

MAX
The Green Hornet strikes again!
WE PULL BACK to reveal John, wooden-faced.

JOHN
He's dead.
Max looks up to see John hanging over the fence.

MAX
Who?

JOHN
Chuck.

Max looks down, his grin fading as it sinks in.

MAX

How?

JOHN

In his sleep last night.

We see the anger in John's face; finally he blows:

JOHN

Maybe you would've known if you weren't out with that mink!

MAX

Hey! Watch yer mouth ya dirty friggin' Swede.

Max stands up and points his knife angrily in John's direction. They're only a few feet apart but the fence between them separates any physical confrontation. As they begin to argue, they step down along the fence...

JOHN

Ya wouldn't catch me with a tart like that!

MAX

I said that's enough!

Max throws the knife down as he walks along the fence. They're nearly at its end--nothing will be between them.

MAX

It ain't my fault! Chuck was my friend too!

Max angrily raises his fist.

JOHN

Oh, ya gonna clock me Max? Ya think ya can take me?

MAX

1934 in the fall at Todd Field-

JOHN

Oh for cryin'--

MAX

--I kicked yer ass after football practice when ya stole my sneakers.

JOHN

I was 12.

MAX

And I can still do it!

They've reached the end of the fence. Both look down in surprise. Their faces say 'Now what are we gonna do?'

JOHN

Yer not worth the time.

MAX

Get outta here!

John storms back to his front door. Max watches him go, his puffed out chest sinking back to its former shape.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - SAME

John slams the door behind him. He starts to walk upstairs but stops when he hears something in the kitchen. A rummaging through the cupboards...

JOHN

Acey? Here girl...

We hear a "MEOW" and John turns around to see Acey already upstairs, peeking timidly through the bannister. John swallows hard and walks cautiously for the kitchen.

NEW ANGLE

as John steps into the kitchen to see Ariel already busily working over the stove. Two burners are on, simmering a bubbling sauce pan and a pot of water.

ARIEL

Hello.

John grunts and nods. He licks his lips and asks:

JOHN

What ya doin'?

ARIEL

Cooking.

Simple enough but he doesn't know what to say. Finally:

JOHN

Chuck, he's uh...

ARIEL

I know. Be thankful, John. It was a privilege to know him while he was here.

Ariel seems completely undaunted by the news of Chuck. However, her reaction seems neither flippant nor unsympathetic--only refreshing and wise. Not knowing what else to say, John changes the topic in the manner which he knows best--clumsily.

JOHN

I'm not supposed to eat spicy foods. If it's too exciting I'll be up all night.

ARIEL

Good. I'm making Szechuan.

DISSOLVE TO:

The two having a candle-lit dinner. John eats enthusiastically as she sips her wine, watching him.

ARIEL

Isn't that amazing? I could feel that you and I shared something quite special.

JOHN

39 years of American History at Wabasha High.

ARIEL

History! How...romantic...

Ariel takes a bite of food from the end of two chopsticks which she holds expertly. The way she takes the bite and the manner in which she handles the sticks give off a slightly erotic feel. Much more so than the topic warrants. It certainly hasn't escaped John.

JOHN

Good...pension plan.

ARIEL

All of the ideas you brought to those young minds--

JOHN

Kids think they know it all.

ARIEL

But once in a while you reach one. You touch them somehow... wake them into the lesson.

John nods, smiling as Ariel watches seductively..

JOHN

I did that once.

ARIEL

Yes...?

JOHN

I "touched" a kid across the back of the head when he was snoring during my "Roosevelt's New Deal" lecture.

Ariel gives him a dirty look as he begins to chuckle.

ARIEL

You're horrible.

She begins to laugh in spite of herself.

CUT TO:

John and Ariel in the living room. For once, John has an opponent in his chess game. Ariel stares at the board in deep concentration as John smiles confidently.

JOHN

I'll have ya mated in three moves.

Ariel sips from her wine and smiles.

ARIEL

Well, that's not the most romantic line I've ever heard.

John laughs and Ariel smiles as she looks at him.

ARIEL

You have such a beautiful smile, John. You should wear it more often.

She touches his face. John's face flushes red.

JOHN

I only take it out for special occasions...

His smile begins to fade. He's really going to do it. He may be rusty, but instinct tells him that this is the time. He leans over the table and kisses Ariel. A BEAT. He pulls back--it's hard to tell who's more surprised.

ARIEL

Well, it's getting rather late.

JOHN

It's not so late. I stay up later than this most nights.

ARIEL
I'd love to play some more, but
I'm afraid it's time for bed.

We can see John's embarrassment as he nervously wrings his hands while Ariel stands up from her chair.

JOHN
When will I see you again?

She stops in the entrance and turns around, smiling.

ARIEL
Soon.

She winks and walks out of the living room.

JOHN
Good night.

He slowly sits back down. We hear a door shut in the distance. He shakes his head as he closes his eyes.

JOHN
Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.

DISSOLVE TO:

IN THE BATHROOM

John brushes his teeth, now dressed in full pajamas.

IN THE BEDROOM

The room is quite dark and John slips off his slippers and crawls into bed.

NEW ANGLE

John turns and closes his eyes. A BEAT. He opens his eyes and slowly turns over to see

ARIEL

She's lying next to him, smiling and looking alluring dressed in a gorgeous black negligee.

ARIEL
Hi.

John lies speechless, frozen in shock. Ariel snuggles up beside him and begins kissing his neck.

JOHN
I...I thought you said...

ARIEL
--it was time for bed?

She runs her fingers lightly across his red cheek.

JOHN
But...but you were with him...

ARIEL
Um hmm...

JOHN
You spent the day with...

ARIEL
Yes...

John is flustered and warm as Ariel continues seducing him, playing with the buttons on his pajama top.

JOHN
So whataya want with me?

ARIEL
Well, for starters...

She crawls on top of him, her lips only inches from his.

ARIEL
I'm not fishing...

John lies stiff as a board, still in shock at the first sexual advancement he's had in years.

