

EXT. MASS. TURNPIKE -- DAY

A stretch of New England road. The bleak mid-Winter. Scrubby pines on either side. A black BMW wagon glides past the light traffic towards the bridge that crosses the Cape Cod Canal.

INT. BMW -- DAY

Inside the car with CLAIRE and RICHARD. They're a Boston couple in their early middle years. Aging preppies.

She drives. He doodles on a mini Etch-A-Sketch.

The back of the car is loaded with stuff -- boxes, suitcases, whatever. Looks like they're moving. Claire points out the bridge.

CLAIRE

See? It's only 56 minutes to the bridge.  
Not bad.

Nothing from Richard.

EXT. ROUTE 6 -- DAY

On the Cape. It's now a two-lane, bordered by sandy rises. There's a little left-over snow crusting the verges. The exit for Wellfleet. The BMW makes the turn.

EXT. MAIN STREET, WELLFLEET -- DAY

With the car as it makes its way down Main Street. Cute. Boutiques and little markets, mostly closed for the off-season.

EXT. SKAKET HARBOR ROAD -- DAY

The car rounds the bend. PAN OVER as Claire pulls into the driveway of a classic Cape Cod cottage. Tucked back away from the street in a copse of spindly firs.

INT. BMW -- DAY

Claire turns off the engine. Richard peers out at the house.

RICHARD

It's perfect. Pictures didn't really do  
it justice.

She wraps a scarf around her neck, pops the back hatch and climbs out. Richard stays stock still. Squeezes his eyes shut.

RICHARD

I told you not to come. I begged.

Richard looks over his shoulder. There, in the back seat, sits CAPTAIN EXCELLENT.

He's a Superhero about Richard's age. He's dressed in the tights, knee boots, insignia leotard and cape. Square jaw, glossy black hair helmet. He has a world-weary quality like he's battled too much evil.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

But we're a team. We're Richard and The Captain.

RICHARD

I'm doing this one alone. Okay?

Claire knocks on the passenger window. Richard jumps. She peers into the car. The back seat is empty.

Richard smiles innocently. He lifts the Etch-A-Sketch. Shows her what he's drawn. It's an elaborately drawn message, reading: WHOOPEE! He beams.

RICHARD

This is so great.

Richard throws open the car door, takes the bags from Claire and bounds up the driveway.

RICHARD

You coming?

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Richard heads for the front door. Up the front steps and...

RICHARD

Oh, good Lord... Claire!

There, at his feet, on the stoop, in a pool of its own blood is A DEAD RACCOON.

Claire rushes over.

CLAIRE

Oh. Poor thing. It was quick at least. Clean thoracic tear.

She dips into her purse, pulls out a pair of fresh surgical gloves. Snaps them on. Without flinching, she picks up the carcass and steps off to fling it into the underbrush.

Richard continues to stare at the bloody spot.

RICHARD

I feel like I just lost my bearings.

CLAIRE  
What?

RICHARD  
Nothing. I'm fine. All good.

He steps over the blood pool and unlocks the door.

INT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

FOLLOW them into the house. The entrance is into the kitchen. It's all sea shells and knick knacks. Standard rental house cute.

CLAIRE  
This is really nice. Double oven....

She sets her box on the counter. Richard picks up a matching lighthouse salt and pepper set and smiles excitedly at Claire. He shakes them.

RICHARD  
Cute...!

She starts to look around the place. Checks cupboards and the pantry closet. Richard wanders into the next room.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Richard glances around the living room: the fireplace mantel, basket of wood, rocking chair, seaside artwork.

He finds a seashell on the mantel. Holds it to his ear. Big smile. Claire breezes in.

CLAIRE  
Nice light in here. This'll be good for you.

RICHARD  
Listen. C'mere, c'mere...

He holds the shell to her ear.

RICHARD  
There she is. The mighty sea. Still in there.

CLAIRE  
Wow.

She heads into the back of the house. We hear doors opening and closing as she checks out the place.

Richard replaces the shell, satisfied. Turns and scans the room. His face falls. THE COUCH.

He stares. It's one of those ugly couches. Large and overstuffed. Upholstered in an aggressive floral pattern. Layers of co-ordinating throw pillows.

He stands and stares.

CLAIRE (O.S.)  
Bathroom's big.... Oh, there's plenty of towels, we didn't need to bring any, oh well... The fuse box is in the linen closet... Richard?

No answer. Richard can't take his eyes off of the couch.

CLAIRE (O.S.)  
Ooh, there's a skylight... Richard?

She comes back into the living room.

RICHARD  
The couch. Could be a problem.

CLAIRE  
Don't fixate.

He turns away from the couch. Rallies himself.

RICHARD  
You're right. Wonderful. Everything. Right?

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

A box of pizza on the counter. Remnants of a casual dinner. Claire tidies the kitchen, flitting around. Richard has his nose in *The Cape Codder*, the local paper.

RICHARD  
Phil Turley is very concerned, Claire, about the community's efforts to protect the nesting grounds of the Native Tern.... As he should be.

CLAIRE  
So, if I can get off by 5 -- god, when did I become someone who gets up at 5? That should put me at the hospital by 7:15-ish. Even with the tunnel traffic....

RICHARD  
Super.

CLAIRE  
I've put all my numbers on the top sheet of the memo pad by the phone.

CLAIRE (cont'd)  
If you want to tear it off and tape it up  
somewhere....

RICHARD  
Ooh, and here... Marjorie Daly-Hayes  
wants to remind all of us residents...

CLAIRE  
So, I'm in surgery from 9 to noon, so  
I'll check in after that. 'Kay?

RICHARD  
Fine. Good. Marjorie just wants to  
remind us to please, *please* remember to  
remove our dog waste from the Town  
Landing.

CLAIRE  
We don't have a dog.

She gently pries the paper from him. Folds it and lays it  
down.

CLAIRE  
Are you sure you don't want to rent a  
car?

RICHARD  
Didn't they say there was a bike? I'll  
dig it out of the garage tomorrow. It's  
ten minutes into town. This'll be ideal.

CLAIRE  
You're sure?

RICHARD  
I'll cycle.

CLAIRE  
Okay. Maybe next week-end I'll bring out  
Scrabble or Scattergories.

She watches Richard pour himself another glass of wine.

CLAIRE  
So, what's your schedule look like for  
tomorrow?

RICHARD  
I guess I'll start at the very beginning.  
It's a very good place to start. Chapter  
1. Down to work.

CLAIRE  
Speaking of which...

She jumps up and beckons him into the living room.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Under the large picture window, looking out into the woods is a desk. Claire stands next to it, smiling. She turns on the desk lamp.

RICHARD

Oh.

On the desk top, Claire has organized everything. Sixteen perfectly sharpened pencils lined up in a neat row, a stack of legal pads, coffee mug and a framed picture of Claire and Richard.

And, in the center, a brand new Apple G4 laptop computer with a bow around it.

CLAIRE

You're all set.

Richard looks overwhelmed, and not necessarily in a good way.

CLAIRE

Marc just got one of these. He said it's foolproof. A five year old could use it.

RICHARD

Actually, I was thinking about writing in the other room.

CLAIRE

Oh.

RICHARD

But this is good. You're right, this is better.

She gives him a supportive hug.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Under the comforter, Claire sleeps a peaceful sleep. Richard does not. Her arm's thrown heavily across his neck. His eyes are wide open and he looks like he's being strangled. HOLD for a long beat.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard's up. In his pyjamas. He's carrying a glass of milk from the kitchen. A little bleary.

He stops in his tracks. Turns to the couch. There sits CAPTAIN EXCELLENT, his arms slung across the back pillows. Dripping sarcasm.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 Saints alive, Richard! These competing  
 patterns! What mad fool would combine  
 these fabrics?!

He and Richard lock eyes. Richard points a trembling finger  
 at The Captain. He whispers a vicious whisper.

RICHARD  
 No.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 What?

RICHARD  
 No no no. No no.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 What?

RICHARD  
 No no no no no no.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 What?

RICHARD  
No.

The Captain shrugs. Richard turns his back on him and bolts.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAWN

Claire's leaving. She tosses her overnight bag into the  
 passenger seat. Richard stands by, shivering in his PJ's.

CLAIRE  
 That's me ready. So... it's a lot of  
 time alone.

RICHARD  
 I've never been more certain of anything  
 in my life. Let's embrace it. My little  
 time here, your little time at home.  
 "Me" time... "You" time... You know?  
 Take some "You Time". You should have  
 massages and scrubs and rubs and...  
 peels. *Peels*, Claire.

CLAIRE  
 I wish. This isn't a vacation for me.  
 I've got to work.

Richard's a little stung.

RICHARD  
 Oh. And I don't.

CLAIRE  
That's not what I meant...

They let it drop. Claire walks around and climbs in the car.

CLAIRE  
Oh, and I talked to Peter and Lucy about coming out. They said maybe the weekend of the second.

RICHARD  
Great. Great. Who?

CLAIRE  
Peter. And Lucy.

RICHARD  
Oh. Good. They're always fun.

Richard leans through the window for a goodbye kiss. Just before he gets to the lips:

CLAIRE  
You didn't, uh... you didn't bring Him out here, did you?

Richard flinches. Pulls back. Claire instantly regrets the question.

RICHARD  
What...? No. Course not.

She believes him. Smiles. Starts the car and puts it in reverse.

CLAIRE  
Have a productive week, okay.

She starts to back out. Richard waves.

RICHARD  
Save some lives!

HOLD ON Richard. He watches the BMW swing out the driveway and out of sight.

He smiles a satisfied, determined smile. But for a split second, it looks like pure panic. He marches inside.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Richard steps over to the desk, appraises the set-up. He scatters the neat row of pencils. Takes the new computer, opens a desk drawer and dumps it in.

He reaches next to the desk for his Smith-Corona Coronet Electric Typewriter. Puts it where the laptop was. Opens its case and dusts the keys.

Steps back. That's better. He sits down to work.

Jams a clean sheet of paper into his typewriter, spins the platen. Fingers on the keys (A,S,D,F,G,H,J,K,L,;). Poised.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"Merton regarded his solitude as something sacred. A kind of bond with himself that, over time, took on a pseudo-holy aspect and was, to him, unassailable."*

Then his head jerks. He looks over his shoulder.

There it is: the couch.

He shakes it off, back to the paper. Re-poised.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"This caused those in his immediate circle to regard him with a certain kind of mistrust, or perhaps distaste. This suited Merton just fine. All he wanted anyway was to be left alone."*

No good. Eyes back to the damn couch.

One more try. The paper, the poise. Nope.

Richard jumps up and heads out of the room. Comes back with a blanket. He throws it over the offensive sofa. A mild improvement. He sits back down.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"The closest thing he had to a friend was Humberto the Steeplejack, himself a man of few words, whose profession embodied a certain remove from humanity, perched as he so often was atop a steel and aluminium scaffold like a preposterous bird."*

He stops again. Reaches into a desk drawer and pulls out a cardboard tube. He slips a poster out and unrolls it. It's a glossy Audubon print of THE EXTINCT AMERICAN HEATH HEN. A bird.

He scotch tapes it to the picture window in front of the desk. Admires it. And then types like mad.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"Some considered Humberto the Steeplejack aloof, but when his gaze fell daily upon Merton, scurrying ant-like the thousands of feet below, he never failed to greet him warmly with a wave of his gloved hand."*

He rips the paper out of the machine and slaps it down on the desk. Leans back, spent.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"Not much, perhaps, but for Merton that was enough."*

EXT. THE HOUSE, GARAGE -- DAY

A little gray shingle garage with the doors thrown open. Richard's in there, rummaging around. A rake comes flying out. Then an old spare tire. A length of lumber.

Then Richard. Wheeling THE BICYCLE.

A cool set of wheels, if you're a 10-year-old boy. Banana seat, suicide handlebars, streamers on the grips. And a nice little basket on the front.

Richard kicks the kick-stand and stands back to regard it. ON the bike. Nice. Richard throws a leg over. Feet on the pedals, knees up by his chin.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Hot wheels.

The Captain is back. He stands behind Richard, holding onto the sissy bar, steadying him.

RICHARD

Let go of me. I can do this on my own.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Remember when you ran over that guinea pig? Little Fluff?

RICHARD

Let me go!

Richard starts pedalling, wobbly. He gets halfway down the driveway, clips a bush and wipes out.

RICHARD

I'm okay! I'm okay!

He climbs back on and wobbles off. The Captain salutes him.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

To Adventure, my friend....

EXT. WELLFLEET STREETS -- DAY

WITH RICHARD as he cruises the small town streets. His awkwardness slowly turning to glee as he feels the cold rush of air. He tries riding with no hands. Rings the bell. Wheeee.

EXT. MAIN STREET, WELLFLEET -- DAY

The main drag in town. Mostly deserted. Three kids hang in the CVS Drug Store parking lot. High school seniors: a girl and two guys.

ABBY (17) is local all the way, hiding behind a little too much eye make-up. BRYCE (18) is gorgeous working class, the beautiful son of a roofer. And CHRISTOPHER (17) is more odd-ball, more loner.

Back-packs and school books.

BRYCE  
Why aren't you a cheerleader anyway?

ABBY  
'Cause I'm not.

Abby and Bryce start seriously necking. Christopher shifts glumly, trying to look invisible.

They pull apart finally.

BRYCE  
Later.

And Bryce takes off on his skateboard.

As soon as he's out of sight, Christopher steps in close.

CHRISTOPHER  
You could easily be a cheerleader.

ABBY  
You could easily drop dead.

Abby blanks him. Christopher sighs and skulks off around the corner. Abby slumps against the wall of the Drug Store. Pulls a pack and lights a cigarette with a match. Then drops it -- lit -- into a trash can. She strikes another, drops it in the can. And another.

Across the intersection, Richard bikes up. His little basket loaded with supermarket supplies. He pulls up at a red light and spots Abby. Curious, he watches her tossing matches. Until --

Whoom! The paper trash in the can lights. Flames lick over the top. A blaze.

Abby watches the burn for a moment, then calmly walks away. Leaving the scene of the crime.

Richard stares. The girl sauntering off, the trash fire getting bigger and bigger. He pulls through the intersection on his bike and kicks over the trash can. Stomps out the fire.

He stares after Abby, but she's gone.

EXT. WELLFLEET STREETS -- DAY

ON Abby, heading for home. The sky beginning to darken overhead.

A high-pitched squeak. CLOSE ON a bicycle wheel. It's Richard, following at a discreet distance.

Abby glances back. No sign of Richard, but she can hear the squeak. Picks up the pace. Heads around a bend in the road.

When Richard gets there, she's already at the next intersection and disappearing again.

Richard stands on the pedals, trying to make up lost ground. He makes a hard right.... and has to jam on the brakes.

Abby's right there. Waiting. A can with a spray nozzle aimed at his eyes. Mace? He throws up his hands in defense.

RICHARD

No, no, no! It's not like that!

