T H E B E S T L A I D P L A N S

A Screenplay

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. AN EDGE-OF-TOWN BAR -- ANGLE ON A WINDOW - NIGHT

Inside the window sits NICK, in a booth, alone. He sips a seven-and-seven and gazes outside at the bar's half-filled parking lot (reflected on the window's glass along with the bar's neon sign: "The Tropico Nocturne").

Nick is one of what Fitzgerald called "all the sad young men": white, educated, attractive and athletic, the sort who just naturally inspires affection from others and, in return, confirms upon them a happy sense of belonging, yet who privately is foundering, listless and dispirited, after having witnessed all his early promise amount to nothing.

Tonight, though, Nick is uneasy, preoccupied. And before the evening's over, we will learn why.

His attention is drawn inside by...

INT. "THE TROPICO NOCTURNE"

...BRYCE, also late 20s, returning from the men's room. He is everything Nick is, but to a far less appealing degree. And he's borderline drunk.

BRYCE
Another: Charles Kanab.

NICK
Large fellow. Played foosball.

BRYCE
Football.

NICK
Charles, Charles. People called him Chucky.

BRYCE
From a distance, in hushed tones. Remember: he threatened to knock up John, um, Birmingham's sister after he caught him calling him that. Anyway, he still plays. Back-up center in the Canadian league.

NICK
High school MVP to second-string Mounty: oof.

BRYCE
The shocking mediocrities our lives have become.

NICK
Hey, watch your possessive pronouns.

BRYCE
Sorry, forgot: your herbal diet program's about to skyrocket.

NICK
I'm gonna live forever.

BRYCE
You're gonna learn how to fly. High.

Bryce drinks; Nick glances briefly at the bar's entrance.

BRYCE
Hey: I had a thought.

NICK
Shit: no.

BRYCE
Mmm-hmm. Amazing but true. I was reading last night, a book I found, a history of twentieth century America. In your honor.

NICK
Whose? Manchester's?

BRYCE
Big thick text. By, um...

NICK
...White, Halberstam...

BRYCE
Um...I am not gonna remember.

NICK
Well, authors don't really matter in your trade.

BRYCE
I'm in the English department. We deal in fiction. I can tell the little shits any name I like.

NICK
Your thought.

BRYCE
Yes. I was reading. The 1960's. The sexual revolution. Free love. Wife-swapping. There was a game, supposedly, some married couples used to play. A sort-of after-dinner, free-spirit parlor game. All the husbands would throw their keychains onto a table, mix 'em up, and then all the wives would pick them up blindly, and whoever got whose keys slept with them. Well, think how old our parents are. They just missed the sexual rev as single people, but they were newlyweds at the height of this stuff. Now: think when we were born. We could be the offspring of a sanctioned, keychain adultery. Not likely, I realize. The pill facilitated most of that sexual indiscretion, but still: we may not be our father's sons. It gives me hope anyway.

Bryce drinks again; Nick looks uncomfortable.

BRYCE
What's wrong?

NICK
Nothing.

BRYCE
No, you look...pissed.

NICK
Well, outside the suggestion that your dad nailed my mom one night twenty-nine years ago because she picked up his car key, you haven't said anything incendiary, Bryce.

BRYCE
Hey, it was just a...Fuck, you've been wound up all night.

NICK
Yes. All this Remember-When, Where-Are-They-Now shit. Alright already. That was high-school, let's talk about something new, huh?

BRYCE
Okay.

A pause.

NICK
So: Herbert Shoeffler.

BRYCE
Harvard undergrad, Wharton Business school, then, get this: jail.

NICK
No kidding. For what?

BRYCE
Eh, mail fraud.

NICK
Huh. Still: one helluva speech at graduation.

BRYCE
Harvard to Sing Sing: oof.

NICK
The shocking mediocrities...

BRYCE
...their lives have become.

A WAITRESS brings drinks.

WAITRESS
Two more seven-and-sevens.

BRYCE
Jesus, another round.

NICK
Thanks.

BRYCE
I've barely touched this one.

NICK
(toasting)
Shhh. To your first month in Tropico. Stay hydrated.

BRYCE
Everybody sucks but us.

They drink. SIRENS draw Nick's attention outside.

EXT. BAR -- SAME ANGLE ON NICK IN THE WINDOW

He watches TWO FIRE TRUCKS, lights flashing, hurtle past the bar as, in the parking lot, A GIRL exits her white Volkswagen Rabbit and struts toward the entrance.

BRYCE
(barely audible through the glass)
Hey, I got a joke for you...

FADE OUT AND IN:

ANGLE ON A WOMAN'S PURSE. Lying on plush carpeting, between a couch and coffee table. Nothing remarkable about the scene really. Except when we pull up...

...there are TWO PEOPLE FUCKING MADLY on the couch. No faces visible. Just two torsos grinding together.

And there's MOANING: the MAN's guttural GROANS and the WOMAN's desperate, escalating GASPS harmonizing rhythmically.

But there's also something wrong here. Or the suggestion of something wrong. Those gasps might sound a little too desperate; someone here might not be a willing participant.

FADE OUT AND IN:

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT

CLOSE ON A POSTER OF PORTLAND, OREGON. Punctured in several places by tiny holes.

RECORD-A-CALL (O.S.)
(Nick's voice)
Hi, this is me. And I'm here. Just entertaining some last-minute...
(SCREECH)

Nick fast-forwards his message machine. Much of his apartment is packed in boxes.

RECORD-A-CALL
(BEEP; a deep baritone voice)
Tic toc, tic toc, the mouse ran up the clock. Motherfucker.
(SCREECH)

No more messages. Nick picks up the phone, dials, checks the time: 1:37 a.m..

NICK
Hi, Charlie. Not yet. Another hour or so. Yeah, and this heat doesn't help any. Soon as I hear.

Nick hangs up and hovers: restless/impatient, with time to kill. He turns to his stereo and plays a disc he's never heard before.

JOAN BAEZ
(after a guitar intro)
"Clouds so swift. Rain won't lift. Gate won't close. The railing's froze. Get your mind off winter time. You ain't goin' nowhere."

Wrong tune, wrong time. Nick doesn't even turn it off: just gets the hell out.

INT. NICK'S 1970 DODGE CHALLENGER -- MOVING - NIGHT

An open window lets in a steady breeze of heat: summer in Tropico.

INT. TROPICO DINER

Challenger parked outside, Nick enters/straddles a counter seat. One other PATRON nearby.

PATRON
Hey, where's that pretty lady a yours?

NICK
Elsewhere.

PATRON
I was there once.

WAITRESS
What's it gonna be, Nick?

Nick studies a menu/extracts a pack of smokes.

WAITRESS
Sorry: new ordinance.
(re: a "No Smoking" sign)
As of yesterday.

NICK
(smiles; re: his Marlboros)
As of today.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT

The time: 2:04 a.m..

JOAN BAEZ
Take this ribbon from my hair. Pull it loose and let it fall.

The phone RINGS. Twice. Outside, a KEY jostles in the door.

Nick enters, cigarette in mouth, take-out bag in hand. Rushes to the phone. Too late: Record-A-Call beats him.

RECORD-A-CALL	JOAN BAEZ	NICK
(Nick's voice) This is Nick, leave a message.	"I don't want to be alone. Help me make it through..."	I'm here, just a sec.

Nick kills the stereo/the machine BEEPS.

NICK
Hi, how'd it go?

A pause. Then, amplified over the Record-A-Call:

BRYCE
Nick...

NICK
Bryce?

BRYCE
(distraught)
I got a problem.

Nick stops the Record-A-Call.

NICK
Yeah. No, no. I was expecting... Uh-huh. Can it wait? Cause it's after... Okay.

Nick hangs up. Pauses a moment to think. Then grabs a pen and scribbles a note and slaps it on the phone.

EXT. AN EMPTY HIGHWAY - NIGHT

A fire engulfs the roadside brush of a closed highway. FIREFIGHTERS combat the conflagration as a COP stops traffic for another TRUCK to arrive.

He holds up Nick's Challenger and a tan Jeep behind it.

NICK
How'd this happen?

COP
Who knows. In this drought, slightest thing'll kick one of these off.

RADIO D.J.
(in the Challenger)
...now let's continue through the wee hours with more classic American music and the Divine One...

The cop waves Nick on, and Nick shoots a wave back as Sarah Vaughn's "Ooh What-Cha Doin' To Me" kicks off his DRIVE THROUGH TROPICO.

Tropico: a city built over old orange groves, smack dab in the middle of a sunbelt state: flat, bleached drab, and bone dry. Sister city of Riverside, California, Daytona, Florida, and a thousand other white trash mainstays.

Nick drives northbound: past a dimly-lit ghetto, past a middle-class suburbia, and into Upper Tropico: a neighborhood of manicured lawns and quaint street lamps.

EXT. UPPER TROPICO HOME - NIGHT

A mailbox reads "Beaumont." The Challenger breezes by/cuts up a meandering driveway.

INT. THE BEAUMONTS'

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

CLOSE ON AN ALARM PANEL. Bryce tries to disengage it -- pointlessly: it's already disengaged.

BRYCE
Shit.

Bryce opens the front door. Nick is there.

NICK
Good morning.

BRYCE
Hey.

Bryce lets Nick in and resets the alarm. He is a collection of strained nerves: his hair wild, his eyes bloodshot, his hands jittery.

NICK
Jesus, you look like I feel.

BRYCE
Well, I feel like it, too. Thanks.

NICK
Sure.

BRYCE
You want a beer. All I've got is domestic shit.

NICK
That'll be fine.

Bryce: to the kitchen. Nick saunters into a living room. Tasteful. Expensive. In slight disarray. Three things amiss...

ONE: a sofa's cushions are askew.
TWO: a coffee table stands off-center.
THREE: a skeleton key to a Victorian-era desk lies on the floor. Nick returns it to its top drawer keyhole.

BRYCE (O.S.)
I forgot: I also have Rolling Rock. Do you want that or the domestic?

NICK
Rolling Rock is domestic, Bryce.

BRYCE (O.S.)
Then, do you want that or the domestic shit?

NICK
If you're gonna put it that way.

Nick joins Bryce in the kitchen.

NICK
These people you're sitting for: they keep a lovely home.

Bryce hands Nick a beer but does not drink himself: he's still a little sauced. Nick swigs his bottle and waits for Bryce to speak. When Bryce doesn't...

NICK
You know, beer tastes great and all, but sometimes it makes me feel kinda funny...

BRYCE
...alright, alright...

NICK
...like I'm a schoolgirl on the first day of class.

BRYCE
I'll talk.

NICK
Talk.

BRYCE
If I tell you about this, it's gotta stay between us.

Nick waves the story on. Bryce pauses dramatically.

BRYCE
I got laid tonight.

NICK
(irritated, but stonewalling it)
How wonderful for you.

BRYCE
The girl we met at the bar.

NICK
Katie.

BRYCE
Kathy.

NICK
A.k.a. "the chiclet."

Bryce: eyes on the floor, squeezed shut in regret.

BRYCE
(edgily)
Yes, Nick, she was young. Yes, Nick, yes.

NICK
Wow, she didn't take the edge off much, did she?

BRYCE
This is not the reason I asked you over at two a.m.: bragging rights.

NICK
Hope's flame burns bright then.

BRYCE
After you left, she and I talked for a while. About some art book she was reading: the cave murals of Hopi Indians or, jesus, something peyote-oriented...

NICK
Broad strokes, Bryce.

Bryce nods, then surrenders to a temptation: he grabs another beer from the fridge for himself.

BRYCE
She bought me a couple rounds.

NICK
Generous girl.

BRYCE
She asked if I wanted to leave.

NICK
Generous and fast.

BRYCE
Thanks to you, I was sauced, so I invited her here. I drove back: yeah, dumb, in my condition, but fuck, huh. We came back here and had another drink, talked a little. Conversation was awkward.

NICK
You tell that wife-swapping story?

BRYCE
No.

NICK
Cause that's sure-fire stuff.

BRYCE
We started making out. She initiated out of nowhere. Did this funny thing while she was kissing me with her hand, squeezing my jaw...

NICK
(not caring to hear this)
Bryce.

BRYCE
Sorry. We make out. That escalates.

NICK
This is on the couch.

BRYCE
Shit, there aren't stains on it, are there?

NICK
Just looks like someone fooled around in there.

BRYCE
(breathing easier, but not much)
Um, so we're on the couch and next thing I know we're naked and then I...we...did it.

Nick: reserving his reaction. Bryce: studying that linoleum floor once more.

NICK
Hey: drop the remorseful bit, hot rod, you lost your virginity months ago.

Bryce looks up, genuinely upset. Nick sees it.

NICK
Go on.

BRYCE
After we...Afterward, she went to the bathroom. When she came out, she asked if I had any Vitamin C...

NICK
What?

Bryce shrugs: he doesn't know why either. He is close to tears.

BRYCE
...so I went upstairs to the kids' room and found some Flintstones, and when I came back down, she was dressed. She said she had called a cab and that she was going home. And that when she got there she was going to call the police and file rape charges against me.

Bryce wipes away an errant tear.

BRYCE (CONT'D)
She says I raped her, Nick.

NICK
Bryce...

BRYCE
Wait.

Bryce tries to compose himself. Without success.

NICK
Is there any credence to...

BRYCE
Wait, I'm getting to that.

Bryce takes a deep breath, holds it, then releases.

BRYCE
I'm sorry. We haven't seen each other for awhile, suddenly I lay this shit on you, I'm sorry.

NICK
It's okay.

BRYCE
Is there any credence to what she's saying? I don't think so.

NICK
You don't think...

BRYCE
Listen: she asked to come back. She initiated the make-out. She came on to me. There's no doubt as far as preliminary shit. It's just that: I was pretty drunk. And I can't remember fucking...
(whoops -- what he meant to say was:)
...and I can't fucking remember if she tried to stop things.

NICK
She says she did.

Bryce nods.

NICK
Are you just hazy on this, or did you black-out?

BRYCE
A mix. During the act, I was in and out.

NICK
Ha ha.

BRYCE
In and out of consciousness. You and your fucking seven-and-sevens.

NICK
You seem alright now.

BRYCE
Well, a chick accusing you of rape'll sober you up like that.

NICK
So either you went out of control, or she's a little whacked.

BRYCE
That's about the size of it.
(he drinks)
I swear to Christ, I'll never get that drunk again.

NICK
Jesus, Bryce. I don't know. That's a -- forgive the pun, but that's a bitch of a problem. Maybe, maybe she won't go through with it. If she is...

Nick flutters his hand: "unsteady."

NICK
Otherwise, I don't know what to tell you, Bryce. Sit tight. For christ's sake, don't tell anyone about it. Not now, not ever.

