

THE GREAT PACMAN WAR OF 1982

(a memoir.....ish)

by
Joe Johnson

PLEASE NOTE:

Music cues here are not meant to be dictates.

They are simply suggestions to convey a sense of tone and mood for a particular scene.

They are songs our boys undoubtedly heard on the radio in the summer of 1982.

They are the soundtrack of their youth.

A BLAZING SUMMER SUN MELTS INTO OBLIVION...

The Pacific Ocean dances beneath a stunning display of purple, pink and orange. California perfection.

KIDS IN AMERICA by Kim Wilde, plays on the sound-track.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD RIVIERA - DUSK

A beach adjacent neighborhood near Torrance, California.

An 11-YEAR-OLD BOY named JJ, rides his low-rent BMX bike for all its worth. Longish hair, bleached blonde by summer sun and slick with sweat, sticks to his forehead.

He jumps a curb. Pops a wheelie. No helmet. No parents.

Because it's 1982 and that's how motherfucking kids rolled.

A CANVAS BAG with NEWSPAPERS is tied to his handlebars. He expertly lobs one onto a doorstep. Never slowing down.

In fact, JJ's speed could be considered reckless, especially--

WHEN A CAR BACKS OUT OF A DRIVEWAY IN FRONT OF HIM!

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

When I look back on the summer of 1982, I often wonder... How the hell I survived?

JJ slashes around it and barely avoids an oncoming truck.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

...And if I'm being honest... I really have no fucking idea...

He dives between parked cars, bunny hops onto the sidewalk and flips his final paper perfectly to another house.

JJ roars down the sidewalk, scattering a group of YOUNGER KIDS playing hopscotch on the chalked-over pavement.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA - DUSK

JJ pedals away from the beach and its bungalows, racing through an INDUSTRIAL STRIP of massive properties.

A LUMBER YARD... STEEL MILL... HUGE AEROSPACE FACILITIES...

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

...Because I definitely got up to some pretty stupid shit that year.

RAILROAD TRACKS slash through the area, right alongside traffic. Ferrying steel, lumber and oil from the harbor.

JJ pedals like a demon, riding parallel to the tracks.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Although truth be told... Me and stupid
had a long standing relationship that
neither began nor ended in 1982.

A freight train rumbles up from behind. JJ rides faster.

HE'S GONNA TRY AND BEAT THE TRAIN TO THE NEXT INTERSECTION!

UP AHEAD -- SAFETY ARMS lower to block cross traffic.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
It all just seemed to be a bit...
Heightened, that summer.

He pushes harder as the train eats up distance between them.
CROSSING GUARD BELLS CLANG WITH WARNING!

JJ reaches the intersection... Slides through a hard turn...
Shoots the gap between the crossing gates.

THE TRAIN IS RIGHT FUCKING THERE!

They are now on a perpendicular collision course!

JJ pumps his little legs as fast as they can go until --

HE SLAMS THE BRAKES!

Leaving a trail of black rubber on concrete as he skids to a
stop a mere few feet in front of the tracks.

The train roars past with a BLAST OF ITS HORN.

JJ stares, transfixed. The world beyond is glimpsed in
staccato bursts through the gaps between cars.

His hand reaches toward the speeding locomotive as it passes.

He leans forward... Fingers almost grazing the boxcars until--

He's yanked to the ground!

His bike clatters out from underneath him as a CONSTRUCTION
WORKER who's abandoned his own truck smothers JJ.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER
Stay down!

He shields JJ, as the final few cars pass...

THE CABOOSE HAS A LOOSE STRAP FLAILING IN THE WIND!

It extends several feet wide of the car, a large METAL BUCKLE on the end, whips through the space where JJ was standing.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER

The hell is wrong with you kid? That strap coulda took your head clean off.

The train disappears down the tracks and around a bend.

JJ

Bite me! I saw it. I was gonna move.

JJ stands and bends to pick up his bike. His shirt rides up his back... Exposing a patchwork of new and old bruises.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER

Holy hell. Who did that to you?

JJ pulls his shirt down and his face hardens. Eyes narrow.