He cowers. She glares, moving the can inches from his face. Holds it on him. Richard finally peeks through his fingers. CLOSE ON the can.

RICHARD

WD-40...?

ABBY

For your wheels. Driving me nuts.

She squats and sprays the wheels, front and back.

ABBY

Nice bike, though. I used to ride one of these when I was your age. My parents put it in a yard sale. So I had to kill 'em.

RICHARD

What?

ABBY

So how come you're following me?

RICHARD  
I... I wasn't.

ABBY  
Were too.

RICHARD  
Was not.

ABBY  
Were too. How come?

RICHARD  
I, um... I was kind of... uh, I just moved to town and I was... I need a.... I need a babysitter.

ABBY  
Uh huh.

RICHARD  
And I just thought, you know... Maybe you'd know somebody who, you know...

ABBY  
Yeah, okay. When d'you need me for?

RICHARD  
Oh. Uh... Friday? Night? Six?

ABBY  
Deal.

She digs a notebook and pen from her backpack.

ABBY  
Address and phone number?

RICHARD  
It's 18 Skaket Harbor Road. I don't know the phone number yet, sorry.

ABBY  
That's cool. See you Friday.

She slings her backpack and makes tracks. After her:

RICHARD  
I'm Richard.

ABBY  
Uh huh....

ON Richard watching her walk away. After she's gone, he turns and starts to ride. ON the wheels, smooth and silent. Richard grins. That's better.

EXT. MARSH -- DAY

On a wooden bridge spanning a marshy inlet. Richard blows across the top of a dried reed stalk, trying to get a whistle. At peace.

Until Captain Excellent appears at his side.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
I'm a little confused about my mission.

RICHARD  
Do you mind? I'm communing with nature here.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
I mean our track record hasn't been so good lately.

RICHARD  
Precisely why I asked you to sit this one out.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Oh, Richard, Richard, Richard.... How many times, how many times...?  
(Mocking.)  
"I'm going through my puberty *alone*..."

RICHARD  
Don't mock me.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
"I'm doing the college years *alone*..."  
"I'm resuscitating my half-dead marriage *alone*...."

RICHARD  
Kindly zip it.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
*Please.* For once in your life. Go it *alone*.

RICHARD  
Gladly. Good day, sir.

Richard turns his back on The Captain. And they stand there. And they stand there. Nobody's going anywhere.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
You can't live without me. Face it.

RICHARD  
You just don't like it 'cause I'm on an up-swing.

The Captain slumps. Head in hands.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard's at his desk. Poised. (A,S,D,F,G,H,J,K,L,;)

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Merton regarded his solitude as  
 something sacred, a kind of..."*

Richard stops. Leans back. Thinks aloud.

RICHARD  
 Merton...? Burton? Milton? Milton.

Back to the keys.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Milton regarded his solitude as  
 something sacred."*

A knock at the door. Richard starts. Looks at his watch.  
 5:45pm.

He pulls the paper out of the typewriter. Turns it face down  
 on the desk. Goes to the door. It's Abby.

ABBY  
 Hey. I'm a little early. Sorry.

RICHARD  
 No problem. I'm sorry, I've forgotten  
 your name...

She pushes on into the house. Nudging him aside with her  
 backpack.

ABBY  
 That's okay, I forgot yours too. I'm  
 thinking it's Steve or Paul or Dave.

RICHARD  
 It's Richard.

ABBY  
 That's what I thought. Here...

Abby goes into her bag. Takes out a child's toy. It's a  
 well used CARE BEAR stuffed animal. Pink. She hands it to  
 Richard.

ABBY  
 It's Love-A-Lot. For the kid.

Richard freezes. Eyes darting.

RICHARD  
Well, actually...

ABBY  
So you just moved out here, huh? Where from?

RICHARD  
Boston. But it's just temporary. My wife Claire's at Mass General... Vascular surgeon.

Abby's eyes find the picture on the desk.

ABBY  
That her? She's cute.

RICHARD  
Yeah. That's the doctor.

ABBY  
My parents had a trial separation once, too.

RICHARD  
What? Oh, no, that's not what's happening here... That's... Is it?

ABBY  
You should probably find out. So is it sleeping? The baby?

RICHARD  
Um, look. The thing about the baby is... it's not, um... are you thirsty?

ABBY  
Not really.

RICHARD  
Um... well, the baby's not here.

ABBY  
What do you mean?

RICHARD  
Well... I guess... basically, um... there is no baby. As such.

There's a lengthy silence. Richard nervously squeezes the Care Bear. It squeaks.

ABBY  
No kid?

RICHARD  
No.

Richard squirms.

ABBY  
Well shit, this'll be easy. So what time  
you think you'll be back?

RICHARD  
Oh. Uh... nine? Nine-thirty?

ABBY  
Great. I've got homework. Have fun.

He's not sure quite what to do. She waits for him to go.  
So, he scrambles for his coat, scarf and hat.

RICHARD  
Okay. Um... there's food in the fridge  
if you...

He hands the toy back to Abby, sheepishly. Throws on his  
coat and leaves in a kind of befuddled slow motion.

Stay with Abby, watching him through the window. She smiles  
as he climbs on his kiddie bike and disappears into the  
night.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

The radio blares loud teen pop. Abby has homework strewn  
everywhere. She spins in Richard's desk chair, distracted,  
bored.

Abby glances up at Richard's Audubon poster. She locks eyes  
with the HEATH HEN. Goes into her back-back. Takes a  
Yearbook Photo of Bryce and tapes it over the heath hen's  
head.

ABBY  
Chickenshit.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Abby's splayed out, belly down, on Richard's bed. She  
notices a stack of books on the night stand. They're all  
identical. She picks one up.

ON THE BOOK COVER: "The Renderer" by Richard M. Dunne.

She flips it over. The author photo on the back: it's  
Richard, a few years ago. She opens it. Reads.

ABBY  
*"Self-loathing is an underrated form of  
psychological checks and balances. Never  
too high, never too low, thought Merton  
to himself as he gazed into the rapidly  
reddening bath water."* Jesus.

She snaps the book closed and rolls off the bed.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby carries the copy of Richard's book in. Opens her back-pack and tucks it inside. Zips the zipper.

INT. THE HOUSE, BATHROOM -- NIGHT

More snooping. Abby squeezes toothpaste onto her finger. Rubs her teeth, spits. Opens the medicine cabinet. There's nothing but aspirin. Six bottles. Six different brands.

Abby pulls down the Extra Strength Tylenol. Pops the lid and pours a mound of pills into her hand. From behind her:

CHRISTOPHER  
What are you doing?

Abby jumps a mile. She spins around and the pills scatter all over the floor. CHRISTOPHER is there, standing in the doorway.

ABBY  
You ass. What are you doing here?

She bends to pick up the Tylenol, jamming them back in the bottle.

ABBY  
You don't have keep checking up on me.

CHRISTOPHER  
Isn't this the guy that was following you? I mean, who does that?

ABBY  
You do. It's just babysitting.

CHRISTOPHER  
Then where's the kid?

ABBY  
Well, he doesn't have a kid.

CHRISTOPHER  
The guy's a perv then. You gotta get out of here.

ABBY  
He's a famous writer, okay? Get a life.

CHRISTOPHER  
You are my life.

She groans. Puts the aspirin back in the medicine cabinet and slams the mirror door. Pushes past Christopher.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Abby's in the fridge. Starts tossing stuff onto the counter: an onion, tomatoes, parsley.

Christopher slinks in. Leans on the counter.

CHRISTOPHER  
You've got a problem with men.

ABBY  
No, I got a problem with you.

CHRISTOPHER  
What about Bryce?

ABBY  
What about him?

CHRISTOPHER  
He treats you like shit.

ABBY  
When?

CHRISTOPHER  
Always.

ABBY  
No.

CHRISTOPHER  
Yes.

ABBY  
Shut up.

She finds a huge pot, fills it with water and sets it on the stove.

CHRISTOPHER  
Oh, you're not!

ABBY  
Not what?

CHRISTOPHER  
What are you doing?

ABBY  
Making soup.

CHRISTOPHER  
You've known this stalker guy five minutes, you're already making him soup?

ABBY

I told you, Christopher, he's a writer.

CHRISTOPHER

I love you.

She shakes her head. Pulls out a knife. Chops an onion.

EXT. BEACH -- NIGHT

The crescent of the Wellfleet Bay. Gathering darkness. We can barely make out the fishing boats and dinghies moored in the shallow waters. Utterly deserted.

CLOSE ON a DEAD FISH. Picked clean. Washed up among the reeds.

ON Richard, sitting atop the lifeguard stand, watching the water gently lap over the carcass. He shudders, frozen. PAN DOWN to find his bike propped there.

Captain Excellent is in the sand. He kneels beside a large sand castle, amazingly intricate in its detail. He sculpts with a steady hand.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

What are we doing here?

RICHARD

I told her nine, nine-thirty.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

No, I mean what are we *doing* here? The girl?

RICHARD

Oh.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

It doesn't strike you as odd, somehow? A *babysitter*?

RICHARD

Hey, I'm under some pressure here. To produce. People expect literature. The doctor. My publisher. I have three months. Three months to crack this thing...

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

And the girl helps how?

Richard peers down at the castle. The critic.

RICHARD

Can you give it more of a... I don't know, a *lair* feeling...?

The Captain stays on message.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
And the girl helps how?

RICHARD  
Do you always have to question every  
decision I make?

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Make better decisions.

Richard sighs and climbs down from the chair.

RICHARD  
Just do The Voice.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Oh, now he needs me...

RICHARD  
At this juncture, yes.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Juncture?

RICHARD  
Just do it.

The Captain nods, grudgingly. Works up to it. Gets into the stance: chest out, shoulders back. He bestrides the beach like a colossus. His voice booms across the bay with that fake echo-y superhero sound.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
"When the World is imperiled... When Evil  
surrounds you... When Danger is  
lurking... Who do you call? CAPTAIN  
EXCELLENT!"

The Voice echoes. Then dies. Silence.

RICHARD  
I'm bolstered. Thank you.

ON RICHARD, his spirits visibly lifted. He collects the bike and wheels it straight through the sand castle. The Captain kicks over what's left of it and trudges off by Richard's side.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- NIGHT

Richard, alone, deposits the bike in the garage. He stands, gazing at the lights from the house. Dreading the re-entry.

There's a rustling from the bushes behind him. Something big. A low growl. Spooked, Richard shoots for the house.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby's there, doing her homework at Richard's desk. The door flies open and Richard flies in. She swivels around and regards him oddly as he stands panting and trembling with cold. After a long beat:

RICHARD  
There's something out there... in the woods....

ABBY  
Oh my god! The Wellfleet wolf. Didn't you hear? It escaped from the zoo this morning.

RICHARD  
There's a zoo here?

Abby cracks up.

ABBY  
Don't worry. Whatever it is I won't let it get you.

Abby crosses to him and puts the back of her hand to his cheek. Richard flinches, pulling away. Undeterred, she takes his face between her hands.

ABBY  
God, you're freezing. C'mon, there's soup.

RICHARD  
What?

ABBY  
Yeah, I made you some soup. I thought you might be cold.

She heads into the kitchen. He follows.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

ABBY  
What'd you do tonight?

She goes to the cupboard and pulls out a mug. Starts to ladle soup into it.

RICHARD  
Went to the beach, did some thinking.

ABBY  
For three hours? In the freezing cold?

She hands him the hot soup. He clutches it, feeling the warmth. Peers into it like he's never seen soup before.

RICHARD  
You made this?

ABBY  
Yeah.

RICHARD  
How?

ABBY  
I don't know, an onion, couple of carrots, one of your beers, um.... Oh, I hope that was okay, I just kind of helped myself.

RICHARD  
No. It's fantastic.

ABBY  
You haven't even tasted it.

RICHARD  
No, I mean the fact of it is fantastic. That you made something. From nothing.

ABBY  
Oh, well, you can make a soup out of anything. That's the great thing about it. Whatever's left laying around. You know, you can either take all the crap that's rotting in your fridge and toss it out, or you can put it in a pot and make soup out of it. I go with soup.

Richard puts the mug to his lips. Sips thoughtfully, savoring. He feels the warmth going all the way down. He defrosts visibly.

RICHARD  
It's superb.

ABBY  
Thank you.

RICHARD  
No, really. It's excellent.

Abby smiles, pleased at the effect she's having.

ABBY  
Remember the moment when you realized soup didn't have to come out of a can? You know, all manufactured?

ABBY (cont'd)  
 That your chicken noodle can kick  
 Campbell's Chicken Noodle's ass any day?

Another sip of the soup.

RICHARD  
 I think I'm having that moment right now.

ABBY  
 And it's very nutritious. Which is good.

She breezes out, into the LIVING ROOM. He's right behind her.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby packs her school stuff into her back-pack. He watches her for a second. Then notices the photo taped on his Heath Hen's head. Points.

RICHARD  
 What happened there?

ABBY  
 Oh. Sorry....

Abby peels off the boyfriend picture, pockets it.

ABBY  
 It's just a boyfriend thing. The bird  
 kinda reminded me of him. Chickenshit.

RICHARD  
 Actually, that's not a chicken. It's the  
 North American Heath Hen. Related to the  
 Greater Prairie Chicken, but not  
 technically a chicken.

ABBY  
 Oh.

RICHARD  
 Yeah. It's extinct now. The last few  
 used to live out on Martha's Vineyard.

ABBY  
 Hmm. I did not know that.

RICHARD  
 Yeah. Look, I'm not a birder or  
 anything. It's just, the last surviving  
 American Heath Hen is a character in...  
 um...

He laughs to himself.

ABBY  
 What?

RICHARD

Well, that bird's a character in this book I'm attempting to produce... to write... to finish... well, actually to start. Saying it out loud just sounded kind of stupid.

ABBY

Hey, you know, "The Little Red Hen," "Chicken Little," "Henny Penny." There's a lot of books about... poultry.

He laughs. And looks at her for an uncomfortably long beat. Then reaches for his wallet.

RICHARD

So, um... we should settle up.

He pulls out a couple of bills and hands them over. She looks down at A TEN AND A TWENTY DOLLAR BILL.

RICHARD

Is that about right...?

ABBY

Actually, I'm 12 an hour.

RICHARD

Oh, okay...

He goes back in the wallet for more. Awkward.

RICHARD

I've only got a ten. D'you have change?

ABBY

Lemme check.

She rummages through her backpack. He fills the silence.

RICHARD

So how come the boyfriend's a chickenshit?

She looks up at him, quizzically.

RICHARD

That's none of my business, sorry.

ABBY

He just bugs. It's like when he's with me it's all, you know, and then when he's with his friends he's like, oh yeah, whatever, you know? He's just a fuckin' chickenshit.

RICHARD

Right.

She comes up with a couple of bills and some loose change. Transaction complete. She slips into her coat.

ABBY

Thanks.

RICHARD

Thank you.

