

THE GAMBLER

Written by

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Adapted from THE GAMBLER by James Toback

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EXT. HOLLYWOOD HILLS. NIGHT

A modern house, packed with dark-clad figures, clings to the edge of a precipice. Its lights are blurred in the sort of fog that Angelenos call a marine layer.

In the road that curves past and below the house, VALETS are silently taking and parking (driving off to park) expensive cars. Valets in their white shirt-fronts are running up and down the road.

The people going up to the house do not seem to be party-goers: they are all male, mostly grave, primarily Asian businessmen.

A fogged view of the valet area is revealed by a sudden sweep of WIPERS. We reverse to see:

A BMW 1 series, the 1M, the orange killer, standing pulled over against the curb, under a spray of somebody's bougainvillea. The car is idling. It contains only the driver.

INT. BMW. NIGHT

A BRASS ZIPPO lighter is clicked open, shut, open, shut.

The driver, JIM – the gambler of the piece – is watching the house. Close on his calculating eyes.

The LIGHTER clicks open, shut, open, shut, and then a decision is made: JIM puts the lighter in the pocket of his dark suit, and gets abruptly out of the car.

EXT. THE STREET IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. NIGHT

JIM walks downhill towards the valet area. He is tall, well dressed, thirty five. He needs a shave, he's tieless, and looks like he might have been up for five days straight, but he has decent style, a natural suavity.

A FILIPINO VALET notes him, and the car.

VALET

You bring car here.

JIM

Already got a space, buddy.

He looks up at the LIGHTED HOUSE, then at the VALET.

JIM (CONT'D)
I've got a lucky face.

THE VALET stares, authority challenged, flummoxed, as

JIM, with a glance back, goes up the steep stairs under flaring torches.

In the undergrowth we see (and JIM sees) that a FOR SALE sign has been toppled over, and badly hidden.

After following JIM briefly through the gardens, over the brick paths, and past big SECURITY MEN (multi-ethnic), one of whom nods as JIM appears, we go to

JIM'S POV to enter the house, to move through the packed rooms. There is a girl inside with a GUEST LIST. She knows him, makes a mark.

The rooms, done up around the edges as a temporary bottle service gambling club, are full of serious gamblers. Again, mostly Asian, but with some serious casuals, a few hip-hoppers. It's a catered affair. The same sort of casually employed actors and models and students that move around with drinks and food on trays at any party in Hollywood.

JIM moves through the rooms, noting...

TABLE AFTER TABLE, all of them in heavy play, by very heavy gamblers.

Through a door, apart, we see a POKER GAME going on, heavy hitters. JIM moves on, observing everything, ready for anything, looking for what he needs, the game he needs.

A STUDENT-WAITRESS (AMY), for a moment, might be it: but after making serious eye contact, and a moment in which JIM and AMY register each other without affect, and he shakes his head very slightly to reject either a canape or something much more complicated, she moves on through the crowd. He keeps moving. She keeps moving.

They seem to know each other from another context, and it's rattled Jim, to see her here.

Near the MONEY changing hands at an improvised CAISSE, where a woman in specs trades colored plaques for cash in the Asian casino manner, KOREAN HEAVIES stand guard, earpieced, armed. (The security guys outside are any security guys: the inner sanctum is Korean).

JIM goes to the caisse table, reaches into his coat, and pulls out ten thousand-odd dollars in a wrapper. He waits, watches, as

His MONEY is counted...

And as...

THE PLAQUES are shoved across.

As JIM gathers up the plaques and puts them in his coat, he notices an older, tough, grave, civil, unreadable Korean man, MISTER LEE, looking at him carefully.

MISTER LEE
You do better tonight.

JIM nods.

JIM
Couldn't do worse.

They look at each other. JIM has his game face: but MISTER LEE always has his. MISTER LEE nods, and, though it's subtle, allows JIM to pass on through into the big, crowded, high-ceilinged room.

CUT TO:

INT. THE BLACKJACK AREA. NIGHT. LATER

SPECTATORS are watching. MISTER LEE moves up to watch.

JIM, the only player at the table, with at least eight times more plaques in front of him than we saw him buy, absolutely intent on the game, shoves 40K in plaques forward and is dealt a

CARD DOWN and a JACK UP.

JIM checks his down card and sees a 4, and looks up at the dealer, like a duellist marking his man.

The DEALER (KOREAN, an at-sea family man who really shouldn't be doing this, really shouldn't be in these circumstances) realizes he's in it, and is very nervous.

JIM
Double down, make it twenty thousand.

The DEALER looks over at MISTER LEE, who nods his approval.

JIM gets a king. He's lost. His on-table pile is raked away. He smiles, and then deliberately, enjoying it, he pushes in the last of his RESERVED CHIPS...all of them.

JIM (CONT'D)
 (to uncertain, sweating
 dealer)
 Mister Lee can cover a lot more
 than that, buddy.
 (a beat)
 You must be new.

MISTER LEE again has to nod his approval.

The sweating DEALER deals.

JIM is given a card down and a 2 showing. The DEALER has a queen showing. JIM looks at him again, briefly; then flips his down card, sees a 7, and tucks it under his 2. After catching the eye of the passing...

AMY

In the crowd...

JIM (CONT'D)
 (off something about Amy)
 Let's go for it, brother.
 (this means something
 about Amy)
 Double it.

JIM takes a card down, flicks it up with his 7 card. It is an ace. He is unmoved.

The DEALER turns up his down card, a 5; then draws a 6 for 21. We stay on the cards long enough to count them.

JIM'S COUNTERS are scraped away by the house.

MISTER LEE moves indifferently away through the crowd.

ON JIM:

JIM is entirely without affect: as if losing money was exactly what he wanted: to be done with it.

He pulls out a single RED 500 dollar counter, looks at it, turns it in his hand, in the well-done light, puts it back in his pocket.

A bejeweled COURTLY GANGSTA (NEVILLE) beside him (and his POSSE never far from Neville):

NEVILLE
 I hope you paid your rent, homes.

JIM looks at him, perfectly capable of either glassing him or walking away.

JIM
I don't pay rent. Homes.

After this (ambiguity) is taken on board:

NEVILLE
You got a problem, an issue of some kind?

JIM
Yeah, I don't like your fuckin' hat.

JIM is quite obviously a gambler in many aspects of life.

NEVILLE and POSSE exchange glances. DANGEROUS KOREANS have moved in at the hint of trouble.

JIM (CONT'D)
(quietly to Neville's ear)
I think you kinda want me to have an issue, so I thought of that one.

JIM tosses down his drink, chews his ice, and stares at Neville.

JIM (CONT'D)
I got plenty of issues. A dangerous guy in a hat's only one of them. What's yours?

NEVILLE
See you outside, motherfucker.

JIM turns back and spreads his arms.

JIM
Well, we all gotta go out sometime. It's never when you want it and it's always gonna hurt.
(turns back, leans in)
You a gambler?

NEVILLE
Not like you.

JIM
You don't know what I am. That's the first thing you should know.

JIM looks intently at him, inches away.

JIM (CONT'D)

You want to fuck around or do you
want to cut cards for 500?

NEVILLE looks at him, at the raised 500 PLAQUE.

NEVILLE

I put ten grand against your five
hundred. Is that gambler enough for
you?

JIM

I haven't got ten grand. That's an
unequal bet.

The courtly NEVILLE indicates his smoldering POSSE:

NEVILLE

It's an unequal general situation.

JIM appreciates that.

JIM

Oh, I like odds.
(holding out palm to the
wide-eyed DEALER, not
looking at him)
Give us a deck.

One is shuffled. JIM takes it, walks with Neville to a nearby
small bar where champagne is set up, puts the deck down, and
nods at NEVILLE who cuts first and shows...with great
reluctance....

The KING OF SPADES.

JIM, amused, looks up at NEVILLE who is not amused at all.

JIM (CONT'D)

That's funny.

NEVILLE

I thought you wanted my business
card.

The deck is reshuffled and JIM cuts, revealing, and taking up
to look at, a JACK OF HEARTS.

AMY is watching.

JIM looks at her: and then looks down.

She turns away.

JIM tosses the card on the table and holds out the 500 marker.

JIM
(genuinely)
Congratulations.

He holds out his hand and NEVILLE takes THE PLAQUE and hands over in return a glass of champagne. JIM takes a small sip and sets the glass aside.

NEVILLE
I seen you around. I think you like to lose.

JIM
Life's a losing proposition, right?
Might as well get it over with.

He starts off.

NEVILLE
(over his shoulder)
You need a stake?

JIM turns.

JIM
You like staking losers?

NEVILLE has no response.

JIM (CONT'D)
I know how you stake people.

NEVILLE
Then you know everything.

He sips his drink and loses interest.

JIM moves away, now broke. (KOREANS watching him, one KOREAN aside talking to MISTER LEE). He goes to a SIDEBBOARD loaded with BUFFET FOOD, and realizes he's famished. He loads a plate, loads it, and carries it out onto the terrace.

EXT. TERRACE. CONTINUOUS

AMY looks briefly out through the window at the oblivious JIM, concerned, intrigued, and then moves on with her TRAY OF CANAPES.

JIM puts the plate on the terrace rail and starts to wolf the food. As we come around,

MISTER LEE materializes behind him.

MISTER LEE
Your luck is no good these days.

JIM brasses this out:

JIM
Maybe.

MISTER LEE is intrigued by this guy.

MISTER LEE
You came in with ten thousand in cash. I don't know where you got it.

JIM
Oh, I think we can be pretty sure it was from gambling.

MISTER LEE
Wherever you got it, you didn't give it to me.

JIM
No, I didn't.

MISTER LEE
Why not?

JIM
This is a gambling establishment.

MISTER LEE
You have a family? A wife?
Children?

JIM shakes his head "no". (Though this is a lie and a truth simultaneously). MISTER LEE looks as if this explains plenty, which it may well do. (Though it doesn't). JIM stares out over the canyon, comes to an abrupt, brass-balled decision:

JIM
Well, that depends if you give me ten thousand more in credit.

MISTER LEE
You owe a lot of money.

JIM
Everybody owes money all over the place. Have I never not paid you?

MISTER LEE

Eventually, a debt gets too big to pay. Then...no one is responsible.

JIM grips the rail of the porch. Down in the LOWER GARDEN, PROSTITUTES do business by the pool, one or another going off with a businessman into the dark. A freshly unfolded aspect of Hell. All whispers into ears. As JIM watches...

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

Some people find impossibility to pay a relief. Their lives...are out of their hands.

(closer, as on Feisal in Lawrence)

I think you may be one of those people.

JIM takes it on. Maybe what Mister Lee said is what he's after - maybe it isn't. TWO BIG KOREANS (the key ones, intelligent muscle) are now with MISTER LEE.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

But all this...is starting to be over.

JIM looks at him.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

Get me my money.

MISTER LEE walks away, his MUSCLE following.

JIM leans back with his elbows on the rail, stretching his back, looking at the stars, and then looks over and sees:

JIM'S POV:

NEVILLE now on the terrace, lying back in a deck chair, smoking a COHIBA, his boys seated in shadow nearby.

MOMENTS LATER:

A shadow falls across NEVILLE. He looks up. We reverse to see:

JIM.

JIM

Stake me fifty grand.

A long look from NEVILLE.

NEVILLE
At twenty points.

JIM
At whatever points you like. We had
a conversation about odds. You
think I mind them?

NEVILLE
(to associate)
Give him fifty grand.
(to JIM)
Make sure my man has your, ah,
digits, and so forth.

A DESIGNER LEATHER BAG is dug into. JIM takes CASH, in ten-grand bundles, and goes over to the surprised MISTER LEE. He shows the money.

JIM
You can take the whole fifty, and
we'll settle up – but as we
discussed, this is a gambling
establishment.

MISTER LEE keeps his counsel; then keeps forty, hands it to a BIG KOREAN, and hands ten grand back to Jim with a grave nod. JIM pockets the ten.

JIM walks past the smoking, disinterested NEVILLE.

NEVILLE
Bonne chance.

JIM
I feel better about your hat. But
not about you wearing it inside.

NEVILLE looks after him. His GUYS stand up.

NEVILLE
Sit down.

INT. THE CAISSE AREA. NIGHT

JIM trades the ten in cash for plaques, then heads (AMY again picking him up with her eyes) for the Blackjack table.

JIM pushes all his markers in. The whole ten grand.

JIM
Do it. No no. Don't look at Mister
Lee. You look at me. Do it.

The DEALER deals.

JIM gets a queen showing. The Dealer has an ace showing. Jim checks his down card and sees a 3. He nods for a card and is hit with an 8 for 21.

DEALER

Twenty one.

The DEALER turns over an 8, making 20, and Jim has won. He could cash out now, and big, but he leaves his winnings down and says:

JIM

Play the two.

The DEALER gives JIM a 10 up and another card down; deals himself a king up. JIM flips and sees another 10 for 20. The dealer draws two cards – and busts. Jim's won again.

JIM nods for the DEALER to start another hand. The DEALER looks at MISTER LEE.

JIM (CONT'D)

He doesn't want you to look at him.
Deal the cards.

SPECTATORS crowd around. NEVILLE is watching. AMY comes through the crowd and SHE is watching.

The DEALER gives JIM a down card and an 8. He deals himself a 4 showing over his down card. JIM sees his down card is a 4.

JIM (CONT'D)

(to DEALER)
You take it.

The DEALER turns over a 2, then draws a jack for 16 and then a queen to bust. Jim wins with a 10 for 14.

MISTER LEE watches. The DEALER looks at MISTER LEE.

JIM (CONT'D)

Don't look at him. There's no
limit.

DEALER

It's for your own protection.

JIM

Fuck my protection. You don't come
here for fucking protection from
yourself.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)
You come here for the fuckin'
opposite and here I am. Deal the
cards.

MISTER LEE nods.

THE CARDS ARE DEALT.

JIM wins another hand with 21. He takes up the counters.
Turns away, goes, with people watching him, Amy watching him,
to...

The roulette table.

JIM stands and looks at the waiting table, magic in the light
over it. He puts down his plaques. NEVILLE has come up beside
him.

JIM (CONT'D)
Everything on black.

NEVILLE
Red's been coming up all night.

JIM
You want me to pay you now? Is that
what you want me to do?

NEVILLE
No.

JIM
Why not?

NEVILLE
Because you'll either lose and
you're mine for talking shit about
my headgear, or either I want to
just watch the show.

JIM
It's all of those things.

NEVILLE
Yeah.

JIM
What about ripping me off outside
if I win?

NEVILLE
Not in that business, brother.

JIM
Everything on black.

The ball rolls, and it's nearly black, but then the ball lands in...

RED

The CROWD reacts as if a man has just dropped from a scaffold. AMY, in the crowd, turns away. JIM leans with his elbows on the table for a minute: but then stands straight to look NEVILLE in the eye. NEVILLE looks at JIM.

JIM (CONT'D)
Float me some spending money.

NEVILLE gives him a thousand dollars.

NEVILLE
That's at twenty points, too.

JIM folds away the money. He looks at NEVILLE. He looks at MISTER LEE. Then he goes, pushing his way through the crowd as those people look after him who still have the interest to do so.

EXT. STREET IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. DAWN

JIM comes down the steps, looks bleakly at the valets, and then walks up to his car. The sun is rising, lighting the shoulder of the hill beyond the Hollywood sign.

