

MOONLIGHT MILE

Written by
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Shooting Script

—FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION—
BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY

EXT. WATER -- DAY

Blue, blue water, rippling and tranquil, extending as far as the eye can see. Brilliant sunlight glints off the surface. In the distance, a small figure enters frame. JOE NAST, early twenties, looking sharp in a crisp, formal black suit. He strolls to the center of frame, moving casually, carefree...until a PHONE begins ringing offscreen. He stops. Turns. Looks all around him. And suddenly realizes...he's walking on water. He looks up and SCREAMS at the top of his lungs --

INT. BEDROOM -- MORNING

Joe FLINCHES, breath halted, jerking awake in a small four-poster princess bed. Disoriented, as the phone RING continues somewhere offscreen in the house, followed by a RUMBLE of feet chasing it down.

INT. SHOWER -- MORNING

Water SPRAYS from the nozzle. Joe slowly drowns himself under it, relieved to be SOAKED -- at last.

CLOSE ON CLOSET -- MORNING

powder pink wood doors parting to reveal Joe's new suit -- black, decent material, just like in the dream-- first time out of the bag.

JOE

perched on the edge of the four-poster, a frilly blue floral comforter beneath him which screams teen female -- clearly not his own. He struggles to slide into new black leather loafers, fresh out of the box, grabs hold of a post for leverage.

CLOSE ON A DUFFEL

as Joe finishes packing full a travel worn bag, zips it closed as if it's ready to hit the road-- then, oddly, he slips it under the bed, hiding it...

INT. FLOSS KITCHEN -- MORNING

BEN FLOSS, early fifties, grey before his time, runs a last minute inspection of the contents in the refrigerator, straightening his tie, his face a mask of concentration. Runs down a mental check-list with his finger as he closes the door, too focused to acknowledge JOE as he enters. The phone RINGS again offscreen -- Ben hustles out for it. Joe downs a glass of fresh-squeezed waiting for him, moves to a dog bowl waiting on the counter -- NIXON handpainted on the side. An aging RETRIEVER pulls his head up off the floor in sluggish response, BELCHES. Joe methodically pours from the bag of dry food, then reaches for a waiting pink bottle. Spoons out a hit of PEPTO BISMOL into the mix. Ben's hand suddenly appears in the doorway, indicating "two". Joe takes his lead, spoons the second hit.

INT. LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUING

Modest Victorian. Ben hangs up the phone, carefully straightens out long rental tables draped in white linen, as Joe enters into the front foyer, reaching for his overcoat. Down the stairs arrives Ben's wife JO JO FLOSS in tailored black skirt and oversized blazer. Late forties, earthy attractive, eye as sharp as an eagle's. Hesitates as she reaches the bottom of the bannister, meeting Joe's eyes. Numb. Ben reenters, begins slipping into his coat -- when the phone RINGS again. He races out for it without hesitation, coat arm flying. JoJo and Joe look each other over.

JoJo gives him an expressionless THUMB'S UP.

EXT. FLOSS HOME -- MORNING

LIMOUSINE DOORS

popping closed -- a line of them.

ON THE CURB

before the Floss home, Joe and JoJo watch blankly as Ben hustles along from car to car, closing and re-closing doors himself, making sure everyone else is in his proper place and taken care of -- leaving only the two of them abandoned, waiting.

At last he turns to them, waves impatiently toward a car up front.

INT. LIMOUSINE -- CONTINUING

Joe and JoJo sink uncomfortably into polished leather. Ben slams the door behind him up in the front seat, nods to the DRIVER -- eighteen if a day with the bad skin to prove it. As he turns the car over, speakers EXPLODE with the alarm volume opening of SLY AND THE FAMILY STONE'S -- "I WANNA TAKE YOU HIGHER". He instantly kills it, dogs BARKING in the distance, throws a sheepish look to the rearview. Joe can barely suppress a smirk. Finally,

BEN
(politely)
We're all set.

As the kid shifts into gear, JoJo impulsively leans out over the seat and CRANKS it back up to obliterate the silence.

ON THE CAR

as it pulls away from the curb, leading the train, MUSIC carries over...

EXT. LIMOUSINE PARADE -- VARIOUS LOCATIONS -- DAY

As the limos, all early seventies makes, weave past various snippets of town life which seem happily oblivious to their presence...

EXT. GRAVESITE -- DAY

BEHIND A ROW OF GATHERED MOURNERS

as the music now gives way to a Hebrew PRAYER being read by an offscreen RABBI, along with a low chorus of SNIFFLES and CLEARING THROATS. One young woman's voice pierces the air with increasingly tortured MOANS of despair. JoJo slowly turns, can't mask her annoyance. Searches for the source behind her.

A YOUNG WOMAN

blonde, early twenties -- the deceased's friend CHERYL -- dramatically wails away.

JO JO

slowly brings her look back to JOE beside her. ROLLS her eyes.

ON THE OPEN GRAVE

as JoJo steps away from it grasping the ceremonial shovel, eyes damp, chin firm. She approaches Joe, hands him the shovel with a knowing look of great dignity, a small nod for him. He tries to move, but can't. Cheryl, beside him now, has her arm LOCKED on his, gasping. Won't let go. Elbowing her awkwardly, he PRIES loose, slowly makes his way toward the mound of dirt.

CLOSE ON JOE

His eyes shift slowly to scan the passing line of mourners.

THE SLOW PARADE OF FACES

eye him closely now, some whispering in hushed tones to each other, studying him in vague recognition. An exhibit.

JOE

hesitates before the dirt mound, squeezes his eyes closed. Takes a breath...then PLANTS the shovel in.

VOICE (V.O.)
"Cielo"...

INT. FLOSS KITCHEN -- DAY

A uniformed SERVER traying hors d'oeuvres cranes his neck, peering directly above himself. Two others join him, peering UP.

SERVER #1
"Cielo"?
SERVER #2
(nods)
Sky...sometimes ceiling.

ABOVE THEM, a small vocabulary sticker with "CIELO" printed on it sticks -- appropriately -- to the ceiling.

SERVER #3

(hushed)

The guys on set-up heard they were planning a trip to Rome before...

He nods meaningfully. They nod back, noticing other stickers on objects around the room. BEN enters on a high wind -- he could be overseeing a bar mitzvah.

BEN

-- How're those cheese coming? Think we're shy about five more plates -- and maybe some of the mushroom -- those are big sellers -- and something for the kids, huh? -- Oh, you know what they love? They love those little hot dogs in the buns. What are they called--?

SERVER #3

...Pigs In a Blanket?

BEN

--Exactly.

SERVER #1

...You want us to go buy some?

BEN

No no no--
(holds his hands up)
--We're fine.

And he's gone.

The servers exchange glances.

INT. LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Ben floats back in to monitor the room where bodies are fairly tightly packed, grazing intently around the rental buffet tables.

BEN

(reassuring all)

Should be some more out in just a sec...

As a middle aged COUPLE move in on him, he spies JOE, standing by the fireplace, trying to blend in -- grabs him to deflect.

BEN (cont'd)

Joe -- Joe, come here, I want you to meet the Myersons, our old neighbors...

Joe awkwardly turns to face the nearby MYERSONS, early fifties, each cradling cocktails.

BEN (CONT'D)
 (the host)
 -- Barbara, Don -- this is Joe Nast,
 Diana's fiance. Joe's been out here,
 what -- few weeks now.

MRS. MYERSON
 Isn't that great...

The Myersons beam, toast their glasses reflexively -- then their smiles gradually taper off as they awkwardly remember the current circumstances. Ben's cue to bolt.

BEN
 -- 'Scuse me a second.

He slips off, leaving Joe stranded. The couple stare at him uncomfortably. Finally,

MRS. MYERSON
 We are so sorry...

JOE
 ...Thank you.

Awkward silence.

MRS. MYERSON
 Beautiful girl...I'm sure you two
 looked just gorgeous together.

Joe smiles uncomfortably, shifts his weight. Myerson swirls his glass.

MR. MYERSON
 (shooting blanks)
 So...how you enjoying our town.

JOE
 (did he just say that?)
 ...Beg your pardon.

MRS. MYERSON
 (leans in)
 You know the weirdest thing? -- We live
 right around the corner from that
 restaurant?... I mean, who would've
 guessed?

MR. MYERSON
 So now what, the arraignment? String the
 asshole up by his toes and wait for a
 trial date, huh? The other one's a
 vegetable, right?

MRS. MYERSON
 The wife.

MR. MYERSON
 Common-law wife -- now there's a piece of
 work.

JOE
(swallows)
...I'm sorry?

MR. MYERSON
(man to man)
Two shots to the head and he still
couldn't put her down. I know the
feeling.

MRS. MYERSON
Oh, stop...

ON JOE

stiff as marble.

JOE
...Would you excuse me?

He escapes, lurches over to the makeshift bar, grabs whatever
the server's pouring into plastic party cups. Quickly downs
it. The SERVER watches him knowingly.

SERVER #1
...Try to breathe.

Joe shakes his head, can't catch his breath now, an anxiety
attack coming on. Notices NIXON across the room, dyspeptic
as ever, standing suspiciously close to the buffet tables on
shaky legs as a crowd of guests hover above him. An overly
sincere FASHION PLATE in her late forties reaches down to
comfort him.

F.P.
Aw...even doggy looks sad today...

She pats his head. He VOMITS all over her heels. Joe nods,
sympathizing with Nixon's response.

VOICE (O.S.)
...You must be exhausted.

Joe warily peers at the source behind him -- a silver-haired
intellect with wire-rims and overly knowing manner.

WIRE RIMS
...All of you. Propping each other up,
running on adrenaline... probably haven't
slept in days.
(nods)
You're in shock. And you don't even
realize it...
(extends his hand)
I'm Stan Michaels, friend of Ben and
JoJo's from school. I'm a shrink.
(meaningful handshake)
It's good to meet you, Joe. Was hoping
we'd get a chance to talk.
You must be filled with...all sorts of
conflicting feelings right now.

Joe isn't quick to offer up any of them, tries to quell his breathing.

MICHAELS

(nods)

This may not be the most appropriate time to ask this, but...do you know what your plans are until the trial?

Joe ponders the thousand possible meanings of the question.

JOE

...Plans?

MICHAELS

I know you kids were just moving in to save up for the wedding -- Ben told me all about your arrangement, taking you into the business with him while Diana prepped for the Bar...

JOE

(even more pressured)

...Hadh't really thought about it yet, Stan.

MICHAELS

Oh.

(a mask of confusion)

...Oh, I thought you'd committed.

Joe's silence tells all.

MICHAELS (cont'd)

Anyway -- I guess selfishly, I'm just asking for my friends, cause I think this is certainly a critical time for them -- and you -- to be together and help each other through this process. Only child gone. Work at a standstill. You know JoJo hasn't touched her typewriter since...

(nods meaningfully)

JOE

It's...only been three days.

MICHAELS

Of course. What I'm trying to say is, I know this town isn't home to you, but...I hope for their sake, you'll consider staying on. You're all the Diana they're going to have left.

(squeezes his arm)

We'll talk more later. Be good to yourself, Joe.

He slips off. Joe suddenly needs air, feeling the anxiety attack coming on strong now. He makes a break for the back door, carefully avoiding eye contact with any of the guests. Slows up as he sees

THE BACKYARD

equally teeming with bodies. Cheryl's surrounded by an audience, body shaking a bit, turns to reveal she's mid-LAUGHTER, cigarette aloft. She waves at him, calling out--

CHERYL

--Joe, come talk to me.

JOE

spins around, moves for the front door now. BLOCKED. Guests swarming it with paper plates. Joe looks almost frantic now as he scans the entire floor, desperate, suffocating. He bolts -- the only available direction.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUING

Joe tears in, suddenly face to face with the caterers. They PEER up from their work. Awkward moment. Averting his eyes, he crosses to a pantry door in the corner, STEPS INSIDE without explanation, closing it behind him. On the caterers' confused expressions...

INT. PANTRY -- CONTINUING

No larger than a coat closet. Joe stands inside now, nose inches from the wall, hanging onto a shelf. Simply breathes. Alone. No interference. No tears. Numb.

INT. FLOSS HOME - NIGHT

Ben closes the door on the last of the departing guests, is surprised to hear the CRACKLING of a burning fire, moves into

THE LIVING ROOM

where JoJo curls her toes in front of the fireplace, alone at last in front of a growing blaze.

BEN

Jo?...You cold?

JOJO

(Cheshire grin)

Not now...

She tosses in more kindling...of a highly unusual nature.

ON THE FIRE

as a self-help PAPERBACK hits the grate -- "THESE THINGS HAPPEN". Others are in evidence around it, going up in flames.

JOJO

Closes her eyes with fatigued satisfaction.

BEN

Jo, what're you -- honey, those were gifts!

JOJO
Gifts. Party favors.

BEN
Gifts -- from our friends. Come on now,
they're supposed to be helpful...

JOJO
(lifts another)
"Grieving for Grownups"? Please. I'll
show you helpful.

Tosses it on the fire. Joe enters from the kitchen.

JOJO (CONT'D)
Oh, good, we're all here now. Let's dish,
shall we?

Joe sinks into a chair, comforted by her tone. Ben continues
picking up around the room, unable to sit still.

JOJO (CONT'D)
Joe, you start.

Joe hesitates, then cocks his head gamely.

JOE
The Myersons?

JOJO
(explodes)
OH my God -- didn't you just want to slap
them?? Why can't people think before
they spew?

JOE
And that matching couple, the --

JOJO
-- Hillers! Oh God, those big, dripping
looks of sympathy --
(mimics)
"She was such an angel..." -- How the
hell do they know?? They met her once
for two seconds and she was being a total
brat that day...
(laughs)

BEN
Oh, come on...funerals are awkward at
best.

JOJO
Awkward at best?

BEN
What are they supposed to say?

JOJO
Nothing, thank you. Not if it's cant and
tripe. Did you hear that cliché parade?
(MORE)

JOJO (cont'd)
 And the way they were all over this poor
 guy?...
 (nods at Joe)

BEN
 What -- it's their first chance meeting
 him.

JOJO
 (to Joe)
 I promise you, they're not all horror
 shows...

BEN
 Put yourself in their shoes.

JOJO
 I don't want to put myself in their
 shoes, Ben -- why the hell should I??
 We're the ones who lost the girl, for
 Christ sake!--Stop defending everyone.
 Let 'em put themselves in on our goddamn
 shoes...

Her words hang hard in the air -- the silence finally
 interrupted by a resounding BELCH from Nixon who lumbers into
 the room.

JOJO (cont'd)
 (brightens)
 Ahh, there he is...the only honest guest
 here today -- even if he does vote
 Republican. Did you see the
 projection he got when he booted on that
 windbag Madeline?

JOE
 Full velocity.

BEN
 It was impressive, wasn't it.

JOJO
 (hugs Nixon)
 --Yes! Good boy!!

Nixon BELCHES again.

JOJO (cont'd)
 Uhh -- I sense an encore coming on. Ben,
 why don't you take him out before he
 spreads the joy again --
 (eyes Ben picking up)
 -- and would you stop cleaning up!
 Please! For once, we've got an excuse
 for our place looking like shit. Relish
 the opportunity...

He heads off for the leash. Nixon follows. As they head out
 the door --

JOJO (cont'd)
Lower your shoulders, Benjamin.
(softens)
Come back to me...

Ben straightens reflexively, maintaining his dignity.

BEN
...Come on, Nix.

They exit. Joe and JoJo turn back to the fire, watch in silence for a few moments -- delicious awkwardness from not having had too many moments actually alone together, but a core affinity here.

JOJO
...God, I miss cigarettes right now.
That wonderful fog...
(eyes him)
You never smoked, did you, Joe.

JOE
(surprised)
...No.

JOJO
(nods)
Diana said you had sweet breath. Very first thing she told me. Least the girl had her priorities straight...

Smiles at the thought. Long silence as the fire crackles. Both lost in reflection. At last,

JOJO (cont'd)
Joe, what do you think you're going to do?...

He eyes her, tensing slightly. She nods.

JOJO (cont'd)
Without our girl.

Long beat. He meets her eyes.

JOE
...JoJo, I have no idea.

She nods absently. Then,

JOJO
Promise me you'll let me know when you do?

A genuine look of care and understanding between them. Joe nods. JoJo turns back to the fire.

JOJO (cont'd)
Course, part of me would love you to stay celibate the rest of your life -- but I'm sure we can negotiate...

INT. DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE -- DAY

Ben, Joe and JoJo sit numbly now in the cramped office of county A.D.A MONA CAMP -- warm, early forties, lockerroom pace -- in it for the sport.