ABBY

Oh, hey, someone called. Your wife, I think. It's on the machine.

She goes for the door.

RICHARD

Can I ask you a quick question?

ABBY

Sure.

Richard turns to the offending COUCH. Whips off the cover-up blanket. Sits dead in the center. Still.

RICHARD

Does this couch make me look fat?

She gives it some thought.

ABBY

I wouldn't sit there.

He nods. He knew it.

ABBY

Okay, I'll see ya'. Good luck with the chicken book.

This time her hand's on the door knob.

RICHARD

Same time next week?

ON RICHARD. Wow. Where did that come from?

ON ABBY. She doesn't turn around. She takes a moment. Then decides:

ABBY

Okay. Yeah... alright.

RICHARD

You didn't tell me your name.



CLAIRE

Okay. The Lobster Pot has "family fare with little or no atmosphere..."

Richard dips into the bag. Pulls out a wrapped piece of candy. He twists it open and pops it in.

CLAIRE

Or, let's see... there's Capt. Elmer's: "The freshest catch on the Cape."

RICHARD

Lobster Pot.

CLAIRE

What're you eating?

RICHARD

Salt Water Taffy. Tastes *exactly* like Key Lime Pie. Here...

He pulls out a pink one. Offers it to Claire.

RICHARD

Razberry Razzle?

CLAIRE

Don't spoil your appetite.

He drops it back in the bag.

EXT. CAPT. ELMER'S RESTAURANT -- DAY

The empty parking lot of a low-slung Fish Market and Diner. Bouys and fishing nets blow in the cold wind.

INT. CAPT. ELMER'S RESTAURANT -- DAY

At a gouged wooden table under a ship's wheel chandelier. Drinks and iceberg lettuce salads already served.

CLAIRE

I don't think we've had lobster together since Crete.

RICHARD

Are we separated?

CLAIRE

What?

RICHARD

Is this a trial separation? What we're doing?

CLAIRE

What makes you think that?

RICHARD  
I don't know. Our separateness?

CLAIRE  
Sweetie. If we were separating we'd be  
the first to know.

RICHARD  
I guess.

CLAIRE  
We'd have discussed it. Trust me.

She reaches across the table and pats his hand.

RICHARD  
Okay. Phew. Good.

The waiter arrives, placing LOBSTER PLATTERS in front of each  
of them. Claire immediately sets to dismembering her meal.  
Cracking claws surgically.

CLAIRE  
We should go back to Greece. I'm going  
to ask Marc for more vacation time this  
year. Remember those tide pools? The  
blue.

Richard eyes his lobster with suspicion.

RICHARD  
It just moved.

CLAIRE  
That's not possible. It's been boiled.  
To death.

RICHARD  
Poor little Louie....

CLAIRE  
Don't name it, Richard. I mean, do  
whatever you want... but don't name your  
food.

She gets up and stands behind Richard, tying on his plastic  
lobster bib. A little too tight.

RICHARD  
It's perfectly natural. To want to name  
something.

CLAIRE  
Sure, a puppy maybe...

RICHARD  
Or a kitten or your pony. Or... you  
know...

Claire stands upright. Veering towards a sore subject.

CLAIRE  
A boat.

She leans over Richard. Cracks little Louie wide open. She  
digs out a hunk of meat, dips it in the butter sauce and pops  
it in his mouth.

He chews as she sits back down. They eat in silence,  
methodically dipping lobster in butter.

RICHARD  
If only everything in the world could be  
covered in butter, what a world that  
would be.

Claire looks up, locks eyes with him.

CLAIRE  
I guess.

RICHARD  
What a buttery world.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

CLOSE on a Scrabble board. Loaded with tiles. Lots of big  
words. And some very small ones. The score sheet reads:  
Claire - 392, Richard - 78.

ON Richard, cross-legged on the floor, staring at his rack of  
tiles. Ruminating.

RICHARD  
Is "tantrum-y" a word? Claire?

But Claire's out. Asleep on the floor next to her empty wine  
glass. Richard plops the "y" down, does the math. 12  
points. Total score: 90. He nods, semi-satisfied.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

In the driveway. Claire's leaving again. Richard in his  
PJ's. Through the window:

CLAIRE  
Well. That was fun.

RICHARD  
Yes it was. Fun-packed weekend.

CLAIRE

Okay. Have a productive week. See you on the 15th.

Richard waves her off.

EXT. WELLFLEET STREETS -- DAY

ON a POLICE CAR. Wellfleet's finest patrolling the sleepy side streets.

Richard cycles up alongside the car. Keeps pace. He knocks on the window. Motions for the COP to lower it.

RICHARD

Excuse me, officer, I have a pressing need to get to Martha's Vineyard. What's the best way to go about that?

OFFICER

Oh... Okay, you're gonna pick up the ferry in Hyannis. Take 6 up to Exit 9, follow the signs to the Harbor.

RICHARD

I'm researching an extinct bird.

OFFICER

That right? You be careful on that little bike, sir.

They reach the stop sign at the corner. A call comes in on the radio. Richard peers in through the window, fascinated.

RICHARD

So, how did you get your start in the law enforcement arena...?

The officer ignores him. Hits the gas and eases off, leaving Richard in his dust.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Richard's still in his pyjamas, pacing while he eyes the typewriter. He's clutching a mug of the soup. He spoons it in rhythmically.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"Milton regarded his solitude..."*

He stops. Thinks aloud.

RICHARD

Milton? Hilton...? Horton? Horton.

Back to pacing.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Horton regarded his solitude as something sacred...."*

The Captain is there.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 The imminent return of the 12th grader.  
 Talk me through that one.

RICHARD  
 I'm not speaking to you.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 Good. 'Cause I'm not listening.

RICHARD  
 Good.

A terse silence.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"This caused those in his immediate circle to regard him with a certain kind of mistrust... no... a certain kind of... of..."*

Richard can't take his eyes off the couch. He glares at it.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Loathing...."*

He puts down his mug and starts pushing the sofa out of the room. It's heavy and the legs screech across the floor like fingernails on a chalkboard.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 What are you doing?

No answer from Richard. He just pushes harder.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"This suited Horton just fine. All he wanted anyway was to be LEFT ALONE."*

He shoots The Captain a dirty look. Lifts one heavy end of the couch.

RICHARD  
 You gonna help me with this or what?

EXT. THE HOUSE, BACK YARD -- DAY

Richard and The Captain have the unspeakable couch on their backs. Hauling it out.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Remember when you stuck the dime up your nose and tried to snort it out your mouth? The cowboy outfit for your seventh grade school picture? Remember?

They get it to the edge of the yard and heave the couch off. Richard sets it up precisely in an alcove of trees.

The Captain still dogs him.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

The horny toads? The hunger strike? "Lard-Ass" Annie Lardner?

Richard's in avoidance mode. Marches back to the house.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

He strides back into the living room. A satisfied smile. Enjoying the couch-free atmosphere.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

I cautioned you against those decisions. You did not listen. Fine. You were just a kid. But now? It's grow up time, Richard. I mean the babysitter? Bad. Very bad.

Richard's tuned The Captain out. He's fixated on an armchair, frowning.

RICHARD

The chair is going to be a problem.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Sakes alive!

Richard sits down at the typewriter (A,S,D,F,G,H,J,K,L,;) and bangs the words onto the page.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"The closest thing Horton had to a friend... was Humberto the Steeplejack..."*

Richard's eyes flit up to the picture of the Heath Hen. Audubon's bird almost seems to smile back at him.

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"The closest thing Horton had to a friend was Humberto the Heath Hen, a creature, if possible, with a greater claim to loneliness than Horton himself. Being, as he was, the very last surviving member of his species on the face of the Earth. The end of a bloodline."*

The Captain throws his hands up. Shuffles out.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Wits end. Wits end....

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Imagine the crushing weight of  
responsibility he felt in his role as  
evolutionary caretaker."*

Richard stops to gulp a gulp of Abby's soup.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"On those days - and they were legion -  
when Horton was overwhelmed by his own  
insignificance, Humberto never failed to  
give a wave of his preposterous tail  
feather. A sign of kinship. And for  
Horton that was enough."*

Richard goes on typing and typing.

EXT. ABBY'S HOUSE -- DAY

A little house. Nothing special.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- DAY

Outmoded 70's wallpaper, deep-pile carpeting. A room in serious need of up-dating. Cluttered with 17 years of girlie stuff.

There's two of everything. Two matching vanities. Two huge Raggedy Ann dolls. Two Barbie Townhouses. And bunk beds.

Abby's on the top bunk, Christopher on the bottom. She's reading Richard's novel "The Renderer." He's watching TV.

CHRISTOPHER  
He any good?

ABBY  
I don't know. It's kinda wordy.

CHRISTOPHER  
So, what does the Renderer render?

ABBY  
I haven't gotten to that part yet. What were you doing in my gym class today?

CHRISTOPHER  
Nothing.

ABBY  
You didn't think I saw you?

CHRISTOPHER  
I was just there for moral support.

ABBY  
I suck at volleyball. My wrists don't work. I have weak wrists.

CHRISTOPHER  
You do not.

ABBY  
I suck at everything.

CHRISTOPHER  
No you don't, you're fantastic. Across the board.

ABBY  
Shut up.

CHRISTOPHER  
Who hates me more, d'you think, your Mom or your Dad?

ABBY  
Me.

CHRISTOPHER  
No, really. Who?

ABBY  
It's a three way tie. Look, you've gotta get out of here. I'm meeting Bryce.

CHRISTOPHER  
He's beneath you, you know...

Abby slides off the top bunk. Sits at her little girl vanity. Does her face. Heavy on the eye-liner. Christopher watches awhile.

CHRISTOPHER  
You don't need any of that....

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Richard sits cross-legged on the bed with a thin paperback. It's "Basic Origami: A Fold-by-Fold Guide."

He reads aloud from the bad Japanese translation.

RICHARD  
"Making the Monkey: A humorous monkey is popular in zoological gardens. For example, it is lovely that you make a baby monkey with small paper and that you put it on a mother monkey." Hmmm.

He reaches over to the nightstand for a copy of his novel. Opens it and tears out a handful of pages.

RICHARD  
Fold A. Top right corner...

He starts to fold. Clumsily.

INT. BRYCE'S CAR -- NIGHT

Abby and Bryce in the back seat. Screwing. Abby's on top, wearing a parka. It's cold enough you can see their breath. Bryce fumbles, trying to unzip Abby's coat. She zips it back up.

BRYCE  
Why do you have to wear so much shit?

ABBY  
It's freezing in here. You could run the heater.

BRYCE  
You wanna pay for the gas?

They continue the love. Bryce groans.

ABBY  
Are you done?

BRYCE  
Yeah.

He wriggles out from under her. Zips his pants. He hops into the driver's seat, gets right back to the half-eaten dinner on the dash: burger and fries.

Abby slips back into her pants. Climbs up front next to Bryce. Helps herself to a french fry.

BRYCE  
Easy. I thought you already ate.

Abby puts the fry back. Watches him eat.

BRYCE  
So I'll see you later.

ABBY  
Okay.

They sit in silence for a second. Then Abby climbs out. Bryce fires up the engine. Cranks the heater on full.

EXT. ABBY'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

Bryce pulls away, leaving Abby on the sidewalk in front of her own house. She slowly turns and heads inside.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby's slumped on the stool in front of her make-up table. She takes a black eyeliner pencil. Draws a line of teardrops down her cheek.

She tosses the pencil down. Climbs up to her top bunk, under the covers. Picks up "The Renderer". Resumes reading.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- DAY

CLOSE ON a little Origami animal, crudely folded. From off:

RICHARD (V.O.)  
 Uh huh. Wow... Did he live?... That's  
 a plus....

PULL BACK on Captain Excellent, seated on the bed surrounded by dozens of paper figures. Origami everywhere. Leftover pages of Richard's novel litter the room.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
 It's gushing out of me, Claire... No,  
 no, there's nothing for you to read yet.  
 You know how I am... Eggplant parmesan,  
 yum... Listen, do you think we should  
 get a dog?... No, me neither.... Yep,  
 busy, busy, busy... Same here. Bye.

Richard wanders into the bedroom, cordless phone in hand.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 So why origami? Why now?

RICHARD  
 I needed something to do with my hands.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 I'm having trouble telling which is the  
 monkey and which is the swan.

RICHARD  
 Don't be ridiculous. The swan's got the  
 wings.

The Captain scans the room. Picks up a swan. Examines it closely.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 Aah. I see...

RICHARD  
No, that's the monkey.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND -- DAY

On the swing set, side by side, Abby and Christopher. They sway gently, not speaking. She drags on a cigarette. He leans over and takes it from her lips. Stubs it out in the sand. She barely notices.

INT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

A knock at the front door. Richard opens up. There's a UPS guy there, holding a large heavy box.

RICHARD  
Great. They're all in there?

UPS GUY  
No, there's a bunch more in the truck.

Richard signs for the delivery.

RICHARD  
You can put them right over there.

He points to where the couch used to be.

EXT. WELLFLEET STREETS -- DAY

Richard, bundled up, rides his bike. The front basket loaded with groceries. He squeezes the hand brakes, screeching to a halt. Looks down.

There, inches from his front wheel, A DEAD SQUIRREL.

Richard stares at the road kill. Dismounts. Fishes in his pocket. Pulls out two pennies. Places them on the squirrel's eyes. Pays his respects. Climbs back on the bike, pedals away.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard at the desk. Hands poised over the typewriter (A,S,D,F,G,H,J,K,L,;). Nothing. He looks at his watch. 6:00. Fingers over the keys. Still nothing. A knock.

Richard leaps up and heads for the door, but Captain Excellent is there. Barring the way, his arms spread wide. He begs.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Don't. It's not too late.

ON RICHARD, his eyes roll.

BACK ON THE DOOR. The Captain's gone and Richard pulls it open.

Abby's on the doorstep, holding a package wrapped in newspaper.

ABBY  
It's Abby. My name.

She steps in.

ABBY  
You got rid of the couch.

RICHARD  
Yes. The couch was a problem.

ABBY  
This is for you.

Abby hands him the package. He smells it.

RICHARD  
Oh, it's...

He unwraps it.

RICHARD  
...it's a fish. A dead fish. A whole dead fish.

ABBY  
Yeah. My dad fishes. I mean, for a living. It's a bluefish. The water around here's swimming with them.

RICHARD  
So it's edible?

ABBY  
Well, yeah.

RICHARD  
Great. Thanks.

He wraps it back up. Doesn't quite know what to do with it. So he sets it down gently on a chair.

ABBY  
So I read your book.

She takes the copy from her backpack. Hands it to him.

ABBY  
I kinda borrowed it last time. Hope that's okay.

RICHARD  
Reading my book? Of course. You're one  
of the few...

ABBY  
Where you headed tonight? Out on the  
town?

RICHARD  
Um, I don't know. What do Wellfleeters  
do on a Tuesday night?