INT. CAR. DAWN

JIM sits in his car, exhausted, defeated, taking shit on, barely holding it together. He watches NEVILLE and his POSSE pile into two Bentleys and drive off down the canyon. Then he puts the car in gear and drives.

EXT. SUNSET BOULEVARD. NIGHT

JIM pulls up to the Seventh Veil, and in one long shot gets out of the car and heads in, handing the doorman a 20, moving through the dark room, avoiding the "dancers" (it's been a long time since strip clubs in Los Angeles haven't been brothels) until he comes to one in particular, a beautiful black Amazon in a yellow bikini. She starts to do the thing, the come-on (stripper ad-libs)...

STRIPPER
You a tourist, baby?

But Jim holds up his hand and stops her.

JIM

We're all tourists. It's the nature
of the planet.

She starts to speak.

JIM (CONT'D)

Listen. I don't need you to talk. I
need you to listen to me. No. No
no, you listen. I know it's hard, I
know you want to talk your
bullshit, but if you do, I'm going
to leave.

She nods, maybe getting it. He holds out a hundred dollar
bill. She looks at it: starts to speak: but he stops her.

JIM (CONT'D)

I don't want you to act like you're
in a porn film made for retards,
because there's no girl in here
better looking than anybody I've
ever even gone out with once, so I
want you to act like a normal woman
with no mental problems and then I
want you to take this hundred
dollars, I want you to take me in
back, where you blow people for
money, and I want you to do what I
ask you to do without saying
another fucking word to me ever
again in my life. Can you do that?
Because if you can't shut up I
can't stay here.

Finally she nods and takes the hundred dollar bill.

JIM (CONT'D)

OK. All right.

He follows her into the back room as if marching to a death
sentence and we go to:

BLACK

EXT. UCLA. DAY

Establish a part of the college, with JIM'S CAR parked
erratically in the foreground. STUDENTS and STAFF on the
grounds of the campus like figures in a painting.

INT. ENGLISH DEPT FACULTY MEN'S ROOM. DAY

JIM is splashing his face with water. He's still not shaved. His white collar is now not clean. Out of one of the toilets comes an English Department ASSHOLE (JONES). Basically FDR without the wheelchair, senior to Jim, and not as good on any subject. He washes his hands.

JONES

First time I've ever seen you
without a shave.

JIM

I'm trying to avoid tenure. You can
have that one.

JONES

If I could teach like you I'd be a
little more grateful.

JIM examines him.

JIM

Fuck you. [Fuck grateful.]

JONES goes. JIM continues to wash.

INT. UCLA CLASSROOM. DAY

We only use one classroom for Jim. It's a big one. This one, only half full, is still a good crowd mixed evenly along racial and gender lines. He's a popular professor. Among the students is (and this explains everything):

AMY, watching him, eyes tired from her night job, her laptop open.

And another is DEXTER, a white, blonde stoner UCLA tennis player, a good one.

Way, way, way, at the back, a ballplayer named LAMAR is checking his cellphone while his "academic advisor" is whispering to him fiercely.

JIM is writing on the board "A Groats-worth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance", then, turning:

JIM

The first public notice that was
ever made of Shakespeare was from a
grub street writer Robert Greene,
who called him an "upstart crow
beautified with our feathers".

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

In the book under that title on the board. If you haven't discovered Robert Greene on your own at this point, the man who wrote the novel *Pandosto*, you don't belong in this class.

ON AMY'S SCREEN is the famous picture of the ghost of ROBERT GREENE in his winding sheet, pen to paper at a table, condemned to hackdom even in the afterlife. She clicks and hides the picture.

NEBBISH

(who has no idea who
Robert Greene is)

Is the stolen feathers thing
because Greene knew Shakespeare was
the Earl of Oxford?

JIM puts his head on the blackboard. Not again.

JIM

Listen. The Earl of Oxford
published poetry. It wasn't any
good. Had Oxford been able to get a
play put on, he would have broken a
leg to do it. Can you think of any
human being that would for any
reason not put his name on
"Hamlet"?

BLANK faces look at him.

JIM (CONT'D)

The Oxfordian thing, the anti-
Strafordian thing...what pisses
people off about Shakespeare...
What lies behind every controversy
about Shakespeare...is rage. Rage
over the nature, and unequal
distribution, of talent. Rage that
genius appears where it appears for
no material reason at all. Desiring
a thing...

He passes AMY, walking...

JIM (CONT'D)

...cannot make you have it.

He drifts through the room, talking.

JIM (CONT'D)

The trouble with writing, if I may bring it up here in the English Department...instead of allowing you all to talk about sexual politics all fucking day long...is that we all do a little of it from time to time, writing, and some of us start to think, delusionally, that well, maybe with a little time, a little peace, a little money in the bank, maybe if we left the old lady and the kids, maybe if we had that room of our own, we might be writers, too. Why do we think that? We accept genius in sports, in painting, as something we cannot do, but it's no more likely that you can be a writer than you can be an Olympic fucking pole vaulter. Because what you have to be before you try to be a pole vaulter, is a pole vaulter.

STUDENT

You are one.

JIM

A pole vaulter?

STUDENT

A novelist.

JIM

No I'm not. For me to be a novelist I'd have to make a deal with myself that it was ok being a mediocrity in a profession that died commercially in the last century. People do that. I'm not one of them. If you take away nothing else from my class, from this experience, let it be this: If you're not a genius, don't bother. The world needs plenty of electricians and a lot of them are happy. I'll be fucked if I'll be a midlist novelist, getting good reviews from the people I give good reviews to...

STUDENT (O.S.)

You're better than—

JIM

I'm not better than anybody but the people who suck.

(turns, points, not going to listen to this)

Let's talk about talent. Let's have a look at Dexter right there.

Dexter, an ordinary-looking young man with a size forty jacket, regular features and decent dentition, is the second-ranked collegiate tennis player in the United States.

He leans in on Dexter.

JIM (CONT'D)

How'd that come about, Dexter? You come from a tennis family?

DEXTER

I started five years ago in high school because the tennis guys had the best weed.

JIM

So you started playing tennis because the tennis guys had the best weed. After you started tennis, how long was it before you and everybody else realized you were better than everybody?

DEXTER is well brought up and doesn't want to answer.

JIM (CONT'D)

Not very long. It was immediately, right? Everybody knew you were better?

DEXTER nods.

JIM (CONT'D)

What happened when you noticed you were naturally better than everybody? Everybody else is lumbering around, essentially pretending to play tennis, while you played tennis like Jesus raising the dead.

DEXTER

...I got interested in tennis.

JIM

Well, we're all different. My own personal view of Jesus is that he'd lose interest in being Jesus as soon as he realized that he was – and that it was easy. You know...how many lepers can you do without getting tired? Lazarus and water into wine are good as one-offs. I personally think that the thing to do is to one thing, definitively, and then move on...to something else...if, and only if...
 (and he is referring to himself)
 ...you can figure out what it is that needs doing. But let's deal with you. Do you remember Machiavelli? That would have been in September.

DEXTER

I can remember September.

JIM

Is it the game, brother, or the money? Virtu, or fama? Fame, or virtue? You're kicking ass in tennis. What are you after? Don't go modest on me. What do you want? Money or glory?

DEXTER doesn't know what to answer.

DEXTER

Both?

JIM

You got ambitious, yeah?

AMY is watching.

DEXTER

I realized...as I learned about the game, and about myself in the game, that I was in reach of the...

He doesn't want to say it. JIM leans in and whispers:

JIM

Highest possible level.

DEXTER

The highest level. Maybe. Yeah.
That.

JIM

OK, so you're headed for the
highest level. But it's not all
roses. It's still a gamble, isn't
it. Things about it burn your ass?

DEXTER takes that on. Nods.

JIM (CONT'D)

People out there writing articles
about less good tennis players? You
know why that is, Dexter? They have
publicists. I've personally seen an
article that put a fake question
mark over your ability.

DEXTER smolders.

JIM (CONT'D)

Also I read somewhere that your old
high school coach got a job in
England claiming to have discovered
and created you.

DEXTER looks ready to explode thinking of that one.

JIM (CONT'D)

Dexter's old coach now coaches the
UK international team because
Dexter was good at tennis.
He used Dexter and fucked him. If
Dexter broke his leg in five places
and never played again, this guy,
this fucking liar, this expatriate
excrescence that came out of an
alcohol coma and Pomona High School
because Dexter picked up a racket
because the tennis guys had the
best weed, is probably going to end
up knighted for services to British
sport. There are two rules: first,
be a genius. Second: don't get
fucked. You got that on board,
Dexter, yeah?

DEXTER nods.

JIM (CONT'D)

I'm a literature teacher. I can't
write well enough to bother.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

Or I just don't bother. Whichever. Whichever it is, there'll be no apotheosis around here, there'll be no ambition here. I put my money down anywhere else. Because if I can't be king I won't be anybody. What did the Emperor Vespasian say on his deathbed?

AMY's hand writes "Vae, puto deus fio" on her notebook and then conceals it.

JIM (CONT'D)

He said, "Dear me, I think I am becoming a God". If I can't die knowing that I'll be remembered, I won't try to be remembered. One novel and out. If you want to learn creative writing you can go down the hall and find seven people who want to do it and can't.

STUDENT (O.S.)

You can.

JIM

But I won't. Because I'm not good enough. But do you know who does write at the highest level? When most of us, and even I, write barely adequately? Do you know who it is, in this room?

The NEBBISH gets ready for coronation. JIM leans in on him and whispers.

JIM (CONT'D)

No, it isn't the one who talks the most...and you really do talk shit. You don't know anything at all. You're an NPR host. Tops.

The NEBBISH freaks.

Jim indicates AMY.

JIM (CONT'D)

The literary person here is Ms Phillips. She is the least obstreperous in this room, the quietest, and the only one in this room who can have a real career in letters. Some of you can have one perceptually.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

Only she can have one in reality.
She's better at writing than our US
presently amateur number two is at
tennis. Let's address the
Shakespeare question. Where do you
come from, Ms Phillips?

She is blushing furiously. Almost soundlessly:

AMY

Ohio.

JIM

Parents geniuses by any chance?
Filthy rich?

She shakes her head. He rounds on her like a prosecutor,
brutal, blunt.

JIM (CONT'D)

Your Dad wasn't the Earl of Oxford
was he?

AMY

No.

JIM

How old were you when you read?

Almost inaudibly:

Amy

I was three.

JIM

That's early. That's prodigious.
Any advantages? Literary home life?

She shakes her head, but is now holding his stare boldly.

JIM (CONT'D)

What was your father?

AMY

He worked in a factory.

JIM

Your mother?

AMY shakes her head. No mother, or don't bring it up.

JIM (CONT'D)

What was your mother.

AMY finally looks up.

AMY
She was an alcoholic. She was
insane.

JIM turns to the NEBBISH.

JIM
Isn't your Dad...

NEBBISH
I don't see how this is pertinent.

JIM
(back on an uncomfortable
Amy)
No money, no advantages, not a peer
of the realm? You're not the Earl
of fucking Oxford are you? No? Then
why the fuck are you better than
the rest of us?

She looks away.

JIM (CONT'D)
No, you look at me.

She does.

JIM (CONT'D)
You are better than the rest of us.
If no one's told you yet that
you're a genius, and an artist, let
me be the first.

She starts to cry.

WHITE DUDE IN BACK
I don't know if you can say that
because I think it is subjective,
man. I mean we all have something
to offer.

JIM goes very close to him, and into his very ear, says:

JIM
Bullshit.

He walks on:

JIM (CONT'D)

Genius is magical, not material. If you don't have the magic, no amount of wishing will make it so.

The period ends.

AMY in tears is gathering her stuff.

To DEXTER, as he slaps him on the shoulder.

JIM (CONT'D)

See you at the house, Shakespeare.

AMY rushes from the room.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY. MOMENTS LATER

JIM is moving along, noticing AMY, who has leaned against a wall to compose herself. She looks up at JIM. JIM knows exactly what he's done: some good, and he's not sure why. AMY tears off down the hall. JIM puts his head down, and continues. DEAN FULLER falls in step beside him.

DEAN FULLER

May I have a word?

JIM

More words? I've about had it with them. I don't care about words or anything else.

DEAN FULLER

That's ridiculous. Jim, the athletic department—

JIM

Yes?

DEAN FULLER

Has asked how a certain person is doing.

He indicates the ballplayer from the classroom — a very tall African American youth with a baby face who is sitting outside an advisors office (on the floor so that his height is not absurd) talking worriedly on a cellphone. It's LAMAR HAMPTON.

JIM

OK. How is a "certain person" doing? The certain person cannot write at collegiate level. Then again, who gives a fuck. Half the tenured faculty would be flogged to death for idiocy at any grammar school in any previous century.

DEAN FULLER

Why do you care about that if you don't care about anything?

JIM

I probably don't care. If you want to give a dyslexic an English degree it's up to you.

DEAN FULLER

It's time to get serious about your career.

JIM

When it is, I'll let you know. Unless, of course, you let me know that it's time to not get serious, and I don't care either way.

DEAN FULLER

You're a born teacher.

JIM looks at him.

JIM

I was born a lot of things. It doesn't mean I want to be any of them.

(knowing the answer)

What, they got a particularly big game coming up?

DEAN FULLER looks desperate and implicated.

DEAN FULLER

I imagine you'd know more than anyone.

JIM

(leaning close)

You don't know anything about me. But hey, I'll throw him out of class right now. He can be in academic arbitration and unable to play. Where's your money go then?

DEAN FULLER is the real gambler.

JIM (CONT'D)

Oh, I'm sorry, it's already down.
I'll keep him in class. Why don't
you give me a call and tell me
about Villanova. Quid pro quo.

JIM moves on and LAMAR, on the phone, watches him pass, with interest, but continues his call.

EXT. ROBERTA'S HOUSE IN BEL AIR. DAY

JIM in his car waits for the GATES to open and then spins in under the canopy of trees. It's one of the more East Coast houses in Bel Air. Let it breath. Jim stops his car, sits for a moment, then gets out, squinting in the California light. He notices that:

THE FRONT DOOR has been opened by a waiting BUTLER. He walks over to the front door.

BUTLER

Good morning Mister James.

JIM

Call me Jim. How's the weekend.

BUTLER

Crap, sir.

JIM

How'd you do on the football?

BUTLER

Not so good.

JIM

It's going around, brother.

He passes through into the shadowed familiar interior.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE CLAY TENNIS COURT. DAY

Like the one at Evans' house. Jim's mother ROBERTA is playing with DEXTER, who is her coach. JIM is sitting in the high referees chair, a hat down over his eyes, smoking a cigarette and watching the play.

DEXTER

Good, good. That's great.

ROBERTA is a good older player. But can't make the last lob from Dexter. She goes to the net to shake Dexter's hand.

ROBERTA

I'll never beat you, Mister Dexter,
but if you ever give me a point
again, I'll fire you.

DEXTER, barely sweating, grins and gets it.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

Good luck in the finals.

DEXTER

Thank you, ma'am.

DEXTER goes to his gear, which is not on the "hospitality" side of the court. He's an employee and Roberta is Roberta. ROBERTA goes to the table at the side near Jim's chair, and pours herself some ice water from a lemond pitcher.

ROBERTA

So. Why do you need fifty thousand
dollars?