CAMP

-- I just don't see the point of you sitting through this. Basically, we're looking at five minutes of motions and two minutes of theater -- this is the kind of bullshit just drives me mad, and I'd just assume not subject you to it. Nutshell, here's what's gonna go down: as I say, big entrance, big theater, they toss their plea -- which, of course, will be not guilty, as there are no guilty pleas to capital offenses in this, our lovely state. Then insanity gets thrown in, some horseshit defense my friend the public defender has managed to cook up in the two minutes he's had since he caught the case -- whatever -- it won't be clean, and then we'll get on to haggling about the calendar. Now the only way to guarantee this asshole's not gonna skate off on a second degree charge is to have someone back up intent. Clearly his target, the waitress -- his common-law wife, concubine -- whatever -- you can bet she'd have a thing or two to say about pre-meditation if she ever actually pulls through this. Two shots to the head -- you just can't count on it at this point. What we do have now is a witness appears was tucked in a corner booth, out of the guy's eyeline. Guy never saw him. Now I'll be talking to him -- but what he's laying out lines up right with the detectives' scenario.

BEN

(swallows)

Which is.

CAMP

...Which is that the wife was the only server on the floor at the time -- stations were empty -- she was refilling Diana's cup at the counter when the husband approached and shot them both. Diana was killed. His wife took two shots to the head.

Their breathing skips. The blunt shock of it. Try to keep it together.

CAMP (cont'd)

And that's the difference between second degree murder, and a real sentence. The man is caught there on the premises, with the gun. And he could still walk... eventually. But he'd walk. Now there's something else we need to discuss at this point.

(MORE)

CAMP (cont'd)
 This may be a capital case -- a death
 penalty case. We may go for death in
 this case.

(eyes them)
 I need to know your feelings.

They sink back in their seats.

JOJO
 Jesus Christ.

CAMP
 (nods)
 JoJo.

JOJO
 ...I...oh, Jesus, I don't...I don't know.
 Christ.

CAMP
 Ben.

BEN
 (calmly)
 Absolutely. Absolutely.

JOJO
 -- I just want it over.

BEN
 --No. No, I want him eviscerated. I
 want him strung up and ripped apart.

JOJO
 --Jesus, Ben.

BEN
 What, Josephine? She asked. She asked,
 and I'm telling her.

JOJO
 We never-- we never agreed to that.

BEN
 We never had to.

JOE
 Is it...Do we really need to decide right
 now?

CAMP
 (gingerly)
 It's ultimately the decision of the DA's
 office. I just want you to be aware that
 if we decide to go for death, it may not
 be so easy to do.

BEN
 What is the death penalty here?

CAMP
 Gas.

BEN

Shit.

(thinks)

Is it better for us if he shot her first?

Jojo eyes Ben like she doesn't even recognize him.

JOJO

---Ben, Jesus Christ---

CAMP

I'm afraid that's hard to prove.

BEN

...What kind of guy is that? Who would do that?

Camp's at a loss.

BEN (cont'd)

He had to kill somebody?...is he that crazy? Why her? Why didn't he just kill his wife first?...Why did he have to kill our daughter?

Silence. Finally,

CAMP

Because she was there.

They sit, not sure which muscles to move next. Finally,

BEN

(closing a meeting)

We have your numbers?

CAMP

(eyes him oddly)

...Feel free to call...call me at any time.

They rise awkwardly, begin to file out.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY -- NIGHT

Joe steps out of the bathroom in shorts and a tee-shirt for bed, hits the light off -- only to find Ben and JoJo standing in the hall awaiting turns, leaning against the walls for support. He hesitates, leans along with them. Silence. No one wants to move. Finally,

JOJO

What...is it?

They're silent.

JOJO (cont'd)

...It's like we're waiting for something to happen...

Nods of recognition.

JOJO (cont'd)
...Suspense.

Long beat. At last,

JOE
...Good night.

JOJO
...'Night, Joe...

Joe moves for Diana's bedroom.

BEN
...Don't you worry about us, we're okay.

Joe nods, gently closes the door behind him.

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Joe FLICKS the bedside princess lamp on, revealing the room we've only seen snippets of before now -- four poster bed, teenage writing desk, trinkets, floral wallpaper -- a time capsule from Diana's teenage years at home. Easing onto the bed, Joe gazes about, eyes his surroundings uneasily, awash with confusion. Notices a strap peeking out beneath his feet from under the bed -- slides out his packed DUFFEL, stares at guiltily at it, conflicted...

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Dark now. Faint dappled moonlight spilling in the windows, picking out Joe's sleeping features. A BREEZE suddenly wafts through, kicking up the window sheers, stirring Joe. A princess phone RINGS beside him. Through drowsy lids, he reaches for it, noticing -- it's UNPLUGGED. The RINGING continues. Thinking nothing of it, he sleepily connects the cord, lifts the receiver, eyes settling on

DIANA

who stands across the room now. She gazes at the duffel bag. Slowly TURNS and looks at him with a sad, confused expression, voice compressed as if over a long distance line.

DIANA
Joe?...

ON JOE

heart stopped.

BEN (O.S.)
Joe?...

CLOSE ON BEN

leaning over the bed, nudging --

BEN (CONT'D)
-- Joe.

Joe starts awake. The room is light, though it's still early. Ben looks haggard, likely hasn't slept, pajamas wrinkled, a scattered urgency about him.

JOE
(clearing the cobwebs)
..wha--

BEN
I...we...I need a hand. I think we forgot something...
(mutters to himself)
...Gotta still be there -- have to --
(sinks)
-- unless they already went...

JOE
--What is it?

BEN
(swallows)
The invitations. We forgot the wedding invitations.

Joe tries to follow.

BEN (cont'd)
(anguished)
...I never called the shop. They had the master guest list, plan was they'd send them out directly.

JOE
Don't you think they'd--

BEN
-- Never assume. First rule of business. You saw the salesgirl, she looked stoned.
(sinks)
I can't...I just don't want everyone getting them now...not now...it would just, it would just be too uncomfortable.

JOE
(calming him)
Sure...

BEN
I gotta meet someone at nine, and then the -- Jesus, the DA at eleven...
(the impossibility of it)
The DA...

JOE
-- Ben, I got it --

BEN
-- You think could you get over there?

JOE
No problem.

BEN
Thanks, Joe.

He rises anxiously, crosses to the door, hesitates.

BEN (CONT'D)
(the invites)
...It would just be too uncomfortable.

Joe nods. Ben notices the duffel.

BEN (cont'd)
...You know there's drawers there in the
bottom of the bureau...

He crosses to Diana's dresser, slides open a drawer, begins
to remove some of Diana's things.

BEN (cont'd)
You want me to make a little room for
you? Here, let me--

JOE
(shocked)
-- No, no, Ben...it's fine.

BEN
You sure?

JOE
(nods)
Thanks.

Ben nods, fights a smile for Joe, exits. OFF Joe,

EXT. TOWN STREET -- DAY

Joe, in pants and hastily thrown on shirt, walks Nixon on
leash. A quiet commercial street typical of many North-
eastern towns -- few pedestrians at this early hour. As they
pass Joe, he finds it impossible to return their looks,
keeping his head down stiffly. A sweatsuit clad speed-walker
makes his way by.

SPEED-WALKER
Morning!

Nixon pukes.

EXT. STATIONERS -- DAY

Joe steps up to the shop, only to discover the front door
locked. Peers in -- it's dark, though an OPEN sign still
sits turned over. Checks his watch -- he's early. After a
beat, an idea. He tugs reluctant Nixon into motion, moves
on.

EXT. POST OFFICE -- DAY

A small storefront substation. Joe ambles up to the door,
reaches for the handle.

INT. POST OFFICE -- DAY

ON AN OVERHEAD BELL

as it CLATTERS over the door.

NIXON

steps through the door.

A TABBY CAT

SCREECHES now like a banshee on the counter as NIXON cowers, rearing back and THE CAT launches full-clawed extension at him as he BARKS furiously and JOE is suddenly caught in the crossfire, banging into the door in the eye of the fur-storm as

A POSTAL CLERK

calmly approaches the teller's window -- BERTIE KNOX, boyish mop of hair, features slightly askew --unconventional look for an unconventional personality.

BERTIE

-- Ray...

The CHAOS continues -- stringing Joe up into the corner.

BERTIE (CONT'D)

-- Ray, off.

No go -- the cat's all over Nixon.

BERTIE (CONT'D)

Fay Ray!!

No choice, she CLIMBS through the window, grabs him one handed, shoves him through an oversized mail SLOT on the wall. He MEWS testily from the other side. Nixon and Joe stand frozen, looking like hurricane victims.

BERTIE (CONT'D)

Sorry about that...Ray likes boys. A lot.

She nods at the dog.

BERTIE (CONT'D)

He gonna live?

Joe collects himself. Nixon's another story.

JOE

(amazed)

He's never moved that fast in his life.

BERTIE

Ray doesn't get much company.

She waves some fur from the air.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
What can I do you for.

JOE
Yeah, I, uh...hi. This is, I know this
is kinda strange, but...well, I
think you have some mail here...

BERTIE
(dry)
You think.

JOE
No, I mean...that I'm looking for.

She sizes him up.

BERTIE
Anything special you had in mind?
He eyes her squarely.

JOE
Wedding invitations.

BERTIE
...You want 'em back?

JOE
...I do.

BERTIE
What, you forget to lick the stamps?

Joe shifts, clearly uncomfortable. She senses this, doesn't
press him. Peers past him -- no other customers yet.

BERTIE (cont'd)
Alright...

She climbs back through the teller's window, turns back to
Joe who can only stand and watch in mild disbelief.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
(turns)
...Well, you coming or not?

No choice, he follows.

INT. SORTING ROOM -- DAY

Bertie picks Fay Ray out of a small parcel bin as Joe climbs
through. He follows her as she steers toward two massive
cloth BINS, each several feet in diameter, loaded with loose
mail.

JOE
You all alone here?

BERTIE
Why, what did you have in mind.

JOE
--What?--No, I...

BERTIE
District manager's been talking since
Christmas he's got subs coming in --
think he forgot. So it's just me and the
Bettys for now-- they're out on route.
We take turns -- butt behind the counter,
butt behind the wheel. Everyone seems
much happier when I'm not behind the
wheel, so...
(eyes him)
You're not from around here.

Joe shakes no.

BERTIE (cont'd)
Boy shortage. You notice.

She studies him, unlacing her shoes.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
So what, you 4-F? Flunk your medical?

JOE
(self-conscious)
Never called up.

BERTIE
Really. Got kind of a...slouch going
there.

JOE
(straightens)
No, I'm...it's...the shoes.

Bertie pulls her gumsoles off.

BERTIE
So now what? -- now that you've blown off
the wedding.

JOE
(how embarrassing can this
get?)
I'm just...trying to collect my
invitations.

BERTIE
Sure.
(nods at his shoes)
Better take 'em off. They hate it when
you leave scuff marks...

Joe watches oddly as, down to her socks, she CLIMBS into the
first bin, quickly knee-deep in mail. He cautiously slips
his shoes off. She motions him into the second bin.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
 Ever see that Lucy episode where she's in
 this big vat stomping grapes, making
 wine? Think of that every time I climb
 in. Pretend I'm in Italy...

He lets it go, gingerly eases himself in -- the mail beneath
 his feet an odd but not unpleasant sensation.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
 ...Feeling Italian?

JOE
 Not just yet.

BERTIE
 Give it a sec. Okay -- any particular
 color we're looking for?

JOE
 ...Pink. I think.

BERTIE
 Really. Your choice?

He shoots her a look.

BERTIE (cont'd)
 Scented?
 (another look)
 Hey, we get 'em all here.

She turns, starts to dig. Joe watches her retrieve the first
 one.

BERTIE (cont'd)
 -- Hello. Look familiar?

She holds it up for him, glancing at the RETURN NAME AND
 ADDRESS on the back for the first time as she does. Her
 expression falls with sudden recognition. Joe sees this.
 Bertie shifts her gaze to him. His eyes confirm it. Long
 beat.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
 ...How many?

JOE
 (quietly)
 Seventy-five.

She nods, wiping her hands, puffs up.

BERTIE
 ...All right, then. Thirty-eight to you,
 rest to me. You ready?

He nods -- surprised at her easy tone -- and somehow relaxed
 by it. As she dives back in, he follows. Two BUTTS bobbing
 up over the bin tops.

EXT. FLOSS REALTY -- A PAINT-SPLASHED LADDER -- DAY

teetering slightly.

A PAINTER IN COVERALLS

stands perched atop it, placing final touches on a business sign we can't make out past him as

JOE

approaches from down the street, loaded down with Nixon and the armload of invites. As he nears, his expression slackens, slowing as he finally gets a clear shot at

THE SIGN

the painter finishing the last letter, revealing: "FLOSS AND SON, COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES". Joe's face is a sheet as BEN emerges from the office, adrenalized. He spots Joe -- and the invitations.

BEN

(relieved)

Oh thank God... Joe, thanks for doing this.

(collects them)

Couldn't stand the painter up -- booked him three weeks ago, would've screwed up his whole schedule.

(follows Joe's look to the sign)

What do you think?

Joe's floored, somehow manages a nod.

JOE

It's...it's...wow.

BEN

(high rev)

--I got it all worked out. Few odds and ends we'll have to take care of to get started -- went ahead and booked a photo for us -- deposit from the wedding took care of the whole-- it's all set. Later, though.

(shrugs)

I just started thinking last night... maybe we're missing an opportunity here. There's work to be done. Maybe the best thing for us at this point is to just -- dive right in. We had a plan -- why not stick with it? I mean, what else are we going to do? Sit around? -- We'll go crazy. Stan Michaels, the shrink -- did you meet yesterday? --

Joe nods -- did he ever.

BEN (cont'd)

--He sees no problem with it. Activity -- very therapeutic. So -- I don't know...

(MORE)

BEN (cont'd)
 (suddenly weary)
 ...I mean, what else are you gonna do,
 right? Curl up and die? I just...
 (throat catches)
 ...I wouldn't want her to see us like
 that. Not like that...

He steels his chin. Joe looks away out of respect, eyes
 coming to rest on...

THE NEIGHBORS RESTAURANT

across the street. Two boarded up WINDOWS yet to be replaced
 from Diana's shooting.

JOE

peers closer as he makes out a

PACK OF EMPLOYEES

noses all pressed to the glass, peering over at him with
 maudlin fascination.

JOE

spooks them with a look.

THE EMPLOYEES

scramble, suddenly caught -- BUMPING into each other
 spastically as they move away from the window.

INT. FLOSS DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

Rainfall drums the roof overhead. Joe, Ben and JoJo sit
 silently at the table -- an odd new family portrait. Energy
 still boils just under Ben's surface. Delivery Chinese in
 front of them, untouched. The phone RINGS in the kitchen.

JOJO
 (without looking up)
 -- Don't do it...

Ben hesitates, but his Pavlovian response is winning...he
 slides his chair back sharply.

JOJO (cont'd)
 --Don't do it, Ben.

He hesitates...then rises.

JOJO (cont'd)
 Ben, you *don't* have to answer the phone --
 we do *not* need another wet blanket
 "dropping by".

He wavers. The RINGING continues, his body visibly drawn.

JOJO (cont'd)
 (finger pointed now)
 ...Benjamin...don't...

He can't help himself, MOVES quickly into the kitchen.

JOJO (cont'd)

(sighs)

The man is hopeless. You know he actually apologized to someone last week for picking up on the ninth ring? Uhhh! Wanna hang a goddamn banner over this place and tell everyone to beg off! Maybe t-shirts...what do you think?

Ben reenters before Joe can respond.

BEN

Ann Swanson, checking up.

JOJO

(disgusted)

"Checking up"...

BEN

I don't know what you're complaining about -- you were livid all day because the Carlsons didn't even ask about Diana.

JOJO

That's right.

BEN

Well which is it, Jo?

JOJO

Both, Benjamin! -- Pisses me off when they ask about her and it pisses me off when they don't -- and that's just the way it is, so there!

She suddenly CRACKS up, hearing herself. Joe joins in. Ben just shakes his head.

JOJO (CONT'D)

-- Oh, don't shake your head, Ben, you know you feel it, too.

BEN

Well, starting tomorrow, we're all gonna get a handle on it. I made some appointments for us.

JOJO

I beg your pardon.

BEN

A stop at the bank to close out Diana's paperwork -- Garfield's for the bridesmaids' returns -- we're gonna get back on our feet and come out swinging.

JOJO

(dry)

...You have all this typed up? An itinerary we can follow?

BEN

Joe and I are gonna get it started with a trip over to Danvers in the morning -- the Spring regional.

JOJO

Ben, are you serious?

BEN

Absolutely.

JOJO

You're not actually gonna subject him to that.

JOE

(suddenly concerned)
...This is what?

BEN

Mulcahey's still out there, Josephine-- that's opportunity. If I don't move now, those yellow coat bastards will. I was this close before to landing him. Time to see the boys.

The DOORBELL sounds. They all flinch reflexively, product of days of intrusions. Ben leaps out of his seat.

JOJO

Jesus Christ -- WE'RE NOT HOME.

Ben hustles for the door. JoJo watches him ruefully.

JOJO (cont'd)

You know he'd kill himself to get that.

Low sound of voices at the door, then --

BEN (O.S.)

(calls out)
Joe...someone at the door for you.

Joe looks at JoJo innocently -- not expecting anyone.

INT. ENTRYWAY -- CONTINUING

as Joe enters from the dining room, slows, face reflecting his surprise as he sees

BERTIE

standing in the doorway, dripping wet in her postal uniform, no rain gear. She greets him with a nod as she reaches into a pocket and produces...