ABBY  
Actually, it's *Wellfleetians*.

RICHARD  
Really?

ABBY  
'Fraid so. Well, there's the Dairy  
Queen. People hang out there. If you're  
into music there's bands at the  
Beachcomber. Up 6A at Cahoon Hollow  
Beach. Unless you want somewhere for  
people who're, you know...

RICHARD  
Old?

ABBY  
Yeah. The Yardarm's totally dead. You'd  
probably like that. Downtown, right  
across from the post office.

RICHARD  
Alright then.

Richard gathers his coat and hat. He hesitates.

RICHARD  
So... what did you think of the book?

ABBY  
I don't know, what do you think of it?

RICHARD  
Me? Oh. I think it has its strengths...  
its highlights... its moments. I think I  
hate it.

ABBY  
You should put that fish in the fridge.  
It'll stink up the whole house. Believe  
me, I know.

Richard grabs the fish and heads for the kitchen.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

He tosses the fish into the fridge. Abby wanders in to find Richard grinning. He stands in front of the counter, hiding something.

ABBY

What?

He steps aside. There on the counter is an impressive selection of produce. Fresh herbs, three kinds of potatoes, all the root vegetables.

RICHARD

Soup ingredients. I mean, if you feel like it.

She smiles. Pleased.

ABBY

Wow. You bought me a rutabaga....

She weighs the vegetables in her hands.

ABBY

You're making it too easy on me.

RICHARD

Like I said, if you feel like it. No pressure.

They look at one another. Appreciative. Then Richard nods and goes.

INT. THE HOUSE, FRONT DOOR -- NIGHT

Richard zips his coat, pulls his hat over his ears. Unlatches the door. From the kitchen:

ABBY (V.O.)

Your book was cool. It kinda blew me away.

Richard stops. A real smile spreads across his face. He steps out into the night.

EXT. THE YARDARM -- NIGHT

Outside the local tavern. Richard's bike leans against the wall next to the front door.

INT. THE YARDARM -- NIGHT

A grungy but respectable little bar with a few tables for food. The motif is nautical.

Richard's at the bar, half-empty pint glass in front of him. There's a bartender and one other customer a couple of barstools down. Pretty quiet.

The bartender, Mike (50's), pulls a menu and pushes it across to Richard.

MIKE

You planning on having something to eat?

RICHARD

Thanks, no. I've got soup at home. Homemade.

MIKE

Can't beat that. 'Nother beer?

RICHARD

Sure.

Richard drains his glass. While Mike pours:

MIKE

What brings you down Cape, then?

RICHARD

A book. A bird. A book about a bird. Research. Work. You know...

The other customer pipes in. He's DAVE (40's), tired-looking and working class.

DAVE

My wife makes a good chowder. Not so much the clam chowder like you'd expect. More of a corn chowder.

Richard and Mike nod in his direction for a minute. Mike brings the beer.

MIKE

My Elaine can shuck a dozen oysters in a minute and a half. Should see the scars on her hand. Beautiful.

RICHARD

The famed Wellfleet oyster?

MIKE

That's the one.

RICHARD

My wife invented and patented a life-saving polymer shunt.

Mike and Dave look both impressed and confused.

MIKE  
Shunt, you say?

RICHARD  
Shunt.

DAVE  
See, she puts red peppers in there.  
Spices it up nicely.

Richard and Mike stop and look at Dave. More nods.

EXT. THE YARDARM -- NIGHT

A CHICKEN sits on the saddle of Richard's bike. Hunkered against the night chill.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE YARDARM -- NIGHT

Dave's moved down the bar to the stool next to Richard. More patrons have shown up, but the place is still dead.

Richard's on his fourth, maybe fifth beer. Well on his way to drunk. He speaks a little too loudly.

RICHARD  
So there she is, our Heath Hen. And this game warden, this Alfred Gross guy... though I'm thinking 'bout calling him Horton... Morton...? Anyway, he's brought his flock back from the brink of 'stinction.

MIKE  
Awesome.

RICHARD  
I mean, he had 'leven of 'em, *eleven*, and now he's got two hundred and it looks like the Hen is saved. But because this is a tragedy, y'know what happens?

DAVE  
What?

RICHARD  
*Fire!*

DAVE  
No!

RICHARD  
Yes! Sweeps across the preserve. And of course the Heath Hen, not nature's most intelligent bird to begin with...

MIKE

I hear ya'.

RICHARD

There she sits, fire raging all around her, trying to protect her little nest and she doesn't even have the sense to run or fly or... waddle, and when the fire's out only five birds remain.

DAVE

Roast chicken....

Everyone in the bar has been drawn into Richard's story. They take a moment to mourn the fallen birds.

MIKE

What happens to the five?

RICHARD

They dwindle. And they dwindle. Until there's just one. Just one. And that's where the story really begins...

DAVE

Awesome. 'Nother round for my friend here, Mike.

Mike sets them up.

MIKE

It's kinda like that coelacanth, then. You know, that prehistoric fish? They thought it was extinct for millions of years and then some guys pulled one out of the Indian Ocean or Nova Scotia or something.

DAVE

Yeah, I heard about that.

RICHARD

Yes. It's like that, 'cept exactly the opposite. Your coelacanth sounds like a happy beginning. The Hen's story's about the end of something.

Richard suddenly becomes emotional. Fighting tears. Mike reaches across the bar, puts a comforting hand on his shoulder. No words needed.

EXT. THE YARDARM -- NIGHT

Richard, re-bundled, stumbles out into the cold. Stands staring at the bike for a second, daunted. He leans in closer. There's something on the banana seat. Closer still. He whispers:

RICHARD  
Chicken shit.

He wipes the bird poop with his sleeve. Climbs aboard unsteadily. Wobbles homeward.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Abby thumbs through a magazine at the kitchen counter. She hears a noise outside.

Goes to the window. Watches as Richard careens down the driveway, crashing into a huge hydrangea bush. He rolls out and jumps to his feet.

We hear him open the front door clumsily. He enters the kitchen sheepish, tiptoeing. He sees the pot on the stove. Makes a beeline for the soup, without speaking. Lifts the lid and inhales deeply.

RICHARD  
You *did* make soup. Bless you.

He serves himself a bowl. Tastes a spoonful.

RICHARD  
It's such a small act of kindness. But I can't tell you what it means to me.

ABBY  
It's no big deal. It's just soup...

RICHARD  
You're such a beautiful girl. Such a beautiful child...

ABBY  
You're loaded.

RICHARD  
No. No. Yes...

ABBY  
Look, I should go...

She heads for the living room to pick up her stuff.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

ABBY  
You were out a little longer tonight, so it'll be...

Richard's right behind her. Crowding her.

RICHARD  
 You know what I am? Let me tell you what  
 I am, in case you're interested.

He points emphatically at the poster of the Heath Hen.

RICHARD  
*This* is what I am.

ABBY  
 What?

RICHARD  
 I am the only child of an only child and  
 an only child. You know what that means?

ABBY  
 No cousins.

RICHARD  
 It means that I am the end of a  
 bloodline. The last of my kind.

ABBY  
 So have some kids.

He laughs ruefully.

RICHARD  
 Said the babysitter... If you only  
 knew... You're such a beautiful girl,  
 such a beautiful child...

ABBY  
 Look, it's sixty bucks. You should go to  
 bed.

He moves closer. Really in Abby's face now.

RICHARD  
 I don't blame her, the doctor, she's  
 a...a human mechanic. She's got her  
 hands inside human beings every day.  
 They're machines to her, machines that  
 break. Like rot factories. So why  
 create life when you know it can only end  
 in death. I mean, I get it. I get that.  
 I don't blame her, but...

His composure is gone. In that drunken emotional place.  
 Abby reaches out and touches his arm. Concerned.

ABBY  
 Hey... I'm sorry.

RICHARD

She doesn't realise that human beings are warm. They need contact, they need...

Richard locks onto her eyes. He touches her cheek.

Abby backs off a step or two. Turns to pick up her school books. Richard advances again. Earnestly.

RICHARD

You're such a beautiful girl, such a beautiful child...

Abby freaks. Too close. Reflexively, she smacks him over the head with her stack of books. Richard, drunk and dazed, teeters.

RICHARD

Oh no. No...

But she thumps him again. This time, he crumples to the ground.

She stands over him, unsure what to do.

ABBY

I'm sorry. Shit, I'm sorry.

Nothing from Richard. His eyes swim in their sockets.

ABBY

Shit. You should go to bed. Okay? Okay?

Richard tries to focus.

RICHARD

Okay.

ABBY

I'm gonna go.

She grabs her stuff in a hurry and makes a hasty exit.

ON RICHARD. Bewildered.

INT. THE HOUSE, HALLWAY -- DAY

Morning. A bedraggled Richard emerges from the bedroom. Hunched from a serious hangover. He's still wearing his parka, but no pants. He rubs his sore head, where he took last night's beating.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

FOLLOW Richard into the living room on his way to get coffee. He stops. Looks up slowly. Croaks:

RICHARD  
Claire....

It's the doctor. She beholds him in silence. Her eyes fixed on his parka and underwear ensemble.

CLAIRE  
Richard, the couch is outside.

RICHARD  
It's the 15th already?

CLAIRE  
Are you okay?

RICHARD  
Yes I am.

CLAIRE  
There's soup in the kitchen. Have you been making soup?

An innocent grin freezes on his face. He's not thinking too well on his feet.

RICHARD  
I'll be right back.

He disappears back down the hallway.

INT. THE HOUSE, BATHROOM -- DAY

Richard in the mirror. He looks like shit. He splashes water on his face. Sticks his head under the faucet.

He throws open the medicine cabinet. The row of aspirin bottles. He lands on the Bayer brand. Pops the lid. Swallows down four, drinking from the faucet. He straightens back up.

Captain Excellent's beside him like a coach on the sidelines.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Alright. You made the soup, the babysitter was never here and work is going great. Now get out there.

A dreadful sigh. Into the fray.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- DAY

Claire's perched on a stool. Richard breezes in.

RICHARD  
So the funny thing about soup? You just get your ingredients, basically, into the pot, along with the sauce... the juice...

CLAIRE  
The broth?

RICHARD  
Right. And then, you know, it just needs some cookin'.

CLAIRE  
Is there anything wrong, Richard? I'm not... I'm just concerned.

RICHARD  
Oh, thank you for your concern. Speaking of, how are all your patients? Are they doing well? And what are some of their names?

Claire looks closely at his forehead.

CLAIRE  
You've got a bruise here....

RICHARD  
Oh, beaten down by life, Claire. Winds of change. Anyway, I was going to do some unloading of boxes if you wanna pitch in, then maybe we could grab a brunch?

Richard peels off the parka, marches to the living room.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Claire comes in to find Richard on his knees in his undies, in front of the stacks of UPS boxes. He tears off packing tape.

CLAIRE  
Did you have to put the couch in the yard? There's nowhere to sit in here...

RICHARD  
Oh, no, that's just temporary. I just love the quality of the light in here, by the way. Love it.

Richard's got the first box open. Dips in and pulls out a hardback copy of "The Renderer". Claire sags.

CLAIRE  
Oh no. Richard. Are those all...

RICHARD  
Oh yes.

CLAIRE  
Why? Why would you do that to yourself?

RICHARD  
Well, I thought as I embarked on the writing of my second -- my much anticipated second novel -- that I should be reminded of the remarkable -- I mean really quite noteworthy -- failure of my first novel to sell any copies whatsoever.

Claire measures her response. Patience strained.

CLAIRE  
I can't go down this road with you, Richard.

RICHARD  
No no, it's going to be motivational. Really.

CLAIRE  
Okay, fine. I just hope you're not losing your... oomph. Glass half full, remember?

RICHARD  
Brimming.

She leaves Richard to it.

Richard starts stacking his books in neat piles.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- DAY

Claire in the doorway, frozen. Her POV:

Bad origami and torn-up copies of "The Renderer" litter the room. She steps gingerly in. Sinks onto the bed, head in hands.

CLAIRE  
Oh... god....

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

We hear the shower running. Richard's got most of the boxes unpacked, books stacked in columns almost to the ceiling.

Captain Excellent sits on a box, casually leafing through one of the copies.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
That was smooth.

Richard whispers, clandestine.

RICHARD  
Hey, I got through it.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Wait. Wait... my Super Sense is telling me something: I think the doctor may be on to you.

RICHARD  
Oh, hush.

A knock at the door.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Knock, knock, who's there?

Richard opens up. It's Abby.

RICHARD  
Shit.

Richard half-closes the door. Talks to her through the gap.

RICHARD (cont'd)  
What do you want?

Abby's surprised by the greeting.

ABBY  
I uh... I just wanted to see if you were okay. Your head...

RICHARD  
It's fine. I'm fine. You need to go.

ABBY  
What?

RICHARD  
You need to go. Now.

ABBY  
Well screw you too. You were the one who came onto me.

RICHARD  
What?

ABBY  
 Last night, asshole. I was gonna  
 apologize for hitting you, but forget it.  
 Creep.

She storms off.

RICHARD  
 Wait! Abby!

The Captain taps Richard on the shoulder.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 She's out of the shower.

Richard slams the front door.

INT. THE HOUSE, BATHROOM -- DAY

Claire's towelling off her hair. She peers out of the  
 window. Sees Abby running down the driveway.

CLAIRE  
 Richard? Who was that?

RICHARD (V.O.)  
 What?

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

CLAIRE (V.O.)  
 At the door?

Richard's stuck. He looks to The Captain. The Captain  
 shrugs, whispers.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 ...Girl Scout?

RICHARD  
 Girl Scout!

CLAIRE (V.O.)  
 Oh....

Saved. Phew. The Captain offers a lukewarm thumbs up.

INT. ABBY'S HOUSE, BATHROOM -- DAY

Abby's in the shower.

ABBY  
 Why are men such dicks?

We PAN OVER to find Christopher sitting in the bathroom with  
 her. On the toilet lid.

CHRISTOPHER  
Beats me...

ABBY  
I just thought he was lonely.

CHRISTOPHER  
We're all lonely.

Abby turns off the water, reaches out for her towel. Dries off.

CHRISTOPHER  
Let's only talk to each other from now on. Nobody else.

ABBY  
I don't know, maybe I shouldn't have hit him....

CHRISTOPHER  
Oh, no, you definitely should've.

Abby pulls back the shower curtain and steps out. Wrapped in the towel.

ABBY  
How can you write such beautiful stuff and still be such... you know...

CHRISTOPHER  
An asshole?

ABBY  
Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER  
You smell nice.

ABBY  
Shut up.

CHRISTOPHER  
C'mere.

Christopher gives her a long hug. She gives in to it.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Richard at his desk.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Horton regarded his solitude as something sacred."*

He stops. Fidgets. Fiddles.

RICHARD  
Horton? Norton? Norwood? Norwood.