JIM looks away, not answering.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

I already sent off a sum of money
to your wife, who hasn't seen you
for two months.

JIM

She doesn't want to see me.

He comes down from the chair. He gets some iced water.

JIM (CONT'D)

Marriage is something they do on
another planet, Mom. You know that
as well as I do, right?

She looks at him sharply: then lets it go. She wets her face with a napkin dipped in ice water.

ROBERTA

I've never claimed to like her, but
she needs to effect a legal
separation, if you're going to go
on as you are.

JIM

Going on as I am is the only thing
I've got.

ROBERTA

That's sophisticated and beneath you,
which you know as well as I do. I
think you would agree that
modifications in your behavior are
possible.

JIM

Something being possible doesn't
make it mandatory.

ROBERTA

I know you're in some sort
of...state. I even might know it's
quasi-suicidal. I imagine it's
connected to what happened to your
book. You're not narcissistic
enough to be putting on a show.
You're not an adolescent, you're
not sick in any way, and we don't
even need to say that you're far
from stupid. You're my son, but you
need to understand very clearly
that I've said goodbye before to
people that I love.

JIM

Yeah, whatever did happen to Dad?

INTERCUT:

YOUNG JIM holding his breath beneath the water of a pool.
Above him at the edge of the pool, through the dancing water,
we see a couple (his parents, Roberta and whoever Dad was),
fighting.

She turns on him coldly.

ROBERTA

I've said goodbye to people many,
many times. And so has every person
on earth who lives an orderly and
sanitary life.

JIM

I said goodbye to my wife only
because I couldn't depend on her to
say it to me.

ROBERTA

I don't want to understand the nature of your problem. I just want you not to have it.

(a beat)

Do you know why you're looking at me like that? Because I just said what you would say to someone else.

He cops to it.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

Any money from me from now on goes directly to your wife. If I hear that you have ever touched a dime of it, there won't be any more. Even for them. And if you don't stop gambling, I'll cut *them* off. Don't come here for money ever again.

JIM

Thank you.

He walks away across the court. She turns away to get more water. DEXTER has packed up. They walk together towards the house.

JIM (CONT'D)

Sorry to use you in show and tell today. You're headed for the finals, right?

DEXTER

Sure the fuck am.

JIM

We're all in the finals. It's the end of days, brother. It's the apocalypse.

His mobile rings. Whatever number is on it, he doesn't answer.

EXT. ROBERTA'S HOUSE . DAY

JIM drives out of the gates and he notices a car containing BIG ERNIE – a pretty big enforcer dude, but not that big. He gets out of his own car, locks it street-parked, and walks over to BIG ERNIE.

JIM
You looking at my mother's house
for some particular reason?

BIG ERNIE
Yeah I'm wondering if she gave you
any money in it.

JIM
Nope.

BIG ERNIE
I'm from Frank. Let's take a ride.

JIM gets in and we

CUT TO:

INT. EXT BIG ERNIE'S CAR/SANTA MONICA BOULEVARD. DAY
They are just driving along, BIG ERNIE saying nothing.

JIM
I don't owe Frank that much, pal,
and it isn't due. Not even the vig.

BIG ERNIE
Did you or did you not call and ask
him for more money.

JIM looks over at him.

JIM
Yeah I did.

BIG ERNIE
Well, we're gonna go see him about
that. We got one stop.

BIG ERNIE wheels into a crappy motel.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOTEL. DAY

JIM trails BIG ERNIE along a line of motel doors. BIG ERNIE
comes to a door, adjusts his jacket, and knocks hard. It's a
knock you never want to hear.

JIM
Do you practice that?

BIG ERNIE

Not really but I got a junkie
girlfriend and it's how I wake her
up in the bathroom.

The DOOR is opened on its chain, and we have a moment to see the smeared unshaven face of a DEBTOR before BIG ERNIE kicks the door in, breaking THE DEBTOR'S cheek in the process.

INT. MOTEL ROOM. CONTINUOUS

LIGHT blasts into the dark, long-term residence as THE DEBTOR, in wife-beater and underwear, reels back from the door holding his face. In an instant, BIG ERNIE is on to him, beating the living shit out of him on the bed. JIM watches. A regular sequence of right hands straight into the face, smashing spectacles, nose, mouth. THE DEBTOR'S face is a ruined mask of blood within seconds. BIG ERNIE drags the guy onto the floor and brings a boot down on a delicate hand. He straightens up, reviews his work. JIM has noticed: CARTOONS silently on TV, TOYS in the corner of the room. He then sees A BOY peeping out of the bathroom door, staring at the ruin of his father.

BIG ERNIE

(to JIM)

Well that's too bad, but the
memories may mitigate against some
pretty shitty genetics.

(idly handing the
dumbstruck BOY a \$100
bill on the way out)

Feel like a schvitz?

INT. SCHVITZ. DAY

FRANK, who is basically Sinatra, but bald and Jewish, sits in the steam, slowly shaving his head, as JIM and BIG ERNIE enter, and sit down - JIM less readily than BIG ERNIE, who takes a covering position. JIM sits beside Frank after Frank slaps the tiles.

FRANK

You have a good time with Big
Ernie?

JIM

He's not that big.

FRANK

They're not talking about his
jacket, brother.

JIM

With all due respect, I'm not interested in his johnson.

FRANK

Are you saying I am?

JIM

No.

FRANK

I admit that in this milieu we live in, this demi-monde, there is a little locker room humor to be expected. Locker room anything always turns out to be fundamentally, in essence, homosexual. I mean let's be frank.

BIG ERNIE

It has been so since the Greeks.

JIM

I can't argue with that. You know your stuff.

FRANK

They used to grease up and have at each other. You don't bet on the football, do you.

JIM

Football's for homosexuals.

FRANK

A friend of mine says that you're a teacher.

JIM

I'm an associate professor at UCLA.

FRANK

My daughter's at The New School. Linguistics. Hey, she's not the Barbra Streisand Professor of Gender Studies, but it's a job. We all got jobs. Mine's supposedly television production. Listen.

JIM

I'm listening...

FRANK

The amount of cash you want is more than I am ordinarily disposed to loan out unless, say, you're a medium-sized country with the ability to raise taxes under the threat of military force.

JIM smiles.

FRANK (CONT'D)

OR, a Eurotrash cokehead who has a father who can be squeezed after the kid's microbudget sci-fi film doesn't get picked up at Sundance. Are you following me?

JIM nods, takes it.

FRANK (CONT'D)

You got family that can be squeezed? I'm saying that rhetorically.

JIM

Let's deal with this as gentlemen who understand each other.

FRANK

No, I need us to treat each other like we're not gentlemen and that we're very very stupid.

JIM

There's no family. There's never any family.

FRANK accepts that.

FRANK

What do you make, a hundred, hundred fifty a year? Two hundred before taxes.

JIM shrugs.

FRANK (CONT'D)

What's wrong with you? You have brain damage, some fundamental disability? Two hundred is a monk.

JIM spreads his hands.

FRANK (CONT'D)

And you, a monk, owe that Korean son of a bitch, the prince of fucking darkness, that much right now, and then another fifty, excluding the vig, to Neville Baraka. Who will kill you because when you cut cards he got the king of spades and you laughed at him.

JIM

You're pretty well-informed.

FRANK

You borrowed 50K from a very dangerous man after he was already going to kill you.

JIM nods.

JIM

Yeah. I did.

FRANK

Birth, education, intelligence, talent, looks, family money, has all this been a real comprehensive fucking burden for you? I see two problems. One, the world at his feet, in this town, and he's a fuckin' monk. Because, apparently, fuck it. Two, he wants to die for some unspecified personal reason and therefore owes money to Korean murderers and talks about a schwarzer's hat in a place where you can get killed and they merely drop your body up the Angeles Crest. Three, he wants to borrow a quarter of a million dollars to pay off debts which he will not, in fact, pay off because, to go back to point two, he's suicidal.

JIM

Just let me know what you can do for me, all right?

FRANK

If I help you consolidate these debts, so you don't fuck the Korean or the schwarzer up the ass, do you think that *I* will be anybody you want to fuck up the ass? Am I *likelier* to be fucked up the ass?

JIM

Less likely, I imagine.

FRANK

Listen to me, listen to me, I'm not your doctor, I'm not your cognitive therapist, but let me be your uncle. You have to pay ten percent a week—

JIM

I know what I have to do.

FRANK

Well, where are you going to get my money?

JIM

I'll get your money.

FRANK

How much you want?

JIM

I'm three hundred and twenty five thousand all in, disregarding that I'm five months behind on my mortgage.

FRANK

When's the last time you ever had money in your hand to pay a debt, and paid it?

JIM starts to speak. FRANK raises his hand.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Don't fuck with me. This will be your first time when you pay. Am I right.

JIM

You're right.

FRANK

We're not done. I need something from you.

JIM

Collateral...what....

FRANK

No, I need you to say to me "I need this money because I'm a scumbag gambler". "I'm a scumbag gambler who takes food out of the mouths of my wife and child. That's the kind of man I am, Frank, and I want you to loan me, a dying suicidal asshole, a lot of money".

JIM

That's too much to remember, to repeat it.

FRANK

Lets make it simpler. I know you're not a gambler. You're doing something more complicated that manifests itself as gambling, but I don't have any other frame of reference. I've got money, you want it. If you want the money, you tell me "I am not a man".

JIM sits. He doesn't respond.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Say it. Say "I am not a man".

We don't know whether Jim is going to say it or not and we

CUT TO:

INT. UCLA CLASSROOM. DAY

Students are filing out and JIM is collecting his papers and putting them into his briefcase. On the blackboard we see that he has written "HCE=Here Comes Everybody". He looks up and AMY is standing and looking at him. They look at each other for a long time. Then he extends a palm. She sits down in the chair. That he is in love with her is painfully obvious. That she is in love with him is apparent. It's one of those times when you know you could cross the room. He smiles, and then doesn't. He looks at the ceiling. Another moment.

JIM

Yes?

AMY

Did you mean what you said? About me having talent.

JIM

I said what I said. Is there something you don't get about "A plus plus plus, See Me?" on every paper?

AMY

Then you never "see me" as a matter of fact.

JIM concedes it.

JIM

Yeah well I was busy and also...I didn't want to see you.

AMY

Because I've seen you...

He stares at her.

AMY (CONT'D)

In your other life.

JIM

It's not another life. Anybody can see me, not see me, I don't care. There's nothing to look at. There's nothing that's going on except that I can't see you privately.

She gets it.

AMY

Oh.

JIM

There it is. I don't know how to lie, so I can't talk to you.

AMY

If you're talking about having a cup of coffee or something, half the faculty...

JIM

I'm not half the faculty and I don't have a social life or a personal life, and I don't have coffee.

She rummages in her bag and throws his NOVEL on his desk. He looks down at it.

AMY

Would you sign that for me please?

JIM

I can't.

She starts to go.

JIM (CONT'D)

Please sit down.

She does.

JIM (CONT'D)

If I've done you any good, accidentally by just telling the truth because I can't help it, I'm glad, but I'm a contaminated, suicidal fuck-up and I'm not hurting another person on the face of the earth.

She indicates the novel.

AMY

I want you to sign that.

JIM

Absolutely not.

AMY

I want you to fucking sign it.

JIM

Trust me, I'm not being dramatic, but that...

He pushes the book away...

JIM (CONT'D)

...was somebody else. Who thought other things. Who lived in a different world. I cannot and will not sign it.

AMY

You are being dramatic. Which is not surprising since the novel is ok but you're basically a dramatist.

JIM

Probably but who gives a fuck.

Putting the book in her bag:

AMY

I didn't get to college until I was twenty five because my father died of cancer and my mother was a drunk, I'm an older undergraduate and I want to go to a restaurant.

JIM

There's a whole bunch of things I don't do any more. That's kind of up there.

Long silence.

When he looks up, she is gone. JIM picks up a PEN, looks at it, and then violently smashes its point on the metal desk. INK is all over his hand like blood and he looks at it.

EXT. JIM'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. DAY

It's a treehouse shack, termite-eaten, a divorcee's hut.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. DAY

JIM sits with a towel wrapped around him at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and staring into space. He looks at a pile of PAPERS, loses interest. His phone rings, vibrating on the yellow linoleum of the 1950s table.

JIM

Guy with no money speaking, how may I direct your call?

NEVILLE

I'm reading your book.

And he is:

INTERCUT NEVILLE lying on an Empire daybed in a fantastical boudoir.

JIM

Yeah? I just had a bit of a conversation about it.

Long beat. Pages turn.

NEVILLE

It's not bad.

JIM

If you want to get into producing. There's only about a hundred grand against it at Warner Brothers. Good script. I know the guy who did it.

NEVILLE

It's an indie if anything.

JIM

That's what they thought.

NEVILLE

I hear you went to Little Frank for money and that he wouldn't loan it to you.

JIM

Well you heard wrong because he did try to loan it to me, and I didn't take it.

NEVILLE

You didn't like the terms?

And this, as we come around on Jim, is Jim's shred of hope in himself, however casually he says it:

JIM

No, the terms were unacceptable.

NEVILLE

But you're into me. I ain't Fannie Mae. Ain't no bailouts.

JIM

Why did you loan me the money?

NEVILLE

A gamble between two players who like to play. You and me. Stakes high. You know the time frame. Tick tick tock.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

This could be good for you,
brother, as a man who needs to come
to his senses, but either way, you
owe me. Peace out.

JIM hangs up, sits for a while, and then dials a number.

JIM

I want Villanova tonight by twenty
points.

CUT TO:

EXT. A MARINA. DAY

A mahogany yacht from the 1930s is swarming with its
uniformed crew. On the rear deck an old man in a wheelchair
sits like a lizard in the sun. It is Jim's grandfather, ED.
Ed is not only on an IV for hydration, a bag attached to the
wheelchair receives an occasional trickle of money-colored
BILE. JIM is looking: a sudden increase in the bile.

ED

(a broad swamp Yankee
accent)

I drink a ginger ale, it comes
right out. Look at that. But I
still like the taste of it. I like
it here, too. I ain't going
anywhere until they come and get
me. I used to take this boat to
French Polynesia. Other places.
Everywhere. They say they'll do my
ashes...

Throwing gestures at the water...

ED (CONT'D)

So I can travel. But I don't buy
it. I have a daughter. She'll get
me in a box no matter what I write
down.

JIM

Do you know who I am?

ED

Yeah.

A long beat.

ED (CONT'D)

You're my Jim.

JIM has to put his sunglasses on.

INTERCUT:

A YOUNGER JIM than the boy in the pool, sitting on a YOUNGER ED'S lap and "driving" a big vintage Bentley car round and round the driveway at what is now Roberta's house.

JIM surfaces as ED grabs his steward by the white-coated arm.

ED (CONT'D)

This is my grandson, Jim.

STEWARD

(disapproving)

I have met your grandson many times.

JIM

(to STEWARD)

He said I could use the boat, brother. If you're not careful I'll use it again, and bring more Mexicans.

The STEWARD, who is Mexican, grimaces politely and fucks off.

JIM (CONT'D)

He doesn't like Mexicans, and he's a Mexican. I can't figure it out.

ED

Takes all kinds. Writing anything?

JIM

That's all done.

ED

Well I won't waste time calling it your prime of life.

JIM

No, I wouldn't bother doing that.

ED

Just be around to bury me.

JIM

I will be.