JJ

Like you give a shit. Mind your own business and leave me alone. Perv.

He hops onto his bike and races away, leaving the man staring after him. Holy hell, is right.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The sun has finally vanished as JJ slides to a stop in front of a small two bedroom house that's seen better days.

A late 70s Chrysler Cordoba is parked at the curb.

The front end is completely smashed to oblivion.

JJ pauses to glare at it, then drapes the newspaper bag over his shoulders and tucks his bike behind a dying hedge.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

JJ enters and turns on a dim light in the small living room.

A threadbare couch and chair occupy one half of the space. The rest is taken up by a HOSPITAL STYLE BED --

Where JJ's grandfather, ALFRED, lies. He's near 60 but looks older due to failing health. Is he even breathing right now?

JJ

Grandpa?

JJ creeps closer. Reaches with an uncertain hand, and--

AAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHHH!

Grandpa rolls over with plastic vampire teeth in his mouth.

JJ leaps backward and trips onto his ass.

JJ

That's not funny!

GRANDPA ALFRED pulls out the teeth and between fits of coughing, he laughs so hard his eyes water.

ALFRED

It's pretty god damned funny.

His voice carries a long faded trace of Cajun accent.

Alfred swings his legs off the bed and sits up. He moves with a general slowness, interspersed with bouts of speed.

JJ

Where's everybody else?

He moves to the adjacent kitchen.

ALFRED

Your mom got home from the Shack 'bout half hour ago. She's taking a nap before she has to work The Sunset.

JJ opens the freezer then closes it without taking anything.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

The Shack was a shitty bar my mom worked at during the day. And Sunset was an even shittier restaurant that she worked most nights for extra money.

ALFRED

You and Sam sleeping over Potter's?

JJ

Maybe. Unless you want me to stay.

ALFRED

Like I want you hanging around. I gotta giant shit to take, then I'm gonna drink half a bottle of vodka and pass out. Perfect Saturday night.

JJ steps back toward his grandfather. Glances at the hall.

JJ
Is he home?

ALFRED
Your dad--

JJ
Step-dick.

ALFRED
--is out with friends.

JJ
Great. He'll be driving home drunk.

ALFRED
Which is maybe the best reason to make
yourself scarce.

JJ sits beside the older man for a long companionable moment.

ALFRED
What's that behind your ear?

The boy smiles. An old joke between them.

JJ
I don't know, but... Definitely feels
like more than a quarter.

Alfred reaches behind JJ's ear with an empty hand...
And magically pulls back a folded up DOLLAR BILL.

ALFRED
Look at that. You were right.

The boy takes it and looks to the hall. Internal debate.

JJ
I'm gonna peek in. I won't wake her.

Alfred shrugs and JJ slips into the hall and opens a door to:

INT. PARENT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

JJ approaches the bed. His mom is asleep in her shit brown
waitress uniform. Her name is IRENE (28).

And yes -- that number beside her name is right.

High-school dropout. Teenage mother. Irene is not even 30 and looks younger. But has a lot of life behind her already.

JJ pulls a small bouquet of flowers from the newspaper bag over his shoulders. Picked from neighborhood gardens.

He sets the flowers on the table beside Irene's head.

Then leans close and gives her the softest, sweetest kiss a boy can give his mother for fear of waking her.

Her eyes open with a start. Panic on her face.

She sees it's JJ and her face softens into a smile.

IRENE

Hey, JJ. Whatchu doing?

JJ

I didn't mean to wake you.

IRENE

It's okay. I gotta leave soon.

JJ

I just wanted to see you before you go.

IRENE

I'm glad you did, so I could see you too.

JJ

Me and Sam are staying at Potter's.

IRENE

Okay. Gimme another kiss.

JJ leans in and kisses her cheek again.

IRENE

Thank you. That'll carry me through my shift. You should check the mail.

Irene smiles, then closes her eyes and drifts off again.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

JJ tiptoes over to a side table where mail is stacked. He pulls out a thick envelope addressed to him.

STORY OF AMERICA CARDS... Is stamped on the outside.

ALFRED

You hit the library today?