Bryce begins to sob uncontrollably.

NICK
What?

BRYCE
Oh fuck, Nick. I really fucked up.

NICK
Bryce...

BRYCE
Can you talk to her, Nick? Tell her it was just an accident. Oh fuck. I hate to lay this shit on you.

NICK
Bryce, c'mon on. Pull yourself together. The chick's gone, nothing you can do.

BRYCE
No...

NICK
C'mon, Bryce...

BRYCE
No. She's not gone.

Nick stares at Bryce. Bryce wipes away tears. Sniffles. Looks up.

BRYCE
She's downstairs.

INT. BASEMENT REC ROOM

Darkness. Silence.

Then: the sound of a DOOR UNLOCKED and OPENED. Then: CLICK -- lights turn on.

A pool table. A dusty pinball machine. An unstocked wet bar.

Bryce leads Nick downstairs/stops him halfway.

BRYCE
Nick. Nick, this is gonna look worse than it is. After she said what, what she said, what she was going to do, I...Nick.

Nick pushes past Bryce and continues downstairs urgently. When he reaches the stairs' bottom, he sees her.

THE GIRL sits on the carpeted floor, weeping slightly, handcuffed to the pool table. Her eyes meet his immediately, appealing to him: help.

The Girl's hands are cuffed behind her back and around a pool table leg. Her mouth, bleeding slightly, is gagged with a kitchen rag. Her shirt is spotted with blood. Her age is indeterminable.

Nick just stands there, surveying her, aghast. Bryce hovers behind him.

BRYCE
I swear to God, I didn't hit her, Nick. All I did was grab her and, and drag her. Coming downstairs, she fell and that's when she, she cut her lip. Other than that...

NICK
What do you think you're doing?

BRYCE
I...well, I need to...

NICK
(nearly losing his cool)
No. Rhetorically. What are you thinking you're doing?

Bryce begins to answer again, then remembers what "rhetorical" means.

NICK
How long has she been down here?

BRYCE
I'm not sure. My sense of time is all fucked-up tonight.

NICK
Guess.

BRYCE
I dragged her down. I tried to talk to her, I called you: half an hour.

NICK
You didn't touch her after that.

BRYCE
No. Nick, I swear: no.

NICK
Well, you're a girl scout.

Nick plucks up the cue ball from the table and, gripping it, breathes deeply, trying to think, trying to keep

calm. He can't. He hurls the ball at a wall.

BRYCE
Nick, c'mon. It's not my...

Nick shoots Bryce a silencing look.

BRYCE
(rescinding)
...place.

NICK
Goddammit, Bryce.

Nick keeps his glare trained on Bryce for a long moment, then he turns and crosses the room. He keeps his back to both people and stands thinking.

BRYCE
Nick...

NICK
Not yet.

A heavy silence. The Girl's eyes shift between Nick and Bryce.

BRYCE
Nick, I'm sorry. I lost control. When she said she was going to call the cops, I, I tried to talk to her, just to, you know, find out what happened, but she kept going for the door. And I just lost it.

Nick turns to face both people. Bryce and The Girl just stare back, waiting for his first move.

And it's toward The Girl. Nick squats down, looks her over briefly, then ducks under the pool table to inspect her handcuffs.

NICK
Where'd these come from?

BRYCE
Upstairs. I found 'em in the parents' bedroom.

Bryce tries to smile: "kinky, huh?" But Nick won't acknowledge him. He notices a phone number written in ink on the girl's palm, then ducks back out.

NICK
You have the key?

BRYCE
Yeah. I, um, gagged her when the cab driver came. In case.

NICK
Give it to me.

BRYCE
The key? Why?

NICK
I'm going to take these off.

BRYCE
Uh-huh. And then what?

NICK
Then I'm going to drive her home.

BRYCE
Um, could we talk about it first...

NICK
The key, Bryce.

BRYCE
...cause I need to figure some things out. I know this looks bad and I screwed up, but I don't think I did before what she said I did, and I want to talk first.

NICK
What is there to talk about?

BRYCE
Well: what the hell's gonna happen to me if we let her go.

NICK
What's gonna happen to you if we don't?

BRYCE
The, this chick is gonna ruin my life, you know...

NICK
Bryce: key.

BRYCE
...she's just gonna fuck it all up.

NICK
Bryce.

BRYCE
No.

Nick sighs: his tolerance of drunk Bryce exhausted. He starts to untie The Girl's gag.

BRYCE
Don't do that: she's gonna...

Gag off: the girl is silent.

NICK
Sorry if that hurt. It's Kathy, right?
(The Girl nods)
You okay?
(she shakes her head)
I know. Things are a little crazy. This situation isn't very good, obviously. I'm gonna take you out of here in a minute. Drive you home. But first, I need to know: are you all right? I mean, are you injured at all?

The Girl, hyperventilating slightly, cannot answer.

NICK
Lis...listen: I want you to take a deep breath with me, okay? Ready? Inhale.
(they breath together)
Good, hold it. And exhale. Again: inhale. Exhale. You're a pro. Now: anything hurt?

THE GIRL
(quivering)
My lip...

NICK
I see that. It's nothing serious. Just a little cut. Question is: what about the rest of you? Anything hurt inside?
(She shakes her head)
Good. Now hold tight a minute, you're doing great. You thirsty?

She nods.

NICK
(indicating upstairs)
Bryce, could you grab her a glass of water?

BRYCE
(re: the wet bar)
There's a sink over there.

Nick sighs/rises/moves to the wet bar. He fills a glass with tap water as Bryce approaches.

NICK
Thanks for the help, champ.

BRYCE
I really think we should talk about this. There's more to it.

NICK
Stop speaking.

A threat. Bryce backs off.

Nick returns to The Girl. He feeds her the water, then wipes a little spill-off from her chin.

NICK
Sorry about that.

THE GIRL
Your friend. He didn't hit me.

NICK
No.

THE GIRL
And I don't care what he did before. I won't tell anyone. I just want to get out of here. If I could go home, everything would be fine. I...

She starts to cry.

NICK
(a hand on her shoulder)
Okay. You will. Very soon.

Nick rises and turns to Bryce.

NICK
Hey. Captain, my captain. C'mon.

Bryce comes hither. Nick smiles at The Girl.

NICK
We'll come back down in a sec.
Everything's gonna be fine.

Nick follows Bryce head upstairs, leaving The Girl alone, teary-eyed and trembling.

EXT. THE BACK YARD

Nick bursts out a screen door and roams onto a lush, green lawn. As he takes the night air, he fumbles a Marlboro from its pack. Bryce slips out behind him.

NICK
Well, Bryce: tonight, tonight you took the road less traveled by.

Nick lights his cigarette, but before he flings his spent match away, Bryce takes it from him: a fastidious housesitter.

NICK
You're gonna have to let the girl go, you know that.

BRYCE
I can't.

NICK
You're housesitting, Bryce: she can't stay here forever.

BRYCE
You don't believe her, do you? The second she gets home she's gonna call the cops.

NICK
Perhaps.

BRYCE
This rap is bullshit.

NICK
I know it is.

BRYCE
What?

NICK
I know you, Bryce. You don't remember forcing yourself on this girl?

BRYCE
No.

NICK
That's because you didn't.

BRYCE
I...?

NICK
You did not rape her.

BRYCE
No?

NICK
The girl is, she's not crazy. She's just very young.

BRYCE
I know.

NICK
And she's not lying maliciously, I think. She's just trying to protect herself. Listen: if you had raped her, some shred of memory would remain, wouldn't it? You'd remember.

BRYCE
Yes.

NICK
And you can't recall raping her. But you do remember making it with her.

BRYCE
Uh-huh.

NICK
Well, it seems pretty obvious to me.

BRYCE
But she says...

NICK
I'm telling you: you didn't. I think she's feeling a lot of guilt, trying to backpedal out of what happened.

Bryce tries to laugh.

BRYCE
I was that bad.

NICK
I don't know. Are you still...?
(he extends his pinky: small penis syndrome; Bryce laughs)
Maybe you were just quick on the draw. Hey, brevity is the soul of wit. She didn't expect such a clever lay.

BRYCE
Would you cut it...I've got a girl tied up in the basement, for Christ's sake.

Bryce continues to chuckle. Nick does not.

NICK
Bryce, in court, she would have the burden of proof. It would be your word against hers. As long as you did not waver, as long as you were faithful to your innocence, you'd have this beat. Lots of people saw you together. Me. People saw her leave with you.

BRYCE
The bartender saw her kiss me.

NICK
Plus, you have character witnesses. The likelihood is she would never bring it to court.

BRYCE
The chick is whacked, Nick.

NICK
Yes, and she'd have character witnesses, too.

BRYCE
Drunk too many times from the crazy well.

NICK
And all this shit: tying her up downstairs. Well, you just deny, deny, deny.

BRYCE
Okay.

NICK
Clean up and how is she gonna prove it. The thing is: we have to let her go now. Every second she stays here, your story loses credibility.

BRYCE
Okay, I just want to talk it through first...

NICK
It is the only possible course of action.

BRYCE
...cause there's more to this.

NICK
Bryce.

BRYCE
What?

NICK
Every second she stays, I become an accessory to this.

BRYCE
You...

NICK
And to kidnapping, Bryce.

BRYCE
Kidnapping? I thought you had to move someone, state lines...

NICK
"Prolonged confinement against one's will," the letter of the law. And now that she's seen me here, I can be implicated as easily as you.

This is news to Bryce; he plucks a leaf from a plant and nervously dissects it.

BRYCE
Man, I'm sorry.

NICK
Don't be: you didn't think. Hey, I came here as your friend. You called me for my support, and, like a jackass, I came over and threatened to hit you, and I'm sorry about that.

BRYCE
S'okay.

NICK
But if you don't let the girl go, I'm going to hit you, Bryce.

BRYCE
Nick.

NICK
Let's see the key.

BRYCE
I can't, Nick. There's more to this.

Nick prepares to strike. Bryce stands his ground, flinching, and Nick can't do it.

NICK
Shit. It's that glassy, blank-eyed stare of yours, Bryce. Feel like I'm beating up on deaf children.

BRYCE
I have to show you something. There's more.

NICK
What?

BRYCE
It's inside.

NICK
(sighs; the night is growing longer)
Show me.

INT. THE FIRST FLOOR

Bryce and Nick enter from the backyard and pass through the kitchen.

BRYCE
You want another?

NICK
Bryce...

They proceed to the living room. A grandfather clock CHIMES. Three-thirty.

Bryce retrieves a purse from the coffee table.

NICK
(re: one couch)
You guys fooled around here?

BRYCE
Yeah.

Nick chooses another couch to sit on.

BRYCE
I went through this while I was waiting for you. I know it's not proper etiquette, going through a chick's purse...

NICK
Neither is chaining her to your pool table.

BRYCE
Take a look.

Nick empties the purse's contents item-by-item: lipstick, car keys, a wad of cash, two driver's licenses, and an opened, empty condom wrapper.

NICK
(smiling, relieved)
Here's a wrinkle. This hers?

BRYCE
Not my brand.

NICK
Do you know where it is now?

Bryce shakes his head.

NICK
You remember wearing it?

Bryce shrugs. Nick snickers.

BRYCE
I said: hazy.

NICK
We should find the thing. A rape charge when the victim supplied a condom, it lacks a certain...

BRYCE
That's not what I want to show you.

Bryce selects a driver's license, hands it to Nick.

BRYCE
Look at that.

Nick does. Name: Katherine Lowell. Age: twenty-one. Picture: The Girl.

BRYCE
Now this one.

Nick takes the second license. Name: Jennifer Bigby. Age: sixteen. Picture: The Girl.

Nick realizes the situation. He sinks back in his seat a little, dispirited.

NICK
(knowing full well she's not)
She's schizophrenic?

BRYCE
She's sixteen, Nick. What twenty-one year old carries a fake i.d. saying she's sixteen? Look, look at the first license. Look at the state emblem. Look at her shadow. It stretches past the photograph.

Nick examines the license: Bryce is correct.

BRYCE
The girl downstairs is sixteen. Sixteen. It doesn't matter if she said no. It doesn't matter if she screamed yes and had a noter republic certify it. She's underage.

NICK
Notary...public.

BRYCE
It's statutory. Forget about the condom. If she presses charges, I'll go to jail.

Bryce rises/paces the room. Nick gazes blankly at the licenses.

BRYCE
Crazy jailbait chick. She's out to take a wrecking ball to my life.

NICK
I guess a second date is out of the question.

BRYCE
Fuckin' A.

NICK
Bryce: we're not in Vietnam.

BRYCE
Do you see? Do you see now? Do you see how fucked I am?

NICK
Statutory cases are...they're tough to prosecute.

BRYCE
No. No. There is no upside to this. There is no angle.

NICK
When a girl misrepresents herself...

BRYCE
The girl is sixteen. And I had sex with her. Boom: conviction. And this isn't just jail. This is my job, my career, my entire education. Shot to blistering fuck. Can you imagine what a statutory rape conviction looks like on the resume of a high-school English teacher? Can you?

NICK
(shrugs)
Start applying to Jesuit schools.

BRYCE
Oh, that's...mmm...

Nick tries to think, but he can't with Bryce lapping the room, muttering:

BRYCE
Vixen bitch.

NICK
Bryce, you're gonna wear tracks in these people's carpet. Sit down.

BRYCE
I only wanted to get laid, instead I got fucked.

NICK
Enough, Lord Irony.

BRYCE
Nick, I want to let the girl go. God, I'm rarin' to get her the hell out of here. But the only way I can do that is if she can guarantee that she won't tell anyone. And I don't know how she can do that.

NICK
You won't take her promise.

BRYCE
Yeah, this girl has shown herself to be a, a pillar of truthfulness. Hell, you said yourself: it's not all there.

NICK
Hmmm...

BRYCE
I can't bribe her: I've nothing to offer. Past that, my thinking fails me.

They think.

NICK
You could marry her. But will she accept your Catholicism?

Bryce glares briefly at Nick: no time for jokes.

BRYCE
I don't think I could threaten her.

NICK
I could.

BRYCE
What?

Bryce stops pacing/stares.

BRYCE
You mean...

NICK
I'm not gonna beat her up, Bryce. She's already got that lip. She goes home any worse, her parents are gonna ask questions.

BRYCE
So...just threats.

NICK
I already played the good cop down there. If I went down and pulled a reversal, it might scare the shit out of her.

BRYCE
Would you?

NICK
I either do that or go home.

Nick picks up a TV Guide, leafs through it.

NICK
No, there's nothin' on.

BRYCE
Jeez, Nick, I, I don't know what to say. Thank you.

Nick rises/moves to the kitchen. He grabs two beers from the fridge and hands one to Bryce.