ED

Not to get the money because you won't. That's our deal.

JIM
I remember it.

ED
Nothing is the best thing I can give you. I don't care about the other sons of bitches, they can have the money. They need it, because without it they are zero. With you...the best thing I can give you is zero. Jim?

JIM
I'm here.

JIM stares through his sunglasses.

ED
I told your mother the other day that I'd just been playing cards with my sister on a porch in Connecticut in a lightning storm. Your mother convinced me otherwise. She told me my sister is dead.

JIM
She would.

ED
How do you be a writer when your mother is a writer is what I want to know.

JIM
You don't. The situation is very nearly Greek.

ED
Anybody ever wrote about you it would be half about her. No wonder you said fuck it.

JIM looks at the old man with great appreciation.

ED (CONT'D)
However, you come into this from nothing. You go back into nothing from this. So in between, you have to do what you have to do. It's the only time you got to do it. Wanted to write down what I remember. Too late. Can't do it now. Why I married your grandmother.

JIM

Tell me what you remember.

ED thinks.

ED

She said "Edward unless you stop dissipating yourself and get your elephants to Croydon I am marrying Frederick Sitwell Three." Well I couldn't stand the thought of that. I wasn't going to let Fred Sitwell to get anything. How many of us succeed not because we want what we get but because we can't be seen to lose? You sit there right now because I hated Fred Sitwell. Male behavior. Is what it is. Ladies different. Long study of subject. Been at it a hundred years now. First man to build a bridge, know what his wife said to him?

JIM shakes his head, smiling.

ED (CONT'D)

"What are you, too lazy to row?"

JIM laughs.

ED (CONT'D)

So because I was a jackass who had to defeat another jackass in combat there I was married almost seventy years to a woman who by and large only gave me a hard time. Got my elephants to Croydon, though. Computers then were cards. Holes in cards. Never understood it. Said I did. Invested in it.

JIM

Did you ever gamble?

ED

No. Gambling is synthetic experience. Cowards do it.

JIM gets it. And the GRANDFATHER, now looking up, isn't as senile as he may have seemed.

ED (CONT'D)

There have been some calls at the office, Jim. Even on the boat.

THE STEWARD is glaring from the companionway.

JIM
What sort of calls.

ED looks off into the marine haze.

ED
Doesn't matter. Whoever's after
you, you're on your own. You'll get
out of it or you won't.

They sit there.

ED (CONT'D)
You want something to eat?

EXT. JIM'S STREET. HILLS. DAY

His BMW is being hooked up by a tow truck by guys with tattoos and weird hair and is dragged off in a cloud of diesel smoke.

JIM, in a bathrobe, watches from the door. He looks across at a NEIGHBOR, a regular middle class retired person, who is standing with a dribbling hose.

JIM
Safe is easy. You keep at it. For
all of us.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE. BATHROOM. LATER

Jim is in the bath eating cereal and watching a college basketball game. UCLA. A small boxy TV is balanced on a chair. In many of the shots we see, repeatedly, and we're in very close, LAMAR, his student and UCLA star.

ON JIM'S face:

JIM
Oh, don't do that.

We hear a ref's whistle and a roar of disapproval.

ANNOUNCER
You know with some people like
Adrian Mueller you just don't know
what their problem is. He fouls
when he has no reason whatsoever to
foul.

JIM

Well, either he can't help it,
Chuck, or he could, but doesn't.
You be the judge.

EXT. JIM'S PORCH. DAY

ROBERTA comes up from her car, up the walk, and knocks on the door. No answer. She finds it unlocked and goes in.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE BATHROOM. DAY

JIM spoons cereal and milk, watching. The game. He looks up to see: ROBERTA, dressed to the nines, looking at him. ROBERTA reaches out a foot in Manolo Blahnik and pushes the TV off the chair – there is an explosion of cathode tube, off – and then sits down on the chair.

ROBERTA

You always said you lost interest
in sports after you stopped playing
them.

JIM

I did.

ROBERTA leaves the room and JIM, after sitting for a moment, begins to get out of the bath. His feet avoid the broken glass and he whips the TV plug out of the wall.

INT. JIM'S LIVING ROOM. DAY

ROBERTA is sitting agitatedly in a chair. JIM comes in, in his bathrobe, and immediately switches on the same game on the wall unit.

ROBERTA

You have money on this game?

JIM doesn't answer. He looks back at the screen. LAMAR sinks a three-pointer.

JIM

He's in my class.

ROBERTA

Is he good at English?

JIM thinks, weighs it, and then says:

JIM

No.

ROBERTA

Do you really want to be a man who goes to his mother to cover gambling debts?

JIM thinks about it. He's in, if he plays it right.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

That you don't want to live with your wife, I accept. You never should have married her. Why did you?

JIM

Because the odds weren't good.

ROBERTA

How bad is the trouble you're in.

JIM

I'm always in trouble.

ROBERTA

I mean: do you still need the money?

JIM

No.

ROBERTA

I don't know when to believe you anymore.

(a beat)

Perhaps I should believe the gangster that called my house.

JIM after a complex look at his mother reaches for a pad of paper and writes on it and folds it and hands it to her.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

What's this?

JIM

What I owe.

She opens it and reads.

ROBERTA

(trembling with rage;
getting up)

How is that possible?

JIM

It was the same as marriage. I gambled, I lost.

ROBERTA

Marriage is in the real world. It's not a game of chance.

JIM

Now you're talking crazy.

He eats cereal again.

ROBERTA

What will they do to you if you don't pay?

JIM looks at her.

JIM

Break every bone in my body. Or go after the family.

ROBERTA whacks him across the face. JIM takes it.

ROBERTA

This isn't something you can't help. You're doing it on purpose.

JIM

There's going to be a time when I want something again. When I won't allow myself to be seen in this condition. But it isn't now, and it isn't up to you or anything you or anybody says.

She sits holding the paper. Then:

ROBERTA

Are you degraded enough to go to the bank with your mother?

INT. A BANK CUBICLE. DAY

JIM and ROBERTA are seated. Jim's dignity is somewhat covered by sunglasses as he sits beside his mother.

ROBERTA

I wish to withdraw three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars in cash.

THE BANKER looks up.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

I wish to withdraw three hundred
and twenty-five thousand dollars in
cash.

THE BANKER looks from ROBERTA to JIM and back to ROBERTA.

BANKER

In cases like this...I have to ask
if everything is all right.

ROBERTA

Nothing's "all right" when someone
needs that sort of money in cash,
but it's my money and it's none of
your business.

BANKER

(to JIM)

Are you a relation?

ROBERTA

This is my son.

THE BANKER takes this on.

JIM

Are you implying she's under duress
or something?

BANKER

(not to be fucked with)

Should I?

ROBERTA

The money's mine, there's plenty of
it, and please don't tell me even
once that your bullshit is for my
own protection. That is understood.
You have a withdrawal slip, you
have my ID, I have sufficient
funds, my family has been with this
bank since my father started it and
I need three hundred and twenty-
five thousand dollars in cash.

THE BANKER goes onto her computer.

BANKER

You're absolutely sure you want it
in cash?

ROBERTA

Cash.

BANKER

I need to get the ok of another officer.

ROBERTA

(face burning)

Do what you have to do.

EXT. BANK. DUSK

ROBERTA, shaking with rage, holds the big yellow envelope of money.

ROBERTA

This is the last of it, forever.

JIM is looking around at the city, as if he's not really there.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

If I ever have to feel the effect of your problems again, be they made up or real, or pay the consequences of your foolishness. I will never see you again. Do you understand that.

JIM nods.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

(shouting)

I need you to really...*fucking*... understand that. And I need you to feel like something not even human when you take this envelope. Am I just a barking dog in a silent film? What the fuck am I to you?

JIM looks at her.

ROBERTA (CONT'D)

Do you even give a damn or do you just want to take the money. Do you want to just take the money and go? Even if I say goodbye to you and consider it cheap to be rid of you?

JIM

I want to take the money and go.

She drops the envelope on the ground. JIM picks up the envelope. ROBERTA puts her face in her hands. Then, tough old bird, she recovers herself, and races off towards her LIVERY CAR.

WE now are watching this departure, JIM holding the money, and Roberta pulling away in the back seat of her town car, from the POV of a car down the street. AS JIM begins to walk, the car is put into gear, and begins to move slowly.

INT. A CAB. NIGHT

JIM, the yellow envelope on his lap, is driving through Koreatown. He passes a dubious doorway of a building containing a Korean grocery that is not really a grocery (the first layer of deceptive businesses that conceal the gambling establishment). There are black cars parked in front of it, a knot of KOREAN HEAVIES smoking cigarettes on the sidewalk. JIM is agitated. He's struggling and losing. There is a reason he doesn't want to pay.

JIM
 (talking to himself, more
 than the driver)
 No no no. I don't want to go here
 anymore.

DRIVER
 This is what you said.

KOREAN HEAVIES, who we recognize, have recognized JIM in the back of the erratic cab.

JIM
 It's not time yet. It's not time.
 Drive. I told you to fuckin' drive.

He sits back.

He looks at the yellow envelope on the seat beside him. Then forward.

THE KOREAN HEAVIES stare after the CAB, one of them walking into the road.

EXT. JIM'S WIFE'S HOUSE. DAY

The CAB drives away.

INT. GARAGE AND HOUSE. DAY. VARIOUS

JIM, holding his envelope, notes that the car is gone. He looks at the STROLLER in the corner, BEACH BAG, other objects recognizable from previous life.

He uses a key on the interior door and after getting in disarms the ADT alarm. He looks around the kitchen, the high chair at the table, the washed-up bottles by the sink. He sits down at the table and with a finger turns around the baby's placemat: it is a brightly colored map of the world. He turns it back to where it was.

He goes and looks at the things stuck to the refrigerator: baby pictures, but nothing of Jim. He clutches the ENVELOPE full of money.

He continues through the house. He regards the LIVING ROOM. He opens a door into what used to be his STUDY and sees that the shelves are empty and the BOOKS are half put into cartons and half stacked on the floor by the door.

There is no desk, merely four indents in the carpet where the desk legs used to be.

He takes that on: he moves along to look into the bedroom. A crib with a mobile, the baby's things. He goes along and looks into the other bedroom, and when he switches on the light stands there with head cocked, looking at:

JIM'S POV:

A man's boots, a rumpled bed, two water bottles and a wine glass on the night stand. He goes into the bathroom and sees: a leather bag of shaving tackle. Not his. He sorts through the toilet kit and finds condoms, and, oddly, Rogaine packets.

He leans against the wall and stays there, head back, eyes closed, holding his crinkling envelope of money.

From OFF we hear two car doors slam close. JIM pushes off the wall, and heads slowly back towards the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN. DAY

JIM'S WIFE has put the baby in the high chair and is putting groceries away. She turns, startled, and stares. JIM stands in the doorway.

JIM ignores his wife, and goes and looks at the baby. The BABY knows him: smiles, three teeth only, and those on the bottom.

JIM holds out his finger and the baby takes it.

JIM's wife, palms on the counter, has begun to cry.

JIM

Well. We can't really make anything you could call a plan. I can't say have him with his hat on at the door on Friday. It's just not like that. The house is yours. I don't care what you do in it.

He looks at the baby.

JIM (CONT'D)

Can I pick him up?

She looks at him and nods. JIM picks up the baby.

JIM (CONT'D)

Well, buddy, at least you're somebody's great-grandson. Exeter, Harvard, and then you're on your own. My father fucked up. I fucked up.

(to wife)

When do we tell him that his paternal grandfather shot himself because he was married to my mother?

JIM'S WIFE

I don't think you should be here.

JIM

Well who should be here? Mister Rogaine? This is my child's house.

JIM'S WIFE

You don't get to say whose house it is.

JIM

There's a male thing. You have to kind of fight it. It's this thing called "I don't want her but you can't have her." It's responsible for quite a few marriages and most anniversaries. So I'm kinda taking that on - that, and that closet full of shitty suits. What is he some kind of salesman? A fucking salesman?

Furiously blushing:

JIM'S WIFE

He's not a salesman. He's in marketing...

Realizing that's the same thing, as JIM smiles:

JIM'S WIFE (CONT'D)

Fuck you. Some people are just people.

JIM

I realize you might need some company around here but I'm disturbed at the stepfather idea.

JIM'S WIFE

Really? Enough to come home?

It's real, too. JIM sits.

JIM

I can't come home.

JIM'S WIFE

Why can't you come home?

JIM

Oh, Telemachus here isn't ready and Ithaca has a new king.

JIM'S WIFE

There's no new "king". Please don't make more of it...more of it than...

JIM

Why's his stuff in here? No, I don't care.

(he suddenly attempts to hold her)

I'm tired. I'm tired.

JIM'S WIFE

Tired?

JIM

(holding her)

I always was the golden boy. I very badly needed to fuck up. Do you understand?

She just looks at him. He slaps the ENVELOPE in his hands.

JIM (CONT'D)

I also really needed to see some asshole's suits in the closet. I really did.

He looks at the BABY as if it is a complete enigma.

JIM (CONT'D)

The one you're carrying now. It's not mine, is it.

She shakes her head and begins to cry. JIM leaves the kitchen. He stops to kiss the baby on the head.

JIM (CONT'D)

But you are, buddy. You are.

EXT. A BOULEVARD. DAY

JIM, like a poor man, or a DUI case, sits at a bus stop. A BUS comes along.

INT. JIM'S OFFICE. DAY

QUICK SHOT of him putting the ENVELOPE into his metal desk drawer and turning the key.

EXT. JIM'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. DAY

A CAR pulls up, containing TWO KOREAN GUYS, the heavies who saw Jim earlier that day. They look at the house through their sunglasses. One gets out and goes up to the door and knocks.

INT. JIM'S MODERN NOVEL CLASSROOM. DAY

The same classroom, but a seminar-sized class for very basic "Modern Novel" go-through with people not so good at English. LAMAR, long legs stretched, sits texting on his phone. He is the basketball player we saw on Jim's TV.

JIM

In *The Stranger*, Camus' protagonist fires five shots. The sixth shot of the revolver, he is reserving, symbolically, for himself. Noticing that that lack of a sixth shot, which no one else ever had, is why I'm here now.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

Along with the being really fucking good at English thing.

LAMAR

Maybe the dude had the hammer down on an empty chamber or it was a weird French piece that only took five.

JIM

My idea works better if he has a full six.

LAMAR

I don't understand suicide.

JIM seizes on this. Really? Really?

JIM

That's because you're happy.

LAMAR

What are you?

JIM

I'm teaching the Modern Novel.

LAMAR

You got the new M1. How you unhappy?

JIM

(to Lamar)

It got repossessed.

(to class)

You know I used to do some journalism and I was sent by a magazine, The New Yorker, as a matter of fact, to interview a famous writer. I put the recorder on the table, I got my pad and pen out, and the great man came in and do you know what I did? I got up and left and I went home and finished a novel instead. Sort of a Frank Sitwell situation...

A hand is raised.

STUDENT

Who is Frank Sitwell?

JIM

A major figure in American realism. You know, we really should have gone for American realism. I mean, let's have more fuckin' realism. I mean, shouldn't I be teaching you things? I know all you're here for is a sufficiency of English credits, but Jesus if I'm here I ought to be doing better. I ought to be doing better but I can't be fucked. Just write down that he saves the sixth shot symbolically for himself, and you won't find it referenced anywhere because I'm the only one who thought of it. It's in a monograph somewhere that got me into this situation.