JJ looks at his grandfather with a smile.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Grandpa always said, "The day you fail to
learn something new is the day you die."
And I believed him. I really believed
him. So I always made sure to learn
something for both of us.

JJ
Read a book about Harvard University.

ALFRED
Oldest college in the country.

JJ
You already knew that?

ALFRED
But you didn't. So that's new for you.

JJ is pensive for a few seconds, then smiles with a thought.

JJ
What year did it open?
Alfred shrugs. His own smile growing wide.

JJ
Yes! 1636... It was called New College
at first and changed to Harvard in 1639.

ALFRED
Thank you. Now get the hell outta here.
JJ opens the door and spins away into the dark night.

EXT. BOWL-O-DROME - NIGHT

1950s GOOGIE-STYLE construction. That, born-in-Los Angeles,
architecture that leaned in sharp angles toward the future.

NEON LIGHTS wash over CARS and TEENS in the vast parking lot.
JJ rolls through and dumps his bike into a pile by the entry.

A weird ELECTRONIC PINGING AND SIREN noise builds up on the
sound-track. Quickly joined by percussion and synth.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - NIGHT

JJ moves through the run-down, but crowded space.
Holy 19-fucking-82!

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
 If we had anything close to a church at
 that time, it was the Bowl-O-Drome...

Head bands and leg warmers on Irene Cara and Pat Benatar wannabes, surrounded by Rick Springfield motherfuckers with feathered, hair and young Michael Jackson look-a-likes.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
 The arcade was our chapel...

JJ pushes into the arcade area with laser focus.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
 And the shrine of shrines, the altar upon
 which we worshiped...

Lyrics kick in to accompany the music:

Revealing the song as that catchy pop confection, written as an ode to the greatest video game ever -- **PAC MAN FEVER.**

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
 Was motherfucking, Pac Man!

Sure, kids are playing DONKEY KONG and CENTIPEDE, but the crowd surges around PAC MAN.

Quarters line the bottom of the screen. It's the universal method of calling "NEXT" in arcades.

Working the stick is JJ's 12-year-old brother, SAM.
 Playing so hard, he might just break his own arm.

His head bobs and weaves. His whole body moves left, right.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
 I'm not even sure why people put quarters
 up when my brother Sam was at the stick.
 He could play an hour easy before the
 game even started to fight back.

A couple of OLDER, SKATER TEENS lean over him. Bumping his arm on purpose. Talking trash in his ear to distract him.

SKATER TEEN
 Come on little queer. Don't mess up now.

The Teen tries to push Sam's elbow, but Sam remains fully concentrated on his game. He's approaching HIGH SCORE.

The Teen pushes harder, and suddenly--

MARCUS POTTER (13), black, shoves the much larger teen away.

POTTER
Back the fuck up, white-boy.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
That's Potter. First name was Marcus,
but nobody ever used it. And he was the
craziest kid I ever knew.

The Teen and his TWO BUDDIES quickly surround Potter.

SKATER TEEN
Oh bro, you did not just fucking touch
me. I'm gonna have to beat your ass now.

POTTER
Hold that thought. Sam. You get high
score yet?

Sam keeps playing, never breaking concentration.

SAM
Soon as I clear this screen.

SKATER TEEN
Bullshit you're knocking me off the top.

SAM
Boom. Just did.

A ROAR goes up. Everyone cheers him on as he keeps going.

SKATER TEEN
Fuck this!

He shoves Potter... HARD! Potter crashes into Sam, who loses
his grip on the joystick and "BLINKY" kills his last Pac Man.

SAM
You, dick!

SKATER TEEN
The fuck did you say?

JJ
He said you're a dickless shitbrain who
eats his own mother's asshole.

POTTER
Funny. I's just eating his mother's
asshole last night, myself.

Teen takes a swing at Potter, who half-blocks/ half gets a
scrape of knuckles across his temple.

JJ shoves the older kid, who pins him against the game.

A few OLDER KIDS in the crowd murmur, "Leave 'em alone" or "Let it go" or other bullshit. But no one intervenes.

SAM

Lemme type my name and we'll go.