JOHN
I'm not...uh, prepared. They
say these days...ya gotta do
that "safe sex."

Ariel smiles and holds a finger over his lips.

ARIEL
John, when was the last time
that you made love?

John thinks for a BEAT.

JOHN
October 3rd, 1977.

ARIEL
I think we're safe...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - MORNING

The sky is a brilliant blue color, the snow is melting and the birds are singing. Today, this is paradise.

Max walks out of his house, grinning like the proverbial Cheshire Cat. He walks around to the back-yard and peers over the fence. John isn't up yet and Max looks disappointed--he's eager to start gloating. He dejectedly starts back when John's front door opens.

Ariel steps out. She's naked, wrapped in a blanket and carrying her clothes as she scampers across the street

MAX

his face slowly twisting from surprise to horror as John saunters out the front door sipping coffee, watching Ariel slip into her house like a bad girl that was out all night. John inhales deeply and turns back inside.

ARIEL (V.O.)

Max!

Max turns around and looks up to the second story window of Ariel's house. She leans out the window still wrapped in a blanket. She's as beautiful as ever and sits cheerfully drinking a cup of coffee.

MAX

stands frozen, unsure of his own response. A BEAT. Finally, he smiles. A big, toothy, stupid smile.

ARIEL

Beautiful morning isn't it?

Max continues grinning like an idiot. He back steps into his house, closing the door behind him.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - DAY

Max stands against the door, trying to bring his breathing down. His pale face tightens. It's happening again. He's losing--again.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - AFTERNOON

John is walking over to Ariel's yard where she tinkers with her snowmobile. John appears both eager and apprehensive as he nears the machine.

JOHN

I uh, don't know about this. I
might get motion sickness...

ARIEL

Yes, then again you might *not*.
You won't know unless you try.

Ariel starts up the snowmobile and hops on. He timidly
straddles the seat behind her, holding onto Ariel's
waist. They very slowly start to move across the yard.

JOHN

...this ain't so bad...

ARIEL

See?

JOHN

(relaxing)

Yah. This ain't nothin'!

She guns it. John's head whips back as the snowmobile
lunges forward at an alarming speed.

JOHN'S POV

It's like something out of "Return of the Jedi."
They've sped into the nearby woods where the trees
approach us at an incredible rate. We dodge each thick
trunk at the last possible second while branches reach
for us like twisted fingers as we pass.

JOHN

His face filled with terror, now holding on as tight as
he can. He can't speak. He can't scream out.

ARIEL

Isn't it wonderful?

JOHN

Look out!

They're headed straight for an old shack, covered with
snow. At the very last second, the snowmobile swerves,
jumps off a snowbank and lands safely over a ditch.

CUT TO:

John and Ariel lying in a field of snow. The roar of
the snowmobile has been replaced by the soothing sound
of the whispering winter winds.

ARIEL

There's nothing like a rush of
adrenalin in your veins to make
you feel alive...

JOHN

Oh sure. I didn't used to have
a bladder control problem...now
I ain't so sure. How long ya
been drivin' those things?

ARIEL

What's today? Tuesday? Let's
see, that makes--

JOHN

Never mind! I don't wanna
know.

She laughs and begins moving her arms and legs back and
forth in the snow.

JOHN

What ya doin'?

ARIEL

Making a snow angel. Remember?

She stands up to look at her imprint--it does look like
an angel's figure; more than anyone else's could.

JOHN

I remember.

John makes one himself. He stands up and they take a
look at their work. The angels appear to be holding
hands. A LONG BEAT.

JOHN

Do you believe...in angels?

Ariel slowly turns and looks into John's eyes. She
smiles brilliantly.

ARIEL

Oh yes. They're all around us.

JOHN

I don't see them.

Ariel looks off to the lightly falling snow.

ARIEL

You have to look hard...but
they're there. Whenever some-
thing good happens to us.

John looks lovingly at her face. As she turns to him their eyes meet. He nods.

JOHN

I think I see one...

They kiss as we slowly PULL BACK, leaving them in the swirling snowflakes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

It's early evening as the snowmobile pulls up in front of Ariel's house. We notice the light from the television on in Max's living room.

NEW ANGLE

as we see John wincing as he lifts his legs off of the machine. He's trying to hide it as best he can.

ARIEL

You're sure you don't want to come in for a cup of cocoa?

JOHN

Thanks but, uh, I really need to feed the cat. How 'bout Tomorrow? I'll give ya my Roosevelt's New Deal lecture. Pretty hot and heavy stuff...

Ariel laughs and kisses him goodnight.

ARIEL

I didn't go too fast, did I?

JOHN

Hah! Maybe next time we'll open that sucker up and see what she can really do!

MAX

watches from his living room. Only the light from the television illuminates his face. His self-pity has turned over the day, festering into a simmering rage.

BACK TO JOHN & ARIEL

Each is on their porch now and they smile to one another before stepping into their homes.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

John lies on the couch, his body covered in hot water bottles, ointments and bandages. His feet hang over the end, submerged in two buckets of water as he GROANS.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

EXT. LAKE - DAY

Like most of the lakes and sloughs this time of year, the water is frozen, however, there are still open patches of icy water in the deeper regions of Shanty Town. We CLOSE ON John's shanty.

INT. JOHN'S SHANTY - SAME

John is smiling, all dreamy and dewy, thinking of his wonderful day yesterday. His moment of revery is snapped, however, when we hear a creaking sound.

NEW ANGLE

as John sits up and looks about in confusion. The creaking comes again, and we begin to realize it's the sound of wood--his wood shanty. It's moving.

EXT. JOHN'S SHANTY - SAME

A red-faced Max is angrily pushing John's shanty.

MAX

(grunting with effort)
Ya dirty rotten bastard! Ya
stole May away in 1939, ya
ain't gonna get this one too!

In the distance we can see one or two curious old faces peeking out from their own shanties.