Back to the keys. (A,S,D,F,G,H,J,K,L,;)

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Norwood regarded his solitude as something sacred, a kind of bond with himself that caused those in his immediate circle to regard him with a certain amount of loathing..."*

Richard sighs deeply and pushes back from the desk. Gets up and paces, agitated. He turns to the wall of stacked books. Facing failure.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"But, you know what, fuck them. If they don't understand him, if they don't respect him, if they don't like him, then they can just... fuck off."*

Claire enters to find Richard staring at his books.

CLAIRE  
You want a drink or something?

RICHARD  
No.

CLAIRE  
How's it coming?

Richard doesn't answer. She doesn't push. Goes to the kitchen. Once she's gone, Richard rushes back to his seat. Pounds the keys.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"For Norwood felt certain that if people would just stop looking over his fucking shoulder all the time and setting timetables and having agendas that were nothing to do with... that were designed to bring about failure and doom..."*

CLAIRE  
Umm, Richard?

He swings around in his seat.

CLAIRE  
What's this?

Claire's holding Abby's fish.

RICHARD

It's a bluefish. The water around here's swimming with 'em.

CLAIRE

Oh. What were you planning on doing with it?

RICHARD

Do I have to have a *plan* for everything? Can't I just *have* a fish? *In* the house?

Claire's thrown by his over-reaction.

CLAIRE

Yes. Fine, I'm sorry.

RICHARD

I thought we could *cook* it. Then *eat* it. How's that?

CLAIRE

I guess I hadn't caught up with the fact that you're a *cook* now.

She carries the fish back to the kitchen. Richard turns back to his work. He gazes at the Heath Hen for a long moment. Then:

RICHARD (V.O.)

*"Norwood's only wish was for he and Humberto the Heath Hen to be left in peace. That, he thought, would be enough."*

He takes the paper out of the typewriter. Leans back and reads it in silence.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

We're in very CLOSE ON the bluefish. It lays butchered on a cutting board. Skin ripped, guts hanging out, head half-hacked off. It's an awful, bloody mess.

ON Richard, a cleaver in his hand. His apron is speckled with blood and scales. He's sweating.

He brings the cleaver down repeatedly, making things worse with every chop.

Claire, wine glass in hand, watches the carnage. She flinches with each blow of the knife. It's too much.

CLAIRE

Stop. Stop it! You can stop now, okay?

Richard calmly lays down the knife. He pulls the trash can out from under the sink and sweeps the carcass in.

EXT. MAIN STREET, WELLFLEET -- DAY

In town. Abby meanders along with Bryce and a couple of his school buddies. The guys smoke cigarettes and goof off. They ignore Abby. She's used to it.

Across the street, Richard sits on his bike. He watches for a second.

RICHARD

Abby!

Abby turns, frowning when she sees him.

BRYCE

Who the hell's that?

Abby brushes Bryce off. She crosses to Richard. Slowly, unsure.

RICHARD

Hi....

She gives him a glare. He reaches into his pocket, comes up with some folded money.

RICHARD

I didn't get the chance to pay you for the other night. I think it was 60?

ABBY

Keep it. I mean, you don't even have a baby.

RICHARD

Right.

He pockets the cash. Shifts uncomfortably.

RICHARD

Uh... I think we had... a kind of misunderstanding about some of my actions... or intentions... and I'm pretty sure I said some things...

ABBY

Whatever. I'm sure your wife's great and you're sorry you said all that stuff.

RICHARD

I'm not sorry, actually. It was good to get it out. I am sorry I was so abrupt at the house, though. It was just...

ABBY  
Your wife was there. Yeah, I know, I figured it out.

RICHARD  
Yes. It would just have been awkward, you know?

ABBY  
No, I don't know.

RICHARD  
Claire wouldn't really understand our, uh...

ABBY  
Our what?

RICHARD  
Our friendship.

That really lands for Abby. She's broadsided. A moment while she takes it in.

Bryce is impatient across the street.

BRYCE  
Abby! C'mon, we're outta here!

She gives him a dismissive wave.

RICHARD  
Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I respect you and... Is that chickenshit?

He points over to Bryce. Abby laughs.

ABBY  
Yep.

RICHARD  
Good looking guy.

ABBY  
He sure thinks so....

Bryce struts across. To Abby, like Richard's not there:

BRYCE  
You coming, or what? We're going down to Tutter's house, smoke a J.

ABBY  
Just a minute.

Richard extends his hand.

RICHARD  
I'm Richard.

Bryce leaves him hanging.

BRYCE  
Look, you said you wanted to hang out  
more... You in or out?

RICHARD  
It's okay, Abby. Don't let me keep you  
from your J.

Bryce finally gives Richard a looking over. Sneers.

BRYCE  
Who's your friend on the bike?

RICHARD  
Abby's been babysitting for me. How's  
Wednesday night?

ABBY  
Umm... okay. Yeah. Same time?

RICHARD  
See you at six.

BRYCE  
Damn, girl, move your ass.

He's back off to his friends. Abby shrugs, apologetically,  
and follows Bryce. She runs to catch up.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Richard, on the stoop, in his pyjamas. He waves as Claire  
backs the BMW wagon out of the driveway. Back to Boston.

Richard's relieved. He goes in.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Out back. The couch is still there, under the trees. Along  
with the problem chair. And a side table.

Richard comes from the house, carrying a table lamp. He sets  
it on the little table. Flops into the chair. Surveys his  
outdoor clubhouse.

RICHARD  
It's coming together.

From around the front of the house, Abby's voice:

ABBY (V.O.)  
Richard?

Richard hops up eagerly, starts for the front to meet her.

Before he can take two steps, The Captain comes hurtling out of the trees at top speed. Like a pro linebacker he dives for the retreating Richard. Hits him hard at the knees and brings him down.

Richard struggles to get up from under The Captain.

RICHARD  
What're you doing? Get off!

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Don't do it!

The Captain pins him WWF-stlye. Richard tries to elbow his way out of the hold.

ABBY (V.O.)  
Richard? Hey! You home?

RICHARD  
Yeah! I'll be right there!  
(To The Captain.)  
Get off of me!

They're really wrestling now. Rolling on the grass, a serious tussle. All elbows and grunts.

Finally, Richard manages to extricate himself. He jumps to his feet. The Captain grabs an ankle. Richard forges on, dragging him along the ground.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Think, Richard! It can't end well!

Richard shakes him, and rounds the house. The Captain's left defeated in the frosty grass.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Out front. Richard jogs over. He's breathless and rumped.

RICHARD  
Hey... how you doing...?

ABBY  
C'mon. I want to show you something.

RICHARD  
Great. Okay....

He bends over to catch his breath as Abby climbs into her idleing '72 Maverick.

EXT. BEACH -- DAY

The ocean side. A gentle surf crashes and whispers up the beach. Tall sandy dunes. Stark and deserted and cold.

Richard and Abby, like the only two people on the planet, wander along in silence.

RICHARD  
I have a problem with my hands.

ABBY  
What d'you mean?

RICHARD  
They won't do what I want them to do.

ABBY  
What do you want them to do?

RICHARD  
Anything. I don't know, something useful... I want them to build something, or make something.

ABBY  
Like what?

RICHARD  
Even Jesus. He was a carpenter. It wasn't enough for him to save all mankind. He needed a trade. I'm a flimsy man. I'm insubstantial.

ABBY  
Well, compared to Jesus....

RICHARD  
I'm a paper man.

ABBY  
No, you're a writer.

RICHARD  
Oh yeah, that's crucial.

ABBY  
No, it is.

Abby stops in her tracks. Looks up at the dunes, searching for a landmark.

ABBY  
Here we are.

She starts to take off her coat.

RICHARD

Where?

ABBY

*"It is possible to be so at sea, when land and life have slipped under the horizon, to quietly wish never to see either again..."*

RICHARD

Did I write that? I wrote that.

ABBY

Hold this.

She hands Richard her coat. She walks deliberately toward the water. Picking up speed as she goes. At the water's edge, now running, she dives in. And disappears under the waves.

Richard is frozen, rooted. Waiting for Abby to surface.

She doesn't. And still doesn't. And still doesn't.

Richard drops the coat. Walks toward the ocean. Starting to panic.

RICHARD

Abby? Abby!

He's knee-deep in the frigid water. The cold drives him back out onto the sand. His heart beats a mile a minute. His eyes scan the surface, helpless.

RICHARD

Abby! Abby! C'mon...!

Richard starts to peel off his coat.

UP ON TOP OF THE DUNES. Christopher's there. Looking down at the tiny figure of Richard in full panic. Still no Abby.

RICHARD

Shit! Shit!

OUT IN THE WATER. Nothing.

UP ON THE DUNE. Christopher, scrambling, half-falling down the steep slope of sand.

ON RICHARD. About to dive in.

OUT IN THE WATER. Still nothing. Then Abby's head bursts through the waves. She gasps in air.

ON RICHARD. He pulls up. Immense relief.

RICHARD  
Jesus! Jesus!

OUT IN THE WATER. Abby, treading water calmly. She looks way back to the beach.

HER POV: Richard, wet to the waist, beckoning.

And behind him, Christopher. Stopped in his tracks half way down the dune. Watching.

She starts to swim. Back to shore. A strong, confident swimmer.

RICHARD  
What the hell are you doing?

He watches, anxious as she draws closer. Reaches to pull her in the last few feet. He pulls her into his arms, wrapping his coat around her.

RICHARD  
What were you doing? You scared the shit out of me!

He holds her crushingly tight. Trying to rub warmth into her.

RICHARD  
Don't do that. You can't do that. You can't do that.

CLOSE ON ABBY'S FACE. She's beaming. Exhilarated. She looks up to see Christopher cresting the top of the dune. Walking away. Her smile slowly fades.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Abby sits on a kitchen stool, wearing Claire's robe and a blanket around her. She and Richard drink mugs of soup.

ABBY  
It was me that dared her to go in. It was really cold, much colder than today. But she wasn't gonna turn down a dare. We were like that. I'd eaten 23 oysters, so... I don't know why she went in in her clothes. I guess we thought it would be warmer or something. Kids.... She was, you know, laughing and... fine and then... and then she was gone. Just under and gone. And I just stood there. A couple of hours later, my mom came and found me. I was waiting for her to swim back in, I guess. But she never did.

Richard soaks this in, hardly dares to speak. Finally:

RICHARD  
How old?

ABBY  
Same age as me. We're twins.

RICHARD  
Oh. Oh my god.

ABBY  
But that was a long time ago, eight years.

She warms her hands around the mug of hot soup.

ABBY  
I go out there every year. And swim back to shore. I like to feel the cold...

RICHARD  
You must've... I don't know what to say.

Abby shrugs. There's a long moment of quiet.

ABBY  
So we're both only children.

RICHARD  
Why did you take me out there?

ABBY  
You said we were friends.

RICHARD  
We are.

ABBY  
And I read your book.

RICHARD  
Oh...

ABBY  
And, you know, despite all your creepy, lonely crap, your point is, you've just gotta keep going.

Richard has to think about this. He's less sure.

RICHARD  
Right.

ABBY  
You gotta just keep going.

She stares into her mug.

ABBY  
This soup needs more celery salt.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby, asleep in her top bunk. It's late.

CHRISTOPHER  
That was our thing. Every year, and you know it.

She stirs. Rolls over with a groan. Her eyes half open to find Christopher sitting on the floor in a darkened corner.

He spits the words out. Hurt, like a wounded animal.

CHRISTOPHER  
You take that guy out there? On this day? He didn't even know her.

ABBY  
I know.

CHRISTOPHER  
If I chopped myself into five thousand pieces, would you care?

ABBY  
Christopher... let's not do this.

CHRISTOPHER  
You remember when I was the only one who would talk to you? For a long time.

ABBY  
I know, I know, but...

CHRISTOPHER  
He doesn't love you. If that's what you think, you're wrong.

ABBY  
What do you want me to say?

CHRISTOPHER  
I could so move to California. Don't just assume I'll always be around, 'cause one day maybe I won't.

ABBY  
Stop it.

She pulls the pillow over her ears.

CHRISTOPHER  
Is that what you want?

Abby squeezes her eyes shut. Christopher sits staring at her. Then gets up and climbs out the open window.

Abby rolls over. Curls up.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

In the back yard. In the trees. On the furniture. Richard and The Captain wile away the afternoon.

RICHARD

I don't have much of a story, do I?

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

It's all relative, I suppose.

RICHARD

Exactly. Other people seem to have had *Events*. Things that have *Happened to Them*. *Life-Altering Occurrences....*

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Yes.

RICHARD

Me? No. Not really. Richard Dunne: born, wrote, died.

Quiet. Richard waits for a response. Some comfort maybe.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

What do you want me to say?

RICHARD

I don't know....

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

No, literally, tell me what you want me to say. Because, frankly, at this point, I got nothing.

Richard leans over and whispers in The Captain's ear. He nods, listening, then regurgitates it verbatim.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

"But you've touched several lives, Richard, through your work. It's not about your happiness, it's about the happiness you've brought to others."

Richard's turn to nod, satisfied, comforted.

RICHARD

Do the Voice.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Why?

RICHARD  
Do the Voice.

The Captain sighs the heaviest of sighs. Climbs to his feet, strikes the pose. Gives it the echo effect.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
"When the World is imperiled... When Evil  
surrounds you... When Danger is  
lurking... Who do you call? CAPTAIN  
EXCELLENT!"

Richard toddles off, rejuvenated. The Captain throws himself on the sofa.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Richard's hard at work. He's building something.

His raw materials are: Elmer's glue and dozens of copies of "The Renderer."

One by one he slathers glue onto the books, assembling them into a crude piece of furniture. It's a couch. Made entirely from copies of his unsold novel. It's a novel couch.

He's putting the final touches on it when there's a knock at the door. Richard sits on his new creation. Grabs a notebook, crosses his legs, tries to look nonchalant.

RICHARD  
Come in!

Abby opens up and enters.

ABBY  
Whoa! Check out the couch.

RICHARD  
You like? I made it. With *these!*

Richard holds up his hands proudly.

ABBY  
Alright. Awesome.

He pats the seat next to him. She sits. It's incredibly uncomfortable.

She peers over at Richard's notebook. He hides the page.

RICHARD  
Oh, just some ideas for titles, you know...

ABBY

For the new book? Cool. Whatchya got?

He's reluctant, but he reads anyway.

RICHARD

Um... "Cloudscape", "Death and Desolation?" "The Daffodil," or "Memoirs of an Amnesiac." "Bolero."

ABBY

*Bolero?*

Richard scratches out the last title.

RICHARD

Okay. So, what about "Ad Nauseum" or "Balm of Silence?" No? "Old Mrs. Ptarmigan's Blackberry Wine..."

ABBY

Whoa...

RICHARD

Look, forget it. It's impossible. Titles are the hardest thing.

ABBY

"Paper Man."

Richard halts. Thinks. Tears the list off of his pad, balls it up.

RICHARD

Right. That's it. Thanks.