LAMAR watches: is the teacher cracking up? But then he gets a text and looks at it.

JIM (CONT'D)

Lamar, we talked about the cell phone shit.

LAMAR looks up from the screen. And as the bell goes:

JIM (CONT'D)

Stay after.

EXT. A PRACTICE COURT. DAY

JIM chucks the ball to LAMAR, who is shooting hoops over and over from the foul line.

JIM

Do I have to get ten guys and some weapons, take out a life insurance policy, and try to put that phone up your ass? Because I will. Even if I'm losing my shit in here I need you to pay attention.

LAMAR

You're not the only one losing his shit. I have stuff going on at home, home things.

JIM

Like what.

LAMAR

I was gonna talk to you anyway. I can't talk to anybody over there.

Gestures vaguely at the invisible Athletic Department.

LAMAR (CONT'D)

Because all they say is what keeps me in line for what they want me to be. Which is "Lamar" and I don't want to be "Lamar". I done all that just want to be a fuckin' dude in the universe. Or do *more* than being "Lamar". Do you follow me?

JIM

Maybe I know all about it.

LAMAR

Fuckin' coach don't know it, but there is more than being "Lamar". I stick with this shit I'll go out of my mind, be one of those brothers talks about himself in the third person. Talk about how Lamar Hampton is at ease with his celebrity.

JIM smiles.

LAMAR (CONT'D)

You think I'm stupid?

JIM

Nope. I just know you can't write the way you think and so do you.

LAMAR

Yeah. I'm thinking about the voice recognition.

A beat.

LAMAR (CONT'D)

You know I can't be anything else cause they got me in a box where they want me.

JIM

Trapped by talent. Imagine that.

LAMAR

You know with you it's all existential situations and shit no matter what you start talking about. No matter what you start talking about you come around to be free or not free. How to be yourself or just fuckin' kill yourself.

JIM

Is that what I talk about? All or nothing?

LAMAR

I never heard you talk about anything else and I had four classes with you.

JIM

Maybe you got me.

JIM goes and sits down. Lamar lofts one and sinks it. He comes and sits beside JIM.

LAMAR

I need to go pro.

JIM

I don't think you're gonna have any trouble, Lamar.

LAMAR

I don't mean later, I mean now. I already got a knee. Nobody knows about it cause I don't say anything but I already got a knee. I'm not gonna tell you my mom needs an operation or my little sister got spina bifida, and I'm not gonna tell you I don't already revenue up within the system, but I'm telling you I got a knee. I got a knee, I'm a junior, and whenever I say I don't want to play college ball my senior year nobody listens to me, it's like I'm speaking fucking Chinese on another fuckin planet, and the agent tells me I don't have the market value I will have if I play out my senior year, but what he doesn't know, is that I have a knee.

JIM
You have it looked at away from the
department?

LAMAR
Yeah.

JONES comes in, arriving with some other faculty to play
hoops. He pauses interrogatively.

JIM
(to JONES)
Work out, don't work out, you're
still gonna die. You do know that,
right?
(to LAMAR)
You have my cell. Call me if you
want to talk or if you want to tell
me what the fuck to do cause I
don't know either.

As he passes JONES, who is tightening his laces.

JONES
Everything all right?

JIM
I don't want to be me, he doesn't
want to be him, but you want to be
you. And, on the whole, that bears
some serious consideration.

JONES stares after him for a minute, then loses interest and
continues tying his shoes.

EXT. UCLA CAMPUS. DAY

JIM is walking towards the road and comes to a BUS STOP,
holding the SATCHEL with the money in it. He has sat down
with domestic workers when an elderly VW RABBIT pulls up, and
the passenger door opens, an invitation for a ride. AMY is
looking at him from inside the car.

AMY
If I have to draw you into an
inappropriate relationship, to get
you out of this job, I'm ready to
do it.

JIM
So am I.

AMY gets in and clears a mess of books and papers and water bottles off the passenger seat, looking up at JIM cautiously. JIM gets in. They look at each other cautiously.

AMY
Well all right.

JIM stares at the floor, into space, and then asks her:

JIM
Is today Friday?

She nods. They look at each other some more.

JIM (CONT'D)
You've seen me. You know what I do.

AMY nods, nervously.

JIM (CONT'D)
Is it ok if I say that if anybody's gonna change me, that may be possible and it may be you, but it's not going to be today?

AMY nods.

JIM (CONT'D)
And that's ok with you?

AMY nods.

AMY
Where are we going?

JIM
A casino.

EXT. A PARKING LOT. DAY

We see AMY'S CAR in an ocean of not expensive cars and then reveal an Indian casino near Palm Springs, wavering in the desert heat.

INT. THE CASINO. DAY. VARIOUS

NEAR-DERELICT, NOT GOOD-LOOKING, POOR PEOPLE are feverishly gambling at the chump games. Slots. Bingo.

JIM, with the stunned AMY by the arm, conducts her past and through MORE GAMBLERS: fucked guys in cowboy hats, ladies with coin buckets and oxygen hoses, fat people in structural wheelchairs, enormously fat freeform waddlers in stretch pants. Jim is jubilant. AMY is having a good time.

AMY

There's something wrong with everybody here. They all ought to be in the hospital.

JIM

That's right. But they're not. *The Man* wants you to be in the hospital.

AMY laughs.

JIM (CONT'D)

These people are goddamned Americans making a major stand for freedom of choice. For autonomy.

(noting a WALKING FRAME
COUPLE, ONE WITH AN
OXYGEN BACKPACK)

Well, assisted autonomy.

AMY

Stop it.

JIM

(rounding on her
seriously)

This is the inside of my soul, kid: you're taking the grand tour: this is what I've got.

AMY is suddenly frightened.

AMY

Bullshit.

JIM

Yeah, well. Maybe not. At least I'm gonna get rid of my mother.

They pass on, JIM carrying his SACHEL.

INT. THE BLACKJACK TABLE. DAY

JIM, AMY beside and behind him, sits down beside a drunk RANCHERO, who eyes his chips.

RANCHERO
How far you going, man?

JIM
Far as it goes, buddy.

RANCHERO
I go about as far as that seat on
the other side of you man.

Meaning the seat in which Amy is sitting.

JIM
Save it for the old lady, cowboy.

The RANCHERO drinks his longneck, laughing. JIM puts chips in
and as AMY watches, the game begins.

DEALER
That's five hundred dollars.

JIM
Yes it is. You a dealer or an
investment counselor.

A JACK. A deuce. JIM indicates: hit me.

He loses. He looks at AMY. Then he holds out the ROOM KEY.
She takes it.

He turns back to the table.

INT. CASINO. VARIOUS

Move onto a MONTAGE of JIM gambling, at everything, with
everything...and end with him seeing the last of it go.

EXT. THE JOSHUA TREE INN. DAY

The place where Gram Parsons died. Out back there is a pool,
not very well maintained. JIM and AMY are sitting together on
chaise-lounges, the only guests there, a fountain trickling
nearby.

AMY
When you say "everything", that you
lost everything, what are you
talking about?

JIM looks over at her.

JIM

I started with three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, but in total I lost about five hundred thousand...I lost track.

She can't comprehend it. While she is still trying to process:

JIM (CONT'D)

Let's go to the desert.

AMY

...We are in the desert...

As he takes her by the hand and pulls her to her feet we

CUT TO:

EXT. THE DESERT AT JOSHUA TREE. DAY

A HUGE SHOT OF THE DESERT.

Wind, deviled dust.

JIM wakes in the shadow of a boulder, lying on a blanket. He sits up.

Amy is nowhere to be seen.

JIM grabs water and walks a little way out into the desert.

Giant rock formations all around, looking like human faces, like Gods.

He comes to a little hill and sits on it looking down across a plain. The moment seems to be biblical. JIM, face whitened by dust, stares into himself, using the desert as a mirror.

Amy sits down beside him and he doesn't react.

Then after a moment he puts an arm around her.

JIM

I was in Morocco once and the muzzein was going and the palms... a wind came up and they rattled and I thought, you know, I hope that isn't god. Because if god existed I couldn't deal with the humiliation. No one needs that class of competition.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)
Whatever Descartes says, game's
over, if there's a god. There's no
game if there's a god.

He looks at her.

JIM (CONT'D)
Do you know that I'm not a gambler?

She nods.

JIM (CONT'D)
Would you know that if you saw me
with a needle in my arm that I'm
not a junkie?

AMY
Yes. I saw you being a professor
for three years and we know you're
not one of those, either. What you
are is all yours. You're the
perfect example of how a person can
start out with no problems
whatsoever and make sure he has all
of them.

JIM looks around at the desert, getting it.

AMY (CONT'D)
I'm pretty sure that's your
intention.

JIM
There's no relative degree of
suffering. You want me to talk
about my "problems"? My case for
them? I won't. I don't like people
with problems or the vanity to
bring them up. That's where I'm
from. I'm like...

He realizes it.

JIM (CONT'D)
...my mother.
(a beat)
Whether I'm like my father or not,
I couldn't tell you, because she
drove him out when I was little.
Like I did with...

He stands up abruptly.

AMY

And you think you don't need anyone to talk to?

JIM

I need a lot of things. I gotta wipe myself out first. I need to have no past. If I can get to nothing, then I can start.

AMY

I don't think that you remember all the things that you say or that people remember them. In class you said, Life's short, get on with it, and always do the right thing, that's all there is to it.

JIM

I did?

She nods.

AMY

Pretty simple, but right on the money.

JIM

I say lots of things. My main position is that anyone who says they know what life is is full of shit, especially me. And even if I've done you any good, I'm still contaminated, until I'm clean.

He gets up and wanders away into the mid-distance, AMY watching him.

INT. THE CAR. CONTINUOUS

JIM'S DUCT-TAPED CELLPHONE rings. We stay on the PHONE as it rings and rings. AMY opens the door and reaches for it.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE DESERT. DAY

JIM looks around, and sees AMY walking towards him with the phone. He starts towards her as if he knows very what it means.

INT. A PRIVATE HOSPITAL ROOM. NIGHT

ED'S TRICKLING BAG is still filled with bile, but ED himself is unconscious. Mere days have done him in. JIM sits beside his bed in the room. ED comes awake, suddenly: and looks around in wonder. He finally focusses on JIM.

ED

You and me are gonna be straight
that I've had it. Everybody else is
full of baloney.

JIM

I'm gonna miss you.

ED looks at the acoustic tiled ceiling.

ED

Fuck that. I won't know about that.
I need to know what you're worth
when I leave you with nothing. What
I need to know is that you'll do me
proud. You're me, if you'll have
it. You're all that I've got that's
anything like me.

JIM can't handle this. ED grabs his shirtsleeve.

ED (CONT'D)

Hey, asshole. If you think *life* is
difficult you should try this.

JIM and his grandfather laugh.

JIM

I know. I'm sorry.

ED

Not as sorry as I am. I think that
nurse took my wallet and I've had
the same money in it for ten years.
What are you gonna do for me, Jim?
My Jim?

JIM

I'll do the best I can.

ED

You're on your own. That's the
point.

JIM

I know it.

ED extends his hand to shake. JIM takes his grandfather's hand.

ED

I'm worried about that nurse. But I don't think I'm gonna need my drivers licence. Do you?

EXT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR. DAY

JIM, coming out of the room, meets his mother, ready to go in. They look at each other. ROBERTA goes into the room, and JIM goes off along the corridor.

ON BLACK WE HEAR:

ED'S VOICE

Funny thing.

EXT. A LOS ANGELES CEMETERY. DAY

JIM stands in a black suit, white shirt, one hand clasping a wrist, watching as ED'S COFFIN is lowered into the ground.

ED'S VOICE

Everybody's alive at once. When my mind goes. I'll see a dream and in that dream...everyone's at the table. My father. His father. You're there too, which is impossible, because I'm dead. My mother came in this morning and woke me up for school.

ROBERTA stands some distance away, alienated one from the other.

ED'S VOICE (CONT'D)

There's this other world that keeps getting bigger with more and more people in it that I remember, where everybody's alive...and I say that as an atheist, but I'm saying it.

MOMENTS LATER

ROBERTA drops EARTH on the COFFIN.

Then JIM steps forward, picks up some dust, and does the same.

EXT. A LOS ANGELES CEMETERY. MOMENTS LATER

JIM is moving fast through the breaking-up crowd, avoiding ROBERTA, who stares after him, avoiding YOUNG MALE COUSINS trying to come up to speak to him.

He gets out of the GATES of the cemetery and goes along to Amy's parked and waiting RABBIT, half a block down the road.

As he moves along, he sees that across the street is a BLACK MERCEDES containing the two KOREAN HEAVIES. He ignores them, puts his sunglasses on, and slips into AMY'S CAR.

JIM

I want you to take off like a bat out of hell and take a left on the next street.

AMY

Where are we going?

JIM

Anywhere but my place.

EXT. AMY'S BUILDING. DAY

It is an older Hollywood apartment building near Koreatown.

INT. AMY'S KITCHEN. CONTINUOUS

KITCHEN CUPBOARD SHELVES are filled with BOOKS. Apart from books, she has barely anything at all. A kettle, a pot, a cup. A beautifully chosen thrift store table, at which JIM sits, admiring the sun-filled room. Amy sits across from him.

AMY

Have you seen anybody? Ever?

He continues to look around the room, registering its normality.

AMY (CONT'D)

I mean, have you ever talked. To *anyone*.

As if she had spoken in another language:

JIM

What?

AMY

There are men chasing you. You have no home. You have no job. What are you going to do.

He looks at her for a long time.

JIM
I'm gonna go.

He stands up.

JIM (CONT'D)
I'm going to go now. If I come to your door, then I'll have made it, you'll know I've made it, and everything can start to be all right. If I don't come, then I didn't make it, and what you do with the dead is bury them.

She nods.

AMY
All right.

We hear him go. She sits on.

EXT. A BUS STOP. DAY

JIM sits at a bus stop. Another guy is beside him. Homeless, with all his shit in a cart. JIM looks up as not a bus comes, but...

A BENTLEY, the first of a fleet of three. The door of the one in front of the bus stop opens, and NEVILLE steps out.

NEVILLE
Let's take a walk.

They do so, and the three Bentleys follow at cortège speed along the curb. TWO BODYGUARDS walk behind NEVILLE and JIM, scanning everywhere.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
My man over there said you 911'd your Old California mega-family and was out of the country.

JIM
Why would I be out of the country?

NEVILLE slams him up against a wall.

NEVILLE
So you don't die.

JIM
Everybody dies.

NEVILLE
You're not afraid of dying of something other than natural causes?

JIM
No.

NEVILLE
What about very severe fuckin' discomfort. You afraid of that?

JIM
I gotta take whatever's coming because I don't have the money.

NEVILLE
Your grandfather pops and you don't have any money?

JIM
I don't have any money. My grandfather's position was that poverty is a character builder. I think he was right. So do you.

NEVILLE
Never mind what I think philosophically! That's none of your business!
(exasperated, as Jim smiles)
Not even "I'll have it"? You just say "no"? You pay the Korean any of his?

JIM
No.

NEVILLE
Sorry about the old man. The grandfather. He was a serious motherfucker and I admire him for leaving you in this situation.

JIM
Thank you.