INT. JOHN'S SHANTY - SAME

John awkwardly fights his way over to the door and sees

OPEN WATER APPROACHING

JOHN

Judas Priest!

John's shouts as he jumps for the door.

NEW ANGLE

as John rolls out of the ice shanty just as it splashes into the water. He gets to his feet, stunned, and watches as it floats out across the lake. As he turns around we see Max waiting for him, his chest heaving. They lunge for each other and fall grappling to the ice.

NEW ANGLE

A sea of old faces look out from their shanties. Like children on the playground, voices begin to call out:

OLD FISHERMEN

Fight! Fight!

BACK TO MAX & JOHN

Grunting and groaning; neither one administering any serious harm to the other yet. Each time they roll over the ice they get closer to the open water. The old men have surrounded them in a semi-circle, eagerly egging them on. Seeing how close he is to the edge of the ice, John reaches up and lightly pops Max on the nose.

MAX

Oww!

He rolls off of John and holds his nose with his thick mittens. The two sit up. The fight is over. The spectators turn and trot back to their fishing shanties.

MAX

Ya broke my nose ya thug.

JOHN

Lemme see...

Max opens his hands to show his nose, which despite being a little red, does not appear to be broken.

JOHN

It's not broke ya baby. What the hell got into you?

They struggle to their feet and begin walking back.

MAX

You did her didn't ya?

JOHN

What?

MAX

She's mine!

JOHN

Sez who?

MAX

Sez me!

JOHN

Hey, she came to me.

MAX

You're tryin' to steal her away
just like May!

JOHN

Hey Einstein, lemme remind ya
of somethin'...I was married to
May and was with her for 20
years before we got a divorce.
She was no prize!

MAX

She was to me!

JOHN

If you would've stayed with
May, you would've never met
Amy. Now she was a good woman!

MAX

The best!

JOHN

Prettier, sweeter and more
loyal than May!

MAX

Absolutely!

JOHN

So?

MAX

What?

The two stand there for A BEAT, forgetting what they're
fighting about. Finally, Max turns to John. He's
filled with a question he simply must have answered.

MAX

Did you?

JOHN

What?

MAX

Do it to her?

JOHN

That's private information.

MAX

I have to know.

JOHN

I...uh...all I can say is...

John looks out to his shanty. It begins to upend and slowly sinks down into the water like the Titanic.

JOHN

YAH! We danced the horizontal mambo! And it was the best sex I ever had! Okay?

MAX

Dirty bastard!

Max jumps on John and the two continue their wrestling. We see the old faces pop back out of their shanties.

OLD FISHERMEN

Fight! Fight!

They begin to rush back over to watch when suddenly...

ZZZZZTTT!

A power auger is thrust between their tangled bodies, missing them by only an inch. Everybody freezes. John and Max swallow hard and turn their heads around to see

GRANDPA

He stands with a cigarette in his mouth, one hand on the auger and the other hand wrapped around a bottle of Pfeiffer Beer as he glares down at the boys.

JOHN

Pop!

MAX

Mr. Gustafson!

Grandpa says nothing, only sips from his beer. Finally he lifts the auger out from between them and waves it towards the two youngsters.

GRANDPA

Don't make me have to separate you two again, Goddamnit!

Max and John immediately climb off one another. They look at each other and then to the ground. Grandpa looks to the others who are still standing by.

GRANDPA

All a ya! Go to your shanties!
Yer scarin' the fish away!

The other old fishermen turn and slink back towards their shanties. Grandpa glares testily.

GRANDPA

Goddamn kids...

Grandpa turns back into his shanty. Before he gets there he tosses the auger over towards Schmidty's shack where it hits the ice with a CLANG.

SCHMIDTY (O.S.)

Damnit!

Grandpa slams the dilapidated door behind him.

NEW ANGLE

John and Max slowly get to their feet. Max turns and begins walking away as John watches. Max suddenly turns around, and we hear his voice, full of emotion:

MAX

I can't wait for another Amy to
come along...I ain't got time.

He turns back around and walks off the ice. We STAY on John for a LONG BEAT as the words stay with him.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

Max works stoically on his pet television project, and it looks as if he's actually getting close. He carefully plugs it into the wall. POOF! Smoke rises up from the picture tube. Max shows no real emotion.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - SAME

John stands doing the dishes, equally as wooden-faced. He watches as Max walks out of his house and dumps his television into the garbage can. Max stands there for a BEAT, looking longingly across the street to Ariel Truax's home. John looks off as we

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER THAT EVENING

John is staring at his chessboard. Joylessly, he takes the white queen. The doorbell rings. He gets up from his chair and walks to the front door, takes a deep breath, and opens the door. Ariel stands smiling, a vision in white. She holds a canvass under one arm.

ARIEL

Well, John Gustafson, if you're not going to keep our date then I'm bringing the date to you.

JOHN

What?

ARIEL

You promised to stop over and give me your 'New Deal' lecture and like a good student I've--

JOHN

What's that?

She holds up the painting--it's the one of he and Max, pressed up against their windows.

JOHN

I...can't accept it.

ARIEL

But I made it for you.

JOHN

Look. Why don't ya just give it to Max?

Ariel's smile begins to waver. She lowers the painting. She hasn't heard him like this before.

ARIEL

You don't like it?

JOHN

Ariel...

ARIEL

Then we'll paint one together! I just know that there's an artistic soul inside you John--

JOHN

No! No...I think it would be best if...we don't see each other for a while. Give us both a little time alone.

Ariel searches his face before replying:

ARIEL
But yesterday--

JOHN
Damn it Ariel!

She stops. John didn't want it to be like this, but he knows there's no other solution.

JOHN
I don't like ya comin' over any
time ya damn well feel like it!

Ariel actually steps back from the outburst.

JOHN
I don't like having you around
ever Goddamn minute of the day!
I'm not like you. I'm not
afraid to be alone!

Ariel's face flushes red, but she quickly recovers.

ARIEL
I am not afraid to be alone! I
just prefer to experience
things rather than watch them
on television--or through
windows. I do not favor my
brain turning into--an avocado.