ABBY

You're welcome.

EXT. WELLFLEET STREETS -- DAY

Abby sits on the handlebars of Richard's bike. They whiz down a hill, screeching with laughter.

INT. DAIRY QUEEN -- DAY

At one of the plastic and formica booths, Richard and Abby share a huge banana split.

RICHARD

Tell me what your favorite sandwich spread is?

ABBY

Does peanut butter count?

RICHARD

Sure.

ABBY

Peanut butter.

RICHARD

Who taught you to ride a bike?

ABBY

Um. My dad, I guess...

RICHARD

If you could travel any place on the planet, where would you go?

ABBY

I like it here.

RICHARD

Really? But you could be anything. You could... you could be... U.S. Ambassador. To anywhere.

ABBY

*Dream world.*

RICHARD

I don't know. You seem a lot more interesting than me.

ABBY

I'm not. It just seems that way because I have a dead sister. That was just one thing that happened one afternoon...

Abby turns to see Bryce and a couple of friends striding towards her booth.

BRYCE

Hey!

Bryce skooches in next to Abby, puts a proprietary arm around her. Ignores Richard.

BRYCE

Where you been all day?

ABBY

I don't know.

BRYCE

Whatever. So the party's off this weekend. Tutter's mom busted him.

ABBY

What about the cove?

BRYCE  
Too fucking cold out there.

ABBY  
So it's off. Big deal.

RICHARD  
What kind of party?

BRYCE  
What do you mean what kind of a party? A party.

ABBY  
Just nothing. Just some friends hanging out.

RICHARD  
You could use my place.

This stops them.

ABBY  
What?

BRYCE  
Seriously?

RICHARD  
Yeah, why not? *This* weekend's a little sticky, though. My wife's back and she'd, um, well... But could you do next week? Friday?

Bryce checks it out with his friends. They nod.

BRYCE  
Friday's cool.

ABBY  
Really?

RICHARD  
Yeah. I'll get a keg.

BRYCE  
Nice.

RICHARD  
What else do you guys need? Appetizers, paper plates and stuff?

BRYCE  
No, it's okay, we got it covered.

RICHARD  
Great. We're on.

BRYCE  
Righteous. Thanks, man.

He slides out of the booth. Takes off with his friends.

ABBY  
You didn't have to do that.

RICHARD  
It'll be fun.

ABBY  
You get the cherry.

She hands over the marischino and digs back into her ice cream.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

In the yard. The entire living room set-up has been moved outside. Including Richard's desk. He sits at his typewriter, an extension cord running back to the house.

The Captain's knee-deep in a hole about the size of a shallow grave. He shovels dirt like mad.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Norwood regarded his solitude as something..."*

He stops, yet again. Aloud.

RICHARD  
Norwood? Norman? Richman? Richmond.  
Richmond.

The Captain groans. Loudly. Goes back to digging. Richard types.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Richmond regarded his solitude as something..."*

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
UN-BEARABLE!

RICHARD  
Do you mind. I'm working.  
(V.O.)  
*"Richmond regarded his solitude as something... unbearable. I mean who did he think he was kidding. Humberto was no friend. He was a heath hen, for chrissakes and worse than that, he was extinct."*

The Captain drops his shovel and starts to yell. Hands over his ears.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Aaaaagggghhh!

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"What was he so afraid of? Was it that other people would find him empty? Uninteresting? Other men were fathers, sons, workers and they kept one another's company. All Richmond had was a chicken..."*

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Aaaagggghhh!

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"And for him, that was no longer enough."*

The Captain stops yelling abruptly. It echoes through the woods. Then he lies down in the hole and starts to pull the mound of fresh earth in on top of himself.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- DAY

Richard, lying on his stomach on the bed. He's lined up his Origami animals on the dresser and he's taking pot shots at them with spit balls and a straw. A homemade shooting gallery.

From outside the house, the sound of a car pulling up in the driveway.

Richard panics. Dives under the bed. Hiding.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Claire pulls up to the house and gets out of the BMW. Carries her weekend bag for the front door. She's about to let herself in when she catches sight of the back yard.

The couch, the chair, all the living room furniture collecting leaves under the trees.

Her face hardens.

INT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Claire steps into the bare living room. There's Richard's couch. She drops her bag.

CLAIRE  
Richard?  
(No answer.)  
Richard!

She's off down the hallway in search of him.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- DAY

CLAIRE  
Come out, Richard! Please...

A beat. Then Richard's head emerges from under the bed.

RICHARD  
Hi.

He wriggles out and climbs to his feet. Claire turns and leaves. Then Captain Excellent pokes his head out from under the bed.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
"When the World is Imperiled... When Evil surrounds you...!"

RICHARD  
Shut up.

Richard slumps after Claire.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Claire stands pointing at the handmade novel couch.

CLAIRE  
Help me, Richard.

RICHARD  
What?

CLAIRE  
Help me understand this. All of the furniture is outside. And this... what the hell is this?

RICHARD  
I just needed a little project.... You don't like it? I'm a disappointment.

Claire just blinks at him.

RICHARD  
Look, I know I could have been more like Rory. Or Bill Boyd. I could've rotted away at McGreely & Kent. Been more of a solid asset.

CLAIRE  
I don't need a... an asset?

She shakes her head. The energy draining out of her.

CLAIRE  
I'm sitting in the Doctor's Lounge  
yesterday and... Marc Cunningham resigned  
this week...

RICHARD  
Who?

CLAIRE  
The whole department's in chaos. And I'm  
looking at my comfortable shoes and I'm  
tired and... shit. Not once did you pick  
up the phone this week. You didn't call  
me once. And I drive all the way out  
here and there's *this*.

Richard just stands there taking it. Chastised.

CLAIRE  
Richard! Aren't you going to say  
something?

He tries, but can't. She's had it. She huffs off into the  
kitchen.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- DAY

Claire's banging through the cupboards. She finds a glass,  
goes to the fridge and pours herself some milk. Richard  
stands in the doorway watching.

CLAIRE  
I've got to call Morgan's again next  
week. It's still damp under the sink.

Richard looks at her blankly.

CLAIRE  
The plumber? Richard...!

RICHARD  
Yes. Okay.

Claire goes to the window over the sink. Stares out shaking  
her head. Glances down and finds Abby's CARE BEAR. She  
picks it up.

CLAIRE  
What's this?

Richard stares right at it.

RICHARD  
What's what?

CLAIRE  
This, Richard. Whose is this?

Richard's stuck. He looks over to The Captain, sitting at the kitchen table.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Tell her it's the babysitter's.

Richard stalls. Shifts his weight uncomfortably.

RICHARD  
Claire?

CLAIRE  
Yes.

RICHARD  
Are we unhappy? Or are we just pretending to be unhappy?

CLAIRE  
What do you mean?

RICHARD  
Are we just pretending to be unhappy to add drama to our lives? So we seem more substantial? I mean, if you think about it our life is embarrassingly easy. You're a doctor, I'm a published writer, we've got plenty of money. We've got... you've got friends.... There are people out there who have real problems, you know? Real reasons to be unhappy. I could be a coal miner dying of black lung or something. You could be a Detroit crack whore on food stamps...

CLAIRE  
*What?*

RICHARD  
I don't know.... Doesn't it feel like we're faking it? Our unhappiness?

Claire looks at him with dead eyes. Warily:

CLAIRE  
No. It's real. It's very real.

She throws the Care Bear down on the counter. Calmly goes to the living room.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Claire picks up her bag. Hand on the door knob.

CLAIRE  
I'm going back home. I just... I don't...

CLAIRE (cont'd)  
 I think you think this is still charming.  
 We're not 23 anymore. You've got to pull  
 it together. Pick up the phone this  
 week.

She goes. Richard doesn't try to stop her. Then, from  
 outside:

CLAIRE  
 And bring the fucking furniture in off  
 the lawn...!

Richard waits to hear the engine start. Sits down on his  
 couch next to The Captain and leans into him. The Captain  
 puts an arm on his shoulder, gives him a few pats.

INT. THE HOUSE, BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Richard, down to his underwear and socks, sits on the edge of  
 the bed. He's holding sea shells to his ears. Both of them.  
 Stereophonic ocean sound. It doesn't seem to be helping.

EXT. THE HOUSE, BACK YARD -- DAY

Richard at his desk, at the typewriter. Fingers poised  
 (A,S,D,F,G,H,J,K,L,;). He sits and sits and sits. For an  
 eternity as his brain slowly shuts down. The Captain sits on  
 the couch, heckling.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 "Richmond regarded his solitude...."  
 Richmond? Hichmond? Schmichmond?  
 Schmichmond....

Richard grabs the typewriter, lifts it high above his head  
 and heaves it at the couch. Almost takes The Captain's head  
 off. He makes a Super Dive out of the way.

Richard bails. After him:

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 That's right, run! Chicken!

INT. DAIRY QUEEN -- DAY

Abby sits alone. Lethargically spooning down a banana split.  
 She dangles the cherry, twirling it in her fingers.

Through the big plate glass window she notices Richard  
 pedalling up. He mashes on the foot brake and fish-tails to  
 a stop. She smiles. He smiles. He beckons her out.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND -- DAY

Richard and Abby on the swings. They've got full grocery  
 bags plopped down in the sand.

It's a swinging contest. See who can get the highest. Richard's pumping like mad, but Abby's got him beat.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

RICHARD

Scalpel.

Richard and Abby stand looking down at their patient: a sea bass. They have a set of knives laid out. Abby hands Richard a filet knife. He starts to make his incision.

ABBY

No no, you're starting too low. Right up under his chin. Take it slow. You don't wanna tear the flesh... that's it... all the way to the base of the tail.

Richard sweats. Concentrates. They pause to swig beers. Richard makes another cut.

ABBY

Here, let me help you...

She puts her hand on his. Guides it through the three remaining cuts. Then he lifts a perfect filet with a satisfied grin.

ABBY

Drop it in the pan.

Richard slips it into the hot skillet. Abby sears the fish.

ABBY

You're pretty good at that.

RICHARD

My wife re-attached a leg today.

ABBY

Wow.

RICHARD

Maybe that's what I should have been. A fishmonger. I could have mongered some fish.

Abby flakes the sea bass.

ABBY

You see, you just sear it, a couple of seconds...

She tosses the fish into an already boiling soup pot. Hands Richard a wooden spoon.

ABBY  
Stir it, will ya'. Gently.

She runs to the living room. He tends the pot. She comes back with a stack of cut newspaper sheets.

ABBY  
Here. You hold this end.

She takes the other and backs away. Stretching out a long paper chain. Twelve feet of little men strung together.

RICHARD  
Paper men.

ABBY  
You know, for your book.

RICHARD  
I have something for you too. Close your eyes.

He opens a kitchen drawer. Comes up with an origami offering. Places it in her hands. Eyes open.

ABBY  
Oh! A...a...  
(takes a wild guess)  
Camel? Peacock?

Richard deflates.

RICHARD  
It's the swan. The beautiful, graceful swan.

ABBY  
Sorry...

EXT. THE HOUSE -- NIGHT

Later. Richard and Abby sit at the kitchen table under the paper chain. They eat their chowder, drink their beer and laugh.

Christopher's at the house. Out in the cold. He peers in through the window.

Abby glances up. Catches Christopher's eye. Holds his gaze for just a moment. Looks away.

INT. ABBY'S CAR -- NIGHT

Abby drives, with Christopher in the seat next to her. She's in a great mood, he's at rock bottom.

CHRISTOPHER  
Okay, so that's it. We're done.

ABBY  
Don't be so dramatic.

CHRISTOPHER  
No. It's obvious. You're done with me.  
You don't need me anymore.

ABBY  
Christopher....

CHRISTOPHER  
Hey, it's okay, 'cause I don't need you  
either....

He starts to cry. For real.

CHRISTOPHER  
If my love means nothing to you, then I  
don't want to go on.

He throws open the door of the moving car. Starts to jump  
out. Abby brakes hard, holding Christopher in.

ABBY  
Don't. Stop it....

CHRISTOPHER  
You have him. You don't need me.

ABBY  
We always knew this was coming. One day.  
Didn't we?

She looks at him tenderly. Touches his cheek. Her eyes fill  
with tears.

ABBY  
Didn't we?

CHRISTOPHER  
I'm dead without you.

He shrugs her off and bolts out of the car. Runs off into  
the night. Abby's left alone.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

It's afternoon and the joint is jumping. Music bleeds out.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- DAY

Richard at the counter, already making party preparations.  
He puts together bowls of nibbles. Olives, chick peas, toast  
points.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby, getting ready for the party. She slathers on the lip gloss. Looks in the vanity mirror and tries on a few smiles.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

The keg sits in the center of the room. Richard grabs a plastic cup from a stack and pours the foamy first beer. Swigs it back. Aaaah. The doorbell. Richard opens it.

It's Abby. A long hello hug. They're happy to see one another. She steps in, looks around.

ABBY

Whoa. You went all out.

She points at the cheesy decorations Richard's hung up. Streamers, balloons and a big banner reading, "PARTY TIME!"

RICHARD

Too much?

ABBY

No. It's great. "Party time."

RICHARD

The keg's in here. I've put out hors d'oeuvres in the kitchen. I think it'll flow well that way.

ABBY

Is that a pinata?

RICHARD

Yeah. I went for the donkey. I thought, you know, go classic.

He looks to her for approval. She smiles, charmed by his enthusiasm.

ABBY

You don't do parties much, do you?

RICHARD

No. I'm a little nervous.

ABBY

Relax. It'll be fun. C'mon, I'll help you hang the donkey.

She picks up the pinata and they go.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Before the guests arrive. Abby, alone, dances to the music on the radio. The door bell. Abby opens it. It's Bryce and his posse.

BRYCE  
Hey.

ABBY  
Hey.

He looks around at the set up. The guys all laugh, mocking.

BRYCE  
Shit....

ABBY  
Yeah, I know.

BRYCE  
Where's the freak?

ABBY  
Don't be an asshole.

Richard enters from the back, a cup of beer in hand. He tries to be loose.

RICHARD  
Bryce. What's up, man?

Bryce looks at him like he's a dork. Holds up a couple of gallon bottles of vodka.

BRYCE  
Where do I put these?

RICHARD  
Kitchen's in there.

BRYCE  
What about the box?

One of the guys has a huge boom box. Tunes.

RICHARD  
Wherever, man. Whatever feels right. *Mi casa...*, you know?

BRYCE  
What?

Richard toasts him with his beer, takes a swig. Bryce shakes his head and rolls his eyes to his friends. The guys move in to take over.

INT. THE HOUSE -- NIGHT

The music's changed. A driving hip hop beat thumps through the house. Kids have arrived. They hang in clusters.

Richard scurries in with an ashtray, hands it to a girl before her ash drops.

The doorbell. Richard skips over, throws it wide. There's a half-dozen kids on the door step. He greets them warmly.

RICHARD  
Welcome! Welcome!