BERTIE

(proudly)
...Seventy-five.

A WEDDING INVITE. Joe's floored.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
You forgot one.

CLOSE ON JOJO

as she settles in the b.g. with Ben, eyes SHIFTING between Joe and Bertie, clocking Joe's behavior.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
Address was on the back. Thought
you'd...want it.

Joe nods, feeling a flush come over his face. Awkward silence as they all await introductions. Finally,

BERTIE (cont'd)
(waves to Ben and JoJo)
-- Hi, Bertie Knox.

JOE
(befuddled)
Oh, I'm sorry -- this is...Bertie works
at the...

BERTIE
-- I sling stamps down at the P.O. We've
never actually met -- I'm your route
manager.

Ben and JoJo nod politely, at a loss.

BERTIE (cont'd)
Helped Joe here do some bin diving -- dug
up your invites -- really excellent paper
selection...
(dips her eyes)
...I'm sorry we couldn't complete the
postal cycle for you.

They nod again, speechless. Bertie fingers the invite.

BERTIE (cont'd)
So you want this or what?

Joe snaps out of it, takes the invite as thunder BOOMS
outside.

JOE
...thanks.

Bertie hikes up her collar.

BERTIE
Was nice meeting you.

BEN
Wait...you're not on foot, are you?

INT. BEN'S LTD -- MOVING -- NIGHT

WIPERS beat out a steady rhythm. SILENCE otherwise. Joe's
at the wheel, Bertie shotgun.

Her hair and clothes are soaked through now, small pool forming beneath her. The oddest tension -- like they're unchaperoned. Finally...

BERTIE
...I'm dripping, Joe.

JOE
...Oh...it's no...
(shrugs)
...It's no problem.

BERTIE
No problem for you -- it's not your car.

JOE
Exactly.

They smile. More silence. Wipers. She runs her hand along the faux leather.

BERTIE
Nice people. So, what, you live there?

JOE
...No, I...well, yeah. Sort of.

BERTIE
You don't.

JOE
No, I -- for now, yeah.

BERTIE
Just the three of you.

JOE
...Yeah.

BERTIE
Isn't that kinda weird?

Joe's disarmed by her directness again.

JOE
...Yeah. It is.

He almost looks relieved, the honesty of this. Bertie gathers her feet under her.

BERTIE
How long you staying?

JOE
...Don't know.

BERTIE
You call them Mom and Dad?

JOE
...No.

BERTIE
They call you Son?

JOE
Not yet.

BERTIE
What do you talk about?

JOE
...Mostly? Diana.

BERTIE
God, doesn't that make you sad?

His eyes find her for the first time. Hold each other's look
-- then,

BERTIE (cont'd)
So what are you doing now?

JOE
Well, I...
(in confidence)
...I don't know, was thinking I might go
back to school.

BERTIE
Really. I meant the next hour.

JOE
(suddenly exposed)
--Oh--oh, I --

BERTIE
I thought you were working for her father-
- didn't I see the sign?...

JOE
--Yeah, no, that's right. I am.
Working with Ben. Yep. New sign.

BERTIE
...So no school.

JOE
No, I just -- I think maybe later, I
might...you know...segue.

She studies him, smelling much under the surface here.

BERTIE
You a secrets guy, Joe?

JOE
(shifts uncomfortably)
...Secrets?

BERTIE
Cause if you are, you aren't very good at
them.

She smiles knowingly. He flushes several shades.

BERTIE (cont'd)
So. Commercial real estate.

JOE
Commercial real estate.

He nods. She nods. Beat.

BERTIE
What the hell does that mean, anyway?

JOE
--I have no idea.

They both CRACK up.

BERTIE
And this...this is what you want to do.

JOE
...Not really.

BERTIE
Ah. And what *do* you want to do?

Beat. He meets her eyes, guard finally down.

JOE
Want to figure out what I want to do.

She smiles. An honest answer.

BERTIE
So you're kinda in escrow at the moment.
--Real estate term.

JOE
Yeah, recognize that one.

BERTIE
Yeah...hey you know what, Joe?

JOE
What?

BERTIE
You just passed my stop.

He SLAMS on the brakes, skidding a bit loudly. Self-conscious smile as he throws it in reverse. The car comes to a stop beneath --

EXT. CAL'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Time worn BAR, weathered NEON sign.

JOE
...This?

BERTIE
You coming in?

He's thrown.

JOE
--Uh, no...no, thanks, I...

BERTIE
I'm buying.

JOE
No, I'm...I gotta...

He nods get back. Their eyes meet a final time. Weird spark.

BERTIE
Well. Good luck in escrow, Joe.

JOE
Good luck to you...Burt.

She quickly covers her name tag, smiles as she rolls out the door without looking back. Joe can't help but watch as she throws back the heavy front door, MUSIC pouring out, and disappears inside. He doesn't move, stuck sitting with the opportunity he just passed up. Suddenly throws the gear into park...then throws it back out again. Long beat, then he reluctantly lets the brake out.

HIGH OVERHEAD

as his car slowly recedes, a small set of headlights on the street's empty horizon...

JOE (CONT'D)
(muffled inside)
--DAMNIT!!!

INT. PORTRAIT SHOP -- DAY

CLOSE ON PHOTO

a formal wedding portrait of a young COUPLE posed stiffly for their photographer -- a fairly unremarkable one, from the look of the final product.

WIDER

to reveal a small SEA of similar portraits on display, all with tux-and-veil couples in fairly identical poses, bride seated, groom at her side. Clearly this shop's core business.

JOE

sits among these, eyeing them with concern as BEN suddenly edges into frame beside him, standing.

BEN
(brightly)
Okay, then.

PHOTOGRAPHER (O.S.)
Little tighter.

REVEAL they're in the middle of what this shop considers its shooting space -- and they're the subjects. Both in blazers now. Ben nudges Joe up enthusiastically.

BEN
Here, Joe -- you get up here next to me.

As Joe rises, the PHOTOGRAPHER grows befuddled beside his studio camera.

PHOTOGRAPHER
Wait, he's not gonna sit?

BEN
(beams)
Partners stand.

PHOTOGRAPHER
I'm not sure I can --

BEN
Sure you can -- just...point yourself
right up here.

He adjusts Joe's blazer, squares his own shoulders to camera, then --

BEN (cont'd)
--Wait--

Ben leans in to OVERLAP Joe and create what's suddenly a recognizable image -- the classic REAL ESTATE PARTNER POSE.

BEN (cont'd)
--Perfect.

FLASH. And CUT TO--

A SEA OF PUFFY FACES

middle aged, mostly male, captured in open-mouthed, back-slapping GREETINGS -- a raucous, overwhelming sight bordering on the obnoxious -- and louder than hell.

DROP WIDER

to REVEAL we're

INT. CONFERENCE BALLROOM -- DAY

the Holiday Inn's finest. Placard overhead identifying the "15TH ANNUAL MID-EASTERN COMMERCIAL REALTORS CONFERENCE". Two hundred bodies. Some already rolling with the pre-noon cocktails.

And conspicuous among them -- a pocket of brokers in ubiquitous matching YELLOW sport coats with NextCentury logo patches.

AT THE DOOR

Ben and Joe step inside. Joe visibly struggles, overwhelmed by the throng. Ben's got a brave face plastered-on, bordering on the sunny, revealing nothing of the previous week's hell.

BEN
(to Joe, never taking eyes off
the crowd)
...Presentation. All in the eyes. Your's
just have to lie better than theirs...

As Ben leads him through the crowd, Joe notices a bank of NextCentury placards, complete with the familiar glowing PORTRAIT of the two agents in yellow coats and confident postures -- and suddenly realizes he just copied it.

TANNER (O.S.)
-- Ben?

They stop, turn to find a group of five BROKERS huddled over Bloody Marys whose expressions say it all -- utter SHOCK at seeing Ben back already.

BEN
(brightly)
Hey -- guys.

He ushers Joe over.

TANNER
(polyester, tan, clearly
uncomfortable)
...I...thought that was you.

BEN
Hard to miss this mug, huh?

TANNER
...Listen, I'm...real sorry about
everything...

BEN
Ah, hell, you let 'em get you down,
they've beat you twice, right?

The others smile weakly, clearly uncomfortable. Little eye contact.

BEN (cont'd)
Listen -- guys -- want you to meet my--
(catches himself)
my son-in-law, Joe Nast...

Joe REACTS to the introduction.

BEN (cont'd)
...Joe's just come on as my associate.

JOE
...Hello...

Joe forces himself to nod and meet their darting glances -- sharing a look that tells them he's as uncomfortable as they are.

BEN
Figured meeting you bastards was all the trial by fire he needs...

More polite half-smiles.

BEN (cont'd)
So. See NextCentury's out in force, huh?
Nice of 'em to send ushers.
(off their uncomfortable smiles)
Listen, we're gonna go steal a cup of coffee before kickoff, we'll see you guys in a sec.

He steers Joe away. Tanner nods at the others, breaks away from the group and catches up with Ben.

BEN (CONT'D)
Hey, Tanner...

TANNER
(gingerly, clearly uncomfortable)
...Good to see you Ben. Must say I'm...glad to see you're doing so well...

BEN
Ready to get to it, Tan. So what do you hear about Mulcahey? Anything last week?

TANNER
Oh, he's serious. Word is his appetite's growing...this thing sounds big, whatever it is. And from what the guys tell me, he's liking your area -- the demographics or some such bullshit. He was asking about you.

BEN
Me? Not the Turd Coats?

TANNER
You.

Ben beams, pumps his arm victoriously. Then,

BEN
What do you think? Greek?

TANNER
Italian. Northern.

INT. "MIO MILANO" RESTAURANT -- DAY

As advertised -- overly atmospheric Northern Italian, stuffy prices. Drinks are dropped off at a window table where Ben and Joe are seated with MIKE MULCAHEY, manicured developer, early 50's, imperious.

MULCAHEY

Kind of thing scares the hell out of me.
Have a daughter of my own that age, I
can't even imagine...

(eyes Joe)

I'm awfully sorry for you, young man.

Before Joe can respond,

BEN

-- Well, Joe and I finally came to a
decision. If work can give us just one
more reason to get up in the morning,
then damned if we aren't gonna jump back
in full steam...

Mulcahey nods thoughtfully, turns his eye back on Joe.

MULCAHEY

And what's your interest in all this?

JOE

(thrown)

....Beg your pardon?

MULCAHEY

The business.

JOE

(on the spot)

Well...actually I'm...Ben actually came
up with the idea for me to...collaborate
with him -- after we, after Diana decided
we should move back to live. It was
really his idea...their idea.

BEN

(laughs)

It was your idea.

JOE

It was...my idea.

MULCAHEY

You studied the market in school?

JOE

...Uh...no, ultimately.

MULCAHEY

Business degree?

JOE

Not...complete, no.

Mulcahey focuses in with interest. Ben's sweating it out.

MULCAHEY

And you see this as your future.

JOE

...I think so...I hope so... Actually, sir, I haven't really...had a chance to think through all the ramifications of a life in commercial real estate.

MULCAHEY

(eases off)

Well, understandable -- you've certainly had plenty on your mind lately.

BEN

-- Which is why Joe and I are both anxious to jump in and roll up our sleeves, Mike. Time to channel all this...scattered energy toward something positive -- like this project of yours we keep hearing about...

Expectant pause. Mulcahey turns, bores in on Joe.

MULCAHEY

Joe, what kind of man do you take me for?

Joe's stomach sinks. Ben pales.

MULCAHEY (cont'd)

A prisoner of history?

JOE

Not...on appearance.

MULCAHEY

Mired in convention?

JOE

I'm...I'm guessing no.

MULCAHEY

Joe, I am your brother. I am younger than you, and I'm a man of your time.

Joe's really uncomfortable now.

MULCAHEY (cont'd)

And what do we brothers lack?

JOE

So...many things.

MULCAHEY

One thing. One.

(nods)

Time. If I have to step back into my automobile and drive a city block to purchase spirits after patronizing my local hardware dealer, only to then find myself back behind the wheel scratching my ass in search of a fine florist for the wife, then I have been robbed, Joe.

(MORE)

MULCAHEY (cont'd)
I have been denied convenience...my town
turned my prison.

Joe nods, helpless here.

MULCAHEY (cont'd)
Solution? Be a man of the time, not a
thief of it. Service my needs, but be
gracious enough to house them all under
one roof. Don't squander my future.

BEN
One roof?

MULCAHEY
One roof. One vendor. One point of
purchase. An entire town's needs.

BEN
So separate stores --

MULCAHEY
One store.

BEN
(reeling)
You're talking all of main street
retail...

MULCAHEY
Reborn.

JOE
That is remarkable.

MULCAHEY
It's necessity. See, Mom and Pop fell
asleep with the gas on. They're over,
that's done. Town like yours is gonna
survive, it's gotta be revolution. Joe
knows this -- he and his brothers on the
streets...

(Ben and Joe exchange looks,
Mulcahey bores in)
Now, I'm sitting here with you cause,
truth is, I can't tell those NextCentury
bastards apart. Don't prove me wrong.
(Ben nods solemnly)
There's a piece in it for you, if you're
up to it. So it's one simple question.
Can you deliver?

Off Ben, as he tries to contain his excitement,

EXT. FRONT STREET -- DAY

BEN
God damn that feels good...

Ben and Joe hoof down the main commercial block of town,
Ben's step slightly more bouncy than normal. Joe tries to
share his enthusiasm as Ben playfully cuffs him.

BEN (CONT'D)
 --Huh?? HUH??

JOE
 (smiles, forced)
 --Hey, hey.

BEN
 You have no idea how long it's been --
 one goddamned break. These people -- I
 didn't drag my family up here to get shut
 out year after year, but that is exactly
 what they've done to me, Joe. All of
 them. Well, I may not be a native, but
 let me tell you --this is my time.

JOE
 (scans the litter of small
 shops and businesses)
 So all these stores?

BEN
 (with an edge)
 Gone. Unrecognizable. A block buy.

He gestures to a small handful of darkened or vacant storefronts.

BEN (cont'd)
 Now I know I can deliver three or four of
 these parcels immediately, they're
 already dead -- Chapter 11's,
 foreclosures. That's one-stop shopping
 before our second cup of coffee. Please,
 that's nothing. The rest...

He smiles meaningfully at Joe.

JOE
 ...And they'd really go that easily?
 They'd just...

They slow up in front of a small SMOKE SHOP. Ben smiles.

BEN
 You watch.

Joe follows him inside.

INT. SMOKE SHOP -- DAY

Time frozen -- somebody's great-grandfather lovingly started
 this place. OLD SALT behind the counter, nose in the paper --
 gazes up as Ben and Joe step in.

BEN
 Hello Sam.

Sam turns, gazes at Ben with hazy recognition -- then his
 eyes flicker with awareness, drop awkwardly out of respect.

SAM
 ...Ben.

BEN
Been a while, huh? Boy...

Sam nods, awkward silence, then,

SAM
(clears throat)
...I'm...sorry for your
troubles...that's...that's just...

Ben eases him with an appropriately sober nod.

BEN
Thanks, Sam. Sam, this is Joe, my
daughter's fiance...just thought
I'd...I'm just trying to give him a taste
of her hometown.

JOE
(respectful)
Hello.

Sam nods, shakes his hand, can't make eye contact -- too
painful. They stand there for a moment, taking it in.

BEN
Mm. Boy. Come in here, really wonder
what I've been missing. You a smoker
Joe?

That question again -- Joe shakes no.

BEN (cont'd)
Nice fat cigar...

Sam crosses up to a glass case filled with a wide variety,
reaches inside a fine wooden box and selects a couple of
Hondurans. Gently holds them out for the guys.

SAM
(eyes averted)
...Please. The least I can do...

Ben and Joe accept them, touched by the gesture.

BEN
...Thanks Sam.

JOE
...Thank you.

SAM
...Such a shame...

Joe looks away -- the guy's breaking his heart.

BEN
So. Quiet day huh?

SAM
Most are.

BEN
Guess more and more so lately, huh?

Sam's silence says so.

BEN (cont'd)
So how's your year going, Sam?

Sam's expression slowly shifts, eyes drifting up to Ben, studying him for the first time.

SAM
...Same as everyone's, I guess.

BEN
Whole world's taking a beating. Whole damn world. Just takes the fight out of you, doesn't it? But then you've had quite a run, haven't you Sam?...

Sam holds his look, as if seeing Ben now for the first time. No expression.

BEN (CONT'D)
God, I can remember sneaking in a place like this when I was a runt -- could barely see over the counter, and here I was trying to bum my first cigarette --
(laughs)
-- You're so great, Sam, you probably would've --

SAM
(flat, no emotion)
How much.

ON Ben -- eyes slowly shifting to meet Sam's...truth baldly on the table now...

EXT. TOWN OVERLOOK -- DAY

CLOSE ON A MATCH STRIKE

As Ben and Joe sit on a bench overlooking town, surveying the kingdom. Ben inexpertly lights a cigar, helps Joe with his. Round of COUGHS. They squint through thick smoke.