Ariel is really steamed now. John's definitely touched on a painful truth whether he intended to or not.

JOHN
Well, I don't remember me or my
avocado ever inviting ya over
here! Ya just show up! That
ain't normal, people just don't
show up! I like being left
alone! That's why I'm a
bachelor! Understand?

ARIEL
I understand! I understand
that you're a bitter, pathetic
old man who says he wants to be
alone, but only because he is
alone. People aren't exactly
lining up outside your door to
be graced with your presence,
John! Look around you!

She turns around, then stops--not facing him. They're both a little shocked at what's been said. We get the feeling that Ariel wants to apologize, but her own wounded pride won't allow her to.

ARIEL

Good-bye John.

He shuts the door and leans back against it, breathing heavily. He steps into the living room where he watches her march across the street.

ARIEL

From behind she looks sure and composed, but as we SWING AROUND we see her flushed cheeks and wounded eyes.

JOHN

suddenly whirls around and strikes the chessboard--the pieces fly across the room.

MAX

walks by his kitchen window but stops when he sees Ariel outside, walking away from John's house. Confused, he grabs his binoculars for a better look, but she shuts the door quickly behind her, blocking him out.

MELANIE (V.O.)

Nosy. Always so nosy.

JACOB (V.O.)

Nah...

MELANIE (V.O.)

You didn't think so?

JACOB (V.O.)

Just...curious.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

We're back to the present as Jacob and Melanie have stopped at a playground across from the church...still helping one other stall for time.

MELANIE

Curious? Like you?

JACOB

What do you mean?

MELANIE

He's not the only one to use those binoculars.

JACOB

What?

MELANIE

You heard me.

JACOB

I don't know what you're talking about.

She claps her hands in delight as we see Jacob blush.

MELANIE

You're turning red.

JACOB

It's cold out.

MELANIE

Ya wanna know something else? I knew you were watching. I used to leave the drapes open just a crack so you could see.

JACOB

You did that?

Melanie giggles and nods.

MELANIE

Just a crack...just enough to keep you up nights.

JACOB

Yeah? Well it did...and I thought I was getting all of those great shots on my own...

MELANIE

So why didn't you?

JACOB

Why didn't I...?

MELANIE

Ever ask me out?

JACOB

Are you kidding? I did!

MELANIE

When?

Jacob stops, using his hands for emphasis as he speaks.

JACOB

Ninth grade! Jerry Kavitz's birthday party. They were taking us to see the North Stars game and we could each bring a friend. I asked you.

MELANIE

What did I say?

JACOB

That hockey was for children.
That you only liked basketball.

She laughs and covers her mouth in embarrassment. Jacob is clearly pleased that the tables have been reversed.

MELANIE

I remember! Oh God...

JACOB

Besides, you practically started dating Mike at conception. You were necking on the patio in retainers while I was stealing glances from "Gilligan's Island."

They sit on tiny swings, swaying back and forth, their laughter dissipating until only a bittersweet smile remains on their lips. They stop and look off towards the church where a steady line of relatives continue filing in for the service.

JACOB

We better head over there soon
or people will start talking...

MELANIE

What?

JACOB

Sure, look.

He points across the street where we see a gaggle of old women whispering and pointing at them while they step into the church.

JACOB

You're the new divorcee in town, you've got a reputation to uphold.

MELANIE

You're right.

She suddenly gets off her swing and climbs onto Jacob's lap. Melanie lifts one leg up over his and waves to the old women. The old ladies gasp and scoot into the church whispering fiercely; fuel for the fire.

JACOB

You've just made some old women
very happy...

Melanie shakes her head.

MELANIE

Why can't they just mind their
own business for once?

JACOB

You inherited it.

MELANIE

What?

JACOB

They don't have your father to
gossip about anymore, so they
go on to the next generation.

Melanie nods and gives a melancholic smile as Jacob's words hang in the air. They look up to the church as we

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

The words "WINTER" burn onto the screen, then off. The weather, of course, looks the same. Jacob rounds the corner and pulls in front of his father's house.

NEW ANGLE

Max's home is **decorated** in lights as are most of the homes. **John's** house is conspicuously **bare**. We see John pulling his mail out of his mailbox as Jacob notices.

JACOB

John!

John doesn't hear him as he dumps his junk mail into the nearby garbage can and starts back for the door.

JACOB

Hey Gustafson!

John stops and turns around. He looks at Jacob for a moment, then registers a smile.

JOHN

Hey Jake.

As he walks over to meet Jacob, we see a noticeable slowness to his step. Both his eyes and smile look dull now, tired and old. The two friends shake hands.

JACOB

Merry Christmas.

JOHN

Same to you, 'cept yer a Jew.

JACOB

Thanks. Hey, I'm sorry about Chuck.

JOHN

They got an Iranian runnin' that store now...go figure.

Jacob laughs, shaking his head at his old friend. John thinks of something that gives him a little lift.

JOHN

Ya know, Melanie said yesterday that she might come by 'round nine tonight for Christmas Eve.

Jacob shrugs, not altogether getting the point.

JACOB

Yeah?

JOHN

Yah, she said she'd come once she heard you were comin'...

Jacob smiles, now catching on, and shakes his head.

JACOB

Aren't you ever gonna give up?

JOHN

What? I'm not sayin' nothin', just that you might wanna stop by a little later tonight.

JACOB

Well I'll do that.

Suddenly a snowmobile comes tearing up the road, whips a donut and stops in Ariel's yard.

As they remove their helmets we see it is, of course, Ariel and Max.

MAX

Come spring this neighborhood's gonna be a safer place without that snowmobile around!

Ariel giggles as Jacob walks over.

JACOB

Pop?

MAX

Jakey!

Max waves wildly to his son as he gets off the machine. Ariel looks over to John, then looks down as they walk over. Jacob and Max hug.

NEW ANGLE

MAX

Ya ever been on one of those things?