NEVILLE
Of course you didn't run. There's no fuckin' terra incognita.
(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

In the old days a white man in your situation would come to America and if things got hot in America, in the old West days you'd go somewhere else and be someone else. Become Bob Smith, shoe horses in East Asshole, start a new family, no one gives a shit. These days we're all stuck with being who we are and where we are forever. No new world except maybe in the stars when we're all dead. So we deal with where we are and what we are.

JIM

We deal with where we are as a matter of fact. What we are is a matter of choice.

NEVILLE gets it. There's nothing that Neville doesn't get. He releases JIM.

NEVILLE

You know Lamar Hampton?

JIM

No.

NEVILLE

Don't fuck with me.

JIM

Student of mine.

NEVILLE

Thing about Lamar is he's from white people land. Grew up in the goddamned Valley. He has a uncle though who is deep in the old neighborhood, in truth *defines* the neighborhood, in the sense that he's in deep trouble one way or another all the time - much like yourself, but not so volitionally - and if I may say so talks a lot of shit about Lamar, because you see, he's a lost soul, the uncle, one of America's poor. You know about America's poor?

JIM

I've seen them.

NEVILLE

He's also stupid as a bag of fuckin' hammers, and Lamar, you see, is the ship he expects to come in. If a man is in having his leg broke and he says "my nephew is Lamar Hampton who is going pro", maybe he does not have his leg broke.

JIM

What's this got to do with anything?

NEVILLE

You know what it's got to do with everything. How much you know Lamar?

JIM

I couldn't say I know him.

NEVILLE

You know his phone number? Cause his uncle don't. His uncle don't even know his own sister's phone number or exactly where she lives. That's how much they admire the uncle.

JIM

I don't have his phone number.

NEVILLE

I never had a professor didn't have my phone number or couldn't get it.

ON JIM as we

CUT TO:

INT. JIM'S HOUSE. BATHROOM. NIGHT

JIM is in the bathtub again, submerged. His AV apparatus has been reduced to a RADIO. He surfaces and listens.

ANNOUNCER

Hampton's at the top of the key, looks to get inside, can't, now goes behind the back to Franklin who one-bounces to Jamal Kendal who turns and fakes and passes to Hampton. Hampton hooks and hits!

(MORE)

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

And he was fouled! Yes and it counts! 88 to 30, UCLA by 11!

COLOR MAN

Quite apart from the great night that UCLA is having generally, Bob, it's another stellar night for Lamar Hampton, who seems to have no limit to what he can do with the ball this season...If he continues, he...

JIM goes underwater again.

NOW show the more intense scenes in the desert: the first wild kiss between JIM and AMY. This may be real. This may be a hallucination of the future or what might have been.

In the bath, JIM closes his eyes, and turns his head to the side.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE. NIGHT. LATER

JIM pulls down all the shades, stares briefly at the digits flashing on his answering machine, signifying 27 calls. He presses the button on the answering machine.

DEAN FULLER (V.O.)

Jim, this is Tom Fuller. Dean Fuller. I hope there's nothing wrong...you didn't come in today ...which of course you know. As you're the person who didn't come in. Well. If you get this, call me. We have to have a more general talk...to see if we can do something about this situation. You know I am your greatest proponent and, well, and there are always things one doesn't know about a person's life...things that may mitigate ...and so forth...so I'd prefer not to do something without-

JIM presses stop. He picks up the phone and dials. He gets a machine. Waits out "You have reached the office of Dean Fuller..."

JIM

This is Jim. Look, you're a good guy, but I'm not coming back, and I never should have started. I'm sorry.

He hangs up and looks into the empty refrigerator. He opens a square Tupperware container, and takes out – a semi-automatic pistol. He snaps the action, cocking it, and starts to put it to his head...but then puts it down.

EXT. JIM'S HOUSE. NIGHT

He stands on the porch of his dumpy house, trying to regulate his breathing, calming down. Lights show in the other houses in the street. Vignettes of life visible inside them.

There is thunder, and a heavy rain begins, the canyons immediately streaming with rain.

BLACK

INT. JIM'S HOUSE. DAY

Broad sunlight is shining into Jim's room. When his eyes open he sees:

MISTER LEE, sitting in the armchair in the corner.

MISTER LEE

What are we to do?

A BIG KOREAN stands in the doorway. He is in the final act of disassembling JIM'S GUN. He tosses the pieces one by one on the bedspread.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

Human weakness...is not something I discourage. How could I? I run gambling establishments. I loan money. I serve liquor in twenty-seven restaurants and bars. I make my living from people in a condition of sickness or stupidity – but also I have revenues from many intelligent people who should know better. This is not my problem. But there is one thing I must hold on to.

JIM

What's that?

MISTER LEE

I have to expect that a person wants to live and will do anything to live.

(MORE)

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)
Nothing makes sense if this is not
the case. Do you want to live?

MISTER LEE is clicking JIM'S LIGHTER.

JIM
That's my business.

MISTER LEE
I have not been in debt for many
years but I remember the feeling.
To be obligated, unbalanced in
one's thoughts, insecure, unclean.
And I felt like that when I merely
had credit card debt and a
mortgage. Nothing like you.

JIM takes this all on without comment.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)
I think you want to hurt yourself,
but make others do it for you.

JIM can't answer. He looks at the HUGE KOREAN, who is staring
at him.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)
I come to see you myself because
you're an interesting man. An
educated man. Ordinarily, my
associates would come without me.

JIM
I'm not going to tell you I'll get
the money, because I don't know if
I can. I wouldn't insult you.

MISTER LEE
Thank you.

JIM
I have made...errors. I could tell
you I've realized that I wish I
could turn over a new leaf, that
I'll try to, but it doesn't make
any difference, and I'm not going
to make any case for myself
whatsoever, because there is no
case. I have no position. There's
only one thing that matters...You
expected your money and I don't
have it. The reasons are
irrelevant. There we are.

MISTER LEE
How am I to collect?

JIM
There's only one way. A gamble.
Loan me another hundred thousand.

MISTER LEE stares, sitting with his palms on his thighs in a shaft of sunlight. He cocks an eyebrow.

JIM (CONT'D)
It's how I got in. It's the only
way I'll get out.

MISTER LEE cocks his head.

The KOREAN heavies start to laugh, and JIM laughs, too. Then he is conducted to the bathroom and his head is plunged into the still-full bath.

LATER

JIM sits against the bathroom tiles, clutching a towel in his lap. OFF, we hear the car doors close and the Koreans drive away. He struggles to his feet and looks at the mirror, on which has been written:

"MUNDAY"

JIM (CONT'D)
That's not how you fucking spell
it.

He shoulders out of the room.

CUT TO:

EXT. JIM'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. DAY

A WOMAN in a business suit and high heels is struggling to put the twin stakes of a metal "For Sale" sign into the earth through the ground cover just off Jim's driveway.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. DAY

JIM — purposeful, dressed, shaved — watches a BOOKSTORE GUY with a gray ponytail examining a book, writing down a price in a buckled notebook, and then putting the book into a box. He is pricing out Jim's library.

JIM
Anything you don't want, stack it
in the fireplace.

BOOKSTORE GUY
There's not too much here that I
don't want.

JIM takes a last look – and goes out.

INT. A JEWELRY STORE. DAY

An IRANIAN JEWELER, wearing a great deal of gold, is
examining Jim's watch.

JEWELER
Perfectly good watch. Why do you
want to sell it?

JIM
Either I don't need to know what
time it is, or I need money. What
do you care?

JEWELER
I need to know if it is...

JIM places his CA DRIVER'S LICENCE on the case.

JIM
What you need to do is to come up
with an offer, or not.

JEWELER
There are so many of these...

JIM looks away, annoyed, as the bullshit starts.

JIM
Look, that's an Omega. It's worth
more than six thousand brand new,
and when you have it, no one will
know it isn't brand new.

JEWELER
You are insulting me.

JIM

We're not going to fuck around, no no no, don't talk to me, I don't want you to name a price any more, and I need you to understand that when I say what I want for it, I am giving you the figure that I will take for it. Do you understand me - no, no, no. No no. Look at me. I will say the price and you will either say yes, or no.

JEWELER

It is impossible to...

JIM

All right.

He puts the watch in his pocket.

JEWELER

Wait wait wait.

JIM

No. I told you not to say anything but yes or no. You're wasting my time.

JEWELER

I am willing to listen to your price.

JIM

You can't counter it. When I say my figure, that's the figure, and you either say yes or no. You got it?

JEWELER

How can I say yes or no until I hear the price?

JIM

You're not getting it.

JEWELER

I am getting it, I am getting it.

JIM puts the watch on the counter pad again and the JEWELER picks it up. He wants it.

JIM

You need to understand fully that what I say is not an opening figure.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

You can say yes or no, you cannot say a lower figure and expect to meet at some point in the middle. Do you understand?

JEWELER

Yes, yes, I understand. What is your price?

JIM

You can't say another price.

JEWELER

I know I know I know I get it.

JIM

Three thousand five hundred dollars.

JEWELER

(involuntarily)
One thousand.

JIM takes the watch and goes. ON JEWELER, as the door chime goes:

JEWELER (CONT'D)

Twelve hundred!

EXT. THE STREET OUTSIDE. DAY

JIM is walking away quickly when THE JEWELER catches him at the head of the crosswalk.

JEWELER

I can't help myself.

JIM

Yes you can.

THE JEWELER looks confused.

JEWELER

Two thousand.

JIM presses the WALK BUTTON.

JEWELER (CONT'D)

Why don't you let a man do business?

JIM

Because you want to go home and sit there chuckling tonight about how you skinned a guy on his watch. You don't need the watch, you just want the watch. Where the "need" comes in is you needing to fuck me up the ass in order for you to feel all right about yourself.

JEWELER

I am in business! You don't understand!

JIM

Thirty-five hundred dollars. Cash.

JEWELER

(involuntarily)
Two thousand two hundred.
(in a panic as JIM starts
off)
OK, OK, three thousand.

JIM leans his head against a lamp-post.

JIM

If I allow you to beat me for five hundred dollars, which you really need to do on some deep personal level, will you just shut up and give me the money in cash?

JEWELER

Yes.

JIM

You can't say anything else.

JEWELER

I won't say anything else.

JIM

You promise.

JEWELER

I promise to God.

JIM

I need you to promise because you're fucking pathological.

THE JEWELER touches his heart.

JEWELER
Please, we will have tea.

As they walk in tandem back to the store:

JEWELER (CONT'D)
I don't have the cash.

JIM
I'll take a check.

EXT. A CAFE IN BEVERLY HILLS. DAY

JIM is sitting at a table with a beer untouched in front of him. He looks up as AMY sits down. They sit there silently.

AMY
Well.

JIM
Well.

AMY
There's quite a lot of talk over at
the department.

JIM
Good.

He drinks some of his beer.

JIM (CONT'D)
I already cashed out my IRA through
the credit union. I'm selling my
books...I'm selling my house.

AMY
What are you doing?

JIM
Raising money.

AMY
To pay everybody back, right?

JIM doesn't look at her.

JIM
To gamble or to run away?

JIM looks at her and doesn't answer.

AMY

I sit here and I wonder did I precipitate some sort of breakdown.

JIM

There was a student...just the other day...who said that my problem, if one's nature is a problem, rather than just problematic, is that I see things in terms of victory or death, and not just victory but total victory. And it's true: I always have. It's either victory, or don't bother. The only thing worth doing is the impossible. Everything else is gray. You're born...as a man... with the nerves of a soldier, the apprehension of an angel, to lift a phrase, but there is no use for it. Here? Where's the use for it? You're set up to be a philosopher or a king or Shakespeare, and this is all they give you? This? Twenty-odd years of school which is all instruction in how to be ordinary ...or they'll fucking kill you, they fucking will, and then it's a career, which is not the same thing as existence... I want unlimited things. I want everything. A real love. A real house. A real thing to do...every day. I'd rather die if I don't get it.

A BENTLEY has pulled up at the curb. Two BLACK GUYS in it, staring at JIM.

AMY

Please don't go with them.

He gets up and walks over to the car. HEAVY ONE (who is really heavy) holds the back door open, and then gets in with JIM and HEAVY TWO in the back, and the car pulls off.

INT. BENTLEY. MOMENTS LATER

JIM rides crammed between the TWO HEAVIES, Rodeo to Wilshire.

HEAVY ONE

Your house for sale.

JIM

Gotta raise some money somewhere.

HEAVY ONE

In this market I wouldn't count on
the real estate.

(to HEAVY TWO)

Check him.

HEAVY TWO goes through every one of Jim's pockets and only comes up with a few dollars and the fresh CHECK from the jeweler.

HEAVY ONE (CONT'D)

What's this?

JIM

Sold my watch.

HEAVY ONE

This ain't gonna cover it.

HEAVY TWO throws a bag over Jim's head, a hotel laundry bag from the Peninsula, and tightens the draw string, shoving Jim onto the floor of the car. Heavy two counts out the money that Jim did have - thirty-two bucks, puts it in his pocket and settles in to enjoy the ride.

HEAVY TWO

My theory is, there's no need to be unpleasant. My associate here would like to beat your fuckin' head in until the shit you've got for brains was all over the fucking upholstery, but that's more about his nature than necessity. I expect you know your situation is serious and let's leave it at that. Internet age don't solve anything but you leave your laptop up and running when you've got "Find my iPhone" open, homes, then shit happens.

(MORE)

HEAVY TWO (CONT'D)

As for your books, that white dude with the bald head and the stupid fuckin' pony tail is sending the check to the right party, for the cover price on everything, cause I renegotiated for you, and I doubt that realtor lady with her badly unstaged open house is still as cool about black people as she was when she started her day, but all in all it's another perfect day in Los Angeles and let's all get along. Let's all just get along and be really fuckin' happy we're not somewhere else, because, you go off LA, you go on it, but go home to Detroit in February and you have no fuckin' trouble coming back out here and having Los Angeles bend over so you can kiss it's ass.

EXT. A STREET IN DOWNTOWN LA. DAY

The BENTLEY pulls into a little driveway beside a derelict one story building that bears the sign "AFRICA MEMBERSHIP CLUB" (which has a WHITE BUM talking to himself in the boarded up entryway) and disappears behind the building.

INT. AFRICA MEMBERSHIP CLUB. DAY

THE PENINSULA LAUNDRY BAG is ripped off JIM'S HEAD and he reels back, blinking. NEVILLE sits looking at him, smoking a cigar. He is wearing a perfect suit with English shoulders. He is on the phone. He holds up a finger and turns away. THE AFRICA MEMBERSHIP CLUB is a former function hall. RAT TRAPS are set along the walls. An unexplained white tennis shoe lies on the floor with blood on it.

HEAVY ONE

You scared?

JIM

That's my problem.

HEAVY ONE rummages for water behind the bar.

HEAVY ONE

We have Fiji and this stuff.

JIM

Doesn't matter.

JIM catches a flipped water.

HEAVY TWO

When did it all become about hydration?

HEAVY ONE

Recently, man. Recently. In my youth, everybody was carbo-loading.

JIM drinks water. HEAVY TWO comes up to him, looks at him, and says:

HEAVY TWO

Sit the fuck down with your water.

JIM sits down. NEVILLE ends his call and comes forward from the shadows at the end of the room.

NEVILLE

You gave me the wrong number for Lamar. That is fuckin' feeble. Do you know what I also know?