BEN
...Now...guarantee, they won't all fall that easy. Have to do our homework...

Joe nods through a grimaced face.

BEN (cont'd)
...Tax rolls...comps...get a pretty quick picture of who's vulnerable. Plan of attack...

They HACK away together, bodies bending.

BEN (cont'd)
You know...I've never had one of these?

JOE
--Me neither.

They HACK some more, fight to catch their breath.

BEN
Nice, huh?

JOE
Mmm.

BEN
(settles back)
Whatever you do, don't tell JoJo. God, I
was on her for years about her
smoking...I'd never hear the end of it.

Joe's reassuring nod. Ben regards him. Sad smile.

BEN (CONT'D)
...You know, this was how I had it.

Joe doesn't follow.

BEN (cont'd)
...In my head.

JOE
Your head...

BEN
(nods)
...The pictures. You know... son-in-
law...first cigar...couple beers once in
a while.

Joe nods, averts his gaze. A breeze picks up, skies
darkening.

BEN (cont'd)
Sometimes you...you just need a little
break, you know? New face. Someone to
bounce it around with...

Joe feels an over-share coming on.

BEN (cont'd)
Jo and I...we don't really socialize too
much anymore. Just us. Just on each
other, you know?... Same face in your
face...thirty years... Forget what the
other pillow even looks like empty.

Joe nods. This is getting weird.

BEN (cont'd)
And, let's face it, Jo's...well, she's
really the more verbal one...likes
to...fill the air up a bit. And I...I
like to give her that.

JOE
Sure...

BEN
(smiles)
So here you guys come -- I figure I
finally got a shot at having *someone* to
talk to...

Joe smiles back, genuine compassion for the man. Beat, then,

BEN (cont'd)
She ever...she ever talk about me, Joe?

JOE
Diana? I...sure... nothing...in
particular, but...sure, Ben.

Ben nods quietly. The breeze picks up. Finally,

BEN
(flatly)
I know something wasn't right.

Joe eyes him unsurely. Ben won't look him in the eye.

BEN (cont'd)
...She asked me to meet her. I was
supposed to meet her there at the
counter, Joe.

JOE
(floored)
...you?...

BEN
(nods)
She said she had to talk -- we really
needed to talk, I don't know. Jesus, I
haven't -- don't tell Jo, please -- it'd
kill her. I was supposed to meet her --
I was across the street in the office,
and I don't know...
(shakes his head)
...some phone call...
(falls off)

JOE
(blanched)
...Did she say anything?

BEN
(shakes no)
I just know something wasn't right. I
know there was something wrong with us.
Had been for a while. Jesus God, please
don't tell JoJo this.

Joe nods. Ben finally drapes an appreciative arm around
Joe's shoulder.

BEN (cont'd)
I'm glad you're here, Joe.

He places his cigar back in his mouth. Joe slowly follows, as they sit side by side...

INT. FLOSS HOME -- DUSK

THUNDER booms outside as Ben and Joe hustle in the front door, coats over their heads, escaping the beginning of a downpour.

INT. KITCHEN -- DUSK

They enter, slowing as they take in a real eye-opener: the breakfast table, walls and cupboards above it are plastered with INDEX CARDS taped haphazardly about, all of them BLANK. JoJo is seated in the midst of the chaos, staring at a blank card in front of her, pen in hand. She gazes up at them calmly, an unapologetic expression. Ben and Joe stand dumbfounded. The phone RINGS upstairs. The kitchen line's been freshly RIPPED out.

JOJO
(smiles, knows him so well)
Phone, Ben.

He nods, speechless, still can't help himself, has to answer it. Races for it. Joe stands his ground. JoJo goes back to her blank card, concentrating.

JOJO (CONT'D)
I need help, Joe.

Joe hesitates, unsure how to take her remark.

JOJO (cont'd)
Sit.

He edges forward, sits beside her. She stares at the blank card.

JOJO (cont'd)
I'm hearing so much shit...so much fluff,
I'm starting to lose sight of her.
Already. The phrase "filled with
goodness" actually passed through my
brain today. I need to purge, Joe.

Ben bounds down the stairs, reenters with purpose, almost winded.

JOJO (cont'd)
...Yes, Benjamin?

BEN
That was Cheryl. She's on her way over.

JOJO
What?

BEN
Don't look at me -- you're the one who
promised her some of Diana's things.

JOJO
A mere moment of weakness. She's
actually coming to collect?

BEN
And she's bringing friends.

JOJO
Unbelievable.
(turns to Joe)
So. She try to jump you yet?

BEN
--Josephine!

JOJO
-- What?? You said yourself you've never
trusted her, Benjamin. Only reason we
tolerate the little tart is Diana somehow
took pity on her...
(snorts)
God, that girl could do many things, but
she could not pick her friends...

BEN
Oh come on, Cheryl's not that bad...
Okay, yes, she may be a bit over
dramatic, a bit... socially overwhelming -
- but you can't blame her under the
circumstances.

JOJO
Yes you can.

BEN
(without hesitation)
Yes you can. She is a bitch, isn't she?

They HOWL with laughter.

JOJO
Yes!! Benjamin Floss, ladies and
gentleman...

She throws her arms around him.

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

CLOTHES PART

on a closet rack to reveal CHERYL, eyes scrutinizing as if
she were in a boutique. Two other young FRIENDS poke around
the room behind her.

IN THE HALLWAY

JoJo arrives up the stairs with a cup of tea. Joe peers in
with amazement.

JOJO
(on the pass)
Oh look...the vultures have landed...

She slides past him into the room, parks herself on the bed.

CHERYL
(combing the selection)
God, just makes you want to cry, looking
at all these...

JOJO
(aside)
Please do.

CHERYL
Every one just reminds me of -- God, I
wouldn't know which to take.

JOJO
You'll manage.

CHERYL
Her jacket, I guess...God, she wore this
all the time -- we were together when she
bought it...

She handles a beautiful LEATHER JACKET toward the back of the
closet.

OTHER FRIEND
(moving in)
No, no, I was there -- you're thinking
of the canvas.

CHERYL
No, it was definitely the leather -- I
remember exactly.

JOJO

eyes a young woman next to her, perusing Diana's shelf,
reaching for --

JOJO
Uh! -- not the watch. Leave the watches.
(squints suspiciously)
...Do I know you?

YOUNG WOMAN
(awkwardly)
I'm Caroline...

JOJO
Caroline who?

CAROLINE
Davis.

JOJO
And you knew Diana?

CAROLINE
(nods)
We were in BlueJays together?...

JoJo lets out a disgusted SIGH, sinks back into the headboard.

INT. CHERYL'S CAR -- MOVING -- NIGHT

Cheryl at the wheel, driving distractedly in Diana's LEATHER JACKET. Joe sinks deep into the passenger seat beside her, clearly on edge.

JOE
Look, Cheryl, this is -- this is very nice of you, but I don't wanna leave those guys f--

CHERYL
---If you're not comfortable, we'll leave -- we'll go. I just think you need a chance to get out of there. That whole house is like under this black pail...

He eyes her in wonder. "Pail".

JOE
...Can we just keep this short?

CHERYL
Whatever you want, tonight's about you.

Joe nods dryly as she pulls them up to the curb. He looks up at their destination with sudden recognition...

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Cheryl leads Joe into the bar he's only seen the outside of. Ty's behind the bar, business a little brisker for once. Joe's eyes search the darkened space, searching a bit expectantly for a certain familiar face. His discomfort grows as Cheryl takes his arm and steers him over to a couple GIRLFRIENDS huddled on barstools like a trophy.

GIRLS
(call out)
-- Hey guys!...Hey!...

CHERYL
(squeezing his arm)
Guys, this is Joe.

GIRLS
(a somber chorus of understanding)
Hey...

CHERYL
Joe has been keeping me together through this whole thing...

Half-baked nod from Joe, feeling the side-show freak -- and the unmistakable beginnings of another anxiety attack coming on. Immediately looks for an escape.

CHERYL (CONT'D)

...I don't know what I would've done
without him...

JOE

--Excuse me.

He bolts, makes a panicked bee-line for the

BACK WALL

the opposite corner, where he finds himself at the jukebox, grabs hold of it for support, checking his breathing. Feeling looks, he makes a show of digging into his pocket for change, absently scanning titles without seeing a word. Finally dropping a coin in, he closes his eyes to calm himself, blindly punches a selection. As the disc slots in, the first notes of music draw a REACTION from the room behind him. The Rolling Stone's sultry *Moonlight Mile* fills the room. Unaware, he finally turns, finds himself staring at a roomful of LOOKS, as from the back --

BERTIE (O.S.)

--Jesus, girl can't even pee without you
guys --

BERTIE

enters from the back, strapping her apron on -- And it's then that she sees WHO'S at the jukebox. And whose expression is more shocked -- it's impossible to call. Joe takes Bertie in, the bar apron -- and, thrust into the spotlight, she has no choice but to slowly make her way toward him. His eyes grow in amazement as she draws near, and, without explanation, slowly SLIPS her arms around his neck, speechless for once. Both of their faces explode crimson now -- beet RED -- Joe absolutely clueless as to what's going on. All of Bertie's former bravado has melted away now as she slowly begins to move, a vulnerability now. Stunned, Joe follows. Not a word. They can barely make eye contact, it's so intimate. And

THE CROWD

sees it all. The bartender and Cheryl each take note, studying the two, the body language. Cheryl's expression darkens. Not a sound from anyone as the music alone fills the space...

JOE'S HANDS

hover over Bertie's back, too stunned to land yet.

THEIR FACES

are turned out from each other, yet so close as Bertie's head hovers over his chest. Each taking in their audience as they slowly revolve. Finally,

JOE

(under his breath to her)
...What did I do?

BERTIE
 (whispers back)
 ...You played my song.

They dance...Bertie slowly letting her head come to rest on his chest, Joe closing his eyes to block out the sea of faces staring back -- their bodies thrown into confusion, so close, but so under the microscope... And as the song winds down --

INT. BAR -- BACK HALLWAY -- NIGHT

Joe, alone again, lurches down the hall toward the co-ed bathroom, only to find it LOCKED. Anxiety attack really kicking in again, he desperately scans for a rear exit -- none in sight -- can't risk returning to the main room -- finally reaches for the only other option -- the

INT. SUPPLY CLOSET -- CONTINUING

He cracks it open, quickly steps inside -- smack into --

BERTIE

who jumps, stifles a scream as JOE almost leaps out of his skin. They're suddenly inches from each other again, trace of wetness on Bertie's cheeks. Both try to capture their BREATHING as they gaze at each other in shock, lit from the glow of a small nightlight.

JOE
 --I'm sorry --

BERTIE
 --No...it's okay...

JOE
 --I should've knocked...

BERTIE
 (wipes her cheek)
 ...On the closet?

They have to smile. Joe's expression suddenly falters -- he still can't catch his breath.

JOE
 ...ho, shit...

BERTIE
 ...It's okay...you're safe. They won't find you here...

His eyes meet hers gratefully -- a recognition between them. He breathes easier.

JOE
 (nods outside)
 ...What was...what was that?

BERTIE
 Old habits.
 (feels his look)
 (MORE)

BERTIE (cont'd)
I'm a source of entertainment, in case
you hadn't noticed.

He eyes her bar apron.

JOE
You, uh...

BERTIE
Work here...

JOE
...Yeah.

BERTIE
...Not in the closet.

JOE
No...

BERTIE
(nods)
...I help out.

JOE
...Your place?

BERTIE
Friend's.

JOE
You work every night?

Small nod.

JOE (cont'd)
...Must be a good friend.

She breaks their look, adjusts her apron.

BERTIE
So you come back for that drink?

JOE
The dancing, actually.

BERTIE
Hey, you had your shot.

Lovely smiles between them. Pregnant beat, then Bertie
breaks her gaze, eyes falling on the closet...

BERTIE (CONT'D)
Well, this...closets tend to work better
for one, so I'll--

JOE
(tenses)
-- Wait? Please...
(suddenly vulnerable)
I don't think I can go back out there.

BERTIE
(calming)
...It's okay...you don't have to.

JOE
...I just...I can't...

BERTIE
...I know...It's alright...

She meets his eyes, speaks with disarming clarity.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
...Everything you're feeling, I'm feeling too.

Joe's breath skips. He eyes her, suddenly emboldened --

JOE
If I told you something, would you--

TY (O.S.)
--Bertie! Dying out here.

She quickly straightens,

BERTIE
--Shit, I gotta go.

She wipes her face one last time.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
(smiles)
...Snot check?

He reaches out, gently wipes lightly at her nose. It's clear neither wants to part. Finally,

BERTIE (cont'd)
(blurts)
You can come back tomorrow if you want --

And she's gone, slipping out quickly, closing the door behind her. Drawing a deep breath, Joe eases back against the shelves, squeezes his eyes closed. What is happening to him? As he opens them, they settle on...

SNAPSHOTS

tacked humbly in the corner by a bank calendar, a small picture shrine of sorts: BERTIE in the bearish arms of a local fellow in a CAL'S PLACE t-shirt, "OWN-HER" playfully black-markered on it. Another -- where she's on his shoulders, both pointing proudly to the tavern window and CAL'S PLACE sign.

ON JOE

as the nickel finally drops...

EXT. FLOSS HOME -- NIGHT

WIDE -- as Joe is dropped off. He steps out of Cheryl's idling car, and before he can even say a word, she PEELS away angrily. Spurned.

INT. FLOSS HOME -- MORNING

Joe silently slips down to the foot of the stairs, trying not to make a sound. He stops short at the sight in the kitchen beyond -- Ben, seated on a stool in the middle of the room, a kitchen towel draped over his dress shirt -- and JoJo, delicately trimming wisps of hair in his ears with sewing scissors. Both silent, bodies bowed, a moment of primal care. Joe takes them in with a visible twinge of guilt, then silently slips past.

INT. FLOSS LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Mona Camp sits with the family. JoJo pulls her robe tighter against the morning chill, expressionless, as Ben hangs on Camp's every word. Glimmer of connection between her and Joe.

CAMP

We, uh...we may have to dump our witness. He's weak. He's a problem. Lab work-ups are all in, and they're conclusive. Guy's alcohol levels were off the charts. And the list of priors we've got now on the guy -- DUI's and sleep-offs -- it's pretty clear this was just another day. He was falling down drunk. Cop on the scene bungles it by giving him a sobriety test, but there's not much we can do about that now.

BEN

Weak. So...so he's no good at all?

CAMP

You've got a legally intoxicated man as your only eye-witness -- you walk in the room with him on your witness list, you're gonna piss the judge off so much, you might as well throw it in right then and there. He's weak.

Ben shakes his head hopelessly.

CAMP (CONT'D)

So where does that leave us...

(rubs her hands)

Well, it really leaves us with this. Now...hear me out. Your daughter was killed by a man who clearly intended to kill his wife and failed. And on the slim chance that she might pull through this, I don't think you could ask for a stronger prosecution witness. She could be our key witness, She could be our whole case.

(MORE)

CAMP (CONT'D)

Now what I'm hearing is signs of improvement from my guys at the hospital, so -- full or partial recovery -- something's gonna happen here, and I think we're foolish if we don't wait this one out. I want to ask the judge for a continuance until the first minute we can wheel her into that courtroom. And I'll get it. Now for you, this means hanging in limbo longer...and probably feeling like this thing's never gonna actually end.

Joe tries to hold his expression, her words landing like weights.

CAMP (CONT'D)

...But I promise you it will. And if we're just patient enough now, it's gonna pay off...and we'll get this prick.

Off their expressions,

CUT TO:

EXT. FRONT STREET -- DAY

Hard SILENCE as Ben and Joe hoof it down the street. It's clear from Ben's body language that he's heard the news. A man possessed. Joe hustles to keep up with him, eyes him with concern.

BEN

Bullshit. It's bullshit, is what it is. Half the people in that place are probably pissed out of their hats by noon -- why should this guy be any different? "Family restaurant"... Unbelievable.

JOE

Ben, you--

BEN

--Okay. We've wasted enough time here. They can screw that up, but they can't touch this. This one's ours. Now the key in these situations?... twelve hundred block... Find the guy who's hurting but fighting to hang on -- can bet your mother he's the one that's gonna be tying up the rest of the vendors emotionally, killing any straight shot you've got at landing the whole block. You've gotta break the spine. You find him, you break it. Sit for a second.

He grabs a seat on an approaching weathered bench. Joe's surprised, sits beside him.

JOE

...You okay, Ben?

BEN
Now I checked the tax rolls, I know their
debt history -- they gotta be *choking* on
that mortgage by now.

JOE
...Who?

Ben's eyes rise, settling on his target -- the building
directly across the street. Joe follows his look -- and
discovers a familiar smoked glass window...CAL'S PLACE.

JOE tries to mask his reaction, but his insides are clearly
doing back-flips.

JOE (CONT'D)
The bar?

BEN
That's not a bar. That's history.
Faithful customers, endless hours of
bullshitting, memories...huge pain in the
ass. And the only likely holdout for a
thousand yards, trust me. You ready?