JACOB

Not in a few years.

MAX

That tin shitter moves kiddo!

JACOB

'Kiddo'?

As father and son talk, we see Ariel and John exchange looks. John looks as if he desperately wants to say something, but thinks better of it. Ariel looks away.

MAX

Jacob, I want ya to meet my friend Ariel Truax.

Ariel looks up and smiles politely as she steps forward.

JACOB

I've heard a lot about you.

ARIEL

And I you, Jacob.

JACOB

Don't believe anything you hear from these two old--

Jacob turns around to gesture to John as he talks, but stops as we see he is no longer there. We hear John's door shut in the distance.

JACOB

thinking about what John must be feeling. He turns back and smiles awkwardly.

JACOB

So...you're not letting him
drive this thing are you Ariel?
He's still perfecting the
automobile--

MAX

Hah! I've been driving that
car since before ya were born
ya wiseass!

Max notices as Ariel looks over to John's house, then back to the ground.

MAX

Who's up for hot chocolate?
Got some schnapps in the house
that'll warm us up in no time!

ARIEL

Uh, no thanks Max. You two go
ahead.

MAX

Ya sure, honey?

Ariel steps backwards towards her home as she talks.

ARIEL

I'm sure. It was very nice
meeting you Jacob.

JACOB

You too.

MAX

Well, uh, thanks for the ride
Ariel...

ARIEL

Anytime.

She turns and slips inside. Max's smile fades as he and Jacob turn around for their own home. Max glances over to John's place as they step inside.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

John sits alone.

He drops a couple Alka Seltzers into a glass of water as he faces the T.V. Headlights from outside shine through the window and he slowly gets up to his feet.

NEW ANGLE

as we see Melanie get out of the car holding an armful of presents while John opens to door to greet her.

JOHN

Where's Santa's favorite girl?

John's smile fades as Melanie is followed out of the car by her still-husband MIKE who carries Allie in his arms. He's a big man; high-school football type that never went far beyond the small town.

MELANIE

Hi!

Melanie's arms are full of presents. Allie sleeps soundly in Mike's big arms and John gives her a peck before looking up at him.

MELANIE

Merry Christmas Dad. Well, one day early. Boy this weather is something isn't it?

MIKE

Hey Mr. Gustafson.

JOHN

Mike.

Melanie gives her father a quick, pleading look as she passes him on her way inside.

MELANIE

(whispering)

Be polite...

She walks into the house. Mike looks uncomfortable and shifts the baby in his arms before he and John begin walking into the house together.

MIKE

Uh, how've ya been?

JOHN

Lousy. I thought you two were gettin' a divorce.

MELANIE
(in the living room)

Dad!

John shrugs and closes the door. They walk in as Melanie unloads presents onto the table.

MIKE
Uh, actually, it was only a separation. I had to get some things worked out for myself before we could work on us.

JOHN
Y'all worked out now?

MIKE
Yeah. I think so.

John nods unsure. Melanie takes Allie, tucking her into a crib which John keeps in the living room.

MELANIE
Where's the Christmas tree?
Dad you've gotta get a Christmas tree for tomorrow.

JOHN
Pine needles all over the carpet, who needs it?

MELANIE
Then I'll get a fake one.

JOHN
Fake one's no good.

MIKE
Can I have a beer?

JOHN
In the fridge.

Mike exits to get himself a beer. Melanie waits until he's out of earshot before speaking.

MELANIE
Dad, try and understand.

JOHN
I am.

MELANIE
He showed up last night, said he's gotten himself all straightened out.

JOHN
 (angrily)
 Great. Great! That's what I
 said in the first place,
 remember? Divorce is no good!

MELANIE
 Dad, you'll wake the baby...

JOHN
 I ain't gonna wake the baby!

Allie stirs and begins to cry in the b.g. John grabs
 his coat off of a chair and begins putting it on. He's
 angry, though he's not sure way.

JOHN
 I'm goin' down to Slippery's
 for a beer!

He storms out of the room and leaves through the back
 door. Melanie steps over to the crib and gently rocks
 Allie, watching through the window as John crosses
 through the backyard and into the cold night. A BEAT.

There's a KNOCK at the front door. Melanie breathes
 deeply, trying to calm herself. She walks over and
 opens the door. It's Jacob.

JACOB
 Mel!

Her face lights up, leaving her troubles for a moment.

MELANIE
 Jacob!

JACOB
 Man is it cold! How are you
 doing? You look great!

MELANIE
 So do you. Merry Chr--er,
 Happy Hanukkah.

JACOB
 Don't you mean 'Merry Christmas
 'cept yer a Jew'?

Melanie covers her mouth, giggling in embarrassment.

MELANIE
 Oh God, he didn't say that...?

JACOB
 Your father? Naah.

MELANIE

What's wrong with those two lately?

JACOB

You mean more than usual?

MELANIE

Yeah.

Jacob suspects that he knows, but shrugs it off, trying to keep his visit upbeat. He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a sprout of broccoli. He holds it up over the doorway.

MELANIE

What's that?

JACOB

Broccoli. I didn't have any mistletoe in the house.

She giggles and kisses Jacob on the cheek. As she does, he looks inside to see Mike lying on the couch. Mike reluctantly gets up from the couch and walks over as Jacob turns for him, smiling awkwardly.

JACOB

Okay big fella, you're next!

Melanie laughs but Mike only shakes his head.

MIKE

Hiya weirdo.

He shakes Jacob's hand in an old-jock, vice-grip fashion as Melanie steps between them.

MELANIE

Jacob just got into town.

MIKE

Ya still livin' in the city?

JACOB

I'm in Minneapolis now.

MIKE

Where were ya before?

JACOB

St. Paul.

MIKE

Same thing. Couldn't pay me to live up there. Wanna beer?

Jacob shakes his head as Mike walks off for the kitchen anyhow. Melanie and Jacob smile awkwardly.

JACOB

Well, just wanted to stop by
and wish you a Merry Christmas.