CUT TO:

THE DOOR, as Richard greets another group. Shouting over the music.

RICHARD (cont'd)  
Hey! C'mon in! Make yourselves at home!

CUT TO:

THE DOOR. Another bunch.

RICHARD (cont'd)  
What grade are you guys in?

CUT TO:

THE DOOR. A huge throng.

RICHARD (cont'd)  
Whassup?!

As this gang of kids pushes past Richard, he turns back to what is now a jumping party. Forty or fifty high school kids doing their thing. Dancing, necking, drinking.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard's manning the keg. Pouring beer into cups for the kids lined up. He helps himself liberally.

RICHARD  
I AM the kegmeister! Whooo!

The teenagers tolerate him. Anything to get the beer.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

At the table, Richard squares off against a couple of party guys. A serious game of quarters. A crowd of high-schoolers watches, cheering Richard on.

He sinks a quarter, points with his elbow in the face of his opponent.

RICHARD  
Drink! Drink, drink, drink!

The crowd chants along with him.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard chats up a couple of sophomore girls. He's got them cornered. They're just intrigued enough by him to play along, and he's drunk enough not to know better.

RICHARD  
I don't know... my high school years were a time of self discovery for me, when I look back, you know? Though I wouldn't want to be 17 again I don't think.

SOPHOMORE GIRL  
We're 15.

RICHARD  
Ah....

He tries for a smooth exit.

EXT. THE HOUSE, BACK YARD -- NIGHT

Richard steps out the back door, drink in hand. He scans the scene. The party has spilled out, and its going strong.

He notices Abby, standing with Bryce and his usual cronies. They're all loud and wasted.

Bryce grabs Abby's ass. She swats him away. Next, he paws her tits. Right in front of everybody. Abby's not amused. She throws his hand off, looking miserable. Bryce and his friends laugh. Hilarious.

Abby turns away. When she looks up she spots Christopher. Standing in the trees at the fringe of the party. Their eyes meet.

Christopher shakes his head sadly.

EXT. THE HOUSE, BACK YARD -- NIGHT

Later. The whole party's out back now. Richard's donkey pinata swings from the branch of a tree. Richard wears a blindfold, holds a stick. The kids spin him around madly, hooting and hollering for him. He's the life and soul.

He drunkenly staggers, takes a couple of wild swings. Misses. Laughs and heckling. Finally, an almighty blow rips the donkey wide open and the contents fall to the grass.

Richard pulls off the blindfold. Smiles a satisfied smile to Abby. Great party.

INT. THE HOUSE, BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Richard, dying for a piss, pushes past kids to the bathroom door. Throws it open.

IN THE BATHROOM. It's Bryce. With a girl. They're making out like crazy, his hands up her shirt.

RICHARD

Oh, sorry....

Richard closes the door quickly. Then re-thinks. Yanks the door back open. They're still going at it.

BRYCE

Dude, d'you mind?

RICHARD

What are you doing?

BRYCE

What?

RICHARD

What the fuck're you doing? What about Abby?

BRYCE

What about Abby?

RICHARD

You don't do this to her. You don't do this to that little girl!

BRYCE

Mind your own business, fucking pervert.

He goes back to the girl.

RICHARD

Chickenshit.

Bryce turns on him, pissed.

BRYCE

What'd you call me?

RICHARD

You chickenshit bastard.

Bryce is on top of him before the words are out of Richard's mouth. He grabs Richard by the shirt and pushes him backwards out of the bathroom.

BRYCE

Don't talk to me like that!

Bryce drags Richard down the HALLWAY. To the LIVING ROOM and into the middle of the party. He slams him up against the wall. Puts a finger in Richard's face.

BRYCE

You don't talk to me like that you fucking freak!

Richard back-hands his finger away. Anger rising.

RICHARD

You think you can threaten me? You're a child.

Bryce sucker punches Richard. Hard. In the face. Richard goes down. The crowd of teenagers surges around the fight. Bryce straddles Richard, fist still clenched.

BRYCE

I'm a child? Is that what I am?

Abby pushes her way through.

ABBY

Get off him! Jesus!

She grabs Bryce by the arm, trying to drag him off. He shoves her aside roughly, still in Richard's face.

ABBY

Stop it! Bryce, stop it!

She pushes past Bryce and kneels beside Richard.

ABBY

You okay?

BRYCE

What's the deal? You fucking him?

ABBY

Stop it, Bryce.

BRYCE

Seriously, you fucking her?

RICHARD

No....

BRYCE

'Cause I don't give a shit. You can have her. She's fucking crazy anyway.

Bryce's boys step in to break it up. This is getting ugly. Bryce yells right in Abby's face.

BRYCE  
Why don't you go back to the looney bin  
where you belong! And take him with you!

Silence in the room. All eyes on Abby.

ABBY  
Get the fuck out.

BRYCE  
Yeah yeah yeah....

Abby loses it. Jumps to her feet. She screams in Bryce's face.

ABBY  
Get the fuck out! Now! Go! Get out of  
here!

Bryce turns and goes. With his posse. And the new girl.

A stunned silence from the rest of the party.

ABBY  
What are you all looking at? Party's  
over, get out of here.

She hunkers down next to Richard. Like two kicked dogs they watch the party disperse.

ABBY  
Get out!

The last one to go is Christopher. He doesn't even look at her.

Richard leans into Abby's side, drunken and beaten.

RICHARD  
Chickenshit's an asshole.

ABBY  
Yeah....

They sit side by side.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard and Abby. On the novel couch.

Richard's curled up, his head on Abby's lap. She presses an ice pack to his swollen eye. He's mumbly, fighting sleep. On the verge of passing out.

RICHARD  
Great party....

ABBY  
Yeah.

RICHARD  
I love you.

ABBY  
What?

RICHARD  
I... not in any way that's in... um,  
inappropriate or anything, nothing that's  
not, you know, decent or... it's just if  
I examine my, if I look in my... heart, I  
find that, I think that it's... there's  
love there. For you. Yeah. I love  
you....

The last is barely audible. Richard's out.

Abby sits quietly. Then:

ABBY  
It wasn't really a looney bin. And it  
was only for a few months. Just until  
I.... My parents thought... I don't  
know. I never told them, I never told  
anyone... It was a pact. Amy and me  
were both supposed to go... in the water.  
She did it, but I swam back. I swam  
back. I couldn't.... I don't know why  
we were so unhappy. What could we have  
been so unhappy about? Eight. I guess  
you're too young to know you can get over  
anything.

She touches Richard's hair.

ABBY  
I should go.... Yeah....

She doesn't. Instead, she reaches for a blanket, pulls it up  
over Richard. And herself. She lays down next to him and  
closes her eyes.

A long beat as she drifts off.

Then, in the murky light, someone steps into the room.

It's Christopher. He crosses slowly to the two sleeping  
bodies. Plants himself in front of them.

Another long beat.

Then Captain Excellent enters. And stands right next to Christopher. Elbow to elbow.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
He's always made poor decisions.

CHRISTOPHER  
Same with her.

They nod without looking at one another.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
You feel helpless....

Heavy sighs.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
How long you been with her?

CHRISTOPHER  
Since she was eight. You?

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Oh, Christ... it's gotta be almost forty years. Since he was three.

CHRISTOPHER  
Wow. Isn't he a little old for you?

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
I keep telling him. He never listens.

CHRISTOPHER  
They never do. What's your gig?

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Oh, I've pretty much done it all. Monsters under the bed, cheerleader, confidante... These days, it's a bit of a mystery to tell you the truth. You?

CHRISTOPHER  
I'm crazy in love with her.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Tough one.

CHRISTOPHER  
Yeah. It's been alright. I think she's almost done with me.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Great. Get out while you can. If they open the door, run. You don't want to end up like me.

CHRISTOPHER

I guess not....

They nod together again. The Captain finally looks at Christopher. Extends his hand.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

Captain Excellent.

CHRISTOPHER

Christopher. Nice to meet you.

They shake.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT

See you around.

The Captain turns and goes. Christopher lingers for a moment. Then takes his leave without looking back.

FADE OUT.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- MORNING

The aftermath of a wild party. Plastic cups litter the lawn, empty bottles everywhere. The smashed pinata swinging from a bare tree branch.

The BMW pulls into the drive. Claire's home.

PUSH IN on her face, behind the windshield, as she surveys the damage. She despairs. Climbs out of the car.

As she closes her door, another car pulls in behind her. And a man and a woman step out, holding overnight bags. It's the week-end guests. Lucy and Peter (40's), fellow Bostonians.

LUCY

Sweet little house, Claire....

They take in the yard. Look to one another, confused.

Claire can barely speak.

CLAIRE

I, uh.... Just a... just a second.

She marches into the house. Peter and Lucy linger, unsure whether to follow behind.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Claire throws open the door. And there they are:

Richard and Abby asleep on the couch together. Spooning comfortably in their deep sleep.

ON Claire in utter disbelief. She stands in shocked silence.  
Then Peter and Lucy step in gingerly behind her. Looks of horror.

LUCY

Oh....

Claire snaps. She steps over the spent keg, pulls off one of her shoes and starts to wail away on Richard with it. Pounding him.

Richard bolts up, wide awake. Throws his hands up in defense. Abby rolls off the couch and onto the floor at Claire's feet.

RICHARD

What!?! What what what what what?

CLAIRE

You son of a bitch!

RICHARD

What?! It's the 2nd already?

CLAIRE

You son of a bitch!

ABBY

It's not like that!

Claire puts her shoe in Abby's face. Trembling with rage.

CLAIRE

Shut up!

(To Richard)

You son of a bitch, Richard!

RICHARD

Claire, don't over-react here.

CLAIRE

You shut up! Don't tell me how to react!  
What is this? Who is that!?

ABBY

I'm Abby...

CLAIRE

Be quiet. I wasn't asking you. Who the fuck is that, Richard?

Richard's hung-over brain is working too slow to come up with anything. He shrugs.

RICHARD

She's the babysitter.

CLAIRE

Get out!

Claire drags Abby to her feet, pushes her towards the door.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Get out! Get out!

Abby pushes her way past Lucy and Peter, still standing in the doorway trying to be invisible. They all watch her go. Then all turn back to Richard. He waves pathetically at the guests.

RICHARD

Hi, Lucy. Hi, Peter.

LUCY

Um... hi... Claire, we'll just be....

She drags Peter into the kitchen.

Claire burns a look into Richard. He looks back with a beautiful shiner from last night's fight. Complete hang-dog.

RICHARD

I didn't sleep with the babysitter. If that's what you're thinking.

CLAIRE

Oh. That's so comforting. Why is it we even have a babysitter!?

He sighs. It's more than he can get into.

RICHARD

It was just a kegger, Claire. That's all.

CLAIRE

A kegger!? With *whom exactly* did you have a kegger?

RICHARD

Just some kids from the high school.

She throws her shoe at him.

CLAIRE

Stop it, Richard! Just stop! All of this. None of this is okay.

RICHARD

Okay.

CLAIRE

You knew we were coming this weekend, why are you doing this?

RICHARD  
I've been at a bit of a loss.

CLAIRE  
That's a bullshit answer.

RICHARD  
I've been... floundering. And Abby has been...

CLAIRE  
What? Abby has been what?

RICHARD  
A friend.

CLAIRE  
Oh, for God's sake, that's not a friend, that's a child. You have friends.

RICHARD  
No. I don't.

Claire turns her back on Richard in disgust.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- DAY

The kitchen's a disaster area. Peter and Lucy straighten up some of the mess, dumping beer bottles into trash bags. They try desperately not to listen in on the fight.

CLAIRE (V.O.)  
That's because you don't know how to relate to other human beings....

Blatant small talk from Peter and Lucy

PETER  
So the drive was pretty.

LUCY  
Yeah, it's nice out here in the winter.

CLAIRE (V.O.)  
You isolate yourself. You make it impossible... you're closed off! From everybody, from me...!

PETER  
Was that a chipmunk we saw?

LUCY  
I think they hibernate...

The fight rages on.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
You can talk.

CLAIRE (V.O.)  
What the hell's that supposed to mean?

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Claire's turned back to Richard. Hands on hips sort of thing. Richard shakes his head.

CLAIRE  
No. What did you mean by that?

RICHARD  
You can be cold, Claire.

CLAIRE  
Oh, please.

RICHARD  
Yes. Your profession, it's made you hard.

CLAIRE  
I don't accept that.

RICHARD  
I wanted a baby.

CLAIRE  
Is that what this is all about?

RICHARD  
We could have had a baby, Claire. Why can't we have a baby?

CLAIRE  
Why? Because you are a baby. You're an infant. The thought of you as a father....

RICHARD  
That's cruel.

CLAIRE  
You've still got an imaginary friend!

RICHARD  
The Captain has nothing to do with this.

Richard looks slapped. He stares at the floor between his feet. Long pause.

RICHARD  
I just wanted a little... thing. A little warm thing.

RICHARD (cont'd)  
 Something simple that I could start with.  
 From scratch, with a clean slate. A  
 single relationship with a person that  
 was new and... pure. Where I'd just be  
 me and they'd just be them and that was  
 all that was expected and we'd build  
 this... world where there was something  
 else other than me to think about and be  
 about. The relief of being able to give  
 the world to someone else and let it be  
 theirs. Let them have their turn. So it  
 doesn't end with me.

IN THE KITCHEN: Lucy and Peter hearing every word. Tears in  
 her eyes. He bites his lip.

IN THE LIVING ROOM: Claire's not buying it.

CLAIRE  
 But that's all *you*, Richard. Where do I  
 come in?

RICHARD  
 What do you mean? You're the *mother*.

Peter and Lucy creep in from the kitchen. They clutch their  
 bags in their arms.

LUCY  
 Uh... I'm so sorry, you guys, but we're  
 gonna go... we're just gonna... go.

PETER  
 A B&B...? Um....

Claire is beyond mortified.

CLAIRE  
 I'm so sorry we...

PETER  
 No, no. It's fine, we're just....

CLAIRE  
 I'll walk you out. I'm so sorry.

They turn to go. Richard perks up.

RICHARD  
 We should all go on a cruise or  
 something....

The three turn, incredulous. There is no response.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

The long walk to the cars. Lucy takes Claire's hand.

LUCY  
Honey....

CLAIRE  
I'm fine.

Peter gives her a tentative kiss on the cheek. She turns back to the house.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

Claire steps back in. Richard's holding an armful of party trash. She glares, then goes into the kitchen. She comes back with a trash bag. Richard dumps his load. Claire continues to clean up in a fury. She crams crap into the bag.

CLAIRE  
If we're going to do this, let's -- by the way, what is she 12? 13? -- let's at least get our facts straight. It was you, Richard. You didn't want a baby. You weren't ready. So that little fuzzy fucking speech that my friends had to hear, that was bullshit.

RICHARD  
No.

CLAIRE  
And now maybe I'm not ready. So I guess I'm the bad guy.