JOE
(snaps to)
--Hey, Ben...you know what?

Ben hesitates.

JOE (cont'd)
...Let me take this one.

BEN
...What?

JOE
Let me handle it. I'll handle it.

BEN
You'll...?
(smiles)
Joe...

JOE
I'm serious.

BEN
(incredulous)
You're gonna do this.

JOE
I'm gonna try. Let me try.

Ben wavers, gradually looking a bit vulnerable.

BEN
But... well, hell...what am I supposed to
do?

JOE
Go on back. I'll find you at the
office.

BEN
...You're serious? You're sure about
this...

JOE
(smiling)
Go on. I'll meet you back there.

They rise, Ben takes a couple steps, stops.

BEN
...You know where to find me.

Joe nods. Another couple steps. Ben stops again.

BEN (cont'd)
...You know where the office is.

JOE
(smiles)
I do. Go.

Ben shrugs, warmly gestures "hands off", then finally turns
and goes. Joe draws a deep breath as his eyes drift back to
the bar.

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- DAY

An grizzled regular is parked at the empty bar, eyes glazed
on the tube overhead as TY, the bartender scans the newspaper
behind the bar. Another baseball cap or two off sipping
early beers in the corner, warm glow through the frosted
glass. BRIGHT LIGHT suddenly intrudes as Joe enters, eyes
adjusting to find Ty's gaze meeting him. Joe knows he's been
recognized. Rush of self-consciousness from the night
before.

JOE
...Morning.

TY
(knowing)
...Morning.

Joe breaks their look, taking a sweeping look around.

JOE
Boy, little quieter by day, huh.

TY
Tends to work that way.

JOE
...Sweet space. How long you had it?

TY
Not mine. Something to drink?

Joe feigns a credible reaction.

JOE
...You're not --?

Nods at the "Cal's" sign over the bar. Ty shakes no.

TY
Something to drink.

JOE
Water's fine. No ice.

Ty thought so.

TY
Bubbles?

JOE
(smiles)
Bubbles.

Pours him a glass of fountain soda.

JOE (cont'd)
So who's Cal?

TY
Name on the door.

JOE
He's not around?

TY
No he is not.

JOE
Friend of yours?

TY
Matter of fact.

JOE
...He's overseas?

TY
Something I can help you with.

JOE
...Just curious. Must've poured a lot of
himself into the place, huh? Pretty
handy guy?

No response. Joe crosses back to the jukebox, peers at
titles through the glass.

JOE (cont'd)
Interesting selection you got on the box,
here...Nothing new, huh?

TY
If it ain't broke.

JOE
 ...Nothing old either. Everything's,
 what -- two, three years ago?

TY
 You didn't seem to mind last night.

Joe smiles, busted.

JOE
 Gotta dime?

Ty TOSSES him one from the till.

JOE (cont'd)
 Gimme a number.

TY
 F-Eight.

Joe drops the coin, hits it. The opening stomp and lyric of
 Dave Edmunds' *I Hear You Knockin' (But You Can't Come In)*.
 Joe nods -- touche. Empties his water glass, tips it at Ty
 as he heads for the exit.

JOE
 Afternoon...

Ty tips an empty he's cleaning back at Joe, a playful truce
 here.

TY
 Afternoon...

EXT. FLOSS REALTY OFFICE -- DAY

as Joe approaches, his eye falls on a startling sight in the
 distance -- BEN, entering the Neighbor's restaurant across
 the way.

JOE
 Oh god.

INT. NEIGHBOR'S RESTAURANT -- DAY

Ben settles by the empty counter, studying the stools with
 odd calm as a WAITRESS edges over, clearly spooked.

WAITRESS
 ...Can I help you?

BEN
 Hi, there...maybe you can. I was just
 wondering if you might have been here
 when my daughter was killed.

The woman doesn't breathe.

BEN (cont'd)
 I'm trying to figure out which stool she
 was actually... Let's see, if she was...

JOE rushes in.

JOE

--Ben.

BEN

Hey, Joe.

(turns back)

...Was she here? Was it this one?

JOE

(low)

Ben, what're you doing?

BEN

...And if he came from...

(turns, piecing it all)

Now I know there was a guy...a witness...

(crosses)

...must've been back here?...maybe you'd remember him -- he was obviously being served alcohol in some quantity, because he evidently can't remember a thing now...

(nods to a stricken customer)

Pardon me...

JOE

Ben, let's...why don't we...

He steers Ben toward the door. Ben's eyes fall on the boarded up glass from the shooting as he passes.

BEN

(calls out)

See your window still needs repair.

That's unfortunate.

(as Joe steers him)

Might want to tell the manager to have it fixed...

Joe nods a half apology as he pulls Ben out the exit.

INT. FLOSS LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

JoJo lounges against Ben's spent form on the couch, television droning in the b.g. She adjusts the strap of a second WATCH on her arm now, clearly one of Diana's. Joe looks on distractedly, mind on the time and a girl halfway across town at this hour.

JOJO

Ben, wind.

He begins to wind the watch for her as her eyes come to rest on Joe, studying.

JOJO (CONT'D)

So where are you right now?

Joe tries to throw her an innocent look, caught.

JOJO (CONT'D)
(smiles)
...You got somewhere to be?

JOE
No, I'm...wow, is it really only eight?
Just a little wiped out, I guess.

JOJO
You don't have to babysit us, Joe. You
can go out if you want.

BEN
Out? It's bed, this kid wants. Had a
big day today -- I almost slipped, and he
broke my fall...

A small look of understanding between them.

JOE
Yeah, maybe I'll...guess I'll head up.
Goodnight...

They watch him go.

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Joe sits on the edge of the bed, trapped, stares at Diana's
walls as if they're closing in on him. He finally kills the
light, plunging us into--

BLACKNESS

Several beats, then a faint KNOCKING is heard. Silence,
then, again, KNOCKING -- on a wooden door.

A LAMP

is SWITCHED on, revealing we're--

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

JOE in bed. Sits up half asleep, squints at the door.
KNOCKING again.

JOE
...yeah?...

No response. Long beat. Then,

VOICE (O.S.)
(faint)
...Joe?

Hairs stand up on the back of his neck. He's suddenly wide
awake.

VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(distressed)
...Joe?...

He stops breathing, frozen.

JOE
(a cracked whisper)
...Di?...

DIANA (O.S.)
...Joe?...aren't you there?...Joe?...

He can't move, can't open his mouth again. He watches in shock as the DOOR HANDLE slowly begins to turn.

JOE'S EYES

flaring wide open against his pillow, still lying down. He snaps to his side, perspiring, gapes at

THE DOOR HANDLE

It's still now.

JOE

can't take his eyes off it. Suddenly whips a look over to the open window -- then suddenly to the far corners of the room. Can't control his breathing. He's thoroughly, genuinely frightened. Gradually, he forces himself off the bed, legs like molasses, edges his way toward the door. Heartbeat on lock-up. Can't shake the panic. He reaches for the door handle -- then pulls up short. Can't do it. Tries to breathe. Gazes around the room again in anxiety. Suddenly he moves for the closet, thinks twice about opening it, finally does -- quickly. Reaches for a pink PRINCESS PHONE tucked up on the shelf, wrapped in its own cord.

CLOSE ON WORN WHITE-PAGES

as they're whipped around on the floor, rifled through by shaky hands.

JOE

squints at a listing, dials fumblingly. Tries to calm himself to no avail as the line RINGS. After several rings,

FAMILIAR FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
(grogged)
...llo?...

INT. POST OFFICE SORTING ROOM -- NIGHT

A door cracks open, spilling dull back-alley light as two SILHOUETTES fumble their way in.

BERTIE
...Might wanna watch your --

Loud CRASH of skin meeting metal.

BERTIE (cont'd)
...yep.

A LAMP is switched on to reveal their surroundings. Joe untangles himself from a bin in his path, moves into the room, still shaken. Bertie tosses her mail sack over the work lamp again to soften the glow.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
This work?

Joe nods absently. Bertie rubs sleep from her eyes, spies an old Folgers can, gives it a shake.

BERTIE (cont'd)
You know how to make coffee?
(off his non-response)
Me neither. Screw coffee.

She TOSSES the can, eases herself up onto the sorting counter.

BERTIE (cont'd)
So what happened? You sounded...

JOE
(caged)
...I don't know, I just...I woke up
and...I swear I couldn't breathe. I
couldn't stay in the room another
minute...

BERTIE
You pee?

JOE
...What?

BERTIE
Pee. Always pee my pants when that
happens. Was it that kinda scared?

JOE
(guard dropping)
Worse. Couldn't have peed if I tried.

He absently plays with the buttons on an old cassette player on the counter. Thundering GUITAR chords explode -- the opening signature of Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*. He scrambles to kill it, catching his breath. Bertie yanks the plug. Mood killer.

BERTIE
Sorry...the Bettys...

As his heart rate returns...

BERTIE (cont'd)
Okay, so wait now. You called me.

He sinks into the corner, nods.

JOE
And, you know? I don't even know why?...

She waits patiently, watches as he runs his hand through a sorting bin, lifts a loose pile of letters.

JOE (cont'd)
God, what do all these people have to say to each other?...

BERTIE
You want to read a few?
(off his reaction)
You don't open 'em....you just...
(his look again)
Hey, don't think we don't do that shit.
You know we do.
(shrugs)
Never get any of my own, anyway... people can share.

He takes her in for a moment, this odd, honest creature -- then turns away, slowly replaces the stack. BEAT.

BERTIE (cont'd)
So your dream.

Joe's back remains to her. His voice is flat when it finally comes again.

JOE
We weren't together. When she died.

BERTIE
Oh, that's so classic, isn't it? Were you, like, floating apart too?

JOE
No. We weren't together.

BERTIE
In the dream.

JOE
...No.

Bertie studies him, floored. Joe turns. Tortured beat.

JOE (CONT'D)
We broke it off. Three days before.

BERTIE
Y-...?

He meets her eyes. She sees it all now.

BERTIE (cont'd)
Oh God...they don't know, do they.

His expression says it all, the weight of it. She holds her breath, nods, meeting his eyes.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
Joe, you have to tell them.

JOE
...I just...I gotta find the right time.

BERTIE
Wow. Couldn't...get a whole lot later,
could it?

JOE
---I know.

BERTIE
Then why aren't you telling them?

JOE
--Because they'll hate me and they'll say
to me, "when did you know?"-- and if I
tell them the truth, I'll say six months
ago -- and, and they'll say to me -- do
you know how many times I've seen them
looking at me-- "if you knew six months
ago, why didn't you tell her and she'd be
alive today?!"...
(off her look)
If I walked out six months ago, she's not
in that restaurant, waiting to tell him --
she's here with them now. Period.

Hard silence. Bertie hesitates, embarrassed at her own need
to know...

BERTIE
...So you broke it off.

His look confirms it -- he did. A glint of relief crosses
Bertie's eyes.

BERTIE (cont'd)
...why?

JOE
...You want to know the truth? Cause we
were really great friends. And moving
here didn't change that.

BERTIE
It was supposed to?

JOE
I hoped so.

BERTIE
Then why are you going into business?

JOE
--Because the truth is I don't know what
I want, and as long as long as I don't
know what I want, why not give them
this??

Silence. Truth baldly laid out now. His eyes begin to fill
as he meets her's, throat constricting. He slowly sits,
shoulders giving now.

JOE (cont'd)
Ah, Bertie...I lost my friend...

His tears come at last. Bertie slides beside him, lends a shoulder of comfort. At last, wiping his eyes...

JOE (cont'd)
...Don't you miss yours?

BERTIE
...Who?

He eyes her knowingly.

Bertie's face falls. Joe meets her eyes. The SILENCE hangs.

JOE
...Cal.
She's silent.

JOE (cont'd)
He owns the bar...
She nods quietly.

JOE (CONT'D)
How long's he gone?

BERTIE
...three years.

JOE
...He's missing.

Another nod. Joe places it all now.

JOE (CONT'D)
So. You married?

BERTIE
I look married to you?

JOE
Engaged?

BERTIE
(her hand)
You see hardware here?...

JOE
Were you gonna be?

BERTIE
No one bothered telling me.

JOE
But you still work his store. Watch his friends.

BERTIE
(shrugs it off)
I lend a hand.

Joe nods, studies her.

JOE
How long you together?

BERTIE
Hey, weren't we talking about you, here?

JOE
...You mind?

She shrugs.

JOE (cont'd)
How long?

BERTIE
I don't know...while. A while.

JOE
That song at the bar...that was yours?

BERTIE
(shrugs, vulnerable)
...He never actually heard it, but...

JOE
...But he knew you pretty well.

Her eyes gaze up in recognition at the phrase. Meet his.
Swallows.

BERTIE
...About sixty percent.

Beat. Truth acknowledged. Both feel the opening.

JOE
How'd you meet?

BERTIE
(matter of fact)
He cracked my lip.

Joe's brows shoot up, awaiting explanation. Finally,

BERTIE (CONT'D)
...Pick up game over at Rodge's field.
The usual -- they picked, I sat out.
Didn't know what to make of me cuz I
wasn't exactly a guy, wasn't exactly a
girl..
(gestures at her face and
figure, shrugs)
So one day I get fed up and go plant
myself behind the plate. First batter's
so distracted, he swings wide -- I stop
the bat with my face.
(MORE)

BERTIE (CONT'D)

(smiles)

You shoulda seen it -- actually tattooed my chin for a week. Anyway, he busted my lip up pretty good...end of story.

JOE

And that was Cal.

BERTIE

That was.

JOE

(smiles)

Romantic.

BERTIE

You shoulda seen the stitches...

(grabs her lip, pulls)

Can still see the scar.

Joe moves in for a closer look.

BERTIE (cont'd)

Bump's never gone away. Feel this...

She guides his finger to the inside of her lower lip. He grimaces/smiles.

BERTIE (cont'd)

(muffled through his finger)

That 'eird?...

His finger lingers, slides outside her lip to touch the hairline scar. Long beat.

JOE

This scar...it ain't new, Bertie.

(meets her eyes)

...Four years?

Bertie drops hers, vulnerable again.

BERTIE

Five.

JOE

And he's missing three?...

Bertie's silent. Joe doesn't take his finger away.

JOE (cont'd)

So long. Bertie, how...how can you...

BERTIE

Because he loved me.

Her eyes slowly rise to meet his, reddening. Instinctively, Joe leans in, places his lips over his finger, KISSES her gently. Their EYES never close, never leave each other. The kiss continues, grows in intensity -- when suddenly, Bertie's expression explodes.

BERTIE (CONT'D)

-- Oh shit -- I have to pee!

She rises like a shot, exits. After a beat, the sound of the van PEELING out outside. ON JOE, his head swimming...CUT to:

EXT. FRONT STREET -- MORNING

Joe, distracted, balances two cups of take-out coffee as he makes his way down toward Ben's office, keeps throwing hopeful looks back over his shoulder at the quiet street, stalling his progress. Passing a MAILBOX, he suddenly yanks its lid down, checking the posted collection TIMES inside, shoots a look at this watch before glancing back up the street again. No sign of her. He continues on -- then suddenly CROSSES the street without explanation, makes a bee-line for another mailbox across the intersection. Yanks the lid down again. Checks that posted time. Looking like a true crazy person as an older patron warily steps up to deposit a letter. He holds it open for her, feigns a nonchalant smile. Giving up, he reluctantly turns back toward Ben's, when -- he spies a glimpse of a MAIL VAN cresting the street behind him. Spotting Joe, it suddenly SKIDS to a self-conscious halt, driver's face hidden. Then, without hesitation, it literally peels out BACKWARDS and disappears on him. Off Joe,

INT. FLOSS REALTY - DAY

A RED MARKER draws large X's over two more acquisition hurdles on a retail block grid, circling the last large remaining parcel.

BEN

Okay, let's have it.

REVEAL Joe who's entirely hidden behind a large home-made MODEL he struggles to hold it up. Were it twenty years later, the words WAL-MART might be emblazoned on it.

JOE

(muffled)

You made this?

BEN

(takes it)

Ah, sticks and glue. I'm yesterday's newspaper, Joe -- this is a young man's game now. Arts and crafts don't get you far. But with the right friends...

He carefully slips the model over the grid.

BEN (cont'd)

Thank...you...Don. See what dinner at the Floss home will buy you? Don Tippet down at the Federal -- commercial loans -- his wife hasn't stopped calling the house. Well tonight she gets her chance. Hopefully with a little table time...

JOE
(noose tightening)
You got both parcels...

BEN
(smiles)
Don holds the paper. That leaves one.
And Mulcahey can lick our toes -- you
know he called to invite us to dinner?
Course he's just checking up on us, but
the boys tell me he never does this.
(realizing)
Shit, JoJo'll never go for it-- I thought
tonight was pulling teeth. I can't say
no to the guy...

JOE
...I'll...I could go. I'll go.

BEN
(eyes him, weighing)
...He did take a hell of a shine to you
at lunch. Yeah...maybe that's the sell.
Good, good. Now how you making out over
there? That's all he's gonna care about.

JOE
I...you know, Ben, I think this one's
gonna take some time.