MELANIE

Well that was sweet. Wasn't
that sweet Mike?

MIKE

(plopping on the couch)
Sweet.

Jacob steps back towards the door.

JACOB

See ya Mike.

He walks back out the door and across the yard as
Melanie watches him go longingly.

MIKE (O.S.)

Hey, Hogan's Heroes!

NEW ANGLE

as Jacob tosses the broccoli into a snowbank as he turns
the corner. He stops when he sees his father stepping
down the porch from Ariel's house. Max has a couple
gifts in his arms and talks to her as he leaves.

MAX

Sure ya don't wanna come over?

ARIEL

I have to call my sister
Crystal. She's coming up from
Cleveland tomorrow.

MAX

See ya in the morning?

ARIEL

I'll bring over breakfast!

Max sees Jacob walking from next-door and trots over.

MAX

Hey Jacob!

JACOB

Hi Pop. All those from Ariel?

MAX

Yah. She says I can't open 'em
'til Christmas morning.

Max grins and nudges Jacob with his elbow.

MAX

Think she knows I'm Jewish?

JACOB

I think she has an inkling.

They both laugh as Max motions back to John's house.

MAX

Over at Gustafsons?

JACOB

Yeah.

MAX

Melanie there?

JACOB

Yes.

MAX

She look good?

Jacob shoots his father a glance as they climb their front steps.

JACOB

Yes. She also looks to be
still married.

MAX

What? Mike's back?

JACOB

Looks that way.

Max frowns as they walk into the house together..

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jacob takes off his coat and plops down onto the couch.
Max walks back from the kitchen with two beers. He
hands one to Jacob and sits next to him by the fire.

JACOB

Thanks.

Max frowns and picks at the label of his beer bottle.
They sit that way, awkward, but neither one knowing why.

JACOB
Melanie says you and John
aren't talking.

MAX
So?

JACOB
So what happened to you two?

MAX
Nothin'.

JACOB
Nothing?

MAX
Nothin' that shouldn't have
happened years ago.

JACOB
Dad...

Max shrugs and takes a sip of beer.

MAX
What did I do? Ain't my fault
he's got no girlfriend.

JACOB
What's that got to do with--

MAX
He tried to steal her away from
me! I got her first but the
second my back was turned he
tried to bed her!

JACOB
Did he?

Max sits up angrily, his feathers ruffled.

MAX
I don't wanna talk about this
no more. It's personal.

JACOB
Okay, okay. But I think you
should make up with him.

MAX
My door's open. He knows the
way over here.

Jacob looks at his father evenly.

MAX

He started it.

JACOB

I don't care who started it.
You're gonna end it.

Max looks sorely to his son.

MAX

I hate that schmuck.

Jacob's had enough mixed feelings himself for one day.

JACOB

I'm tired of trying to get you
two to grow up. If you wanna
act like children, go ahead.
Hate each other. Knock your-
selves out! I'm going to bed.

Jacob gets up from the couch and marches up the steps as
Max watches him go, surprised. Max walks back to the
kitchen. As he passes through the hallway he stops when
he sees his prized fishing pole resting in the corner.

IN THE BEDROOM

Jacob is passing by the window when he stops.

JACOB'S POV

It's Melanie. She's undressing before the window--the
blinds open just wide enough to give him a show.

JACOB

is mesmerized. He shakes his head and walks away, but
stops. He turns off the light and walks back to the
window, watching in the darkness. He reaches into an
old dresser and pulls out a pair of binoculars from the
top drawer, never taking his eyes off of her.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Max walks over to John's house and pauses before the
door. He lifts his fist to knock, but stops. He shakes
his head, breathes deeply and finally knocks twice.

BACK TO JACOB

wincing through binoculars as Melanie stops the show.

JACOB

Not now dad!

We see Melanie put on her robe and walk downstairs.

BACK TO MAX

Melanie answers the door with Allie in her arms. Max looks very pained at what he's about to do.

MAX

Hiya Mel. Is uh...he around?

MELANIE

(surprised)

He went down to Slippery's.

EXT. SLIPPERY'S - NIGHT

The wind is beginning to pick up and the temperature is plummeting as John steps out of the tavern. John walks quickly for an old man, his face pinched and red from either the cold or his anger or both.

JOHN

slows down for a moment, catching his breath. He scowls at himself and tries to keep walking, but stops and clutches his arm. He stumbles back down against an old pine tree and slides slowly to the ground.

CUT TO:

Max a few blocks away. He stands alone on the sidewalk determining if he should go down to Slippery's Tavern or give up on this crazy idea of his son's and go home. He turns back to his house. He pauses again, turns back around and continues walking towards the bar.

NEW ANGLE

We can barely see the body of John Gustafson lying in the dark along the pines. With the biting wind and the lateness of the hour, nobody else would be out on a Christmas Eve night like this.

JOHN

his breathing is labored. His eyelashes are frozen from the moisture in his eyes and his lips are dull and grey.

NEW ANGLE

as Max turns the corner he sees something in the dark. His eyes open wide and he begins to run.

MAX

John? John!

He reaches down and kneels beside him.

MAX
John are you dead?

John barely groans.

MAX
Stay here!

John moans some inaudible smartass reply.

MAX
Yah I know that was a stupid
thing to say!

Max runs to the nearest house and pounds on the door.

MAX
Open up! I need an ambulance!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Lights flashing. A police car stands by. Max and Jacob support Melanie as she cries, watching her father being lifted into the ambulance.

MELANIE
Can I ride with him?

The PARAMEDIC hesitates.

MELANIE
Please?

He nods and she climbs into the ambulance. Max tries to follow her in.

PARAMEDIC
Sorry sir.

The Paramedic hops into the back and closes the doors.

MAX
The roads are snowed in! How
am I gonna get to the hospital?

JACOB
C'mon Pop.

They walk back slowly to the house. Max stops and turns around to watch the ambulance disappear. We PULL BACK to where the man and his son look very, very small.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HOSPITAL - MORNING

The sun comes up on a very cold Christmas morning.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Melanie sits in the lobby, now joined by Allie and Mike.