NICK
Here. I prefer you drunk to maudlin.

Nick cracks his beer, gulps some, then hands it, too, to Bryce.

NICK
That...is shit.

BRYCE
Told you.

Nick heads for the basement door. Bryce follows again, but Nick stops him.

NICK
It'd be better if you stayed up here.

BRYCE
Oh.

NICK
You got no game face tonight. Listen: find the rubber. It'd help me persuade her she's got no case.

BRYCE
I'll look for it.

NICK
And Bryce...

BRYCE
Yeah.

NICK
Next time you ball a girl and she accuses you of rape and you lock her in your basement: blindfold her before you invite me over, huh.

BRYCE
I'm sorry. Thanks, Nick.

NICK
Yeah.

Nick opens the door to the basement and starts down.

INT. BASEMENT

The Girl sits alone. Nick descends the stairs slowly, stops at their bottom, and listens: Bryce is moving furniture upstairs.

Nick turns to The Girl.

NICK
We're fucked.

THE GIRL
You're telling me.

FADE OUT AND IN:

EXT. TROPICO - DAY

It's winter now in Tropico, which is indistinguishable from summer in Tropico except that a billboard (for the TROPICO RECYCLING COMPANY: "What the world refuses, Tropico uses") declares it's a chilly sixty-two degrees.

EXT. TROPICO RECYCLING PLANT

SEVERAL ANGLES OF TRASH. Piles and piles of it. Aluminum, metal, plastic, glass, all being sorted, cleaned, crushed, compacted, and/or processed by several semi-legal WORKERS. A SPANISH RADIO STATION plays.

Inside the Manager's Office, another radio plays: Nellie "Jukebox 'Lil" Lutcher, not Selena, singing here. The music floats outside the office where...

...Nick stands. Catching the afternoon sun. He cracks an eye to check a clock.

NICK
C'mon, Barry, put a move on.

The sound of an approaching SUPERMARKET CART snaps Nick out of his tan; it's A VAGRANT pushing his spoils to market.

VAGRANT
Hiya, Nick. Brought cans today.

NICK
So I see. Looks a little low for you, Cal.

VAGRANT
February's a bitch all-round. Wait 'til Saint Patty's, then things'll pick up.

Together they unload and count the cans.

NICK
Saw you on the town last weekend. You got your eyesight back.

The Vagrant furrows his brow, befuddled, then remembers.

VAGRANT
Oh, you mean the...
(he imitates a blindman begging)
Helps pick up revenue.

NICK
Whatever gets you by.

VAGRANT
Whatever gets me drunk.

A BUS stops past the plant's entrance. BARRY, Nick's assistant manager, leaps out and jogs into the parking lot. Nick immediately starts for his Challenger.

BARRY
Sorry, Nick. I got hung up...

NICK
Of all days, Bare.

Nick tosses Barry the plant's key.

NICK
The VIP rate for Cal. And lock up this time, huh? See ya, Cal.

VAGRANT
(to Barry)
"Of all days?"

Barry whispers something to the Vagrant.

VAGRANT
(calling after him)
My condolences, Nick.

Nick speeds off.

EXT. NICK'S FATHER'S HOME - DAY

The Challenger slams to a stop in the driveway. Nick bolts inside.

INT. NICK'S FATHER'S HOME

In his bedroom, Nick dons a suit, then ransacks his closet for a belt -- fruitlessly.

NICK
Hey, Dad, you got a...

Nick remembers/snickers.

EXT. NICK'S FATHER'S HOME

Nick, half-dressed, climbs back into his Challenger, keys it, reverses, and -- THUNK -- runs something over.

NICK
Shit.

A CAT writhes/MOANS on the driveway by Nick's tire.

NICK
Shit.
(calling next door)
Mr. Leland! Mr. Leland, you home?!

No answer.

NICK
Shit!

INT. NICK'S MOVING CHALLENGER

He checks his car's clock: bad news. Checks the cat in his passenger seat: worse.

EXT. A SMALL ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Nick's Challenger jumps a curb/SCREECHES to a halt. Next to a white Volkswagen Rabbit.

INT. ANIMAL HOSPITAL

At the admitting desk sits THE GIRL FROM THE BEAUMONTS' BASEMENT. She is killingly nubile.

Nick enters, cat in hand.

NICK
I think I might be too late.

THE GIRL
Doctor Ciolli!

A VETERINARIAN appears/inspects the cat.

NICK
I backed into it.

THE VET
How long ago?

NICK
Five minutes.

THE VET
Doesn't look good. Is it yours?

NICK
My neighbor's.

THE VET
He home?
(Nick shakes his head)
I should have the owner's permission on this sort of thing, but this cat's in a lot of pain. We okay if I say she was dead on arrival?

NICK
Yeah.

THE VET
I'm gonna put her down.

The Vet whisks the cat away.

THE GIRL
The, um, the shot is ten dollars. If that's okay.

NICK
Sure. Least I could do.

He gives her a twenty. She makes change.

THE GIRL
Ten back.

NICK
Cheap absolution.

A pause. Nick is impatient to leave.

NICK
I'm sorry: I'm late for something.

THE GIRL
Go ahead. I can get her info from her collar.

NICK
Thanks.

Nick exits.

EXT. ANIMAL HOSPITAL

The Challenger has a flat. Nick slaps its roof three times.

NICK
Shit, piss, cocksucker!

INT. MOVING WHITE VOLKSWAGEN RABBIT - MOMENTS LATER

The Girl drives. Nick, her passenger, ties his tie.

NICK
My name's Nick, by the way.

THE GIRL
Mine's Myrtle.

A pause.

NICK
Myrtle, really?

THE GIRL
No. It's Lissa. I was trying to lower expectations.

NICK
Two s's.

LISSA
Short for Melissa. Learning to talk, I pronounced it "Me-lissa," as in "me Tarzan." So the story goes.

A pause.

NICK
Left here.

EXT. CEMETERY

The Volkswagen wanders past hills of tombstones. It stops, and Nick gets out. He heads up a slight slope to a PRIEST who greets him.

EXT. A GRAVESIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

A funeral. An urn and a hole in the ground. Nick and the Priest the only attendants.

Nick sneaks a glance behind him: Lissa stands twenty yards back, watching. He smiles/beckons her over. Lissa, in her jeans and scrub shirt, comes to his side.

Side-by-side, they watch the Priest bless the urn a final time and bury it.

EXT. TROPICO DINER - DUSK

The Volkswagen is parked outside.

INT. TROPICO DINER

Nick and Lissa eat dinner in a booth.

LISSA
High school. Took the equivalency exam after sophomore year. Off to be an actress.

NICK
(skeptically)
Actress.

LISSA
What: "actress"?

NICK
Can never be sure they're giving you the straight stuff.

LISSA
You can't be sure anyway. First camera I got in front of, this imposing machinery right in my face, and I froze. Theater's no good: my voice barely passes the second row. So it's back to home and school, and the local vet to make a buck.

NICK
Back to school where: TCC?

LISSA
Mmm-hmm. Our blessed community college. Studying art.

NICK
My dad taught there.

LISSA
(an awkward pause)
Oh.

NICK
This was before they put him in the urn.

LISSA
What'd he teach?

NICK
History. The study of things past.

LISSA
He enjoy it?

NICK
Well, occupationally, yes. Personally, it paralyzed him.

LISSA
How do you mean?

Nick cringes a bit, then starts in.

NICK
Dad died a victim of a manic nostalgic paralysis. He spent the last few years of his life almost entirely in an armchair in our living room. I'd come home to find him in it, his head tilted back slightly, eyes drifting over a patch of blank white wall, sitting in silence. Lost in reverie: recalling those resplendent days when love, enterprise, vitality all seemed certainties, those days before his wife tired of a life in retreat and left him, before the pointlessness of his work, and his living, emasculated him completely, before the burden of his own failed history became unbearable. The heart attack which ended Dad's life did just that: it ended it. But it was his past which killed him.

LISSA
How much of that was memorized?

NICK
'Bout seventy percent. I spent the last coupla days trying to drum up a eulogy, that's as far as I got. I figured silence was more respectful.

LISSA
You figured right.

NICK
One piece of advice Dad gave me before he died, I think he realized during those armchair hours. It was just after his first coronary, he called me to side, half-delirious with painkillers, and said to me in this weak, medicated rasp, "Cut ties, kid. From the past, from history. Cut those mothers, or they'll never stop tripping you up."

The check comes.

NICK
Thanks. So: next week I will plunder my father's belongings for its few items of value, and I will scrap the rest. I will collect my inheritance and the life insurance Dad left me, and I will deposit it in an appropriate bank account. I will put his home of fifteen years up for sale and, once sold, I will deposit those monies into the same account. And then, after all that is accomplished, I will promptly get the fuck out of town.

LISSA
Just that easy.

NICK
No.

Nick drops some cash. They both rise. There is an obvious attraction between them.

NICK
It's been nice meeting you, Lissa. I'm sorry we didn't until now.

LISSA
Yeah. Thanks for the wake.

INT. LAW OFFICE - DAY

Nick and his LAWYER.

LAWYER
Okay: I have bad news. For legal reasons St. Vincent's Memorial conducted an autopsy on your father, chiefly to clear themselves of any negligence or malpractice charges you might bring, which they did: their prescribed medication had no correlation to his second coronary. However, they did discover that his liver was near failing, a fact which it turns out your father had known about -- it having been diagnosed ten years ago in writing by his GP then, Dr. Rothstein -- but had failed to list on his life insurance application, which constitutes "deliberate misrepresentation" and therefore invalidates the policy. So you're not getting the life insurance money.

NICK
Even though it had nothing to do with his death.

LAWYER
That's right. Next: I've contacted each of your father's creditors and informed them of the seventy-percent compensation schedule until the sale of the house...

NICK
Wait. What creditors?

LAWYER
American Express: $14,770. Visa: $11,240. St. Vincent's: $91,720...

NICK
A couple hundred thousand. The estate constitutes more than that.

LAWYER
Twenty years ago it did. After house payments, alimony, private school tuition for seventeen years, all on your father's earnings as an

(continued)

LAWYER (CONT'D)
associate professor, the estate is more or less, well, no: it is more than exhausted. The only way your father's debts can be cleared is by the sale of your home, and with property values so low it will barely do that. I asked him to sell years ago when the market was peaking, but he insisted on maintaining it, I think listing your habitation as the primary reason.

Nick smirks at the cut.

NICK
How much will be left over?

LAWYER
Depends on the sale of the house.

NICK
How much do I get?

LAWYER
(calculating)
If it goes for asking price, after taxes...nothing.

INT. RECYCLING PLANT -- MANAGER'S OFFICE - DAY

Nick sits down for his shift. Numb in the realization that he is poor and, consequently, not going anywhere. At least, no time soon.

Barry throws darts behind him.

BARRY
Everything go okay with your lawyer? You get the money?

NICK
Fine, yeah.

BARRY
You gonna give your notice?

NICK
Not for a while. Thought I'd kick around here a little longer.

Nick gazes out his office window. He fixates on a TRC sign and its symbol for recycling: an arrow turning

perpetually in a circle.

INT. NICK'S FATHER'S HOME - DAY

Nick loads his father's paraphernalia into dozens of boxes. Occasionally he sets aside an old, leatherbound book.

EXT. RECYCLING PLANT - DAY

Nick tosses the boxes one-by-one into a large incinerator.

EXT. "CHARLIE'S COLLECTIBLES UNLIMITED" STORE - DAY

Nick carries in a pile of leatherbound books. He emerges shortly with a handful of cash.

INT. NICK'S FATHER'S HOME - DAY

Loading more boxes. Nick leafs through a handwritten manuscript, "The American Empire Dismantled."

In his open doorway, Lissa appears.

NICK
"A requisite trait of any sovereignty with imperial ambitions is a moral temperament for exploitation, a stomach for abusing not only the underclasses but the self, and America (and I) have lost it."

Nick tosses the manuscript in the trash pile.

LISSA
Your dad's?

NICK
Mmm-hmmm.

LISSA
You inherited his vocabulary.

NICK
That's about all.

LISSA
Moving?

Nick smiles.

LISSA
I know. Whatever gave me that impression. I mean, out of town.

NICK
No.

Lissa smiles. She starts loading boxes, too.

NICK
No cats dying today?

LISSA
Not with you inside.

EXT. NICK'S FATHER'S HOME - DAY

Nick and Lissa maneuver a queen-sized mattress across his front lawn to a rented moving truck.

From next door, MR. LELAND, a fay, older man, hurries to rescue his new kitten from being trampled by the movers. Puss in hand, he scowls at Nick.

Nick and Lissa burst into laughter helplessly, and the bed topples from their hands...

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

...and lands on the floor of Nick's new, unfurnished digs, Nick and Lissa landing on top of it, and top of each other, not laughing now but tearing each other's clothes off.

During the kissing, panting, and stripping:

NICK
Wait a minute. How old are you anyway?

LISSA
Old enough. And that's the one question you should never ask a woman.

NICK
How much do you weigh then?

LISSA
The one question you should never ask a woman you're about to nail.

She flips Nick over, stradles him, inserts him, and rides him. As they make love...

LISSA
Cradle robber.

NICK
Hippo.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nick and Lissa lie in bed, post-coitus. The room is now fully furnished. They've been moving/screwing all day.

LISSA
When I was sixteen, I made the discovery. Love. All at once and much, much too completely. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably. Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty -- which wasn't empty, but had two people in it. The boy I loved and an older man who had been his friend for years...

Lissa bows her head, emotional. Nick can't hide his uneasiness: what kind of girl did he just bed?

NICK
Go on.

LISSA
I can't.

A pause. Nick realizes something/turns instantly crimson.

NICK
That was a monologue.

Lissa nods. She can barely contain her laughter.

LISSA
Blanche du Bois. My old audition piece.
(letting her laughter slip)
The look on your face.

NICK
Let me tell you something, sister: that sob story may score points with the crowd you hang out with, but this kid's a little too quick...

LISSA
"Into a room I thought was empty -- which wasn't empty, but had two people in it."

She wipes away tears, mocks his expression.

LISSA
I'm sorry.

NICK
No you're not.

LISSA
No.

She takes a deep breath, tries to stop laughing, but can't. She erupts again.

NICK
So: you split up with the guy, right?

Nodding, her laughter quells, and she begins to kiss Nick again, using the jaw-squeezing method Bryce described. As she mounts him once again...

FADE OUT AND IN:

EXT. RECYCLING PLANT - DAY

A CAMERA'S POV: Nick and Lissa face us. (Months have passed, evidenced in Lissa's new haircut.)

NICK AND LISSA
Tropico and recycling: together, we're on the move!