BEN
Time? What, we've got momentum now.
What time -- what's the problem?

JOE
It's, it's just complicated.

BEN
(antennae up)
Complicated.

Joe nods. Ben studies him.

BEN (cont'd)
Well...maybe you're right. Would be a
hell of a P.R. storm if Don forecloses on
the guy while he's still overseas...
missing or not. But hopefully, with a
little table time tonight...

JOE
(tries for casual)
You know the place, then.

BEN
(evenly)
JoJo knew it.

Joe doesn't press the point.

BEN (cont'd)
 (glances at watch)
 Well, look, we got a couple hours -- why
 don't we take a run over there and rub
 noses.

JOE
 (rises)
 You know, I -- I think I've got a pretty
 good thing working, Ben. Trust thing.
 The one on one.

BEN
 I won't get in your way -- just, just
 treat me like your assistant.
 (reads Joe's hesitation)
 ...Hey, I'm great in a crisis...you
 always need one of me around...

JOE
 ...Let me make the stop.

Ben meets his eyes, clearly struggling here.

BEN
 You sure you don't --

JOE
 Really. This is...this is good.

Joe nods reassuringly. Finally, Ben offers up a small smile.

BEN
 ...You're really loving this, aren't you?
 I can see it.

Joe returns it, heads for the door.

BEN (cont'd)
 -- You'll be home in time for the
 Tippetts, yeah? Kick-off's at seven --
 this is a big one, Joe. Need my
 partner.

JOE
 Sure, Ben.

BEN
 ...All right then.

And Joe's gone. HOLD on Ben, as he sinks into his seat,
 tries desperately to sit still. To trust. Clearly crawling
 out of his skin. After a moment, he half RISES, then slowly
 wills himself to sit again. A beat, then he's UP again.
 Finally sits. Agony.

EXT. CAL'S TAVERN --- DAY

Joe approaches slowly from across the street, can't bring
 himself to do it. To step inside again. Feeling a fraud.
 He hesitates, then moves on.

EXT. WATERWAY -- DAY

Joe moves along the banks of the town waterway, anxious to put any distance between himself and the town behind him.

EXT. TOWN OVERLOOK -- DAY

The same perch Ben and Joe sat upon earlier. Joe arrives, slowly sinks onto the bench, nowhere else to go. Eyes the town spread before him below like his accuser...

INT. DA'S OFFICE -- MORNING

Mona Camp juggles files and a thermos down the hall as she stops to pick up mail outside her office, DONUT wedged in her mouth. As she steps inside, she suddenly starts -- discovering

JOE

seated in front of her desk. Her surprise filters through her donut.

CAMP
(muffled)
...Joe...

She clears the donut.

CAMP (cont'd)
--Joe...hey. What are you--
(the donut)
Shit, you're not supposed to see this.
Here, help me.

She splits it, hands him half. Pops hers in as she rounds the desk.

CAMP (cont'd)
What's going on? Were we -- was I
expecting you?

JOE
No.

CAMP
Thank God. Thought I was losing my mind.

Beat. She studies him. He's looking a little self-conscious.

CAMP (CONT'D)
...Something I can do for you?

JOE
Just like to sit here, if that's okay.

CAMP
(small smile)
...You checking up on me, Joe?

JOE
Think it would help me to watch...
actually.

CAMP
Watch.

JOE
You work. Be near it anyway. Something
happening.

Beat.

CAMP
How's your filing?

He smiles, relaxes a bit. She sits, drops heavy folders on
the desk, pats them.

CAMP (cont'd)
Hard to believe it all comes down to
paper, huh? All of this.

Joe nods. She meets his eyes.

CAMP (cont'd)
Joe if there's ever anything you want to
know...You just tell me if you do.
Anytime, okay?

JOE
(blurts)
...I guess I'm just wondering how much
longer you think this is all gonna take.

She holds his look.

CAMP
Wish I could tell you.

Her line RINGS. She holds a finger up as she answers--

CAMP (CONT'D)
--Mona Camp.
(switching on)
Yeah, Rick...
(listens intently)
Fuckin' A. Bitchin'. We like it.
Good work, buddy, excellent. Call me
when you've got it.

Hangs up.

CAMP (CONT'D)
Little paperwork the defense has been
fighting to keep out of my reach. Nice
try.
(leans back, softening)
...So how are Ben and JoJo?

Joe shrugs -- how else?

CAMP (cont'd)
Jesus, I can't even imagine.

JOE
...You have kids?

CAMP
I have an ex-husband. He qualifies.

Warm smile between them. Beat.

CAMP (CONT'D)
You hangin' in there, Joe?

JOE
I just want it...I just want it over.
For them...you know?

CAMP
I do.

JOE
Just over.

She nods.

JOE (cont'd)
It's gotta...there's gotta be something
right in all this for them, some way
it'll...

He meets her eyes.

JOE (cont'd)
...Won't it?

She sees his need. And wishes to hell she could answer him...

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- DUSK

Another set of EYES peer out from the seclusion of a dark corner booth, spying on the entrance door. BEN. He bears the haunted look of someone whose lack of trust is brutally being borne out, waiting for any sign of Joe... Nothing.

EXT. TOWN OVERLOOK -- TWILIGHT

A clock tower bell TOLLS in the distance. The bench now appears empty from behind...until a HAND rises and grips the seat-back. Joe rises groggily from a crooked sleep, peers out at his whereabouts without recognition for the moment -- then suddenly straightens, brain suddenly jogging -- looks at his watch in a panic --

JOE
--shit!

INT. FLOSS HOME -- NIGHT

Ben helps his guests the TIPPETS into their coats, clearly at the end of their evening as Joe ENTERS the front foyer, flushed and winded from a long sprint. The tension's immediate -- he's clearly missed the meal. JoJo hangs back, detached.

BEN

(strained)

Ah...well, here he is. Don, Tammy...
this is our son-in -- Diana's fiance,
Joe. Joe, Don and Tammy Tippet.

Joe nods, awkward handshake with Don as he's halfway in his coat.

DON

Heard a lot about you, Joe...sorry we
didn't have more time.

Joe nods. Tammy turns to JoJo, places both hands on her shoulders.

TAMMY

Now you call us any time you need
to. Goddamnit, you poor things. We're
here, okay?...

Huge hug. JoJo's a rag doll, expressionless over the woman's shoulder.

DON

You guys take care of yourselves.
Hang in.

He slips an arm around Tammy, they exit. As soon as the door closes, Ben turns heel, livid, marching into the dining room to start the clean up...

JOE

(lamely to them both)
...Sorry, I'm...

BEN

--Where the hell was he??

JOJO

I don't know Ben, why don't you ask him.
(turns)
Where the hell were you?

JOE

JoJo, I'm sorry, I--

JOJO

Sorry? Did you SEE that?? Try ninety-
eight minutes of it -- not that I was
counting, you lucky bastard. Don't you
ever leave me stranded like that again...

She grabs him in a playful hug.

BEN
 (glowers, passing through)
 --He should have been here.

JOJO
 Jesus, Ben -- would you stop treating him
 like he's under house arrest.

BEN
 I thought he was part of this family.
 Obviously I'm mistaken.

JOJO
 I don't know -- you're certainly
 treating him like he is.

BEN
 And what's that supposed to mean?

JOJO
 He's right here, Ben. Talk to him.
 (shoves Joe forward)

BEN
 He knows how important this was --

JOJO
 --Then tell him.

BEN
 You tell him!

Joe literally teeters between them in the tug of war.

JOJO
 Ben -- goddammit -- you're doing it
 again.

BEN
 --What??

JOJO
 The thing.

BEN
 --Stop.

JOJO
 You never talked to the girl, you talked
 around her.

BEN
 --I wha--

JOJO
 --You didn't say a straight thing to her
 from the time she was nine years old --
 you made me do it. God forbid she should
 grow up and you have to, too. The
 perfect father, long as she was a kid --

BEN
--That is so unfair--

JOJO
--Don't you see you're doing it again??

BEN
(glowers)
That's so unfair, and you know it.

JOJO
Hey, if you really want to get into
it, pal, stick around. If not --
go walk the dog. I'm mad at you, now.

Ben burns, then stalks off into the kitchen. After a beat,
the back door SLAMS. Beat.

JOJO (cont'd)
Poor guy...with Diana gone, he's got no
one else to catch the blast. Isn't he
amazing?
(nods)
You gonna sit?

JoJo sinks into a chair, switches OFF the lamp next to her.
To Joe's pointed surprise, she LIGHTS up a cigarette.
Notices his expression. Nods.

JOJO (CONT'D)
Fourth one today -- Ben'd have a cow.
(deep drag)
...Last time I snuck one was with
Diana. Bra shopping...
(closes her eyes)
...Ah, who gives a shit, anyway...

She slowly begins WINDING her watches -- THREE in all now,
strapped on both arms. Feels his look.

JOJO (cont'd)
What. Speak.

JOE
...I don't know. Sometimes I just...I
look at you guys...

JOJO
And you wonder why the hell we're
together.

JOE
...Thank you.

She nods, inhales knowingly. Beat. Slow exhale.

JOJO
...When I climb into bed at night, I do
four things. Drop my robe. Slide into
the sheets. Roll on my left side. And
stick out my ass. That's right...that's
the signal.
(MORE)

JOJO (cont'd)

I back it right up, because I know when I do, no matter how cold the damn thing is, no matter how hard it might feel or how much we desperately want to kill each other -- I know it's gonna be met by this warm body on my right that's always there to hold it...two arms that wrap around, and pull me out of my head, and stop the voices, and save me from myself. Without ever having to ask. Every night, for thirty-one years. Every night, there's my ass. And every night, he never lets me down.

Joe meets her eyes.

JOJO (cont'd)

You find your home. Might not be what you thought -- color's off, style's wrong -- but there it is anyway, and fuck you if you can't take a joke.

(nods)

You find your home. Ben's mine.

Joe takes this in.

JOJO (cont'd)

And don't think Diana didn't ask the exact same thing four weeks ago.

A sad smile plays on his lips. JoJo rolls her neck. Closes her eyes.

JOJO (cont'd)

I saw her, today.

JOE

...Who?

JOJO

Diana.

Joe REACTS.

JOJO (CONT'D)

At the Fotomat. Girl behind the counter. A definite eight, maybe a nine. The chin, the eyes -- even had her ears. Stopped my fuckin' heart. You had any sightings yet?

JOE

...Not...quite like that.

JOJO

(nods, then)

I just wonder how long this is all gonna last...

(beat)

Jesus, if that woman doesn't come out of her coma soon I'm gonna go over there and beat her out of it...I can't take this.

She smiles, lolls her head his direction.

JOJO (cont'd)
And you, good sir? How are you keeping
your head from exploding?

He struggles to hold her look.

JOJO (cont'd)
Tips, Joe. I need tips.

JOE
Wish I had 'em, Jo.

JOJO
(focuses in)
No, you seem...I don't know. Guess you
two just kept your side of the street
cleaner. God knows I didn't. Must be a
hundred things we weren't right about...
(turns away, beat)
You know, if there was anything, Joe...
it would help me to know...so I don't
feel like such a freak out here.

Joe feels her probe. Wants to speak...but says nothing. She
turns back, eyes him warmly.

JOJO (cont'd)
Well you, my good man, look wiped as I
feel -- and you don't even have the
Tippets as an excuse, you lucky bastard.
Don't let me keep you.

Joe smiles, rises, gives her a kiss on the cheek.

JOE
Night, Jo.

JOJO
Night, Joe.

As he turns to go,

JOJO (CONT'D)
-- Hey.
(Joe braces, turns)
Isn't it the tits we have the same name?
I know we've never acknowledged that...

JOE
(smiles)
It is.

JOJO
It certainly is.

Joe gives a wave, heads for the stairs. Stops at the bottom
to look back, heart sagging as he gazes at the small woman
alone in the dark.

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Wide awake in bed, Joe SWITCHES the bedside lamp off.

SWITCHES it back on moments later. Tormented, JoJo's words ringing in his head. He climbs to his feet, moves around the room like he's caged, crawling out of his skin now. Every moment he's in the room now a lie. Crosses to the bureau, hesitates guiltily -- then pulls out his pants and jostles into them. Shoes, shirt -- dresses like he's in a fire drill. Moves to the door with determination -- then stops short, remembering JoJo downstairs. At last, he turns and heads for the window. A sticker by the handle reads "FINESTRA". He cracks it open with some difficulty, winces as a loud SQUEAK screams from it's hinges. As he angles his way through, he CRACKS his head against the frame.

JOE
(mutters, disgusted)
...Jesus, what're you, sixteen?

Shakes his head and continues on, reaching for a tree branch as the low opening chords of Van Morrison's *I'll Be Your Lover Too* rumble under...

EXT. FRONT STREET -- NIGHT

Stark empty streets. The distant STRING of traffic lights change from RED to GREEN in unison, but have no audience. A lone FIGURE emerges, moving with determination. Joe. A lone passing PATROL car sends him ducking into a doorway impulsively. Can't believe his behavior. Once it passes, he continues on.

EXT. THE DINER -- NIGHT

as Joe passes it, shielding his face from dark figures seated by the windows, taking no chances again.

EXT. BUNGALOW -- NIGHT

CLOSE ON JOE'S FACE

drawing shallow, STEAMING breaths, filled with anxiousness and need, nose inches from

THE DOOR

as it finally slips open. BERTIE peers out, meets him with anxious, searching eyes. Before he can even open his mouth, she retreats. Joe, dizzy, heart pounding, steps inside.

INT. BERTIE'S BUNGALOW -- CONTINUING

Bertie looks so small in the entry hall, eyes filling. Joe won't back down, moves to her.

JOE
...I want to see you...

Face averted, Bertie shakes her head, holds up her hand. No words.

JOE (cont'd)
 (a whisper)
 ...Please let me see you...

Shaking no desperately, tears coming, she moves her hand to his mouth...

JOE (cont'd)
 I--

She covers his mouth with her fingers, and then with her mouth. Kisses him hard, tears running over their lips. No more words, only --

HAUNTING SILENCE over the following:

THE COUCH

The dimly lit figures slowly LOWERING into the threadbare cushions. Bertie struggles through her self-consciousness, PULLS Joe closer into a deep, needful kiss, eyes finally OPENING as Joe's open his own. As he slowly reaches for his shirt, she STOPS his hand. With incredible deliberateness, she reaches for her own, slowly UNBUTTONS it, eyes swollen, not letting him undress. Gradually, she eases out of her shirt, and with great courage PRESSES herself against him, utterly exposed. Holding each other tightly, expressions mixed with need and pain wash over their faces as they rest on each other's shoulders, unseen by the other.

BERTIE
 (barely a whisper)
 ...Why me?...

Joe's heart twists at her vulnerability. He rocks her head gently in response, love pouring out in the gesture. They CLING together...

INT. BERTIE'S BEDROOM -- PRE-DAWN

as their shapes lie still beneath warm sheets. Joe's lids part, sleepily taking in Bertie's slumbering form beside him, the curve of her shoulder as she eases onto her side... and the few inches that now separate them. Silently, he slowly slips an arm around her, slides closer, fulfilling JoJo's gesture. Bertie breathes deeper, at peace...then, with the slightest start, flinches AWAY. All unconsciously.

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- DAWN

First signs of pale light break through the window as it CREAKS open again, illuminating a "FINESTRA" sticker. Joe slips a leg inside, carefully easing his disheveled figure over the sill. As he turns, he JUMPS back, STARTLED, nearly tumbling out the window again as he gazes at

A FIGURE

propped up on the bed in the dark.

JOJO. Slumped in a drunken stupor, eyes at half-mast, tumbler glass on the bedside beside her.

JOJO
...Door a little easier?

JOE

dies on the spot, color draining from his face.

JOJO (CONT'D)
...Hope she's nice. She nice, Joe?

He can't respond.

JOJO (cont'd)
...What kills me? I knew... I knew... I knew in my...I saw it in Diana's face and I didn't ask and she couldn't tell me but I knew, I knew and now she's...you're..... It's not gonna happen, is it, Joe? The two of you...You weren't gonna happen...
(takes his silence as confirmation, nods sadly)
...Thing is...I know this part's supposed to happen...you with another... you're... I'm just...I'm not ready. And now you're going and I...
(bumps the bedstand and the glass, desperate)
Look at me...look at this...
(lifts the drink)
June sixth, nineteen sixty-six, Joe...my last blast. Fucked that up pretty good, here, huh?
(finishes it)
Before the girl?
(nods at glass)
-- Only way Ben and I survived under one roof...And now... you're gonna go...

Joe crosses to her, helpless. She meets his eyes, choked.

JOJO (cont'd)
...I don't know where she is. Everyone says they do but I don't and I'm scared for my baby and it's... killing me. The not knowing? I can't...I can't... do...anything. All of it...everything I...it was her. All of it. The writing. For her. For her. And now...now I...oh God, I don't know what to do... What're we gonna do, Joe? What're we...
(slumps)

She leans against him, begins SOBBING uncontrollably, finally letting go... As he holds her,

INT. DEN -- DAWN

Joe finishes easing JoJo's exhausted form onto the couch, drapes a blanket over her. Feels EYES on him from across the room -- a shrine of Diana PHOTOS perched on the mantel. He shifts uncomfortably under their gaze, exits.