JIM

What's that?

NEVILLE

Do you think all Koreans are all Korean and shit and don't communicate with the American Negro?

JIM

I don't know anything.

NEVILLE

I hear that you asked Mister Lee to stake you out of your situation. That he give you enough to have another shot at the title of the world's stupidest asshole. By the way, you are not to say anything to Mister Lee about the information I have, lest he speculate about the source.

JIM

If you have a source you know he didn't give me anything.

NEVILLE

You do know that all of your money is mine.

JIM

All of it forever or just what I owe you.

NEVILLE

Don't be ridiculous. All of it forever.

JIM

If that were true we're not talking money any more, and you better kill me, because my only option then, because I'm not the world's stupidest white asshole, would be to kill you. I want to pay you off, not to be married to you.

NEVILLE

All right, all right, I only want my money.

JIM

Then I can deal with that.

NEVILLE

You're going to tell me how you're gonna make good on your debt right now. Gimme Lee's money.

JIM

He didn't front me any.

NEVILLE

Fuck you.

JIM

Your information's wrong.

NEVILLE

How you gonna pay me?

JIM

Well. What if I told you I quit my job and I'm going to write a novel.

NEVILLE

Yeah, what the first one make?

JIM

With the advance and royalties, seventeen thousand dollars all in.

NEVILLE

Fuck me. For one of the better reviewed first novels of 2007? I think we have to make some other arrangements. The culture evidently has. Let's talk cash first and other business later. You can't get cash from your family?

JIM

I got all I could get.

NEVILLE

Could I get cash from your family if I sent you down to Mexico – whoops, I don't know what happened to him – and had my friend Valerio send them your dick?

JIM

My family didn't make their money because they pays up easy.

NEVILLE

Well that's apparently genetic. Genetics is a cruel fuckin' mistress. Would you come up with any money if I lit this cigar and put it out on your eyeball?

JIM

I'm not a magician.

NEVILLE

If you didn't think you was fuckin' magic occasionally you wouldn't be in the Africa Membership Club sitting there with a bottle of Fiji water owing me almost two hundred thousand dollars. Guess what?

JIM

What?

NEVILLE

I already asked your mother.

He sits down, affably.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

You see, my lawyer went to her lawyer, and her lawyer came back to my lawyer and said "Fuck you".

JIM

Did he say it just like that?

NEVILLE

As a matter of fact he did. I'm gonna need the equity in your house. We'll paper it right. As a sale. But that means I have to take over the fuckin' mortgage and get some goddamned vice-president of animation or some other cocksucker to rent it and I don't like that shit. But you gotta make the turnip bleed from whatever hole it's got.

(a beat)

Now Lamar, who you gave me the wrong phone number for...

JIM

Lamar's a good kid, he doesn't need any of this shit.

NEVILLE

You're not gonna say you made a mistake with the number?

JIM

No, I didn't. I gave you a fake one. I made it up.

NEVILLE

Well Mister Jones here is gonna give you a real one.

HEAVY TWO punches JIM and knocks him out of the chair. The skin is split by Jim's left eye-socket. He pushes himself up off the floor, and stands.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

That's the last time you lie to me. Lamar don't need your help. Every man has to go it alone. Lamar has to make his choice. Let him make it. But I'm not going to call him now. It would merely confuse the issue. You're gonna get me Lamar. It will be more than an introduction. I don't want an introduction any more. I want Lamar doing what I need him to do without him ever seeing my face. Deniability is where it's at. I hear Lamar is all Hamlet and shit because he wants to go pro.

JIM
 (bleakly)
 Yeah he does.

NEVILLE
 I need Lamar, and I need him before they play Michigan tomorrow at home. They're running eight points on Michigan. You tell Lamar if he wants he can win by seven - no more. But you get him for tomorrow. Or I'll kill every member of your family and show you the pictures before I kill you. Can I consider you incentivized?

JIM stares at him.

INT. JIM'S PERSONAL OFFICE. ENGLISH DEPARTMENT. DAY

He is cleaning out rubbish, papers, whatever. He isn't really cleaning. He runs a coin over his fingers, thinking. Then looks up at a sound: JONES is there.

JONES
 May I come in?

JIM shrugs.

JONES (CONT'D)
 May I sit?

JIM is uncomfortable with that.

JONES (CONT'D)
 I thought the end would be heroic in some way. Not just - not showing up.

JIM
 Well now, however it happened, now you're the Shakespeare guy. Road's open, brother. I hope you seriously give a fuck because I don't and it would be nice to think that someone did. Be all that you can be and have a nice day.

JONES
 We clubbed together and got you something.

He rummages in his bag and brings out a small wrapped GIFT.
JIM reluctantly takes it.

JONES (CONT'D)

In all honesty I wish you were
disliked. But you know that's not
the case and from time to time I
have found you admirable, charming,
compelling, and stupendously
fucking brilliant, much to my
horror. Though your erasure from
the department can only be viewed,
from my perspective, as a positive.

LAMAR has ducked through the door and towers over JONES.

JONES (CONT'D)

Good afternoon...I am not void of
the fear that you will go on and
through some endeavor or
accomplishment, make my existence
seem comparatively wretched....

LAMAR

Did I come in at the wrong time?

JIM

No, he was just finishing up saying
that he wishes I was dead.

JONES

Well. Bonne chance.

He ducks out. JIM sit looking at Lamar.

JIM

Sit down.

LAMAR does. JIM can't speak to him yet. LAMAR looks at Jim.

LAMAR

What happened to your face, man?

JIM

A little while ago you came to me
for advice about turning pro. I
know it's about your knee. I know
you have a feeling you have to put
money in the bank.

LAMAR

I do, man. I'm afraid every day
that the knee will go.

(MORE)

LAMAR (CONT'D)

I'm afraid every day anyone will even notice it, because then I get...

JIM

How'd you like to make two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in two hours?

LAMAR

Depends on what you have in mind.

JIM

Throwing a game. You can't beat Michigan by more than seven points.

LAMAR takes that on.

LAMAR

Well that's not throwing a game. That's winning by less than eight. That's not throwing a game. Who wants me to do it?

JIM points to his eye.

LAMAR (CONT'D)

What they got on you?

JIM

It doesn't matter.

LAMAR

I don't want to talk to nobody; I don't want to see nobody; I don't want to hear no names. I'll take the money from you - and I'll take it up front.

JIM

That's the way it works.

JIM reaches beneath his desk and brings up a SPORTS BAG. He puts it on the desk. LAMAR looks into it.

LAMAR

They fucked you up? They didn't need to fuck you up. I'd have done it.

JIM

I needed it. They'll fuck you up if you need it, too. You gotta deliver.

LAMAR holds the bag.

LAMAR
I bet you wish I don't take this.

JIM
That's up to you.

LAMAR takes the bag.

LAMAR
I'm not gonna be immortal in this game. Pretty soon I'm just gonna be a real fuckin' tall dyslexic guy selling fuckin' Buicks. I'm gonna take what I can get.

JIM nods.

LAMAR (CONT'D)
I take this bag I get you out of trouble?

JIM nods.

LAMAR (CONT'D)
That's the other reason to do it.

He stands up. At the door he says:

LAMAR (CONT'D)
This is nothing on you. I done it before. I need you to know that.

JIM nods.

LAMAR goes.

JIM slowly unwraps the package given to him by the asshole on behalf of the department. Inside is a small statue: a representation of a bird: ideogramatically, Freedom itself.

JIM
Well all right.

EXT. DEPARTMENT CORRIDOR. DAY

JIM is moving fast through the crowded hall, not looking at anybody, not speaking to anybody. He passes the Dean's office and keeps moving even though the DEAN has spotted him and has come to the door. AMY falls in beside him.

AMY
What happened to your eye?

JIM
Whatever happened it already
happened and it won't happen again.

AMY
You're starting to make promises?

He stops and looks at her.

JIM
I think I am.

JONES is there:

JONES
Did you open it?

JIM
Yes. Very nice, thank you.

JONES
I didn't pick it myself.

JIM
I could sorta tell that, Larry,
thank you anyway.

AMY
What's going on?

JIM
I'm getting out of here as fast as
I can and as everybody and their
aunt is eyeballing me right now it
might be better if you weren't
chasing along as if you're my wife,
unless you want to be, in which
case I don't mind.

AMY
Jesus Christ.

JIM
I tell the truth. That's all I got.
That first sight thing really
works. I want you to stop looking
concerned, I want you to stop
walking with me, and I want you to
shake my hand, and let me say
goodbye to you.

She looks more worried.

JIM (CONT'D)

You've got months to go here and you don't need the trouble. Hold out your hand and say goodbye.

She holds out her hand.

JIM (CONT'D)

Goodbye, Ms Phillips. Good luck.

AMY

Goodbye, Professor Bennett.

JIM

Goodbye.

He surges on.

ON SOUND:

RACE ANNOUNCER

And coming up on the inside is Barcelona Postcard. Barcelona Postcard is now neck in neck with Last Thanksgiving...

INT. A DARK SPORTS BAR. DUSK

A higher-end old line bar in the Valley with red banquettes and just a few customers. JIM comes in from the blinding light and removes his sunglasses. FRANK and BIG ERNIE sit at the bar watching a horse race on a huge television and eating peanuts. A moronic din.

RACE ANNOUNCER

And it's Barcelona Postcard by a length. No one can believe it.

FRANK

Well they fuckin' weren't supposed to, were they. That was the point. Hey, turn that off.

THE BARTENDER does. JIM comes up.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Sit down.

(a beat)

Do you drink? I don't remember if you drink. Of course there's drink and drink.

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

I drink but I haven't been drunk since Reagan was president. God's honest truth. I got a DUI. And in jail I actually fell down and pissed my pants. You don't need to do that twice. I am telling you this so you know that everybody's been there.

BIG ERNIE

Everybody's been there.

FRANK

Once. If you're there twice...after having been there once....I can't help you. You know I listen to the drunks, and it's like you're listening to a fairy story about a fight with a fuckin' monster when the actual title of the story is "I can't handle my liquor," by Mister Crybaby.

BIG ERNIE

Amen.

FRANK

I don't know, maybe they have a problem, but fuck 'em if they do, cause I don't. Which leads me to ask: are you pulling this shit just now, or forever.

JIM doesn't answer.

FRANK (CONT'D)

I mean do you have a "problem"? Wah wah wah like some little fucking girl wah wah wah, or some Somali who can't process that there's no food where they live, or are you just fucked up temporarily because you're temporarily fuckin' stupid.

BIG ERNIE

Are you long business or short business?

JIM

What's the difference right now?

FRANK

I need to know if you have the fuckin' brains to walk when it's time to walk. People don't, you know? Ball players who can't play any more, assholes trying to maintain a standard of living not possible any more. Lot of them around. I've seen you be half a million dollars up.

JIM

I've been up two and a half million dollars.

FRANK

What you got on you?

JIM

Nothing.

FRANK

What you put away?

JIM

Nothing.

FRANK

You get up two and a half million, any asshole in the world knows what to do. You get a house with a twenty-five year roof, an indestructable Jap economy shitbox, and you put the rest into the system at three to five percent to pay your taxes, and that's your base, get me, that's your Fortress of Fuckin' Solitude, and you are for the rest of your life at a level of "fuck you". Someone wants you do do something? "Fuck you". Boss pisses you off? "Fuck you". Own your house, have a few bucks in the bank, don't drink, that's all I have to say to anybody at any social level. Did your grandfather take risks?

JIM

Yes.

FRANK

I can guarantee he did it from a position of "fuck you".

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

Which is what he means to you when he says fuck you also, and what he would mean when he said "fuck you" to me. The wise man's life is based around "fuck you". The United States of America is based on "fuck you". You're a king? You have an Army, the greatest Navy in the history of the world? "Fuck you, blow me". We'll fuck it up ourselves.

(raises his drink)

Which we have done. Beautiful fuck you position, lost forever. King George the Third looks like a fuckin' birthday present.

(to BARTENDER, with Zapata mustache)

This is the grandson of the seventeenth richest man in California.

BARTENDER

Does he drink?

JIM waits it out.

FRANK

What he wants is money because he doesn't know when to say "That's it, I'm two million ahead, fuck it, fuck you, I have a car and a house and a family, it's all paid for, fuck you."

BIG ERNIE

Even I did that, of course it's out by Pearblossom.

JIM

I'll have a beer. Just like anybody else.

BARTENDER

What kind.

JIM

Any kind.

BARTENDER

I got thirty-seven beers. Don't put this on me.

FRANK

He fuckin' put it on you.

THE BARTENDER goes.

FRANK (CONT'D)

You still owe large, two places you shouldn't. Why you want door number three?

JIM

How else do I get out?

FRANK

Time payments, sell your sperm, sell your ass, how the fuck should I know. Your grandfather's boat ever go to Mexico?

JIM

It's been to Mexico many times.

FRANK

What if it stayed there.

JIM stares at the bar.

FRANK (CONT'D)

I'm not saying I need you to get the keys, I could do it myself. Well not personally. But me selling a fifty million dollar yacht to some narco for ten percent of its value would not absolve you. You haven't looked at this game once. What's wrong with you, you don't watch sports?

JIM

It's watching other guys do things.

FRANK

So's readin'.

There's a point: Jim concedes it.

FRANK (CONT'D)

I'm so sick about that Columbia-Brown game, I'm lucky I can swallow my fuckin' drink. I got muddled on the game. Rotten lowlife Ivy League faggots, no offense if you're a lowlife Ivy League faggot.

JIM

None taken. I was at Harvard but I have also been in Cleveland. Neither experience was definitive.

FRANK

I am of the universe and you know what it's worth.

BIG ERNIE starts singing "Yer Blues" and pounding the bar.

BIG ERNIE

Yes I'm lonely...wanna die...Yes I'm lonely...wanna die...etc.

FRANK

I give you this money, and you don't pay it back, there are no rules. You never, ever, get to say "fuck you" to anybody. You'll get not just what you owe me from your grandfather, you'll get me his accounts so I can have them vacuumed from Russia. You commit suicide, you can do it knowing that I'll kill your whole fuckin' family. Do you understand the gravity of your situation.

JIM

I understand.

FRANK

You get up? You get out.

He holds out car keys.

JIM

What's this?

FRANK

This kinda money, what's a car. What do you want to be able to say to me?

JIM

Fuck you.

EXT. BAR PARKING LOT. DAY

JIM uses the key and looks into the trunk. There is a duffel in it. He closes the trunk. He pulls out his cell phone, punches a number.

JIM
Dexter? I need you to not give my
mother her lesson tomorrow.

INTERCUT:

DEXTER, lying on a couch, sitting up, coughing from
bongsmoke.

DEXTER
I'm not doing that any more.

Back to JIM

JIM
Good. You like Las Vegas? Get a
pen, I'm gonna give you an address
to meet me at. I've got a job for
you. No I'm not gonna fucking text
it, get a pen.

He slams the trunk on the BAG OF MONEY.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS. NIGHT

He walks into the living room and-

BLACK.

INT. JIM'S HOUSE. LATER

He comes to consciousness lying on the floor. The first thing
he can focus on are...shoes. Black, polished, shoes. A KOREAN
grabs Jim's lapels in his fists and hoists him leglessly
upright.

MISTER LEE
Where is my money?

JIM
I don't have any money.

The KOREAN punches him twice, brutally, and lets him fall.