A VOICE (O.S.)
Once more, please. With conviction this time.

NICK AND LISSA
Tropico and recycling: together, we're on the move!!

A VOICE (O.S.)
Good, cut.

A VIDEO CREW tapes Nick and Lissa. The plant's unctuous OWNER (the Voice) oversees the production.

OWNER
Okay, let's move onto the guys. Oscar, Miguel, bring the lift over here, please.
(to Nick and Lissa)
Thanks, you two.

Nick and Lissa smile and wave back. They hate him.

LISSA
Oh, he's dreamy.

NICK
Hmmm. It's not so much that I dislike him than that I loathe him.

LISSA
But loathing in warm sense.

NICK
Of course.

They kiss.

LISSA
I have to go. Ask him for money. A non-union shoot like this should cough up at least five hundred bucks.

NICK
I will.

She whispers something briefly in his ear.

NICK
Me only recycling plant manager: what means this word "love?"

Lissa whispers something else briefly in his ear.

LISSA
You know what that word means?

NICK
(much too loud)
Cunnilingus? Sure, I use it all the time.

She slaps him playfully across the chest, kisses him once more and departs.

Watching her go, Nick notices: Barry greets a shady FRIEND and invites him into the manager's office.

Meanwhile, the production continues.

OWNER
Renaldo, keep your eyes either on the cans or ahead of you. Remember: you're building America's future.

RENALDO
Dios mio.

THE VIDEO CAMERA'S POV - LATER

Nick and the Owner confer, smiling, and they gesture toward the plant as if they're speaking of it.

OWNER
I'm sorry, Nick. Once the ad runs, when revenue picks up, then let's talk. Right now, though...

NICK
I'm not asking for a loan, Mitch. It's money owed for services rendered.

OWNER
It's not possible now, Nick. All my cash is committed to this crew at the moment.

NICK
(pissed; spots something)
That's a new tie pin you got there. Gift?

OWNER
(laughs, slaps Nick jovially on the back; to the crew)
You got enough?

CAMERAMAN
Yep.

OWNER
Okay. Next set up.

The Owner steps out of frame, leaving Nick scowling.

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE - LATER

Barry and his Friend argue in hushed tones. Rookie thieves conspiring.

FRIEND
I don't care how long you've known him...

Nick enters. They stop abruptly.

NICK
Hey.

BARRY
Nick, you know...

FRIEND
Would you shut up. You tell him my name, you're out, too.

NICK
Out of what?

Silence. The cat's outta the bag.

FRIEND
Shit.

Barry looks to his Friend, pleading, and the Friend concedes.

BARRY
Nick, we got this thing. You doing anything tonight?

The Vagrant appears at the door. Barry shuts up fast.

NICK
Cal, how'd Independence Day treat you?

VAGRANT
Christmas in July, Nicky.

Nick steps outside to serve him but turns back to Barry's Friend, signals him to wait.

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE -- SUPPLY CLOSET - LATER

Nick has joined the other two in privacy.

BARRY
Okay, the thing is: my friend here works for a pretty big guy in town...

NICK
(to The Friend)
Why don't you want me to know your name?

FRIEND
You get busted, how you gonna identify me: "He was black and, uh, his hair was kinda curly." Describes every guy my boss employs.

BARRY
His guy, Nick, is under serious investigation right now. He thinks he's gonna get busted anytime, so every day he moves his stash from one house to another, so the cops can't get a search warrant in time to snatch it. Tonight his stash is in Jimmy's house.

Another cat outta the bag. The Friend (JIMMY) stares at Barry with his jaw open..

JIMMY
You got pond water for brains, you know that?

BARRY
I'm sorry.

JIMMY
I got a sofa at home smarter 'n you.

BARRY
(shrugging)
I like saying people's names.

Jimmy shakes his head, turns again to Nick.

JIMMY
It's a real easy job.

EXT. COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAMPUS - DAY

Nick peruses a newspaper's sports section atop his Challenger.

JIMMY (V.O.)
Barry breaks into my joint when I'm pulling watchdog duty alone. I show him where everything's stashed. He takes it, knocks me out to make it look good. We wait a few weeks, then I got a friend outta town who'll move it for us.

Nick wanders past academic buildings, en route to the Arts Building.

NICK (V.O.)
You're willing to take that lump?

JIMMY (V.O.)
For half of thirty grand, sure.

BARRY (V.O.)
It's a two-man job, Nick, except for: we need a look-out man, one who'll double as a driver. Jimmy's first choice got the runs real bad this morning, he can't make it. So I recommended you.

INT. ART CLASSROOM

STUDENTS, including Lissa, paint at easels. Nick studies Lissa's abstract work-in-progress.

NICK
Barry just landed two tickets to the game tonight. I'm gonna go.

LISSA
Uh-huh.

NICK
Feel free to come over, though, I'll be home around eleven.

LISSA
Great.

Nick: not a very good liar. Lissa smiles hesitantly.

EXT. CLASSROOM

Nick exits, pissed. He knows he didn't sell it.

JIMMY (V.O.)
The offer to you is a fourth of whatever we take. Your job's too easy, too safe for any more than that.

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE -- SUPPLY CLOSET

Jimmy and Barry conclude their pitch.

JIMMY
It's one night's work and nearly risk-free.

Nick thinks.

BARRY
C'mon, Nick. The only way we can fuck up is you forget to put gas in the car.

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

Nick fills his tank.

EXT. A LOWER-CLASS STREET/INT. CHALLENGER - NIGHT

The Challenger is parked in a shadow, close to a house, "365," and Nick and Barry sit within: Nick nervous, Barry, as always, eating peanuts.

NICK
You gotta do that now?

BARRY
Nervous habit.

Barry opens his door to throw his shells out and the car's interior light flashes on. Just as an Oldsmobile pulls out 365's driveway.

NICK
Shit. There they go. Close the door.

Barry does, plunging them into shadow again. The Oldsmobile backs out and drives off.

BARRY
Game time.

Barry shoots out the car and up the driveway. Nick sits alone: alert to every shadow, every owl hoot.

TWO DOGS scrap in a neighboring yard.

A CAR creeps down the street. Nick monitors it in his driver's side mirror.

A WOMAN'S LAUGHTER echoes from a nearby house.

THE CAR pauses right next to the Challenger. Nick sneaks a glance from the corner of his eye.

An OLD DRUNK MAN gets out of the car and strolls boozily into his house across the street. The car pushes on.

Barry hustles back to the Challenger.

BARRY
Christ, that was easy.

NICK
That's it. You got it?

BARRY
(tapping his jacket)
Right here. You wanna drive a little?

The Challenger takes off.

INT. THE MOVING CHALLENGER

BARRY
Jimmy's gonna have an Advil binge tomorrow.

Barry begins to laugh; Nick joins in.

NICK
You're not too bright, are ya, Bare?

BARRY
Nope.

Barry pulls out the spoils of the evening: a zip-lock bag full of white powder.

BARRY
Look at this. Gotta be forty thousand dollars worth.

Barry tries some.

BARRY
You wanna?

NICK
My heart's beating fast enough, thanks.

INT. NICK'S APARTMENT STAIRWELL

Nick walks up his apartment stairwell, pleased with himself. He starts taking steps two at a time, laughing.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nick enters, flushed. Lissa sits on his bed; she is not happy.

NICK
Hi.

LISSA
Hi.

A pause. Tension.

LISSA
It's strange. For a guy who wants to forsake the past, you don't own a single note of music post-1952.

Another pause. More tension.

LISSA
I bought you something.

She points to Nick's chest of drawers. A compact disc lies there: "Joan Baez Greatest Hits."

LISSA
So people'll stop laughing at your music collection.

NICK
"I've looked at clouds from all sides now?"

LISSA
That's Judy Collins.

NICK
What's the difference?

LISSA
Baez is more political. And I think she had a lesbian phase.

NICK
Thanks. This'll stop the jeers.

A pause. The tension has not diffused.

LISSA
How was the game?

NICK
Fine.

Lissa nods; she'll pursue it no further.

NICK
You wanna know what the score was. I specifically listened to a sports radio show so I could lie factually.

LISSA
You don't have to tell me where you've been.

NICK
I will if you ask.

Their eyes lock. She does not ask.

NICK
I'm thinking about moving.

LISSA
Where?

NICK
I don't know yet. You wanna come?

LISSA
(playing it cool; obviously thrilled)
Matters where.

NICK
Peru. Malta. Portland, Oregon.

LISSA
Rains a lot in Portland.

NICK
Great, pissing sheets.

LISSA
We'd have to wear rubbers.

NICK
Shoes.

LISSA
Mmm-hmm.

NICK
I don't think I own any.

LISSA
Mmm, we'll do without then.

Nick approaches/kisses her. She hold him away briefly.

LISSA
Nick, I am a failed actress. I am a part-time art student with no sense of color or structure and, by profession, I am a baby-sitter of poodles. Except for you, my life right now offers nothing which I desire or cherish. So anything you do to change that, whether I know about it or not, whether it's strictly legal or not, is fine by me. I just want you to promise me one thing.

NICK
At this moment: it's unlikely.

LISSA
You won't lie to me a second time. Promise me that.

NICK
I promise you that.

He smiles, and she does, too.

LISSA
Once more. With conviction.

NICK
Lissa...together, we're on the move.

INT. RECYCLING PLANT -- MANAGER'S OFFICE - DAY

Nick is on the phone.

NICK
Bare, this is Nick at two-fifteen p.m.. Fifteen minutes after you were supposed to be here. Reminding you the future state of our finances does not excuse us from our efforts here at the TRC. Hope you're on your way.

Nick hangs up. A YOUNG TOUGH stands at his door.

NICK
Can I help you?

YOUNG TOUGH
(nods)
Get in that car.

Behind the Young Tough: a waiting tint-windowed Oldsmobile. Nick deliberates a second-and-a-half, decides it's healthier to follow the instruction.

INT. THE OLDSMOBILE

Nick climbs into the backseat. A BAD ASS DUDE, early 20's, sips a boxed fruit drink inside.

BAD ASS DUDE
(the "deep baritone voice")
How do you do. We haven't met. You you know who I am?

NICK
I got a couple guesses.

BAD ASS DUDE
I'm the guy you stole forty-thousand dollars from last night. Were your suspicions correct?

Nick nods. The Bad Ass Dude signals the Young Tough to drive.

EXT. THE OLDSMOBILE

It SCREECHES away from the plant.

INT. THE OLDSMOBILE

NICK
I thought you'd be an older guy.

BAD ASS DUDE
(nods)
My profession does not promote career longevity. It's a young people's industry.

A pause. Nick thinks to speak again.

BAD ASS DUDE
It don't matter how I found out, I found out. It don't matter how sorry you feel, you're gonna feel sorrier. It don't matter how you plan to correct it, that plan is obsolete.

NICK
You got another one of those?

BAD ASS DUDE
Freddy, what we got left up there?

YOUNG TOUGH
(checking a cooler)
We got grapefruit and a mango.

BAD ASS DUDE
(laughs; to Nick)
This just ain't your day.

Nick signals to the Tough: he'll pass. They ride in silence.

BAD ASS DUDE
Freddy, take that thing off your head.

The Young Tough takes a bandanna from his head, hands it to The Bad Ass Dude who hands it to Nick.

BAD ASS DUDE
Blindfold yourself.

NICK
Why?

BAD ASS DUDE
Cause I don't know you. And I don't know who you know.

As Nick dons the blindfold...

BLACKOUT.

A MEDLEY OF SOUNDS: DRIVING, CAR DOORS OPENING AND CLOSING, A SCREEN DOOR, ANOTHER INTERIOR DOOR, THEN A MAN'S TORTURED, MUFFLED SCREAMS AND GROANS.

The blindfold comes off...

INT. A DARK, WINDOWLESS ROOM

CLOSE ON NICK. He squints under a bright light. Someone MOANS in the background.

NICK'S POV: The Bad Ass Dude stands before him, holding a mobile flood light in his eyes, the only light in the room.

BAD ASS DUDE
You ever read Adam Smith's "An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations?"

Nick hasn't.

BAD ASS DUDE
In it, he addresses the two simple "laws of the market." First Law: Self-Interest. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner but from their self-interest." I don't sell junk because I feel a civic duty. I do it out of...?

The Bad Ass Dude looks to Nick for a reply.

NICK
Self-interest.

BAD ASS DUDE
Second Law: Competition. "Only under the check of competition is a man's self-interest regulated from ruthlessness." I don't charge a c-note a pop because I know some other dude's gonna underprice me. I don't overcharge because what suppresses me...?

NICK
Competition.

BAD ASS DUDE
"Consequently, man's motivations of...

NICK
Self-Interest.

BAD ASS DUDE
"...are transmuted by..."

NICK
Competition.

BAD ASS DUDE
"...to yield: Social Harmony." You, motherfucker, have fucked with the laws of the market. You have fucked with competition. You have deregulated the self-interest of some other dope-peddling fuck. You done fucked up harmony, and you must unfuck it. This is all simple economics.

The Bad Ass Dude's light leads Nick across the room...

...to Jimmy. He sits in a corner, tied to a chair, face bloodied, MOANING through a ducktaped mouth.

BAD ASS DUDE
Jimmy here has learned a lot about economics the last few hours. Keynesian theory, market trends, all that shit. We taught him the difference between laissez-faire, which is what I'm doin' right now, and about intervention, which is what I'm about to do.

Jimmy begins to buck and protest. The Bad Ass Dude pinches Jimmy's nostrils closed -- a double effect: it quiets him and he can't breathe.

BAD ASS DUDE
We tried to see your other associate: Barry? He was not at home. Neither was his most of his clothes. We surmised he would not be returning soon. So we came to see you.

NICK
What do you want -- financial reparation?

BAD ASS DUDE
(smiles; to the Young Thug)
Motherfucker likes big words.
(to Nick)
Hold that thought, though. You gotta see the show first.

Jimmy protests again. The Bad Ass Dude tugs his nose.

BAD ASS DUDE
Quiet. Freddy: coca-cola.

The Young Thug uncaps a bottle of coke, hands it to The Bad Ass Dude. Thumb over the top, he shakes the soda.

BAD ASS DUDE
Amazing what a little carbonation in the sinuses will do.

Holding the bottle under Jimmy's nose, The Bad Ass Dude releases his thumb/Jimmy's nose simultaneously. Carbonation launches up Jimmy's nose as he involuntarily inhales. The ducktape muffles his SCREAMS.

Nick witnesses all of this from behind.

YOUNG TOUGH
The pause that refreshes.

BAD ASS DUDE
Now. Let's deal.

NICK
I don't have your stash.

BAD ASS DUDE
Then I want "reparation": forty thousand dollars.