MIKE

C'mon Melanie. Let's go home.

MELANIE

No.

MIKE

I'll take Allie.

Melanie nods as Mike takes Allie, kisses Melanie on the forehead, and exits down the hall. Max and Jacob greet him as they pass by, then quickly walk to Melanie.

MAX

How is he?

MELANIE

I don't know. They said he's in...critical condition.

JACOB

You should get some sleep.

She shakes her head.

JACOB

Then let's at least get you some coffee, okay?

Melanie reluctantly nods.

MAX

You two go. I'll stay here.

Jacob and Melanie walk down the hall to the hospital cafeteria. Max moves down the hall to the RECEPTIONIST.

MAX

What room is John in?

RECEPTIONIST

John? Sir I need a last name.

MAX

John Gustafson.

She ruffles through her charts as she talks:

RECEPTIONIST
Are you friend or family?

Max stops for a moment to let the question sink in. He looks up and we see his eyes; they look tired and red.

MAX
Friend.

The Receptionist goes back to checking the charts.

RECEPTIONIST
John Gustafson, here it is.
I'm sorry but he's in ICU. He's
allowed no visitors until his
condition stabilizes.

Max nods and walks down the hall. The Receptionist turns back to work on some paperwork. Max looks back and sees that her back is turned. He sneaks past her.

INT. ICU - DAY

Max steps around a glass partition and into John's ward. John is hooked up to dozens of tubes and IV's; his breath coming out in slow, labored whispers.

MAX
Merry Christmas, John.

We leave the two friends alone as we

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MAX'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Max and Jacob step out of Jacob's car, their breath visible in the night air. We hear the snow crunching under their feet as they walk to the front steps.

JACOB
It's...it's gonna be okay pop.
You heard what the doctor said,
the ICU there is the top in the
county. He's in good--

NEW ANGLE

as Jacob stops to see Max isn't with him. Jacob turns around to see the back of Max's coat in the dark, walking across the street to the home of Ariel Truax.

INT. ARIEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ariel is painting. She has arranged a tribute to the different religions around the world throughout the living room, mini-altars celebrating each one's version of their Holy Day. There's a knock on the door.

ARIEL

crosses the room and opens it to find Max.

ARIEL

Alright Max Goldman, there better be a good reason why I was stood up for breakfast this morning. You missed out on a veritable feast of--

She stops as she sees the sadness in his face.

ARIEL

What's wrong?

MAX

Can I come in?

NEW ANGLE

as Max steps inside.

MAX

Ariel...I'll never forget this past month we had together.

Ariel looks to Max cautiously.

ARIEL

Neither will I.

MAX

You helped me learn to have fun again.

ARIEL

Why does this sound like good-bye?

MAX

Do you care for me?

ARIEL

Oh dear, a great deal.

Max pauses. This is the most difficult part for him.

MAX

I know your feelings for John
are...different than your
feelings for me.

ARIEL

But--

MAX

I know Ariel. You know it too.

Max stands up and walks across the room. He stops in
front of the window.

MAX

I know you would never want to
hurt me. So I'm making the
decision for you.

Ariel slowly rises and walks across the room to Max.
She puts a hand on his shoulder and turns him around.

ARIEL

a firm look on her face. This supreme gesture isn't
going to be made without her commentary.

ARIEL

Nobody makes my decisions for
me. I reserve that right.

Max tries to talk but Ariel puts a finger over his lips.

ARIEL

(continuing)

I always have and I always
will. If you take away that,
you take away my person.

MAX

But all I'm trying say is--

ARIEL

What are you telling me this
for, Max? If you don't wish to
spend time with me anymore--

MAX

That isn't it! It's John--

ARIEL

What about John? I decide who
I see. I'm not a damn baseball
card or some comic book to be
traded among friends and I'm
tired of being treated as such!

MAX
Please...see him...

Ariel begins to slowly calm down.

ARIEL
Why Max? Why should you want
me to see him?

MAX
He needs you. More than you
know. And right now...he needs
you the most.

Max's solemn statement strikes her and Ariel softens.

ARIEL
What is it?

MAX
John is sick, Ariel.

Ariel looks off, taking it in. A BEAT.

ARIEL
Damn...

EXT. ARIEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ariel is getting onto her snowmobile while Max watches
from the doorway.

ARIEL
You're a hell of a guy, Max
Goldman.

MAX
Who am I to argue?

Ariel zooms up the street.

NEW ANGLE

as we see Jacob in the window of Max's home. Father and
son look at each other from across the street and smile.

Max turns to where the statue of Earnest, Ariel's late
husband, watches over him, giving his silent approval.

MAX
Hiya Ernie.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

John lies in bed, looking more sickly than ever. Ariel sneaks in. She sits on his bed and holds his hand. John's eyes open slightly.

ARIEL

I know that you wanted to get rid of me, but isn't this rather drastic?

She attempts a smile, but her eyes quickly begin to brim with tears, spilling down her cheeks.

ARIEL

My husband died at Easter and if you die at Christmas, I'll have absolutely no more holidays left to enjoy. Except Thanksgiving. And I simply loathe turkey. So let's get out of here, what do you say?

John tries to smile, but his eyelids flutter, then close and once again he drifts off. She holds his hand against her cheek, then lies on the bed next to him.

ARIEL

Okay. I can wait.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - MORNING

Max walks out to his car with his fishing gear and throws it into his trunk. But he stops when he sees something across the street; someone's sitting in a tree in Ariel's yard. It must be Ariel, but we're not sure.

MAX

Hello...

Max's curiosity is piqued so he walks across the street.

MAX

How's he doing?

WOMAN

Who?

Max walks closer as the woman climbs down the tree. She takes off her hat to reveal short, spiky, silver hair.

It's Ariel's sister, CRYSTAL.

MAX

Oh my...