MISTER LEE sits fastidiously in his chair, palms on thighs,
feet together. He watches JIM crawl.

MISTER LEE
Debt. It's terrible. You make
promises. Impossible.

JIM sits back against the wall.

JIM
I didn't make promises.

MISTER LEE
You will.

JIM
I can't.

MISTER LEE
Why did you see Frank?

JIM
I didn't.

The BIG KOREAN kicks him.

JIM lies on the floor.

MISTER LEE
What can I do with you?

JIM sits up and says:

JIM
I told you before. You need to
gamble. *Stake me.*

MISTER LEE stares at him as if he is a limitless curiosity.
And as MISTER LEE contemplates his own gamble....

And we:

CUT TO:

INT. ARENA. NIGHT

WE follow the players from the UCLA locker room out into the light, the explosions of cheering, details of the watching fans. A big crowd. JIM sits way up in the gods, watching down. The players of both teams are warming up, and among them, swishing one, is LAMAR, looking cold and complicated and alone. THE GAME AND HOW TO HANDLE IT: shoot a real game, then bring back a quarter of the crowd and all the refs and players. LAMAR is the only actor and he must be a great basketball player at the level his character is intended to be. JIM watches uncertainly.

And let's go to TOBACK:

As the game progresses, several things become apparent:

(1) LAMAR (though looking flashy and, from appearances of form, easily the best player on the court) is playing a horrid game - throwing the ball away, missing shots, allowing his man to score. He is so good at his act that he makes it appear to be a lack of quickness or grace on the other players' part that is to blame.

(2) The rest of the UCLA team is playing remarkably well. Wild shots are falling through, loose balls are bouncing lucky, rebounds are coming perfectly off.

(3) MICHIGAN is having a bad night. Only because of LAMAR's errors is anything at all going right for them. There is a lid over the rim for their shooters and they throw the ball away continually.

(4) Consequently, there is rising sense of panic in JIM (and distress in FRANK). When LAMAR loses the ball to a Michigan player who in turn loses it to a UCLA player who scores, the Michigan coach calls a time-out. At this point UCLA leads 47 to 40 with 8:08 remaining in the game so that JIM and ONE are only one point ahead of what they need. JIM sees the coach motion LAMAR to the bench and another player to get up to replace him. The new player joins the huddle. LAMAR, on his way to the bench, glances up nervously.

BACK TO US.

INT. AFRICA MEMBERSHIP CLUB. CONTINUOUS

NEVILLE and POSSE are watching on TV.

UP IN THE BOOTH:

TWO JOCK-SNIFFERS, ANNOUNCER AND COLOR MAN.

ANNOUNCER

With one exception, UCLA has played great ball tonight, and, ironically, that exception is Lamar Hampton, who has been the leader of the club this season...he's having a bad night...

COLOR MAN

He's lost the ball repeatedly and his defense is sub-par.

ANNOUNCER

Let's be serious: a sub-par Lamar is better than anybody else on this court. We're judging Lamar by Lamar and maybe that's not fair.

COLOR MAN

It's fair to judge a man against
his best.

On JIM (off this idea) as the buzzer sounds, ending the time-out. As the game recommences, JIM leaves the arena, fighting his way through the crowd. The SCOREBOARD shows UCLA up by exactly 5. JIM can't think about it: he keeps going. As he goes we hear a roar from the crowd:

LAMAR puts on a dazzling exhibition of ball control - passing up several easy shots as he dribbles out the clock: during the last five seconds before the buzzer sounds to end the game, he dribbles under the Michigan basket unmolested - passing up an easy chance to score - and then (the game finished, the buzzer going) - twirls the ball on the tip of his finger like a Harlem Globetrotter and stares over at

HIS COACH, who stares aghast.

LAMAR throws the ball away and walks off the court. UCLA has won by exactly seven.

JIM, walking along, hears his cell phone ring. He looks at the screen, which reads:

"DEXTER"

JIM

How's Vegas?

He listens.

JIM (CONT'D)

Right.

INT. AFRICA CLUB. NIGHT

NEVILLE is sitting in a ruptured banquette smoking a cigar and drinking cognac. At another one nearby, HEAVIES ONE AND TWO are counting money. JIM stands there.

NEVILLE

Your boy delivered.

JIM nods.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

You delivered. You know how rare that is? A man delivers? You get so used to every motherfucker not delivering that when one does, you wanna cry.

JIM
So are we square?

NEVILLE looks hesitant: clever.

NEVILLE
What if I told you you keep your
job at the university forever and
you make sure you teach English 101
to a lot of tall brothers.

JIM
I'd tell you to kill me.

NEVILLE
I get it. Have a drink.

JIM
Don't want one.

NEVILLE
You got your face fucked up by
Koreans.

JIM
Yeah I did.

NEVILLE
That's just valedictory, man.
You're just moving on to the next
phase of bullshit. You know what
the only trouble is with the game
tonight?

JIM
What's that?

NEVILLE
Someone else bet a seven point
spread, with a lot of fuckin'
money, in Vegas. Now, would you
know who that was?

JIM shakes his head.

INTERCUT:

DEXTER, in Vegas, handing over the very recognizable DUFFLE
OF CASH that Jim got from Frank.

JIM
No idea.

NEVILLE
You don't tip no one?

JIM
No.

NEVILLE takes this on: blows smoke into his glass: drinks.

NEVILLE
What's your life plans?

JIM shrugs.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
Make part of it never seeing me
again. I don't need you, brother. I
have Lamar, forever. He's going
pro, not doing his junior year.

JIM
I know.

NEVILLE
You think I want you out there
knowing that?

Gestures over at the MONEY being counted.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
Knowing this?

JIM
I'm gonna tell you that I'm not
going to do you the discourtesy of
assuming what you're thinking, but
I know you're going to do the right
thing.

NEVILLE
Why's that?

JIM
Because that's what you do. That's
what you are. You do the right
thing.

NEVILLE doesn't want to wear that halo.

NEVILLE
Why am I so fuckin' transparent.

JIM gets up.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
Odds still not in favor of you
getting out of the other mess
you're in, but you're done with me.
We're square. Where you get it?

JIM
Borrowed it from Frank.

NEVILLE
Fuck you you did.

JIM
Ask him.

NEVILLE
I will ask him.

JIM
Then you'll find out that I did.

NEVILLE LOOKS at the MONEY and then up at JIM. He knows exactly what JIM did and

JIM knows that NEVILLE knows.

Finally NEVILLE puts the envelope in his coat and holds out his hand.

NEVILLE
That Lamar was crooked anyway.
Everybody's ready to be bent, or
ready to be straight. Personally
I'm ready to be straight. Get
myself a avocado farm or a winery.
I do what I have to do but I'm not
a huge fan of low company. A man
can transform his shit.

JIM starts to go.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
Brother.

JIM stops, turns around.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
If I find out you suddenly paid
Frank back in any sort of mystery
fuckin' situation, then I know what
you did. And nothing changes.

JIM nods, and goes.

EXT. JIM'S HOUSE. NIGHT

JIM'S BAGS are packed and by the door.

DEXTER, the tennis player, is sitting on one of the few remaining bits of furniture, a hard chair in what used to be the dining room. JIM is washing his face in the kitchen sink.

DEXTER

I have never done anything like that in my life. I didn't think I was gonna get out of Vegas alive.

A LARGER DUFFEL than Dexter left with lies on the floor.

JIM

Open it, and take out fifty grand. That's yours.

DEXTER doesn't move.

DEXTER

I'm gonna have my picture on the Wheaties Box within fuckin' months, dude. Unless I'm on Youtube doing a bong hit. I don't need it.

JIM

That's why I picked you. Do what you like.

JIM looks out the window as a car passes slowly.

JIM (CONT'D)

It's time to get away from me, Dexter. Far, far, away.

INT. CAR. NIGHT

JIM, driving downtown, picks his cell phone up off the seat, and speed dials.

JIM

Frank, it's Jim. I've got your money. No, I can't go there. The thing is, you have to meet me. Koreatown. The place, you know the place, right?

INTERCUT FRANK in the schvitz.

FRANK

Everybody knows the place. Whether I want you anywhere near that place with my money in your hands is another fuckin' story.

JIM

That's the only place I'll meet you.

FRANK

You have *all* my money plus everything? Are you telling me you have all my money.

JIM

I have all your money plus all Mister Lee's money. I have all the money to pay everything I owe to everybody.

FRANK

What do you do when you're in fuck you position?

JIM

We've had that discussion and I understand your point, but you gotta meet me there.

FRANK

If there was a list of places where nobody gets ripped off I believe that's at the top.

EXT. KOREATOWN. NIGHT

Establish the non-descript building with a corner entrance that we've seen before, guarded by Koreans.

INT. KOREATOWN GAMBLING DEN HALLWAY. NIGHT

JIM comes up some stairs and heads down a corridor towards a door guarded by two KOREAN GUYS we have never seen before. He stops. One of them snaps his fingers and JIM hands over first a CARD with Korean writing on it...a passport from Mister Lee...and then, for inspection, the DUFFEL. The BIGGEST KOREAN looks up in wonder after inspecting what is inside. Then they open the door...and Jim passes through into...

INT. KOREATOWN GAMBLING DEN. NIGHT

Another world. At low tables around the room, Korean businessmen are drinking and being served by submissive, attentive, women. They refill the men's glasses and cut their food for them.

JIM, backpack on his shoulder, stands looking at the GAMING TABLES.

Blackjack, roulette, the usual. All games here are played with CASH – masses of cash, deployed by not only Asian businessmen but serious and rich professional gamblers. In a side room, poker is being played at a lighted baize table.

JIM refocuses on the roulette wheel, obsessively. He moves forward. Then stops. All or nothing: what about nothing. For the first time the tables have no allure.

MISTER LEE materializes.

MISTER LEE

You have my money?

JIM looks at him.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

If you have the money, I advise you not to play. It's all over.

JIM

I know that.

MISTER LEE

My partner is in the corner.

JIM looks, not wanting to. The PARTNER is a big Korean, having his meat cut for him by a bottle girl. He is merely a businessman...except for the security with folded arms. JIM looks back at Mister Lee and then at the TABLES.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

If you lose, the money does not go to me.

JIM

I know that.

FRANK and BIG ERNIE have entered. They see JIM in the room, standing with MISTER LEE, and instead of approaching (FRANK looks worried), they move to the BAR, from which they can observe JIM.

JIM is very aware of them: very aware too of Mister Lee's HEAVIES.

MISTER LEE

I cannot take money off you by force in here.

JIM

I know that. That's why we're here. I told you we were going to gamble, right?

They stare at each other.

MISTER LEE

You have enough money to pay me?

JIM

Yes.

MISTER LEE

You must come outside.

JIM

No.

MISTER LEE

You owe Frank, also.

JIM nods.

MISTER LEE (CONT'D)

You are going to pay?

JIM

No, I'm going to play.

MISTER LEE

What are you going to play?

A long beat.

JIM

Everything.

MISTER LEE

You can't.

JIM

It's the only way I'll do it. You can't take the money off me in here, and neither can he.

JIM indicates FRANK, and is now watching the ROULETTE WHEEL. The ball doing its thing.

JIM (CONT'D)
Red or black, all or nothing. All the money down. That's all I'll do.

MISTER LEE
If you lose, you will not leave here alive. I can't allow it.

JIM
Exactly. Is the table clean?

MISTER LEE
This is not my establishment.

This is terrifying: but JIM is committed.

JIM
They'll take a very sizeable bet?

MISTER LEE
That is what this establishment is for.

JIM
Good.

MISTER LEE
Let me have my money.

JIM surges forward.

BIG ERNIE intercepts him.

BIG ERNIE
What the fuck are you doing?

JIM looks down at the hand holding his coat. A KOREAN BOUNCER comes and deliberately removes BIG ERNIE'S HAND.

BIG ERNIE (CONT'D)
What the fuck are you doing?

FRANK is standing alarmed by the bar. BIG ERNIE is hustled out of the room, going along, because it would be very unwise not to.

JIM goes to a table, unzips his backpack, and stacks his cash on the table. He discards the backpack. He picks up the block of cash and heads towards the roulette table.

JIM moves forward, fast, and puts HUNDREDS AND HUNDREDS OF THOUSAND DOLLARS in cash on the table, all the money he has made in Vegas from betting on Lamar's game, less what he paid Neville Baraka, putting down one lump of cash after another.

The croupier stares.

Jim's gaze wanders over the table...reds and blacks blurring.

He is dimly aware of SPECTATORS crowding in...FRANK...MISTER LEE...

JIM

All on black.

THE CROUPIER spins the wheel. The ball goes into the wheel.

JIM closes his eyes and listens to the clatter of the ball.

IMAGES cascade through his mind: the DESERT SUNRISE, AMY in the desert, his child staring at him from a basin in the delivery room, his mother, himself leaning in a balcony doorway and looking out over a foreign city on the best morning of his life, an image of a typewriter, with a blank page, on which we PUSH IN.

We are on his face, covered with sweat, when the clatter of the ball stops. There is nothing but silence from the Korean spectators.

JIM opens his eyes and sees:

THE BALL LYING IN BLACK.

JIM turns immediately from the table and begins walking out of the establishment: out of everything.

FRANK is staring.

THE OWNER of the ESTABLISHMENT is standing right in front of him. JIM walks up to him.

JIM (CONT'D)

I was playing for Mister Lee, and for that gentleman over there.

He points at FRANK who stands there stunned.

JIM (CONT'D)

I'm not actually a gambler.

Everyone watches as he crosses the room, and goes to the door, and is let through by Koreans.

EXT. THE BUILDING IN KOREATOWN. NIGHT

FRANK and BIG ERNIE come out, escorted as far as the sidewalk, carrying the winnings. FRANK looks around and sees:

JIM leaning against the black borrowed MERCEDES, flipping the car key in his hand.

BIG ERNIE and FRANK come up to him. There's not much to say. JIM holds out the car key and FRANK takes it.

FRANK
You need a ride?

JIM shakes his head.

JIM
No, I'll walk. I feel like walking.

FRANK
You got anything on you?

JIM
Not a fucking cent, brother.

FRANK
That's not "fuck you" position.

JIM
Yes it is.

FRANK
Then say it to me.

JIM
Fuck you.

FRANK
Good boy.

JIM shoves off the car and begins to walk down the old downtown street: as SCORE comes up and carries us along into his new world (needless to say this is about the music), we:

CUT TO:

EXT. AMY'S BUILDING. NIGHT TOWARDS DAWN

ESTABLISH THE BUILDING, with its red "Los Altos" sign lit now for the first time in the film.

We are at Jim's POV.

JIM stands across the street, head slightly cocked, looking at the building, hands in the pockets of his coat. He seems for a moment to have his old look, his solitary look, and moves on along the sidewalk, to pass the Los Altos by...but then he stops and looks again, and crosses the deserted boulevard the way he walked towards the roulette wheel in Koreatown.

MOMENTS LATER

He is leaning, humped in his coat, in the entrance way. He takes a deep breath: he's redeemed: it's over. He reaches and (in the greatest act of his life) presses the intercom button.

FROM ACROSS THE BOULEVARD

We see JIM, now a small figure, waiting for the doorbell to be answered. Finally he pushes through the glass and goes inside and as a RED AND BLACK VAN wipes the screen very close we go to

BLACK