NICK
I don't have that either.

BAD ASS DUDE
I think you do: you just being coy. But I don't expect you to hump the whole take. What was your share?

NICK
A fourth.

BAD ASS DUDE
Ten thousand dollars. You pay me twenty. Then we're square. You don't have it by Sunday, you take the Pepsi Challenge.

The blindfold comes back on...

BLACKOUT.

THE SOUND OF CAR TIRES SCREECHING AWAY.

The blindfold comes off...

INT. CHALLENGER - NIGHT

Nick sits in the driver's seat, back in the plant's parking lot. The Oldsmobile speeds away in his rearview mirror.

As soon as it's out of sight, Nick keys/guns his engine.

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT

Nick bursts in, goes right to his phone/dials. Notices a new poster on his wall: Portland, Oregon.

NICK
What the hell...

Record-A-Call blinking, he punches it.

RECORD-A-CALL
(BEEP; Bryce's voice)
Hey, Nick the prick! This is Bryce, your old friend and sometimes concubine. Guess who just moved to Tropico...
(SCREECH, BEEP; Barry's voice)
Nick, Barry. Listen: Jimmy isn't answering his phone. I think things got fucked up. I'm takin' off for a while 'til I get hold of him.

Nick slams the phone down.

NICK
Call the office next time, you sonovabitch!

Lissa stands in his doorway; Nick startles.

LISSA
You like the poster?

NICK
Yeah.

A pause.

LISSA
Things got fucked up with Jimmy?

NICK
He's a friend of Barry's. A prospective assistant manager. We were supposed to...

LISSA
You promised.

NICK
I did. I'm in a doghouse.

EXT. ROOFTOP OF NICK'S BUILDING - NIGHT

Lissa oversees Tropico's flaccid skyline. Nick laps the rooftop's perimeter.

NICK
If this month's rent check cleared, my bank account holds a little over eighty dollars: that takes me maybe a thousand miles. Then I'm a vagrant.

LISSA
I've got two hundred.

NICK
(smiles at her -- "thanks")
Another thousand miles, a few days room and board. Then I'm a vagrant.

LISSA
Then we're vagrants.

NICK
Lissa, don't burden yourself with my fuck-ups...

LISSA
We were gonna leave town anyway. Maybe, maybe this is a blessing in disguise.

Nick stops and stares at her. Lissa concedes: dumb comment.

NICK
Some fucking disguise.

LISSA
Still, I'm coming with you. I've developed a tolerance to your fuck-ups, I can burden myself a little.
(Nick acquiesces)
Now: what about the twenty thousand?

NICK
What about it?

LISSA
You just don't pay it?

NICK
If I could, I wouldn't. All it does is buy rights to keep living here. And who wants to do that.

LISSA
You think they'll try and find you?

NICK
(shrugs)
But I stand a better chance financed and somewhere else than broke and here.

LISSA
How financed?

NICK
Preferably a couple thousand. I'd sell my car, but the pink slip's in my father's name: all the money would go to creditors.

LISSA
I don't think my parents'll underwrite my running away with you. At least, not that much.

NICK
Then I have five days to raise two thousand bucks. Or else we leave town broke. And you know what a champ I am at asking for money.

A SALSA TUNE transports us to...

INT. RECYCLING PLANT MANAGER'S OFFICE - DAY

Nick confronts the Owner. A Spanish radio station PLAYS outside.

OWNER
I told you, Nick: in a month or so, we'll talk about this.

NICK
It can't wait. I need an advance today or I'm through.

OWNER
Nick, I appreciate your taking Barry's shift. You'll get double-time for it. But that doesn't change my cash flow.

Nick takes out his key to the plant.

NICK
The next words out of your mouth are "yes, Nick" or you're locking up tonight.

OWNER
Nick, don't try and blackmail...

Nick flings him the key, grabs his dartboard, and exits.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT

Nick scrutinizes his address book. The phone RINGS. Nick lets it.

RECORD-A-CALL
(BEEP; Bryce's voice)
Hi, Nick, this is Bryce again. I don't mean to pester you, but I'm looking for a good auto mechanic in town, was wondering if you knew of any...

Struck by an idea, Nick nearly slaps himself it's so obvious. He snatches up the phone.

NICK
Bryce.

EXT. MIKE'S AUTO BODY SHOP - DAY

Bryce sits on the hood of his red Honda Civic. Nick's Challenger arrives, and Nick strides up to Bryce, hand outstretched. Bryce hugs him.

INT. THE CHALLENGER - MOVING

Nick and Bryce.

BRYCE
Gear shift. Keeps crapping out on me.

NICK
When'd Mike say he'd have it ready?

BRYCE
Tomorrow morning at eleven.
(scans the car, smiles)
You got a Challenger. Cool. Sure, it's a little different seeing a white person driving one of these, but hey -- good for you.

NICK
(laughs)
I can give you a ride back down if you like.

BRYCE
Thanks, I can walk. Summer vacation, got time on my hands. Life of a teacher.

INT. THE BEAUMONTS' HOUSE

Bryce opens the front door and hurries to the alarm panel, which is BEEPING.

BRYCE
Freshman English to start: "Lord of the Flies," "Catcher in the Rye," "The Great Gatsby."

NICK
(entering; surveying the decor)
"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Bryce doesn't understand.

NICK
The last line of Gatsby.

BRYCE
Oh, we don't actually read the books we teach. The school gives us Cliff Notes at the beginning of the semester, we just say whatever's in those.

Bryce disarms the alarm, then closes the front door behind Nick and rearms it.

NICK
Tad excessive.

BRYCE
The guy I'm housesitting for: a tad retentive.

NICK
(spots an oil painting: a copy of Manet's "The Fifer")
That him?

BRYCE
Mr. Beaumont would never wear that hat.

Bryce leads Nick down a hallway to a lavish den.

BRYCE
He's a friend of my mother's. An oil lawyer. In legal circles he's known as "The Indiscriminate Lay" -- he'll fuck anybody. Can you imagine: being branded unscrupulous by other lawyers. That's low. He moved his whole family to Alaska for the year.

NICK
Alaska?

BRYCE
He's negotiating some Eskimos out of their tundra.

NICK
He sounds like a peach.

BRYCE
Yes, Mr. B's an ingrain turd, but he has his upside. Observe: the perks.

Bryce opens two cabinets -- a complete audio/video center and a complete wet bar. Nick spots a family portrait.

NICK
Smiling bastard on the outside, smiling bastard on the inside.

BRYCE
Observe: the corridor of wonder.

Bryce opens a doorway to a carpeted bathroom and sauna.

NICK
The man likes carpet.

BRYCE
Even on the toilet seat. For those prolonged stays of leisure. Observe: the cabinet of whimsy.

Bryce opens a cabinet filled with men's magazines.

BRYCE
Hey: speaking of masturbating fathers, how's yours?

NICK
Fine. Actually, no. He's dead.

BRYCE
Jesus.

NICK
Five months ago. Funny, I still respond automatically.

BRYCE
I'm sorry. My mom talked to yours not long ago, to ask if you still lived here. She didn't mention anything. I guess you still don't...

NICK
No.

Bryce wants to change the subject bad. He snaps his fingers.

BRYCE
Hey: I've got something to show you. This'll knock your socks off.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM

Bryce opens the top drawer of the Victorian desk, withdraws a plastic cover enclosing an aged piece of currency with a handwritten note on its backside.

BRYCE
It's a stay of execution. For a Union deserter during the battle of Vicksburg. Mr. Beaumont's great-great somebody-or-other. Check out the sig.

Nick does. "A. Lincoln."

NICK
Honest Abe. Didn't he ever get tired of emancipating people.

BRYCE
Supposedly the stay was last minute, that was the only paper around. Anyway, I remembered you were a history buff.

NICK
It's fascinating. Glad I wore extra socks.

Bryce returns the plastic cover to the top drawer and locks it. The Grandfather clock CHIMES.

BRYCE
Two o'clock. There's a fern nearby that needs me.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Bryce waters potted plants.

NICK
You paying them anything to live here?

BRYCE
Just utilities. Rent is free on three conditions: feed the plants, keep the place clean, and don't let anyone in. I'm making an exception for you.

NICK
You rebel. This has gotta save you a bundle.

BRYCE
Yes and no. Teacher's starting salary is a pittance: I'm saving it, but it's not a bundle.

NICK
Your folks still have money, though.

BRYCE
Their own mint. The last few years, however, my father has developed this financial tough-love philosophy toward his children, kind of a benign neglect without the benign part.

NICK
He cut you off?

BRYCE
As far as he knows. Mom still sneaks me a few hundred each month, but you know moms.

Wince City: Bryce has put his foot in his mouth again.

Nick lets it slide, though; his last chance for financial salvation has turned out to be a bust and that hurts far more than Bryce's faux-pas.

Bryce turns on a sprinkler system; the palatial lawns are watered.

BRYCE
This life of penury is killing me.

INT. MOVING CHALLENGER - DAY

Nick drives, brow knit. Pissed.

NICK
(slamming his steering wheel)
Fuck!

He stops at an intersection (which in two nights will be cluttered with firetrucks). A sign reads "Citrus Highway East, Left Lane."

The light turns green. A last minute decision: Nick cuts into the left lane and turns, then jogs onto an onramp.

EXT. COMMERCIAL AREA - DAY

Nick parks in front of the "Charlie's Collectibles UnLimited" store.

INT. "CHARLIE'S COLLECTIBLES UNLIMITED"

THE PROPRIETOR (CHARLIE) pulls a thick text from his shelf, "American Book Prices Current," and pries it open. Nick sits beside him.

PROPRIETOR
(flipping through pages)
Lincoln, Lincoln. Lindbergh. Lincoln: here it is. Signature goes for seventy-five thousand dollars.

NICK
What about a letter in his hand?

PROPRIETOR
Probably kick it another twenty grand higher. Is it on White House stationery? That might add on.

NICK
It's written on the back of a piece of currency, a five dollar bill.

PROPRIETOR
Letter's dated 1863?

NICK
Mmm-hmm.

The Proprietor plucks another book off a shelf, "Coins & Currency." He flips through it, finds his page, lays it before Nick.

PROPRIETOR
Look like any of those?

NICK
That, the blue one, Jefferson and Monticello on it.

The Proprietor whistles.

PROPRIETOR
That's a rare item there. Only a few in existence. Worth about two hundred thousand.

NICK
So altogether...

PROPRIETOR
That's a three hundred thousand dollar stay of execution.

Nick smiles, too. The Proprietor SLAPS his book closed.

PROPRIETOR
Unfortunately, it does you no good to steal it.

NICK
That's speaking presumptuously.

PROPRIETOR
You're asking about it, and it's not yours.

NICK
(thinks of a lie; decides to skip it)
Why would it do no good to steal it?

PROPRIETOR
Well, if it's a registered document, if it's ownership is on record, then it's unmovable. No one would buy it from you. If it's unregistered and you stole it, the owner would report its theft, it's unmovable again.

NICK
What if it wasn't reported stolen?

PROPRIETOR
Why wouldn't it be?

NICK
I don't know. What if?

PROPRIETOR
Then you'd have to wait two months. No one's gonna touch an unregistered document unless they do a search first. After sixty days and no theft report, then you could sell the thing.

NICK
What if it was reported stolen but not until, say, ten months after the theft?

PROPRIETOR
You could still move it. You'd want to muddy the trail of ownership leading back to you, of course, else you might be arrested, but that's not so hard to do if you know how.

NICK
So as long as it wasn't reported gone within two months, you'd be okay?

The Proprietor studies Nick.

PROPRIETOR
Uh-huh. Of course, you'd have to cut some people in on the money. Like those who helped you move the thing.

NICK
How much would a person like that get? Ten percent?

PROPRIETOR
Fifteen.

Nick smiles. The Proprietor smiles.

PROPRIETOR
You want me to check if there's a listing on it?

NICK
Yeah.

The Proprietor disappears into a sea of books. Nick spots a portrait of Lincoln hanging on a wall, and he shoots Abe a wink.

INT. DINER

Nick and Lissa drink coffee.

NICK
It's unregistered.

LISSA
Which means...

NICK
...it's fair game. Charlie offered to advance us five thousand dollars against the sale upon receipt of the stay. Once he sold it, he'd send the remainder to us.

LISSA
You trust him?

Nick nods. Lissa thinks.

LISSA
So the trick is to steal it from a house with an elaborate alarm system and a housesitter who's not allowed to invite anyone over, without having its theft reported for at least two months.

NICK
And, of course, without getting caught.

A pause. They think.

NICK
You know: I'm just stating a wild possibility here. I'm not really suggesting...

LISSA
The hell you are. And if you are, screw that, let's do it: let's steal the fucker.

A pause. Neither says a word. They just lock eyes. Then, simultaneously, they smile.

NICK
When did you grow testicles?

LISSA
I didn't. I had yours transplanted.

EXT. CITY PARK - SUNSET

Nick and Lissa sit on a park bench, faces like sentencing judges.

Before them, CHILDREN play Marco Polo around a jungle gym. One BOY, eyes closed, feels about blindly for his friends.

LISSA
You could forge a copy, a fake, and then switch them.

NICK
I don't know the wording of the letter. It's probably impossible to imitate Lincoln's hand without the original. Plus we'd have to counterfeit the bill.

LISSA
In three days time. How well do you know Bryce?

NICK
If you're asking, could we bring him in on it: no, I don't think so.

LISSA
You don't trust him.

NICK
I trust him too well. Bryce never lied, cheated, stole in his life: the kid's so straight I'm surprised he doesn't nap. And down deep, I'll betcha he's Mr. Beaumont's lap dog.

In the Marco Polo game, all the kids have climbed on top of the monkey bars, far out of the reach of the closed-eyed boy.

BOY
Fish out of water?!

HIS FRIENDS
No!

NICK
The short of it is: we have to steal the thing outright and somehow make Bryce not report it.

EXT. NICK'S APARTMENT BUILDING - EVENING

They walk together.

LISSA
He needs something to lose. He needs to fear the consequences of reporting the theft.

NICK
Like?

Lissa thinks. The first, obvious thought...

LISSA
Like your threatening him.

NICK
He knows me better than that.

LISSA
If he doesn't fear the thief, he's got to fear the police.

Unseen by Lissa, Nick cracks a grin, then quashes it.

LISSA
He's gotta believe he'll get into more trouble reporting it than not.

NICK
How?

LISSA
Make him think he committed a crime.

They enter the building.

INT. NICK'S APARTMENT BUILDING

Walking upstairs.

LISSA
Murder's the obvious choice...

NICK
...but how do you convince someone he's a murderer?

LISSA
Other crimes. Um, rape. But again, how do you convince him he raped someone?