She sweeps cups off the mantel. Picks up a stack of typing paper and is about to trash it, too.

RICHARD  
No, not that, that's the novel.

She drops the trash bag. Looks at the substantial stack of paper. Weighs it in her hands. Starts to read.

RICHARD  
Uh... I'd rather you didn't....

She does anyway. Scans the first page. Flips to page two. It's empty. Page three, blank. She rifles through the stack. Nothing there.

CLAIRE  
Where's the rest?

RICHARD  
That's it.

CLAIRE  
Really?

RICHARD

Yeah.

Beat. Claire loses it completely. Hurls the blank pages at Richard's head. Takes his one written sheet and tears it into confetti. Holds it in her clenched fist.

CLAIRE

This is what you've been doing? For a month? This is it?

She throws the pieces into his face.

CLAIRE

Maybe if you'd been working instead of fucking the babysitter...!

RICHARD

No.

CLAIRE

You're useless, Richard.

RICHARD

Yes!

CLAIRE

You're totally useless! What is wrong with you!?

Richard reaches deep down inside and screams with everything he's got.

RICHARD

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH MY *HANDS!*

This stops everything. His body shakes. Claire is spent. They look right through one another. Richard speaks perfectly calmly.

RICHARD

You have a place in the world, Claire. You do something. Every day. I... I do this....

He reaches down and scoops up a handful of blank paper. Crumples it.

RICHARD

And this is nothing.

Claire slumps down onto the novel couch. Exhausted.

CLAIRE

This was what you wanted. Coming here. This is what you wanted.

She takes a deep breath.

CLAIRE

Everyone - Jen and my sister and Liv - they all envied me because I had the one who made me laugh. What happened? I don't know what happened.

RICHARD

You stopped laughing.

Silence. They look at one another. Drifting, unmoored.

CLAIRE

Please come out of your head, Richard. I'm so tired of trying to get in there.

Claire stands and makes a dignified exit.

Richard drops the ball of paper at his feet. Turns to the window and gazes out at the desk in the back yard.

A beat of glassy-eyed silence.

Then, from out of nowhere, SMASH! A BIG, BLACK BIRD flies into the window. Crashing into the glass right in front of Richard's nose. Kamikaze. He jumps clear out of his skin.

EXT. THE HOUSE, BACKYARD -- DAY

There it is. A STARLING. Draped lifeless in the bushes.

Richard picks it up gingerly, cradles the bird. Looks around the littered yard. There's an empty 12-pack box. He carefully drops the bird corpse in. Closes the flaps.

Walks to the trash cans, lifts the lid and lowers the little coffin in.

CLOSE ON Richard's weary face.

EXT. HYANNIS HARBOR -- DAY

Out on the pier where the ferries dock. Signs advertise day trips out to Martha's Vineyard.

Leaning against a lamp post, there's Richard's bike.

EXT. FERRYBOAT -- DAY

Richard, on the deck of the ferry. He leans into the railing, the freezing Atlantic spray misting his face. The boat steams for the grey horizon.

EXT. NATURE CONSERVANCY -- DAY

A weathered caretaker's house sits at the edge of an open field. The sign next to the door reads: *Martha's Vineyard National Seashore Nature Conservancy.*

A Park Ranger emerges. Brown pants, khaki shirt.

PARK RANGER  
Help you?

RICHARD  
I, uh... I came to pay my respects.

PARK RANGER  
Sorry?

RICHARD  
The Heath Hen. This is where the last  
North American Heath Hen lived.

The Ranger looks blank.

PARK RANGER  
Oh. Uh... I wouldn't know anything about  
a Heath Hen. But you're welcome to look  
around. We've got some Plovers....

Richard's crestfallen.

RICHARD  
Oh... Thank you....

EXT. MEADOW -- DAY

An unremarkable open space with clumps of scraggly marsh grass, surrounded by barren trees. Richard stands solemnly, staring out at the empty field. The Captain stands a few paces behind him.

RICHARD  
So this is what the end of something  
looks like.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
The world went on, Richard.

RICHARD  
But never the same. Who knows how she  
might have changed the world. Her just  
being here. The ripple effect.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
What? If she hadn't died out you'd be  
normal? Well-adjusted?

RICHARD  
Maybe...

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
Doubt it.

RICHARD  
Instead I'm a childless loser. I'm  
condemned to oblivion, Captain. Just  
like our little hen.

A heavy silence between them.

RICHARD  
It's time for you to go.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
No.

RICHARD  
You know what I'm saying, Captain. I  
mean go and never come back.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
I'm not ready.

RICHARD  
It doesn't matter. You can't help me  
anymore. The doctor's right.

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
But then you'll be all alone.

RICHARD  
Yes.

Richard gazes out at the Heath Hen's last resting place.

RICHARD  
The last of my kind.

He nods. Resigned somehow.

RICHARD  
Okay.

The two men stand quietly, shoulder to shoulder.

RICHARD  
Do the Voice. One last time.

The Captain thinks about refusing. Richard begs.

RICHARD  
Please....

To the sky:

CAPTAIN EXCELLENT  
 "When the world is imperiled... When  
 Evil surrounds you... When Danger is  
 lurking... who do you call?!"

Richard whispers the answer.

RICHARD  
 Captain Excellent....

The Captain nods. There's nothing left to say.

He raises his arms above his head and...

WHOOSH! He shoots up into the air. Flying. Away.

Richard quietly watches Captain Excellent streak across the winter sky. Going, going, gone.

He stands in the meadow not moving. Alone.

EXT./ INT. BMW -- DAY

Parked outside the CVS Drug Store. Claire opens the door to the car, throws her purse on the seat and sits heavily behind the wheel.

She tears at a new pack of cigarettes. Shaking. She lights one and takes a deep drag. Trying to keep it together. But she breaks anyway. Finally. Sobs. Tears and smoke.

A tap on the window. She starts. Looks up. There's Abby.

Claire clumsily wipes her eyes, stubs out the cigarette. She looks through the glass at Abby for a long beat. Then lowers the window.

ABBY  
 I wish I had a really amazing, fucked up  
 father like him.

Beat. Claire just stares. That's all Abby had to say. She turns and walks away.

Claire watches her. Then presses her palm on her horn. Strong. Abby turns. Summoned, she comes back. Ready for anything. By the open window:

CLAIRE  
 You don't know, do you?

ABBY  
 No.

CLAIRE  
How it is? What it is? You don't. What  
it's like...?

ABBY  
No.

CLAIRE  
No...

Pause. Abby waits. Claire looks right through her. Talking to herself.

CLAIRE  
...It's a weight. That he adds. Little by little. Over years. That's what it is... The things he does, the way he is, who he becomes... Each thing a little heavier. Just a little heavier. And the thing is, you don't notice right away, because it isn't all at once. It's incremental, this weight that you're lifting every day. Little by little... it's more and more... until you're lifting this impossible, heavy thing. And you don't even know it.

She turns her eyes back to Abby.

CLAIRE  
But you can do it. Every day. Because you've become that strong. You can lift anything. Do you see what I mean?

ABBY  
You're that strong.

CLAIRE  
You can lift anything. Yes.

The two women look at one another. Things clearer somehow. Claire nods. Abby smiles.

And Claire drives away.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Richard enters, and goes to the window. Pulls down the Audubon print of the Heath Hen. And crumples it in his hands.

EXT. BACKYARD -- DAY

At the break of dawn. At his desk. Poised at the typewriter. Richard's hands lie heavily on either side of the machine. It's an enormous effort to lift them onto the keys.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Richmond regarded his solitude as something..."*

He stops. Lowers his head onto the desk. He whispers hoarsely.

RICHARD  
 Captain...! Captain...!

But he doesn't come.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Richmond regarded his solitude as something..."*

He lifts his head.

RICHARD  
 Richmond? Richmond...? Richard.  
 (He laughs weakly.)  
 Richard.

He starts to type.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Richard regarded his solitude as something sacred...."*

PULL BACK and BACK and BACK. Leaving Richard alone with the rat-tat-tat of the keys.

EXT. WELLFLEET STREETS -- DAY

Richard cycles along. It's slow-going. Like he's biking uphill, even on the flats.

EXT. ABBY'S HOUSE -- DAY

Richard's on the front step. The door opens. It's Abby. They look at each other. Then Abby slips outside, quietly closes the door.

ABBY  
 I had this dream last night, you were in it.

RICHARD  
 Oh. Was I interesting?

ABBY  
 You were you.

They fall silent for a moment, but their eyes are still locked.

ABBY  
You're leaving, aren't you.

RICHARD  
Yeah. You know, with the situation...

ABBY  
Yeah, I figured.

She rubs her shoulders against the cold.

ABBY  
Spring's my favorite time. The summer people aren't here yet and it's not so fucking cold.

RICHARD  
I made something for you.

From behind his back he pulls out a small white paper bag. Gives it to her. She peers inside. Her face breaks into a huge smile.

Abby reaches in and pulls out the gift.

ABBY  
It's the swan. The beautiful, graceful swan. It's perfect.

She takes in every detail of Richard's origami bird.

ABBY  
Thank you.

RICHARD  
It feels like we were just getting started...

She nods ever so slightly. They don't know how to be in this moment.

ABBY  
Here....

She rises up onto her tip-toes. Haltingly kisses Richard lightly on the lips.

They stand a few inches apart, the fog of their breaths intermingling.

Their last looks at one another.

A shy shuffling of feet.

RICHARD  
Okay.

And that's it. Richard goes.

Abby stands for a long moment, watching him climb onto his bike and ride away. She cradles the paper swan.

INT. ABBY'S HOUSE -- DAY

Abby trudges up the stairs. Carrying the swan to her bedroom.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- DAY

The door opens and Abby steps in. She stops dead, stiller than a statue. She slowly looks up.

There's Christopher. Hanging by the neck.

Abby's face crumbles. She gulps in air, struggling to breathe. A slow tremble builds in her body. Tears want to come, but she won't let them.

And then it passes. Little by little. The breathing comes back. She steadies herself. And looks at Christopher. Really looks at him.

ABBY

Okay.

She looks away. Carries Richard's gift over to her vanity. Sits upright on the stool and places it in front of her.

She looks into the mirror. Reflected behind her is... nothing.

Christopher is gone now.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Richard pulls up the driveway. Sees out back. There's Claire curled up on the couch. Head back, looking up through the bare tree limbs to the blue, blue sky.

Richard approaches quietly. Stands in front of Claire.

RICHARD

I'm a horse's ass.

CLAIRE

Yes you are.

RICHARD

I'm sorry.

He sits. Carefully. The far end of the couch.

CLAIRE  
I spent a whole summer sleeping outside  
once.

RICHARD  
You did?

CLAIRE  
Yeah. In a treehouse. I was probably  
about eight...

RICHARD  
Sounds nice.

CLAIRE  
I remember fire ants... and not believing  
they could climb that high.

He moves over a seat. Next to his wife.

CLAIRE (cont'd)  
Maybe it was just a couple of nights...  
but it felt like the whole summer.

RICHARD  
What kind of tree?

CLAIRE  
Maple.

RICHARD  
You never told me about that.

CLAIRE  
I know.

Richard nods. Looks at Claire a long time.

RICHARD  
I'm going to need some help getting the  
couch in.

Claire turns to him. A long look of her own.

CLAIRE  
In a minute....

She leans into Richard's side. Head on his shoulder.  
Richard puts his arm around her. They go back to sky-gazing.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- DAY

Abby sits cross-legged on the bottom bunk. Her sister's  
bunk.

Delicately, she begins to unfold the wings of Richard's swan. Looking for the words printed there. As she smooths the paper out:

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"Richard regarded his solitude as something sacred..."*

She settles in to read.

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- DAY

On Richard, kneeling in front of his handmade couch. He dismantles it book by book. Stuffing each copy of "The Renderer" into big, black trash bags.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"...as a well earned badge of honor, a cloak to be worn to ward off life. As his safety. Solitude is who he was."*

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Out in the back yard. The couch is still there under the trees.

And Claire's curled up on it. Under a blanket, sipping tea. Relaxed.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"This caused those in his life to view him with a barely veiled contempt. Richard was certain that he was not liked. Which is hard on a man. Maybe it was because he gave nothing that he received nothing in return. In any case, his situation had become intolerable..."*

She breathes in the air.

INT. ABBY'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Abby's at her vanity. She's carefully re-folding Richard's paper back into a swan.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"The closest things he had to friends were either imaginary or extinct. And Richard had reached a point in his life where this was no longer enough. And then he met a girl...."*

With the last fold, Abby smiles.

INT. THE HOUSE, KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Richard sits on a stool at the counter. Watching Claire make soup. Campbell's. From a can.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"And she was warm. And she was sad. And she was maybe lonely in a way that reminded him of himself."*

INT. THE HOUSE, LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Late. Richard, in his pyjamas, stands in the center of the room. Everything is back to the way it started. Everything in its place. He stares at the couch.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"She'd lost things that a girl should never have lost. And she knew things. And she taught him. And Richard thought: Maybe this is what friendship feels like. Maybe."*

Richard extends his hand and touches the couch. Then lies face down on it and wraps it in his arms. Making peace with the couch.

EXT. BEACH -- DAWN

The icy wind tears at Abby, standing at the edge of the pounding surf. Alone on the beach with the sun just rising. In her hand, she carries Richard's swan.

RICHARD (V.O.)  
*"It was just a glimpse, they'd barely begun, really. But in those long, few winter days she'd given him so much. Enough so that Richard could go on."*

Abby kneels in the surge of foam at the water's edge.

RICHARD (V.O.) (cont'd)  
*"And what had he given her? Just a few words on a page."*

And she releases the paper swan into the ocean.

RICHARD (V.O.) (cont'd)  
*"Not much, perhaps. But for Abby, he hoped it was enough."*

She watches it bob on top of the waves, headed out to sea.

Abby turns and walks up the beach.

EXT. THE HOUSE -- DAY

Richard steps out carrying two black trash bags. He closes the front door behind him. Takes a final look at the place. Heads for the trash cans and lifts the lid.

There's a sudden commotion, a flurry of feathers. It's the BIG, BLACK BIRD. The starling. It erupts from its coffin, madly flapping its wings. Back from the dead.

Richard watches as the bird takes flight, soaring above the trees and out of sight.

He dumps the bags and heads for the waiting BMW. He slides into the driver's seat. Right next to his wife. He looks at her with a tentative smile. Turns front.

CLOSE ON Richard.

To Claire. To himself. To...

RICHARD

Okay.

And...

INT. BMW -- DAY

...Richard pulls out of the driveway, turns down the street. He tries to keep his eyes focused on the road. But he can't help it. He takes a look in the rear-view.

There, in the middle of the street, rapidly receding from sight, is Captain Excellent. In his Mighty Superhero Stance.

ON Richard. He turns in the seat, looking out the back window. He sadly nods his goodbye.

ON The Captain. He slowly raises his hand.

And gives Richard the finger.

The End.