CRYSTAL

My sister's not around so I
thought I'd climb a tree. I
used to love to climb trees as
a kid didn't you?

Max's look of perplexity gradually turns to a smile.

MAX

Yah.

CRYSTAL

I'm Crystal.

MAX

Max.

CRYSTAL

Ah, the fisherman.

MAX

Yah.

CRYSTAL

I've never been myself.

MAX

Fishing? You're kidding.

She shakes her head and smiles.

MAX

You a communist?

We slowly PULL BACK as they talk. A BEAT. We see
Crystal hand to him...his mail.

JACOB (V.O.)

Mel.

MELANIE (V.O.)

Yes Jacob?

JACOB (V.O.)

It's time.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

We're back to Easter morning where our story began.

Melanie and Jacob are standing outside the doors of the church. The words "SPRING" burn on, then off. Our weather, of course, is cold as always.

GRANDPA

suddenly steps out of the church.

GRANDPA

Get your asses in here!

Melanie and Jacob look at each other and smile. They both take a deep breath and start for the church. As Melanie steps into the doorway:

JACOB

Hey Mel?

She turns around.

JACOB

Thanks for leaving those blinds open for all of those years.

MELANIE

(laughing)

Anytime.

She turns back towards the church.

JACOB

Tonight?

She turns and smiles, shrugging innocently before stepping inside.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Jacob takes off his heavy, dark coat and we now see that he's wearing a tuxedo.

NEW ANGLE

Jacob walks into the back entrance of the altar where his father stands waiting nervously.

MAX

Where the hell ya been?

JACOB

Relax Pop. Nervous?

MAX

I ain't nervous, the groom's nervous.

We PULL BACK to see John also in a tuxedo, standing next to him. Unlike Jacob and Max, John wears tails.

JOHN

I'm not nervous ya smartass.

JACOB

Hey fellahs, we **are** in a church.

The organ music picks up as everyone stands. The wedding is about to begin.

NEW ANGLE

Melanie walks down the aisle, looking absolutely breathtaking in her bridesmaid's dress. Jacob swallows hard as he watches her walk towards him, and just for a moment it feels like they are the ones getting married. But Melanie steps off to the right and a moment later, Crystal walks down the aisle. Max watches as she stops at the altar and files off next to Melanie. The Wedding March begins as everyone stands.

ARIEL

in a gorgeous wedding dress is greeted by John, the two beaming at one another as they step up before the PRIEST. Everyone sits.

PRIEST

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join John and Ariel in holy matrimony.

John looks over to Max and the two old men share a secret smile. As Max looks back towards the altar, something catches his eye. It's Crystal--giving him a seductive smile accompanied by one arched eyebrow. Max swallows hard and looks back to the altar.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

The bride and groom run out to their car beneath a cascade of rice and cheers from their friends. Max is already at the limousine door, opening it graciously for them to climb inside.

MAX

Have a wonderful time.

Ariel stops and kisses Max on the cheek. They smile at one another before she ducks into the car. John and Max shake hands, grinning.

JOHN
See ya shithead.

MAX
Five bucks says ya can't get a
stiffie the whole honeymoon.

JOHN
Hah!

Max slaps him on the back as John gets in and Max closes
the door behind him.

INT. LIMOUSINE - SAME

Ariel and John share a deep kiss. John pulls away and
wrinkles up his nose as he sniffs the air.

JOHN
Do you smell somethin'?

Ariel sniffs the air.

ARIEL
What in the world...

It suddenly hits him and John begins to search wildly
throughout the back seat as the limousine pulls out.
John suddenly stops when he sees it.

JOHN
That son of a--

EXT. LIMOUSINE - SAME

MAX'S POV

As the limousine turns the corner, the window is rolled
down and a dead fish is thrown out onto the street.

Max waves innocently as we hear Ariel's deep laughter
from inside the car.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

The street is quiet as usual and covered in snow as it
has been throughout our story.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jacob walks through the kitchen with his tuxedo still on. We hear Max humming in the b.g. as Jacob rummages through the cupboard before taking out a bottle of scotch and a bottle of brandy. Through the kitchen window he can see Melanie tucking in Allie, then walking upstairs for bed. Jacob sighs and turns away longingly.

JACOB

What a nice wedding. Lutherans
give great weddings don't you
think pop?

Max doesn't answer, just continues humming off in his bedroom. Jacob unbuttons his top button as he reaches for two glasses.

JACOB

I think ESPN is showing the
Women's Luge Championships at
11:30. Sounds exciting, huh?.

Jacob doesn't sound too convinced, but he's making the best out of it. Finally, Max walks in from the bedroom.

JACOB

How about us bachelors knocking
back a nightcap? Ya want
scotch or--

He stops cold as he turns around to see his father dressed in a snazzy outfit. He breezes by Jacob and snatches the brandy from his hands.

MAX

--brandy.

Jacob watches in amazement as his father walks to the front door and opens it. He turns around smiling.

MAX

Don't wait up, son.

He leaves. Jacob walks over to the window where we watch Max knock on Ariel's door. We see Crystal open it and giggle as he kisses her hand. They go inside and shut the door behind them.

JACOB

slowly shaking his head. He turns and walks upstairs. The window of his bedroom glows softly from the light emitting across the yard. Specifically, the light that's been left on in Melanie Gustafson's bedroom.

JACOB

peeks through the curtains to his neighbor. There's a flicker in his eyes. It's show time. Jacob begins to reach for the binoculars--then stops. He looks back to where his father just went, then back to Melanie. A determined look comes across his face.

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - SAME

Melanie puts on her nightgown, smiling to herself. She suddenly peeks through the curtains. Nothing. Jacob wasn't watching. Her smile slowly fades as she sighs and turns back around.

The doorbell rings.

Melanie smiles. She turns away from the window and walks out of our view. A BEAT.

JACOB (O.S.)

Hi.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - SAME

The sole light at Ariel Truax's home turns off. A BEAT. The light at the Gustafson home follows as we

FADE OUT

THE END