NICK
You make it statutory.

Lissa stops. Turns back. Nick is staring at her. He's been leading her to this point all afternoon.

LISSA
You want me to lay your friend?

NICK
There's a strong chance you wouldn't have to.

She pauses. Tears fill her eyes. Then she starts downstairs.

LISSA
You fuck him, Nick.

NICK
Liss...

LISSA
And after that you know who else you can.

She storms past him and out. Nick stands alone.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT

Nick enters. Feeling lowly as it is, but to boot there's a surprise waiting on the floor for him: a manila envelope.

Nick opens it and withdraws an 8X11, black-and-white photograph with a note attached: "You need a new assistant manager."

Nick eyes the photograph, and it staggers him.

SAME SCENE - NIGHT

The lights are off. SHOWER WATER runs in the bathroom.

The front door opens, and Lissa enters. She sneaks to a closet and starts tossing out several pieces of her clothing onto Nick's bed. They land very near...

...the 8X11, black-and-white photograph: it shows Barry, in a bathroom, lifeless, face down in a pool of blood. A threat of things to come for Nick.

Emerging from the closet, Lissa spots it and gasps.

INT. NICK'S BATHROOM

Lissa enters, pushes through steam to the shower curtain. She pulls it open.

Inside, Nick lies naked in the bathtub, showerhead raining down on him. He looks up at her with desperate, reddened eyes.

Her eyes tear as they hold on his.

FLASH!

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - THE NEXT DAY

Lissa squints under lights. A backdrop of a driver's license hangs behind her. Nick and an AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHER stand behind a camera.

NICK
Now, we need to change the name and the birthdate. Liss, throw on the other shirt, okay?

Lissa dons a precious pink sweatshirt. She is not enjoying this and lets Nick know with a glance.

When the backdrop is changed, the Photographer readies his camera...

PHOTOGRAPHER
Whatever gets you guys off.

...and snaps it: FLASH!

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

Nick on the phone, congenial as hell.

NICK
Bryce, how are you? Uh-huh. Hey, what are you doing tomorrow night?

In the bathroom: Lissa rehearses before a mirror like the trained actress she is.

LISSA
You raped me. You bastard. You raped me. Mah may mee moh moo. You bastard. You fucking bastard. You raped me.

In the bedroom:

NICK
Yeah, it's an out-of-the-way bar, but fun. Wait: hold on, I got call-waiting.
(clicking over; his amiable tone dies instantly)
Hello. This is he. Yeah, I'll have the money. Sunday morning. I'll be here.
(clicks back; all smiles)
Sorry, that was my local drug dealer. Anyway...

SAME SCENE - THAT NIGHT

Nick and Lissa sit on his bed. The two fake licenses lie between them.

NICK
Afterwards he'll either sleep or piss. Those are the two common male reactions to a drunk orgasm. If it comes to that.

LISSA
You're sure he'll be drunk.

NICK
He'll be drunk. If he does neither, improvise. Ask him to get you some aspirin.

LISSA
Make me waffles.

NICK
Sure, but only from scratch.

The levity doesn't help matters. Lissa is not happy.

NICK
When he's away, you grab it. Letter only, leave the plastic cover. Slip it into your purse and call the cab. You got the number memorized?

LISSA
459...459...
(off Nick's dubious look)
Don't worry. I'm better with words. I'll jot it on my hand.

NICK
When he returns, you give him the low down. Succinctly. Flash the driver's license.

LISSA
Won't that seem a bit forced?

NICK
This isn't method acting, it's theft. After you've given him reasonable cause for concern, get the hell out. Wait for the cab outside, on the street, not even on his property.

Lissa nods.

LISSA
Is that it then?

NICK
I think so.

They lock eyes for a moment, Nick sweetly, Lissa frightened. He moves to kiss her, and she bows her head away.

LISSA
I, I won't see you 'til tomorrow night. And I probably won't come back here afterwards. I'll call when it's over.

NICK
If that's what you want.

She gets up, moves to the door.

NICK
Liss...

She turns, stares at him. Nick tries to smile.

LISSA
Yeah.

She leaves.

OUTSIDE NICK'S WINDOW - MOMENTS LATER

He peers down to watch Lissa exit his building and drive away. He turns inside, turns off his light.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT - THE NEXT MORNING

The clock radio: 7:59 a.m...8:00 a.m...and suddenly Kay Starr and Tennessee Ernie Ford are CROONING "I'll Never Be Free" over the airwaves.

Nick lies in bed, his eyes wide open -- they have been all night. He does not turn off his alarm.

A CLOSER ANGLE ON NICK - LATER

Dressed and packing his apartment into boxes.

He ogles his phone -- waiting for it to ring, for Lissa to call. The phone is mute.

A CLOSER ANGLE ON NICK - LATER

Hiding his anxiety in a game of darts. The apartment is now fifty-percent packed.

He withdraws his last three shots from the dartboard, eyes the phone again, then steps back to his firing line, and takes aim.

Thump thump thump. All three shots plunge into the Portland poster. He goes to his phone and dials.

NICK
Is Lissa there, please? Her day off. Thanks.

Nick slaps the phone down.

EXT. TCC CAMPUS - A CLOSER ANGLE ON NICK - DAY

Hustling up stairs fronting the Arts building.

INT. ART STUDIO -- STILL CLOSER ON NICK

Entering and scanning: no Lissa. Just a single ARTIST painting a nude.

MALE ARTIST
Can I help you?

Nick leaves.

INT. THE MOVING CHALLENGER - EVEN CLOSER ON NICK

Fidgeting in his seat now, and noticing it.

NICK
Oh, for Christ's...

INT. LIQUOR STORE - A TIGHT ANGLE ON NICK

Perusing an array of cigarettes. His selection made by a cowboy poster on the wall.

NICK
Marlboros, please.

CLERK
Lights or regulars?

NICK
Um, regulars are fine.

CLERK
Filtered?

NICK
Yeah.

CLERK
Soft-pack/hard-pack?

NICK
Either.

Nick pays/takes the smokes/starts packing them.

CLERK
You're doing that the wrong way.

NICK
Huh?

CLERK
You're packing those upside down.

NICK
Oh.

EXT. LIQUOR STORE - AN EVEN TIGHTER ANGLE ON NICK

Fumbling with the inside wrapper of his pack, fumbling change from his pocket and fumbling that into a pay phone. He dials.

NICK
Hi, is Lissa home, please?

Suddenly: one tint-windowed Oldsmobile stops before the liquor store. Nick's back quickly turned to it. The Young Tough gets out/runs inside the store.

Nick eyes the rear tinted window: it is impenetrable.

NICK
(remembering the phone)
No, I'm here. I'm sorry. I'll try her later, thank you.

Nick keeps phone-to-ear. The Young Tough exits the liquor store/climbs back in the Oldsmobile.

YOUNG TOUGH
They're outta fucking Ruffles.

The Oldsmobile speeds off. Nick sighs heavily, lights his cigarette with difficulty.

INT. CHALLENGER/EXT. CITRUS HIGHWAY ONRAMP - SUNSET

Nick: waiting for the onramp's stoplight to permit him on the highway, cigarette sedating him, a Xavier Cugat mambo doing the same.

Green light: Nick tosses out his Marlboro and accelerates onto the five-lane Citrus.

Hold it here a minute: that cigarette isn't out just yet; in fact, it's rolling into a gutter. There, it meets a piece of white trash, a fast-food hamburger wrapper, and the two spark a flame together.

The wrapper (complete with recycling logo) blows into the bone-dry roadside brush. Tonight's blaze ignited. From this flame to...

INT. THE "TROPICO NOCTURNE" - NIGHT

...the one Nick touches to his Marlboro. He and Bryce sit in their booth, two or three drinks into the evening.

BRYCE
From the Where-Are-They Now file... Wendy Wilcox: wily wonderwoman. She loved not wisely but too well.

NICK
Mattress disguised as a woman.

BRYCE
She married recently. To a, um, optometrist? Opthamologist? She's Wendy Weintraub now.

NICK
The alliterative lass lives on.

BRYCE
You had a piece of that, didn't you?

NICK
What?

BRYCE
I think the young people today call it "fucking."

NICK
No.

BRYCE
No, you never fucked her.

NICK
No.

BRYCE
Is that a lie?

NICK
Yes.

BRYCE
Okay. Isn't it nice to be in the majority?

Bryce drinks. Nick smirks, drags hard on his Marlboro.

BRYCE
Didn't know you smoked.

NICK
I don't.
(evidence to the contrary)
These are medicinal. My doctor told me I needed to lose some weight, he prescribed these.

Nick offers him one. Bryce declines.

BRYCE
A girlfriend in college made me quit, pure torture. Course, she never stopped smoking an awful lot of dope.

NICK
Mine'll probably give me hell when she finds out I started.

BRYCE
You're going out with someone? I didn't know that.

NICK
Yeah.

BRYCE
Ask her along next time. Set me up with one of her friends. I'd like to get laid sometime...

NICK
(sharply)
You have the time?

BRYCE
...this year. Sure, it's...
(checking)
...almost ten. You wanna get something to eat? I'm starved.

NICK
The food here's shit. I know a place...later. Ever been to the Tropico Diner?
(Bryce hasn't)
Orange Grove and Second. I practically live off the menu.

BRYCE
Sounds fine.

NICK
(rising)
In the meantime, though, I have to regrout the men's room here. Excuse me.

NEAR THE RESTROOMS

Nick uses a payphone: no answer.

NICK
Hi, this is me. And I'm here. Just entertaining some last minute reservations. Thought you might have stopped by there.

Bryce walks past, en route to pee.

BRYCE
Calling your girlfriend? Whoop-cha.

Bryce enters the Men's room; Nick glares after him.

BACK IN THE BOOTH

Nick orders another round. He scans the parking lot: no white Volkswagen Rabbit.

He closes his eyes and taps his forehead -- rethinking things. Eyes open, he briefly scans the lot again before Bryce returns.

BRYCE
Another: Charles Kanab.

NICK
Large fellow. Played foosball.

SIRENS drown out the conversation...

EXT. "TROPICO NOCTURNE" BAR - MINUTES LATER

MOVING WITH LISSA as she struts from her Volkswagen Rabbit to the bar's entrance. Nick glances at her from his window, then looks away as Bryce speaks to him.

Firetruck lights flash in the background.

INT. "TROPICO NOCTURNE" BAR

BRYCE
Hey, I got a joke for you...

Nick squares himself toward Bryce, intent to listen, but as the joke wears on, something happens.

Nick's eyes sneak a glance at Lissa entering the bar. Then, as Lissa stradles a barstool, Nick sneaks more than just glances. By the time Bryce's punchline rolls around, Nick is ogling her jealously.

BRYCE
...there's this elephant in the jungle, and he has this thorn caught in his foot. A mouse wanders along, the elephant stops him, tells him he'll give him anything if the mouse'll just take the thorn out of his foot. The mouse says, "Okay. I'll do it, but under one condition: Afterward, I get to fuck you up the ass." Elephant says, "Okay," and the mouse takes the thorn out. Elephant sighs with relief, grateful as hell. Mouse says, "We had an agreement." Elephant nods okay, and the mouse jumps on top of him, starts giving the elephant his business. Now, meanwhile, there's this monkey up above in the trees, and he looks down and he sees this mouse sodomizing this elephant and it just disgusts him and he's so upset he grabs a coconut from a tree and he hurls it down at them. The coconut hits the elephant on the head, the elephant hollers in pain, and the mouse says...

NICK
(rising and leaving)
Sorry, I have to...

BRYCE
(his punchline diffused)
..."That's right, baby, take it all!"

Nick moves to the bar. He stands next to Lissa, neither acknowledging each other.

NICK
(to his waitress)
Could I settle my tab, please?
(to Lissa)
Get out of here.

A BARTENDER serves Lissa her drink, and she sips it.

LISSA
No.

Nick faces Lissa. She won't turn his way. Nick pays his waitress.

NICK
Could I get four quarters change from that?

INT. THE MEN'S ROOM

Nick throws quarters into a condom dispenser.

BACK AT THE BOOTH

Nick returns; Lissa has taken his seat.

BRYCE
Hey, Nick. This is Kathy. Kathy, my friend Nick.

LISSA
Hi. Sorry, is this your seat?

NICK
Not anymore. Please...stay. Bryce, I'm gonna go.

BRYCE
Everything okay?

NICK
Yeah, I'm just a little preoccupied.

BRYCE
No kidding.

NICK
I settled the tab already. You take care of the tip?

BRYCE
Sure. Your woman get home?

NICK
Mmm-hmm.

BRYCE
(to Lissa)
My friend here, it's been discovered, is on a very short leash.

LISSA
Oh.

NICK
I'll call you tomorrow, Bryce. Nice meeting you, Kathy.

Extending his hand to shake Lissa's, Nick knocks a bar napkin off the table.

NICK
I'm sorry.

He squats to pick it up, enclosing the newly-bought condom within. He hands it back to Lissa.

NICK
Just in case. Goodnight.

BRYCE
See ya, Nick.

Nick pries himself away. He and Lissa both have faint suggestions of tears in their eyes.

Nick moves toward the exit, every step torturous, and just as he opens the door to go outside, he looks back: Lissa and Bryce are talking/laughing.

EXT. "TROPICO NOCTURNE" BAR - NIGHT

Nick steps outside, anguished.

NICK
Idiot.

LISSA (V.O.)
You're telling me.

INT. THE BEAUMONT'S BASEMENT

Nick and Lissa and the pool table. Where we last faded out on them. They gaze at each other for some time, eyes full of sadness and regret.

LISSA
You didn't get the key.

Nick shakes his head.

NICK
Where is it?

LISSA
He has it.

NICK
He has the letter?

LISSA
No, the key. I have the letter.

NICK
It's not in your purse.

Lissa shakes her head.

LISSA
I didn't put it there. I have it.

Lissa: upset the "letter" was the first order of business. Nick senses it, squats before her.

NICK
You really okay?
(she half-nods)
What happened?

LISSA
What he said. He blew his cool.
Your friend is not a nice drunk.

NICK
Tell me.

LISSA
He laid there for awhile, not doing anything...

NICK
This is...after.

Lissa nods. Nick winces: his girlfriend just confirmed she slept with someone else.

LISSA
I got up, because I needed to pee.
I did, and flushed your condom with it. I came out, and he wouldn't leave the room.

NICK
So you asked him for vitamins?

LISSA
I goofed. I meant to say aspirin, but it just came out vitamins.

NICK
So, which...Barney, Wilma?

Lissa tries not to smile.

NICK
Dino?

Lissa laughs, helplessly. Nick smiles, brushes back her hair.

LISSA
Thanks. I must look terrific about now.

NICK
You wear captivity well.