INT. BEDROOM -- MORNING

Joe, passed out in his clothes, flinches awake at the sound of raised VOICES rise from down below, followed by GLASS breaking.

INT. STAIRWAY -- MORNING

Joe edges his way down unsteadily, ear on the argument spilling out from the kitchen.

BEN (O.S.)
Bullshit, Jo!

JOJO (O.S.)
-- Get away!

BEN (O.S.)
Look at me, then!

JOJO (O.S.)
-- Stop it!

BEN (O.S.)
That's weak!

JOJO (O.S.)
-- Fuck you!

BEN (O.S.)
Weak! We gonna go back to this every morning?? That it??

JOJO (O.S.)
Benjamin --!

BEN (O.S.)
-- Don't you fall apart on me now!! Not now...

INT. KITCHEN -- SAME TIME

As JoJo collapses in her chair, in tears and profoundly hung over --

JOE (O.S.)
-- It wasn't her, Ben.

Ben, deep circles under his eyes, TURNS to discover Joe in the doorway.

BEN
(hoarse)
...What?

JOE
...It wasn't her fault.

Ben waits for the explanation. Joe looks him square in the eye, screws up his courage. No turning back now.

JOE (CONT'D)

She was...

(swallows)

...Ben, JoJo got...she got upset because
we... Diana and I --

Phone RINGS. The moment interrupted, no one moves. Ben studies Joe intently, torn even now by the phone, finally breaks and crosses to answer it. JoJo meets Joe's eyes.

BEN (O.S.)

Yes?

Long beat.

BEN (CONT'D)

(voice flat)

...When?

Joe looks up.

ON BEN

apoplectic.

INT. DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE -- DAY

Ben, Joe and JoJo sit numbly again in Camp's cramped office -- a sadly familiar scene.

CAMP

(grim)

Got the call myself at six-thirty this morning. First words out of her mouth were his name.

BEN

...Is she out of her *mind*??

JOJO

Ben, the woman has two bullets in her brain -- what does this suggest?

CAMP

(disgusted)

She's backing up insanity. She claims he quit taking his meds a week before the shooting.

(disbelieving)

The things we do for love. So, at this point, we've really got no choice but to press on -- any more delays, they scream due process and God knows we can't let him slide on that bullshit. ...All of which means -- the pressure falls on you. Now I can tell you from experience that seeing your faces up there front and center every minute, day in and day out -- this weighs on the judge, whether or not he or she will ever admit it. It's a simple fact. So, I'm gonna need your help.

(MORE)

CAMP (cont'd)
 I'm gonna need you to be there...all of
 you...for the duration...for your
 daughter.

INT. FLOSS REALTY OFFICE -- DAY

CLOSE ON PHOTOS

Color PROOFS of Ben's portrait with Joe, done at last -- as a hand slowly peels them off one by one...

BEN

sits alone behind his desk, hollowly reviewing them as the vitriol bubbles beneath his skin, with no outlet. He can't help bringing his eyes back up to the sight which remains inexorably within his view: the Neighbor's restaurant across the street -- and the yet-to-be repaired WINDOW now feeling like nothing less than an outright insult. A STREET SWEEPER glides by in front of it, scattering the dry remains of memorial flowers left behind on the sidewalk below. Ben, face flushing, leaps out of his seat.

EXT. FLOSS REALTY OFFICE -- CONTINUING

Ben races out onto the sidewalk, bellows at the unseen faces behind the window across the street --

BEN
 WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?? JESUS
 CHRIST, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?? HOW
 HARD IS IT TO FIX A WINDOW???

As the employees peer out at him with perverse fascination, the PHONE rings inside Ben's office. His body reacts, his age old Pavlovian response. He hesitates, willing himself not to answer it, to let it ring and keep his fury focused...but he can't help himself. Racing inside -- he's visible through the window as he grabs it, answers...and clearly misses the call. At wit's end now, he slams the receiver down. Then lifts it again, and begins BANGING it mercilessly against the cradle. CUT TO --

INT. MULCAHEY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

Mulcahey FILLS Joe's wine glass, clearly on a mission.

MULCAHEY
 I'm sorry Floss and his wife couldn't
 make it, was looking forward to meeting
 the woman. I...took the liberty of
 filling the space, long as we've --
 (peers up)
 -- ah, here she is...

Joe turns.

MULCAHEY (CONT'D)
 Joe, my daughter, Jillian. Jillian, say
 hello to Joe.

JILLIAN, borderline attractive in a dress that's clearly trying too hard, nods shyly as she approaches her seat.

JILLIAN
...hello...

Joe's antennae creep up -- sensing something afoot.

MULCAHEY
That dress looks sensational, honey.
(nods)
Little gift. Jillian's birthday was last week.

JOE
...Is that right.

MULCAHEY
When's your birthday, Joe?

JOE
December...actually.

JUNE
Is that right? Only seven months apart.

MULCAHEY
-- Isn't that something?

JOE
(shifts uncomfortably)
...Huh.

JUNE
You know, Jil's father and I actually met at your age...

MULCAHEY
(smiles)
Stranger things have happened.

Jillian blushes. Mulcahey pours more wine for Joe.

JUNE
So Mike tells us you're well on your way in the world of real estate.

JOE
Well, that's being generous...

JUNE
That must keep you very busy. You must value your free time.

JOE
...Free time?

JUNE
(smiles)
Going out, recreation.

JOE
(is this woman an idiot?)
Uh...not of late, no.

JUNE
No?

JOE
No...actually lately I've been a
little...preoccupied.

JUNE
...Oh, I see. Other interests?

JOE
My fiancée's death.

A chill descends on the table.

JUNE
I...didn't realize you were still
involved with...that.

JOE
(she didn't just say that)
...Beg your pardon?

JUNE
Mike ...Mike hadn't mentioned that you ---
he hadn't mentioned that you were still
tied up with that.

BEAT.

JOE
Really.

JUNE
No.

Joe studies her. Then, oh so lightly, REFILLING his glass...

JOE
Well, you know...it was kind of a deal --
the whole thing. I mean, the clean up
alone took days. You'd be amazed at what
a mess a high-caliber weapon makes -- and
in a restaurant? All those little pieces
of...all over the...
(cringes)
-- well, anyway, was pretty time
consuming, let's put it that way.

June and Mulcahey are bleached sheets.

JOE (CONT'D)
(continuing; rolling)
...And then you've got the burial to deal
with. I mean, this coffin business?
Much more complicated than people think.
Standard sizes? Dream on. Had to custom
fit the whole deal -- we had to get a
tailor come out to do her sizes, right
then and there. You know how hard it is
to get a tailor to do house calls -- and
on a school night? I mean, this is
pulling teeth, you know what I'm saying?
(MORE)

JOE (CONT'D)

And the cemetery? -- forget it. The selection these days?..

(sighs)

And then, of course, there's the house, and that's a whole other ordeal, all that cleaning out -- cuz, you know, who wants her stuff around, right? That's a valuable room -- why waste it? So you slog through that and, yeah, next thing you know, couple weeks have gone by -- you're thinking, "Man oh man, am I still tied up with this? Where did the time go?"...

He nods at them calmly.

OFF their utter catatonia, CUT TO--

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Bertie kicks on Gary Glitter's *Rock and Roll Part 2* on the jukebox as she straps on her apron, floats through her paces behind the bar. The smallest upturn of a smile she can't suppress as she racks clean glasses in sync to the music. The unmistakable look and feel of someone who's clearly gotten some. And when she finally looks up -- she finds the barfull of regulars all STARING, knowing smirks on their faces.

BERTIE

What.

No one says it. They don't have to. Her face blooms three shades. She leaves them quickly, punches the jukebox volume UP as she crosses to the back booths to cover her giddy smile. Tosses a cocktail napkin down for the corner booth -- only to see who's sitting alone...BEN. As their eyes meet, it's hard to tell who's more surprised -- each quickly recognizing the other. And in the space of a moment, we see each react -- the pieces falling painfully into place for each of them. For Ben -- that it's Bertie who's behind Joe's attachment to the bar. And for Bertie... a look of pure shame.

BERTIE (cont'd)

(voice quavering)

...Can I help you?

BEN

A...soda.

BERTIE

...Sure.

She turns away, fighting for composure, heads back for the bar.

INT. FLOSS HOME -- DUSK

Dark inside. Joe enters quietly, feels a presence in the living room chair, sitting in the shadows. Drink lurking nearby. Telephone. Joe hesitates, then peers closer --

JOE
...Ben?

BEAT.

BEN
(flat, in darkness)
Hello Joe. Have a seat.

Joe sits warily across from him, still unable to make out Ben's expression in the darkness. Excruciating SILENCE. Finally,

JOE
...I don't know, I'm thinking maybe some light. What do you think, Ben?

BEN
(calmly)
You want to tell me what's going on Joe?

Joe braces.

JOE
...pardon?

BEN
...Explain to me. You explain me why I shouldn't throw you out that window right now.

JOE
...Ben-?

BEN
Do you know...what an idiot I look like?? Do you? Mike Mulcahey, calling to tell me how sorry he was the deal didn't make - Now what the hell am I supposed to say to that? "Yep Mike, sure is...damn shame." What the hell did you do over there, Joe?? You were just supposed to have dinner!

JOE
Ben, I'm sorry--

BEN
--You ended it??? You killed it right there -- you told him the bar was off the table??

Joe looks him in the eye.

JOE
...I did.

BEN
Without even consulting me. You who know shit about this business. You think that's how partners behave?

JOE
I'm not your partner, Ben... And this has
nothing to do with business.

BEN
--Oh, then what is it?

The question hangs there, reverberating. Both feel it.

BEN (cont'd)
What makes you give a red goddamn cent
about a bar in a town that you don't even
know?? This isn't your home. These
aren't your people. So why do you give a
shit? I mean, there's no reason not to
move the bar, is there, Joe?

JOE
Ben, this whole thing was a mistake --

BEN
--God yes -- I trusted you!!

JOE
I am so sorry...

BEN
--You tell me what's really going on!
(throat catching)
--You help me understand what's happening
here.

JOE
I wanted to tell you before, I--

BEN
--You tell me now.

JOE
--Please, listen to me. Diana and I --

BEN
Don't say her name.

JOE
Diana --

BEN
Don't say her name.

JOE
She wanted to talk to you because -- Ben,
we weren't going to--

BEN
--Don't.

JOE
That's why she wanted to meet you...

BEN
Please don't.

He turns away, his shoulders beginning to shake.

JOE
...Ben...

BEN
...don't...

Excruciating beat. Joe watches helplessly as the man finally dissolves.

BEN (cont'd)
...please don't...

Weeks of torture, finally crashing to the surface. Joe hesitates, reaches a careful hand out -- Ben flinches. Joe patiently reaches out again, hand hovering, finally rests it on Ben's back again. Holds it there now as Ben gives into the pain.

DARKNESS

which gradually resolves into a group of silhouetted BODIES filing down rows of wooden benches like so many spectators at the ballpark, low HUM of anticipation in the air.

DROP WIDER to REVEAL we're

INT. COUNTY COURT ROOM -- DAY

As the bodies settle, PRESS and public mixed, REVEAL the home team alone in the front row left. Ben, Joe, and JoJo. Ashen. Eyes simply taking in the details of the room, the impossibility of it.

JOJO'S HAND

finds the bench beneath her, feeling the wood carefully -- trying to grasp the reality here.

JOE'S EYES

drift across the aisle to the FIGURE parked in a wheelchair opposite him now -- recuperative neck brace, temp wig, raccoon-eye discoloration. The defendant's wife. As he takes her in, her gaze shifts to him. A frozen moment as their eyes MEET, and hold...an unspeakable connection. A flash of embarrassment seems to cross her eyes -- quickly interrupted by

THE ACCESS DOOR

to lock-up opening. A tall, thin, pathetic figure of a young man is escorted inside in shackles, walked to a standing position behind the bench. Glances up only briefly, searching for her. She shifts expectantly, small smile for him, steals a little wave.

ON CAMP

watching this all, seeing the entire playing field shift before her eyes...

INT. CAMP'S OFFICE -- DAY

Joe sits in a client chair as Camp enters, drops her files, collapses into her seat across from him. All they can do is look at each other.

BEAT.

CAMP
Well shit.

They have to smile, it's so awful. She pulls herself up in her seat.

CAMP (cont'd)
Okay, let's talk about this. We, uh...we're in a spot here, Joe. That asshole just became a loving husband. Right in front of our eyes. And if we don't launch back with something serious here...I do believe we're screwed. And I know that's not what you want for these people.

(deep breath)
Now...if I had one wish here -- any wish at all -- it would be that I could bring Diana into that courtroom. Now obviously that's not gonna happen, and trust me -- the defense is desperate not to have it happen. They want to keep her as far away as possible, keep her from having any dimension to that judge. But that's exactly what's gotta happen. She's got to breathe in there. He's got to see her, and know her, and realize what was taken here. I don't know any other way to do this. So I think I need your help, Joe...

(meets his eyes)
...I need you to bring her in the room.

Joe doesn't breathe.

JOE
Testify.

She nods.

JOE (cont'd)
...What do I...what am I supposed to say?

CAMP
Say what you felt. Your life was taken away here, Joe. This man stole your bride. The judge needs to know that.

She reads him carefully.

CAMP (cont'd)
...Can you do this.

ON JOE, as the Airplane's haunting "Comin' Back to Me" rolls over...

EXT. PORTRAIT SHOP -- DUSK

Newly-wedded couples seem to ask the same question as they shine their example down from a phalanx of large portrait photos on display. Joe passes by, visually confronted by them.

EXT. CAL'S PLACE -- DUSK

Joe brushes past...can't bear to look at it, can't bear not to. A true emotional walk-by. He presses on.

INT. FLOSS REALTY OFFICE -- DAY

Joe sits alone in the shadow of the Mulcahey model. Doesn't know what's hit him when the door SLAPS open -- WHAP! -- and BERTIE suddenly looms over him, burning.

BERTIE
--How dare you.

Joe blinks in confusion.

BERTIE (CONT'D)
--How dare you treat me like this. I haven't let a man touch me in three years and -- look at me -- and I'm finally right here. And what? Now I'm a one night stand?

Joe's silent.

BERTIE (cont'd)
I have to look into her father's eyes and see you haven't said a *thing* about me?

JOE
Bertie, I -- it is so complicated right now...

BERTIE
So that means you *hide*? This can't be you.

JOE
-- I can't be both of these things!

BERTIE
Well try being one.

JOE
I can't do this...I can't *do* this.

She sees him as if for the first time.

BERTIE
You think if you just run around fast enough, figure out what everyone wants, no one'll notice what a coward you are? Are you that scared?

(MORE)

BERTIE (cont'd)
 You sleep in that house, you eat their
 food, act like every day's another Sunday
 -- you think if you just keep it up,
 these people won't notice their
daughter's missing?

Joe's stung. Beat.

JOE
 What are we doing that's so different?
 "Lend a hand"...Bertie, you're so busy
 hiding out, you don't realize there's not
 a body in that bar thinks Cal McGuinness
 is ever coming back. You think I don't
 know you're never gonna make room in your
 life for someone who -- who wants to know
 you better than sixty lousy percent?

Bertie's emotions finally get the best of her.

JOE (CONT'D)
 It's the last forty that counts.

She backs away, crushed, fighting tears now as she shuts
 down.

BERTIE
 ...Where did you go, Joe? I thought you
 were...

She's backs out the door.

JOE
 Bertie, I'm right--

It SLAPS.

JOE (cont'd)
 (hollow, alone)
 ...here.

The song resumes again over...

CUT TO:

INT. DIANA'S ROOM -- MORNING

CLOSE ON SHOES

as Joe slowly slips into his formals again, his labored
 movements and expression mirroring those from the very
 opening of the picture...

INT. FLOSS KITCHEN -- MORNING

Joe and Nixon, side by side. Joe, dressed and ready for
 court, spoons Nixon's Pepto into his bowl. As Nixon watches,
 Joe spoons himself a shot, swallows.

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

BODIES

flowing in SLOW MOTION, crisscrossing, almost abstract.

ON JOE

peering in at this spectacle through a small window in the courtroom door. Impenetrable gaze.

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

As he sits in the witness docket, Joe's EYES find the defendant. Can't seem to look away. Camp straightens behind her lectern, capacity crowd behind her, BEN and JOJO prominent in front.

CAMP
Mr. Nast, may I call you Joe?

JOE
...Joe, yes.

CAMP
Joe, you knew the victim, Diana Floss, did you not?

JOE
...Yes.

CAMP
Would you please describe the nature of your relationship.

JOE
She...I was...we were engaged.

CAMP
Engaged to be married.

JOE
...Yes.

CAMP
How long were you together?

JOE
Three years. Close to...three years.

CAMP
That's a long time.

JOE
...yes.

CAMP
Long enough to get to know someone pretty well.

His eyes shift to her at the mention of these words, the unintended irony.

JOE

...yes.