Lissa shoots him a remonstrative, if kidding, glance.

LISSA
I got the letter, called for the cab, and got into the moment. He came downstairs, I started my routine, and he went ballistic.

NICK
I'm sorry.

LISSA
I tried to get out, but, you know, he double locks that front door everytime he walks past.

NICK
He didn't do anything after that. To you.

LISSA
(shakes her head)
He's a bad drunk is all.

A tear streaks down her cheek.

NICK
Well, he doesn't go on our Christmas card list, then.

Nick dries her eyes.

NICK
Where is it?

Lissa grins through her tears, looks down at her crotch. Nick grins back. He starts sliding his hand up her skirt.

LISSA
Least you could do is kiss me when you do that.

Nick hesitates, then kisses her. He withdraws the Lincoln letter from her panties, then gestures to her: 'Can I hold onto this?' She acquiesces. Nick tucks it into his shirt pocket.

LISSA
I'm glad you're here.

NICK
I'm glad, too.

LISSA
That doesn't mean we have to stick around, though.

NICK
No.

They share a look: "What are we going to do?"

NICK
I have two ideas.

LISSA
Uh-huh?

NICK
First one. I pick up this pool table, you slip your hands out, and we go home.

LISSA
I like that idea. What do you say to Bryce?

NICK
Anything. Nothing. If he objects, I'll floor him. There's a downside, though: we don't get the money.

LISSA
Why not?

NICK
He's been studying your i.d.'s for the past two hours. If we leave, I don't think Bryce would leave it well enough alone. He'd investigate you, check out the address on the i.d., find out you were a fake.

LISSA
And...

NICK
...he'd blow the whistle on the letter.

LISSA
Idea Two?

NICK
One more thing about Idea One. We walk out the door, there was no point to any of this. It invalidates our...your sacrifice tonight.

LISSA
Our.

Nick smiles sweetly, kisses her.

LISSA
Idea Two?

Nick sighs.

NICK
Idea Two. We stick around a little longer.

INT. THE DEN

ON T.V.: Deborah Kerr stars in The King and I.

DEBORAH KERR
"Hello, young lovers, wherever you are. My hopes and my dreams are with you..."

Bryce watches, slouched in an easy chair, drunk. He snaps out of his stupor only when he hears Nick emerge from downstairs and rummage through the kitchen.

BRYCE
Hey!

NICK
Yeah.

BRYCE
How'd it...

NICK
Where are you?

BRYCE
In here. The den.

Nick enters, exhausted, two beers in hand. He gives one to Bryce.

BRYCE
How'd it go?

Nick sits, rubs his eyes.

NICK
Not, uh...not well. We got problems.

Bryce opens his hands: "what happened?"

NICK
You didn't find the condom, did you?

BRYCE
No.

Nick nods, thinking to himself.

BRYCE
Nick...

NICK
You got a real queen bee tied up down there. Somebody's little princess.

BRYCE
...what happened?

Nick cringes, shakes his head.

NICK
I fucked up.

BRYCE
Wha...?

NICK
I just talked to her awhile. Nicely at first. Asked her where she was from, what high school she went to. She told me.

He drinks.

BRYCE
Yeah?

NICK
Shit. This beer is...Can I mix myself something?

BRYCE
Yes. What did you do?

Mixing a drink:

NICK
I started in, reasoning with her, what would happen if she went to the police. Her reputation would suffer, people would ostracize her, no boys would like her, blah blah blah. The TeenBeat rationality for not crying rape. I told her if it went to court, we'd depict her as a harlot-in-training, trying to play grown-up.

BRYCE
Which is true.

NICK
She insisted you raped her, though. Was adamant about it, blocked out all other possibility, so I...

BRYCE
You what?

NICK
(painfully)
I told her we found the condom.

BRYCE
Uh-huh.

NICK
I argued she had no case, the rubber proved it. "What does a rubber say, Kathy?"

BRYCE
Her name's Jen.

NICK
What?

BRYCE
The real i.d.. It's Jennifer Bigby.

Nick shrugs it off. He has mixed two drinks and hands one to Bryce. Before Bryce (already with a beer from Nick) can refuse it:

NICK
"What does a rubber say? Does it say 'rape?' Does it say 'struggling toward insertion?' No. It says 'consent.' It says you waited while he slipped it on. It says 'conscientious.' Bryce was conscientious enough to protect you, himself from the possible consequences. And obviously he needed to."

BRYCE
And what'd she say?

NICK
She said you didn't wear one. She said that wrapper was left from a time before. Busy girl, apparently.

BRYCE
So I got disease to worry about.

NICK
You got more than that.
(a big sigh)
She called me on the lie. She realized I was full of shit. And it pissed her off.

BRYCE
How?

NICK
She launched into me. Like a pit bull.

BRYCE
What'd she say?

NICK
Girl has a mouth on her. "My uncle's a fucking lawyer. He's gonna have your ass. He's gonna tear the scrotums off you cocksuckers. Both of you are gonna rot in fucking jail the rest of your life, gonna be mayors of ass-rape city."

Bryce punches his chair.

BRYCE
Jesus. Jesus!

NICK
Needless to say, I did not point out the fact that if we were, as she professed, scrotumless cocksuckers, an eternity spent governing ass-rape city might be right up our alleys. Speaking figuratively and literally.

That does it. Bryce nearly vomits right then and there, but somehow he manages to hold in his mucus. He clumsily rises and rushes into the bathroom to spill it there. Which he does, loudly.

Nick moves to the bathroom doorway to view the aftermath.

NICK
You may want to lift the lid there, sport.

Bryce lies on the bathroom floor, wiping vomit from his chin, the carpeted toilet seat a disaster.

BRYCE
Nick. Nick, I'm so fucked.

NICK
We are.

BRYCE
Huh?

NICK
Aiding and abetting. I told you, Bryce: kidnapping.

BRYCE
She's bringing that against me, too?

NICK
Us, Bryce. Us.

Bryce squirms, kicking his legs.

BRYCE
Bitch! Wicked fucking bitch!

NICK
C'mon. Let's clean you up.

Nick escorts Bryce to a sink. He washes up.

NICK
I screwed it. I'm sorry.

BRYCE
She's whacked. There's no way to reason with someone...

Bryce splashes water on his face.

BRYCE
God, I'd like to kill the girl.

A long pause. At first, neither one of them appears to pay much attention to that last remark.

But in the continuing silence, Nick glances at Bryce in the mirror, then pushes quickly back into the den. Bryce dries himself off with a towel and follows.

Back in the den...

NICK
She showed up at the bar alone, right?

BRYCE
Yeah, I think.

NICK
She has those car keys. She probably drove herself.

Bryce nods, chews on a finger nail.

NICK
Didn't seem like she knew anyone there. And no one, I imagine, would remember you two leaving together.

BRYCE
Bartender saw her kiss me.

Nick shrugs that off. Bryce stares at Nick.

BRYCE
What are you suggesting?

As Nick opens his mouth to speak, his eyes flash to the t.v.: <u>The King and I</u> has gone to commercial...

NICK
Bryce...

BRYCE
(turning and watching)
Hey, you in this?

Bryce laughs. Nick realizes trouble.

BRYCE
Wow, this thing has the production value of a bad porn. Your boss must...

NICK
Bryce, you prick.

BRYCE
(facing Nick)
Huh?

NICK
Why did you call me?

BRYCE
Why did I...?

NICK
Yeah.

BRYCE
I needed help.

NICK
Horseshit. Help how?

BRYCE
I needed advice.

NICK
Yeah? Get advice over the phone next time. Why?!

BRYCE
Cause you're my friend. Cause I don't know anyone else here...

ON T.V.:

A wide overview of Tropico.

VOICE (V.O.)
Tropico, the time has come for you to pitch in...your cans, bottles, and other recyclables!

The Owner appears over the city in a grotesque blue screen shot.

OWNER
Hi, I'm Mitch Bennett, owner and manager of your Tropico Recycling Company, inviting you to jump on the bandwagon toward a brighter, environmentally-safer tomorrow!

Shots of The Owner speaking with Nick, of Renaldo and Oscar, etc.

OWNER (V.O.)
Together with my dedicated staff, I'm trying to clean up Tropico...for a better future for our children. So won't you help out? Come on down and pitch in!

Shots of cans, bottles, etc.

SINGERS (V.O.)
(a Peter Allen knock-off)
"Preserve all your cans of metal/Tell ev'ry gal and ev'ry fella/Save all your glass 'n' aluminum/ To make everything old something new again!"

And, at last, the tag:

NICK
(overlapping, deafening)
Then stop fucking patronizing me! I know what you're doing!

NICK AND LISSA
Tropico and recycling: together, we're on the move!

End of commercial: Bryce, bewildered, missed it. The danger passed, Nick calms his tone.

BRYCE
What?

NICK
You've been playing me for the fool all night. Ever since I walked in that door.

BRYCE
I...

NICK
Leading me up to this. Well, I'm onto you. "Nick, what are you suggesting?" Oh, you're sweet, asking my opinion. Congratulations, Bryce. You got me where you want me: right in the thick of things.

Nick heads into the living room and Bryce trails him.

BRYCE
I really don't understand what you're saying.

NICK
If you want to kill her, then say so, but stop playing games with me.

BRYCE
Kill...?

NICK
Deny it, Bryce, and I'll frigging tag you in the face. That's why you invited me over.

BRYCE
No!

Nick stops. Again he threatens to attack, and Bryce sidesteps behind a chair.

NICK
To give you the nerve. That's why I got the call. It's out in the open now, don't pussyfoot around.

BRYCE
I, I...Kill her?

Nick starts inspecting every pillow on every couch and chair.

BRYCE
I can't do that.

NICK
You can't?

BRYCE
We can't. I don't even believe you're saying this. That I would do that. I...What are you doing?

NICK
Looking for a pillow.

Bryce gestures: the room's full of them.

NICK
One with a case you can wash.

INT. CHILDREN'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Lights click on to illuminate a bunkbed, a litter of stuffed animals, and teddy-bear wallpaper. Nick enters, snatches a Snoopy pillow, and slings it at Bryce.

NICK
There. Have yourself a time.

BRYCE
Nick...Nick...

NICK
You wanted my advice, my support: there it is in your hands, kiddo. That's the best I got.

BRYCE
This is not why I called you.

NICK
Why else? You were looking for an alternative to letting her go. What other alternative did you think I'd suggest?

Bryce stands speechless, caught.

BRYCE
I...
(surrendering)
Yes.

Bryce begins to weep. Nick pulls out a desk chair, child-size, and sets it in the middle of the room.

NICK
Sit.

Bryce does; his knees jet up into his chest. He wipes his nose with his sleeve.

BRYCE
I just want to do what's right.

NICK
I know, Bryce. We all want to do that. We all do. But it's just not always possible. We try, yes, always that, always try, but we know sometimes, often even, we know our actions won't be best for everybody. Hard as we may try. They cannot and will not. Sadly. So we do what is best considering the circumstances. We distinguish what we would like to do and what we can do, and we act accordingly.
(squatting down to him)
Bryce, it's a moral decision and it's a practical decision: the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It's a tough one, granted, it's Truman and the bomb: you save her, you fuck us, and vice-versa. But it's your decision to make. I'll stand by whatever you say.

Bryce wipes his tears away. Nick glances at a framed crayon drawing of a boy and girl holding hands.

BRYCE
Okay.
(looking up to Nick)
But I can't do it. I can't.

NICK
S'okay. I'll do it. It's why you called me.

Hiding a smile, Nick grips Bryce's shoulder reassuringly and notices something: a hickey on Bryce's neck.

NICK
What's that?

BRYCE
What it looks like.

NICK
She give it to you?

Bryce shoots him a look: "who else?"

BRYCE
That's the weird thing. What I do remember is her being really into it. Screaming like a champ and writhing...

Bryce starts to weep again. Meanwhile...

Rage floods Nick completely. His face turns blood-red, and his whole body stiffens.

It takes every ounce of Nick's strength not to kick the shit out of Bryce right then and there.

NICK
I need the key now, Bryce.

BRYCE
Huh?

NICK
Handcuffs.

BRYCE
Oh.

Bryce fetches the key from his pants pocket, slaps it in Nick's hand.

NICK
I'll be back up in a few minutes.

Nick plucks the Snoopy pillow from the floor and exits, a scowl frozen on his face.

INT. FIRST FLOOR

ON T.V.: "March of the Siamese Children." Richard Rodgers' music accompanies Nick's slow, seething descent from the second floor to the first, through the living room, to...

INT. THE BASEMENT

...and as Nick marches downstairs toward Lissa and the pool table, shadows blanket his face and Lissa can't really see how he's feeling.

LISSA
What now?

Nick enters the light and glares down at her. Balling his fists in the pillow. Eyes full of contempt.

NICK
Die.

INT. THE FIRST FLOOR - LATER

MOVING BEHIND NICK as he hauls Lissa's limp, lifeless body up from the basement, wrapped in a bedsheet.

Bryce leads Nick through the kitchen and a service porch, and as he opens the door to the Beaumonts' garage...

...A DEAFENING ALARM SOUNDS. Both men startle, as does Lissa under the bedsheet.

Bryce doesn't her, though. He's too busy disengaging the alarm.

BRYCE
Sorry.

In the garage, the Challenger awaits, trunk open, next to Bryce's Honda Civic.

BRYCE
Need a hand?

NICK
I got her.

Nick gently loads Lissa into the trunk. With Bryce out of earshot, he whispers...

NICK
Have you out in two blocks.

...then shuts her in as, simultaneously, Bryce SLAMS the passenger door closed behind him.

NICK
Bryce, what are you doing?

BRYCE
Coming with you.

NICK
No. You're not.

BRYCE
But...

NICK
I can't use you and I don't want you.

BRYCE
What are you going to do?

Nick sighs: time for lies.

NICK
There's an incinerator at the recycling plant. I'll put her in it.

BRYCE
Is that safe?

NICK
No one arrives for work 'til nine. Now get out of the car.

BRYCE
What about her car?

NICK
What about it?

BRYCE
Well...if she's reported missing, the police'll track the car, and when they find it, they'll ask around the bar.

NICK
Fine. I'll move it.

BRYCE
You'll need the keys.

Nick closes his eyes: another key dilemma.

NICK
You have them.

BRYCE
I can't stay here. Alone. I...I need to eat something. I haven't eaten all night.

Nick pounds the Challenger's roof, then pushes around to the driver's seat.

NICK
Fine. I drop you off to eat, then I deal with the girl. Okay?

BRYCE
Okay.

As Nick gets into his car, he shakes his head, muttering:

NICK
...goddamn high school reunions...

EXT. THE BEAUMONTS' HOME - NIGHT

The garage door rises slowly, revealing the fierce Challenger, engine roaring, headlights beaming.

It pulls out of its stable and creeps into the night.

INT. THE CHALLENGER -- DRIVING THROUGH TROPICO - NIGHT

Nick and Bryce ride in silence. On the radio, more hits of the forties and fifties. Bryce starts to change the station, but Nick yanks his hand away from the dial, turns it back.

NICK
Don't touch the radio.

The car comes to a speed bump, and Nick, conscious of Lissa in the back, takes it real, real slow.

BRYCE
You trying to break a land speed record or something?

Nick grits his teeth and turns up the radio: a LOUD BRASS OPENING introduces...

MILLS BROTHERS
"Shine, little glow worm!
Glimmer! Glimmer!
Shine little glow worm!
Glimmer! Glimmer!
Lead us lest too far we wander
Love's sweet voices calling yonder
Shine, little glow worm!
Glimmer! Glimmer!
Hey there, don't get dimmer, dimmer!
Light the path below above
And lead us onto love!"

Bryce laughs.

NICK
What?

BRYCE
This song. It's all about sperm.

NICK
No, it's not.

BRYCE
Of course, it is. "Light the path and lead us onto love?" The glowworm is like Rudolph the red-nosed sperm, leading all the other sperm up through the dark cavern.

They listen.

MILLS BROTHERS
"Glow, little glowworm!
Glow and glimmer!
Swim through the sea of night,
Little swimmer!
Thou every nautical boweevil
Illuminate yon woods primeval!

BRYCE
See.

Nick clicks off the radio. A tense silence.

NICK
You know, Bryce, everything in the world doesn't revolve around fucking.

BRYCE
You just need to get laid.

Nick shoots Bryce a murderous look. Avoiding it, Bryce stares straight ahead and he spots something...

BRYCE
Shit, turn around.

...up ahead: a police roadblock.

BRYCE
Nick, get outta here.

NICK
Calm down, Bryce.

Driving closer, it's only a detour, there to divert traffic around the Citrus Highway blaze, still raging.

NICK
Jesus, what's wrong with these guys? Couldn't put outta match underwater.

EXT. THE ROADBLOCK

The Challenger breezes past the same COP from before, Nick throwing him another wave as he turns off the main road into shadowy suburbia.

INT. THE CHALLENGER

Bryce exhales deeply.

NICK
What are you worried about? There's no APB out on you. Yet.

BRYCE
Yeah, what if they stopped us? What if they'd checked the trunk? We'd be fucked.

NICK
Man, you're right. It's good thing that cop didn't lose all sense of

(continued)

NICK (CONT'D)
reason. It's a good thing he didn't dismiss all rules of procedure and every shred of basic law to stop and search the car. We dodged a bullet there.

Nick stops at an intersection.

NICK
Keep it up, Bryce. Drunk and paranoid looks good on you.

CRASH! Nick's window shatters next to him, and he is yanked outside through it.

EXT. THE CHALLENGER

TWO HOODED CAR THIEVES hijack Nick's Challenger, their tan Jeep parked behind it. One Thief, brandishing a lead pipe, throws Nick onto the ground and kicks him. The Other holds a gun on Bryce from outside.

THIEF 2
Unlock the door, get outta the car!

Bryce resists, scared-shitless.

NICK
Please don't do this! Please!

Thief 1 climbs into the driver's seat and, reaching past Bryce, unlocks his door. Thief 2 opens it, pulls Bryce out and throws him on the sidewalk.

Meanwhile, Nick scrambles to his feet and attacks Thief 1 through his shattered window.

THIEF 1
Son of a bitch! Get 'im off me!

Thief 2 pistol-whips Nick, and he falls out of the car. The Challenger SCREECHES away.

Bryce picks himself off the sidewalk.

BRYCE
Nick? Nick?

Nick writhes painfully on the asphalt, barely conscious.

BRYCE
Nick, what are we gonna do?

Nick sits up, delirious, looking off in the car's direction.

BRYCE
Nick...

NICK
Lissa.

BRYCE
Oh shit. Oh shit. Nick, they took the car. They're gonna find her. They're gonna call the police.

Nick cringes, holds his head.

BRYCE
Nick, what are we gonna do?

NICK
Quiet.

Bryce shuts up. Not for long.

BRYCE
Nick...

NICK
Bryce. They're car thieves. They're not going to call the police.

BRYCE
Well, what are we going to do?

NICK
Help me up.

Bryce does, and Nick stumbles about for a moment. Rediscovering his equilibrium.

NICK
I need to borrow your car.

Nick starts walking, then jogging back toward the Beaumonts'. Woozily. Bryce follows.

EXT. THE BEAUMONTS' NEIGHBORHOOD - DAYBREAK

Bryce's red Honda Civic is the only car on the road.

INT. RED HONDA CIVIC - DRIVING

Nick drives alone, the gear shift giving him trouble. He checks his face in the mirror: black eye developing.

BRYCE (V.O.)
What are you going to do?

NICK (V.O.)
Take care of it. Gimme her keys.

BRYCE (V.O.)
You okay to drive?

NICK (V.O.)
Yeah. Stay here.

BRYCE (V.O.)
There's no food here.

NICK (V.O.)
Bryce. Stay friggin' here.

EXT. HIS APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Nick parks and runs inside.

INT. NICK'S STUDIO APARTMENT

He scrounges through his medicine chest for aspirin. None. In the bedroom, the PHONE RINGS.

Taped on the phone, Nick's note:

2 a.m.

"L.,
He called, says he has 'a problem.' Back in an hour (hopefully).
Love, N.

Nick rips it off/answers the phone.

NICK
Yeah?

BAD ASS DUDE (O.S.)
Got something a yours. Got two things a yours. You want 'em back, be at the SuperFood in ten minutes.

Nick hangs up. Quickly dials again.

NICK
Charlie. I got it. Three hours at your store.

He hangs up again, then mutters to himself:

NICK
...if I live.

From his dresser he plucks up a pair of dark glasses to disguise his eye. Exits.

EXT. TROPICO STREETS - DAY

Nick maneuvers Bryce's car as morning traffic thickens.

Halfway through his journey, Bryce's gear shift collapses and the car stalls in the middle of a major boulevard.

Nick gets out, pissed, and, in the midst of heavy traffic, he pushes the Honda onto a center divider.

He proceeds on foot, dodging cars as he crosses the street, then breaking into a sprint through pedestrian traffic, heading toward a large sign in the sky: SuperFood.

EXT. SUPERFOOD SUPERMARKET - DAY

A monstermart. In its mammoth parking lot, the Young Thug leans against the parked Oldsmobile.

Nick jogs up, out of breath. The Young Thug taps his watch. Nick starts into the SuperFood.

NICK
Two minutes.

INT. MOVING OLDSMOBILE

Riding up front, Nick withdraws a bottle of aspirin from a SuperFood bag, throws a couple in his mouth, and washes them down with a can of coke.

YOUNG THUG
Usually buy that in a bottle.

The Young Thug hands Nick a bandanna.

YOUNG THUG
You know the routine.

Nick takes off his shades, puts on the bandanna...

BLACKNESS.

LIKE BEFORE, A MEDLEY OF SOUNDS: CAR DOORS OPENING AND CLOSING, A SCREEN DOOR, AN INTERIOR DOOR, THEN...

BAD ASS DUDE
Boy, you got a funny idea a chivalry.

And the blindfold comes off...

INT. THE DARK, WINDOWLESS ROOM

Again, the Bad Ass Dude holds a floodlight in Nick's face.

BAD ASS DUDE
When my lady and I go drivin', she always rides up front with me.

The Bad Ass Dude smiles broadly. Nick does not.

NICK
I thought our date was Sunday.

BAD ASS DUDE
It was. I bumped it up. Thought you might be gettin' flighty. Apparently, you were gettin' somethin'. What the fuck you been up to?

NICK
Where is she?

The Bad Ass Dude turns his light: Lissa sits in Jimmy's old chair, tied to it, mouth ducktaped.

BAD ASS DUDE
Don't worry. We ain't offered her any soda.

Nick steps toward Lissa. She looks frightened again, but exhausted now by this captivity routine. She's happy to see Nick, though.

Still, it seems the only thing on Nick's mind is Bryce's hickey.

BAD ASS DUDE
Hundred fifty years ago, we had a curious economic system in this country. Adam Smith wrote: 'The inherent economic failing of slavery is it supports a working class which is not also a consuming class.' So, for monetary reasons, and some say moral, the system was abolished. There was a civil war...

NICK
I read something about it once.

BAD ASS DUDE
Before that happened, though, my great-great-great grandmother got sold at an auction. She set a new female record in Georgia: eight hundred dollars. Now, given inflation, in today's dollars, she went for approximately fifteen thousand and change.

NICK
That your asking price?

The Bad Ass Dude nods.

NICK
What about my car?

BAD ASS DUDE
That ain't for sale. Actually, that ain't even a car no more. Just a collection of parts.

Nick sighs: he has no recourse.

BAD ASS DUDE
That's thirty-five thousand dollars you owe me in total.

NICK
I'll have it in three or four hours. Can you wait that long?

BAD ASS DUDE
(nods)
I'll have Freddy drive you back. Your girlfriend stays here 'til you bring it.

Nick starts to leave, then pauses.

NICK
How'd you know she's my girlfriend?

Behind the light, the Bad Ass Dude stays silent. Nick steps toward him and -- CRUNCH -- crushes something under foot. In the darkness, it is barely visible: a peanut shell.

Silence. Nick slowly scans the dark room. He perceives something, and heads for it.

BAD ASS DUDE
Hey.

Nick finds it: a door. He tries it, locked, then steps back and kicks it.

BAD ASS DUDE
Hey!

The door splinters open, revealing...

...Barry and Jimmy, sitting on a couch, playing Nintendo with the sound off. They are as stunned to see Nick as he is to see them.

JIMMY
Hey, Nick.

Nick enters. The Bad Ass Dude appears behind him.

BAD ASS DUDE
Ah, fuck.

Nick surveys. Through another door lies the bathroom where Barry lay dead in the 8X11 photograph, and a tub filled with photo development equipment.

Nick begins to quantify how big a sucker he's been.

BARRY
Nick...Nick...it was just...

NICK
What was in the bag? What'd we steal?

BARRY
...we thought you got all that money from your dad...

JIMMY
Baking flour.

BARRY
...we didn't expect you to pull this shit...

NICK
And the soda torture. That real?

JIMMY
(nods)
The trick is don't inhale.

Nick nods, then snaps. All night long, he's been a storm brewing, and now is his time to rage. And he does.

Nick charges Barry, pummeling him with both fists, and when Barry and the Bad Ass Dude pry Nick off, he attacks the entire room: ransacking shelves, hurling a t.v., all the while shouting:

NICK
Fuckers! Fuckers!

At last, the trio of Barry, Jimmy, and the Bad Ass Dude tackle Nick and pin him down.

BAD ASS DUDE
Cool down, dude. Cool it.

On the bottom of the dogpile, Nick squeezes his eyes shut, wanting but unable to cry. All his efforts, all his sacrifices and deceits, all for nothing.

BAD ASS DUDE
C'mon. We gotta get him outta here.

They pull Nick up, brush him off.

In the next room, Jimmy flips on the lights -- it is an ordinary living room, windows boarded up. He peels the ducktape off Lissa's mouth, unties her, and gestures that she may leave.

The Bad Ass Dude leads Nick to the front door.

BAD ASS DUDE
Sorry about your car. We had to contract that out. It's junked by now. You can call the cops if you want, but you do, we start mentioning the chick in the trunk.

Barry approaches Nick hesitantly. He holds out the stay of execution letter.

BARRY
Nick, you dropped this.

Nick takes it. He looks at Lissa. Her eyes are pitiless. The Bad Ass Dude opens the door for them.

BAD ASS DUDE
("get outta here")
No hard feelings, huh.

EXT. THE HOUSE - DAY

Nick and Lissa exit. He immediately sees the home's address: "365," the house he and Barry "robbed."

Lissa leads Nick down the street's sidewalk. They walk silently, children laughing and playing around them: it's Saturday morning.

EXT. A TROPICO INTERSECTION

Where Nick left the Honda Civic. A tow truck hauls it away, followed by a police car. Nick and Lissa pass by on foot.

EXT. CITRUS HIGHWAY

The fire is, at last, extinguished. A FIRETRUCK backs away from the scene, and that same cop stops pedestrian traffic (including Nick and Lissa) so that it may do so safely.

Nick ogles the charred brush. Lissa is lost in thought.

NICK
It's out.

He turns to her just as the other pedestrians start to walk. The Cop is waving them across the street, and he spots Nick, smiles, throws him a wave this time.

COP
We both been up all night.

EXT. TROPICO DINER - DAY

Nick and Lissa enter.

INT. TROPICO DINER

A HOSTESS greets them.

HOSTESS
You two together?

Nick looks to Lissa: "are we?" No response. He nods to the hostess who leads them to...

A booth. As Nick sits...

NICK
You know, we still have the...

LISSA
Keep it.

...Lissa proceeds past him, to a payphone. There, she checks the palm of her hand and dials.

Nick watches her, realizing: "they" are over.

A BUSBOY delivers two ice waters.

NICK
Gracias.

Nick applies one ice-water to his black eye. With his eyes closed, he doesn't see who's coming...

BRYCE (O.S.)
Jesus, you're here.

Nick opens his eyes. Bryce stands before him, sweaty, out of breath.

NICK
Bryce...

BRYCE
What happened? Did you find the car?

NICK
Bryce, I told you to stay at home. Would you get outta...

BRYCE
I was fucking starving. You better be right about the food here. I had to ride little Beaumonts' ten-speed down...

As he gestures toward a bike outside, Bryce sees her.

Lissa walks back from the pay phone, past the booth, past Bryce and Nick without paying them the slightest glance, and out the diner's front door.

Bryce watches her, aghast -- the girl is alive. He turns to Nick, and then, slowly, it dawns on him.

Nick pulls out the stay of execution and tosses it on the table. Bryce's gaze turns from bewilderment to hurt to loathing.

NICK
What -- you never fucked a friend before?

Bryce plucks up the letter, eyes Nick once more, and exits.

A WAITRESS approaches.

WAITRESS
(laying down menus)
You one or two today?

NICK
One.

She leaves him.

EXT. DINER -- ANGLE ON A WINDOW

Inside the window sits Nick, in his booth, alone.

He scans the diner's parking lot, reflected on the window's glass. A cab arrives for Lissa as Bryce pedals past on a child's bicycle.

Nick dons his darkglasses and just sits there. Friendless. Loveless. Carless. Broke. Unemployed. And shit out of luck.

FADE OUT.