His eyes drift back to STARE at the defendant, who shifts uncomfortably now under Joe's gaze. Joe searches his eyes for something...an answer?...

CAMP

Joe, what were your plans for afterwards -
- after the wedding,
I mean?

JOE

(distracted)

...The honeymoon?

Light laughter pulls him back momentarily.

CAMP

(smiles)

No, the future.

JOE

We...we'd been planning to stay here in town. I was...going to go into business with Ben...with her father.

CAMP

And that would be a commercial realty business?

Joe's eyes DRIFT back to Ketch again.

JOE

...Yes.

Their eyes MEET and hold.

CAMP

Have you always had this interest in commercial real estate?

JOE

(distractedly blunt)

...No.

CAMP

(notices)

Then why would you do it?

JOE

It's what they needed.

CAMP

Who?

JOE

(bluntly)

Ben and Diana.

CAMP
 (reacting)
 Well...that's quite a commitment. You
 must have cared for her a great deal to
 make that kind of sacrifice.

He doesn't even respond now, eyes LOCKED on the guy. Camp
 calmly moves to the witness box. She settles by his elbow.

CAMP (cont'd)
 -- Didn't you, Joe?

Nothing. She LEANS in out of the judge's earshot --

CAMP (cont'd)
 (low and even)
 ...Stop it. You are gonna blow this
 whole thing right now. Look at me.

He tries to pull his eyes away as she steps back to resume.

CAMP (cont'd)
 Joe...when Diana was killed, how far
 away were you from the actual wedding
 date?

But he DRIFTS back again, searching...

CAMP (cont'd)
 (losing patience)
 ...When was the wedding scheduled for,
 Joe?

No response.

CAMP (cont'd)
 ...Joe?

Again.

CAMP (cont'd)
 --Joe.

JOE
 --What?

CAMP
 --The wedding.

JOE
 --What wedding?

CAMP
 --Your wedding.

JOE
 --My wedding? It was...there was...
 (suddenly breaks, to Camp)
 --I'm sorry, I can't -- I can't do this.
 I can't. It didn't happen --there was no
 wedding.

(MORE)

JOE (cont'd)

We loved each other -- we broke it off -- and if I don't -- Jesus, if I don't say this now, I'll never-- she will never be part of this. What are we...what are we doing here? I don't know this guy...she didn't know this guy... What's he got to do with her?

Camp's speechless.

JOE (cont'd)

You asked me to bring her in the room. She's not here. She's not. And whatever happens here -- whatever happens to this guy -- that's not gonna change...it's not gonna matter. She's not here. And the only way you're gonna bring her in is with the truth. I don't, I don't know what else to say...what do you want me to say? Tell me, please -- I swear I'll try... But if you want her, then you've gotta keep it honest.

(turns to the judge)

You have to understand, Diana had this thing...this way of bringing out the real in people, not just the best. Their honesty. And I know she's still doing it -- cause God knows there's no other way I'd be sitting here right now saying things I can't believe are coming out of my mouth... It was Diana who had the courage -- she was the one who told me I didn't want to go through with it. And I guess she's doing it again now. All of this...this is everything she wouldn't want. She wasn't a bride to be -- she wasn't a victim. She was strong and...and real and messed up and wickedly honest...just like her mother. And if I sit here painting it any other way...

(eyes the judge)

I'm sorry, I tried... I thought if I could just...give you the pictures you needed, you'd bring these people some peace finally...and somehow they'd have their daughter back.

(looks to JoJo)

But that's not how she'd want to be.

JoJo meets his eyes, nods bravely back through her tears...yes.

JOE (cont'd)

The truth is hard. Sometimes it looks so wrong... But I guess...

(quietly)

...I guess it's where the good ones live.

Silence. The room is still. Joe sits quietly.

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Bertie's back behind the bar -- another night like every other. As Bertie pours Baxter his customary shot, she stops short of pouring her matching shot, eyes taking in the place now, searching as if from a distance, hovering outside.

INT. BERTIE'S BATHROOM -- NIGHT

CLOSE ON A FLAME -- swaying in the darkness.

BERTIE

lies in an old claw-footed tub, steam twisting around her in the candle's faint light. Slowly, she gently lifts her feet just above the water line, studies them, her ankles...revealing a lone silver band wrapped tight, a private memorial bracelet. With great care, she reaches out, gently begins soaping her ankle beneath the band, almost caressing it as its hold slowly loosens...

JOE (V.O.)

Dear Bertie...

INT. DIANA'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Joe sits at a teenage writing desk, knees barely fitting under as he writes...

JOE (V.O.)

You asked me before where I went... I want to tell you.

A growing PILE of identical handwritten letters sits beside him, fat roll of stamps at the wait.

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

...I went to a place where nothing's right. Where every word hurts, every moment's backwards, every sky's without color, without hope...

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREETS -- NIGHT

DARKNESS

suddenly parts as a mailbox lid is lowered, REVEALING Joe who peers inside carefully to make sure there are no obstructions -- places an envelope inside, moves on, snapping us back to BLACK.

JOE (V.O.)

...I tried to come back, Bertie...but I got lost.

ON JOE -- as he hits the NEXT mailbox on his pilgrimage, massive STACK of letters under his arm.

JOE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

...And while I was gone I met you. And I didn't even have the courage to realize I was home...

HIGH AND WIDER now to reveal the string of mailboxes along the empty street, stretching into the distance as Joe's small figure makes his way to the next...

JOE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
A wise friend of mine told me we all have
our homes... and now I know it's true.

EXT. BERTIE'S BUNGALOW -- PRE-DAWN

Joe stands at her door, waits for the answer that will not come.

JOE (V.O. CONT'D)
...And I hope you get this letter, Bertie
-- I figure I got seventy-five chances...
Cause if you do you'll know that, in the
end, that's where I was. I found home,
Bertie. I found you.

CLOSE ON BERTIE'S MAILBOX LID

yawning open as Joe's hand carefully places the letter inside.

JOE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
...I hope you find yours soon. Get
there. As fast as you can... And write
me when you do...

As he RAISES the red flag...MATCH CUT to:

EXT. FLOSS HOME -- DAWN -- THE RED FLAG

on the Floss mailbox snapping UP.

JOE (V.O.)
...Love...Joe.

Joe closes the lid on his last letter, quietly drags his body toward the house. As he goes, ADJUST to reveal the entire line of residential mailboxes along the block -- all with their flags RAISED now...

INT. FLOSS STAIRWELL -- MORNING

Joe tiptoes up the stairs, spent from his mission, slows as he hears the distant sound of muffled typewriter keys CLACKING. He stops, bends his ear toward the sound. Can't believe what he's hearing. Slowly he makes his way toward a door cracked open at the end of the hall, long closed, dusty light pouring through it. As he nears, he spies

JOJO

inside her office, a joyous mess heretofore sealed off like a tomb -- now open once again with the shades rolled up. She types away furiously.

Joe leans against the door jamb, enjoys the sight.

JOJO
(doesn't look up)
If I'm making too much noise...tough
shit.

Joe smiles.

JOJO (cont'd)
(twists around)
Can you believe it?

JOE
It's great to see, JoJo.

They share a look. Her features visibly relaxed for the first time. She leans back.

JOJO
...Woke up at five -- the weirdest thing happened. I had a thought -- this image -- and I was actually able to hold onto it. Hold onto it! Do you have any idea?? God, it's been so long...
(beams)
The specifics are back, Joe. So I'm doing some accounting. The real her.
(eyes her growing list)
...The Diana facts.

She finds an entry, reads aloud:

JOJO (CONT'D)
Number ninety-two: "Laughed like a pig. Full-throated, nasal snorts."

Joe smiles immediately in recognition.

JOJO (CONT'D)
-- Huh? Huh? This is the stuff -- *this* is the stuff. Fuck the perfume, give me the warts.
(waves her pen at him)
You.

Joe leans his head back in thought, then a smile erupts. JoJo nods him on, at the ready.

JOE
(nods)
Her favorite sandals, the really ratty ones she loved to wear?... Every time she moved -- they made this incredible ...farting sound.

JoJo SCREAMS.

JOJO
--Oh my God, yes!! Yes!!

They laugh to the point of tears, easy and grateful in each others presence. Released. As the laughs subside, JoJo wipes at her cheek.

JOJO (cont'd)
...You did such a good thing, Joe-Bob.
Gave us all a nice big truth enema.
(MORE)

JOJO (cont'd)
 Little Roto Rooter for the head. And a
 hell of a show of...
 (taps courage on her heart)
 ...So what excuse have I got not to get
 back to work, huh? Screw the verdict --
 whatever it is. I'm back in action...

She turns back to the typewriter. On her back, as Joe goes,

JOJO (CONT'D)
 I love you, Joseph.

Joe stops in his tracks. As he slowly turns back...

INT. POST OFFICE SORTING ROOM -- MORNING

As a SHOWER of letters tumbles from a vast collection bag.
 BERTIE watches them all with disbelief, as a towering MOUND
 forms in front of her -- all addressed to HER, stamps and
 all...

INT. RESTAURANT -- MORNING

Beautiful, almost abstract refracted light shifts as Ben
 enters through double glass doors. He hesitates, then calmly
 crosses past a dining counter, coming to rest framed by a now
 familiar, boarded up WINDOW, his office visible across the
 street. He's back inside Neighbor's. And finds himself
 facing a rather frozen MANAGER with his ever-gawking STAFF
 behind him.

BEN
 (smiles)
 Morning.

Manager can barely manage a nod as Ben reaches for his
 wallet.

BEN (cont'd)
 Two vanilla cones.
 (winks)
 And pack 'em tight.

He produces a crisp FIFTY DOLLAR bill, hands it to the
 manager.

MANAGER
 (dumbfounded)
 Sir, it's...it's only ninety cents.

BEN
 That's right. Now you take that ninety
 cents, and with the rest of the change --
 buy yourself a new window.
 (beams)
 My treat.

EXT. FLOSS REALTY -- DAY

CLOSE ON "FLOSS AND SON" SIGN

as a wide brush PAINTS OUT the "SON" portion -- then
 continues on, surprisingly painting over the rest of the
 sign, "FLOSS" and all...

JOE

arrives below, spies the work above with great surprise.

INT. OFFICE -- MORNING

Joe enters to find the Mulcahey model CRUSHED like kindling in the trash can. Ben boxes up his files, emptying the office out. He looks older now than even a few days earlier. But peaceful.

JOE

...Ben?

BEN

Joe...

(the model)

Welcome to keep that as a souvenir.

(off Joe's reaction)

Oh, please, who was I kidding -- he was never gonna cut me in. I may be in denial, but I'm not an idiot. You see this? --

He lifts a newspaper section -- complete with the familiar NextCentury agents' PHOTO by a splashy headline announcing Mulcahey's pact with them.

BEN (cont'd)

Deal was already in place, four counties over. The Turd Coats ride again...

(sits, small smile)

I don't know, Joe... If I helped Mulcahey carve this town up, it'd only be so I wouldn't have to see it look the same...I mean, how can it now without her?...

(eyes meet Joe's)

But then you get to thinking...who the hell wants to buy milk and tube socks on the same aisle? -- What is this, Russia? We're Americans, dammit. I like getting in my car to drive thirty feet. To hell with him...

Joe smiles, enjoying Ben's peace. Ben eyes him with great affection.

BEN (cont'd)

Was fun having a partner for a while, though...wasn't it? You figure out your next venture -- I'm available... I'm great in a crisis...

Joe takes in all the packing up.

JOE

...You closing up?

BEN

(off Joe's obvious surprise)

...Trust me -- you should've seen JoJo's face. Surprised the hell out of me, too -- think that's why I'm doing it.

(MORE)

BEN (cont'd)
 (hesitates, then)
 ...When Diana was too young to remember,
 she used to come in here
 every Tuesday, spill a cone from
 that...wonderful place across the street,
 and spin in this chair. For hours. That
 was it. That was Dad to her. I wish I
 could say that changed when she got older
 but...I don't think I let it. She knew
 me here.
 (beat)
 So somehow, when all this crap
 happened -- the thought of not being
 here, not working...not having you...
 (swallows)
 ...How else is she gonna know me?

Joe eyes him compassionately.

BEN (CONT'D)
 ...And then...you get to thinking...
 maybe this is just another one of those
 ways to avoid letting go they all tell
 you about. You know -- those damn books
 JoJo loves to barbecue?...
 (shakes his head, grows
 quieter)
 ...I can't keep her here... That's not
 what she needs... It won't change the
 ending.
 (lifts his eyes to Joe)
 ...And I can't keep you either.

Joe holds his breath. Ben nods.

BEN (cont'd)
 Maybe, if it's okay, I can... say to you
 something I didn't get a chance to say to
 her?...
 (then, simply, kissing Joe's
 forehead)
 Go...go...

Joe nods his promise...impressed beyond words. And as if on
 cue, the PHONE suddenly rings. Joe watches Ben for his age
 old response. He hesitates, a Herculean effort not to answer
 it, transfixed by the instrument's Siren Song. Wavers. Then
 finally, he gradually meets Joe's eyes, and a slow, beautiful
 smile blooms. He doesn't lift a finger. Doesn't move. And
 as he and Joe simply stand facing each other with big,
 wonderful, stupid grins, CUT to:

INT. FLOSS KITCHEN -- DAY

CLOSE ON ITALIAN LABELS

as they begin to be PEELED off a variety of household
 surfaces, one by one, an unveiling... We CROSS CUT with...

EXT. FRONT STREET/INT. CAR -- MOVING -- DAY

ON NIXON, face hanging out the window, eyes reflecting the
 passing storefronts as

JOE

rolls through town one last time on his way to the highway, his face a wash of feelings. He slows as he nears...

POV -- THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

CAL'S PLACE. Quiet outside in the morning light.

CLOSE ON JOE

as his eyes take it in wistfully, slowly reacts to...

A SIGN

nailed up now beside the CLOSED placard. Handwritten and bold. FOR SALE BY OWNER...

JOE

slows to a stop, floored. She did it. She actually did it. As he takes this in... CUT to:

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- SAME TIME

The still beauty of the space at this hour reveals a silent visitor -- a single FIGURE silhouetted against the frosted windows' golden light. BERTIE. She stands in the middle of the space, takes it in one last time, letting it wash over her.

EXT. CAR -- SAME TIME

Joe IDLES, heart lifted and sinking bittersweetly at the same time as he takes in Bertie's achievement. His eyes hold on the closed front door...

INT. CAL'S PLACE -- SAME TIME

FROM DARKNESS

REVEAL Bertie's face as she opens a door and we discover we're inside her supply closet. As she peers peacefully inside, CUT back to:

EXT. CAR -- SAME TIME

Joe's HAND hovers over the transmission, poised to slip it back into gear...

INT. SUPPLY CLOSET -- SAME TIME

Bertie's HAND gently begins to unpin image after image...gradually bringing down her shrine to Cal.

EXT. CAR -- SAME TIME

Joe draws a final look, eyes still fixed on the door. Finally eases his foot off the brake, slowly rolling out of frame...

INT. SUPPLY CLOSET -- SAME TIME

Bertie takes the last of her photos down, eyes running over the now empty wall. Simply stands in the sacred space, brushing her cheek. Brave girl. Closes her eyes...and as she does, the unmistakable sound of music drifting through the walls, echoey and dreamlike... Her imagination? Her eyes slowly open as it seems to continue...

THE BACK HALLWAY -- CONTINUING

As Bertie edges her way toward the main room...the music's growing. Definitely not her imagination. And it's coming from the juke. As she makes her way to the corner, heart stopping, she's almost afraid to peer around. Screwing up her courage, she does, and discovers

INT. CAL'S -- CONTINUING

JOE

across the room, peering into the jukebox, holding it for support. Alone with the music, searching for solace. A final moment with her memory in the empty bar. He doesn't even see her behind him. She studies him for the longest time, heart breaking open at the sight. Finally wills her feet to move. And as

HER SHADOW

falls across the glass, Joe's hairs stand on end. He turns. Can't believe his eyes. They simply look at one another, take each other in completely, a whole exchange without words. Eyes locked. He finds his way to her and, at last, they KISS, their bodies begin to turn in response, slow and unconscious -- a remarkable dance all its own.

The SONG carries over...

INT. CAR -- MOVING -- LATE AFTERNOON

CLOSE ON NIXON -- pressing himself into the far corner of the backseat now, shying warily from his travelling companion. FAY RAY -- who PURRS wantonly over in his direction, surrounded by their things. JOE AND BERTIE enjoy this sight in the rearview. Out the windows, last glimpses of town catching late afternoon light. They take each other in without words now, this journey they're now joined on. Easy, peaceful eyes, filled with pasts and futures, as

INT. FLOSS KITCHEN

CLOSE ON JOJO FROM ABOVE

Her face fills the frame as her eyes turn up toward us, settle on the ceiling above her with great peace, the final touch to be removed...

INT. CAR -- MOVING

CLOSE ON JOE AND BERTIE

Gazing up at the same object now. Joining hands, they reach up together and touch the small STICKER now hovering on the roof panelling above their heads. A blessing.

"CIELO"...

BLACK OUT.