SKATER TEEN

Don't worry, I got it.

He shoves Sam aside and quickly works the joy stick and button to select his three letter initials: **F... A...**

SAM

Come on, man. Stop.

Sam tries to shove the Teen away, but his two BUDDIES hold Sam back as the Teen locks in the final letter... **G.**

SKATER TEEN

There. Perfect.

Behind the Teen, Potter wipes a sleeve across his eyes, then reaches into his military style, CAMMO-CARGO PANTS...

POTTER PULLS OUT AN EXPANDABLE BATON.

At that moment, some disco-ish dance song... Something ironic like **GOOD TIMES** by Chic blares through the arcade as --

Potter flicks his wrist and activates the weapon.

POTTER

Hey cock-breath.

The Teen turns to look at Potter.

KA-FUCKING-CRACK!

Potter whips the baton across the older kid's knee-cap!

The Teen drops to the floor with a howl of pain. His two BUDDIES immediately close in on Potter.

AND IT'S FUCKING ON!

One kid grabs Potter's arm before he can swing the stick again, and the other slugs him in the gut.

JJ and Sam jump in, knocking the older kids away from Potter, and they all sprint for the exit before the teens get up.

EXT. BOWL-O-DROME - NIGHT

JJ, Sam and Potter burst out and run for their bikes, only to find a half-dozen GANG-BANGERS standing in their way.

Flannel shirts buttoned at the neck with plain white T-s underneath. Dark slacks over Adidas sneakers. All have bandanas around their foreheads. Aged 15 to 19.

The doors slam open behind them and everybody turns.

SKATER TEEN

You shit stains are dead.

DANNY MENDEZ (18) is the "leader" of this crew.

The three Teens advance, but Danny holds a hand out to stop them. VICTOR AND EDDIE (both 17) step forward to flank him.

DANNY

Who the fuck you talking to?

SKATER TEEN

Hey, we got no problem with you guys.

FELIX (O.S.)

Are you sure about that?

From behind Danny and his older crew steps FELIX (12).

FELIX

Cuz these are my boys right here.

Felix slaps skin with JJ, Sam and Potter. They all puff up now, feeling confident with Danny and crew behind them.

A crowd is forming as other teens spill from inside. THE MANAGER (20s), a stoner who's half-baked, arrives.

MANAGER

Yo, amigos, there's no blood-shed allowed at the Bowl-O-Drome. Can we all chill?

SKATER TEEN

Yeah, whatever man. We're just here to play some Pac Man.

MANAGER

That's a totally excellent idea!
Game's on me. You two head to head.
Winner gets pizza from the snack bar.

Danny stares him down for a beat, then smiles wide.

DANNY

Fuck yeah, homes. Pac Man's my shit.
Let's do it.

MANAGER

Right on. I'll see you inside.

Skater Teen follows with a last glance at the younger boys.
JJ tosses a double barrel of middle fingers at him.

Danny turns and SMA-FUCKING-SMACKS JJ upside the head.

Ain't no love tap, that's for sure. But JJ barely flinches.
A snot bubble drips from his nose. Eyes red and watery.

FELIX

Damn, Danny. What the fuck?

DANNY

That's why people wanna beat your ass,
yo. Act like a little bitch alla time.

JJ stares Danny down without saying a word.

DANNY

My grandma says not to fuck with you. Cuz
you're friends with my little brother.
But... East-Side, ese'.

Danny throws a hand signal: E-S-T (East Side Torrance).

DANNY

You live on my street, your ass belongs
to me, right?

He leans close to JJ who silently holds his stare.

FELIX

Come on Danny, leave 'em alone.

DANNY

Hey, Felix. Familia primero. You wanna
hang out with these fuckers, fine. But
you don't tell me what to do. Ehh?

Felix ducks his head and looks away with an embarrassed nod.

DANNY

Now you little panochas get outta here...
I gotta go get my free pizza.

JJ, Sam and Potter grab their bikes. They meekly wave at
Felix, who follows Danny and his crew into the bowling alley.

EXT. STREETS - NIGHT

JJ, Sam and Potter ride in a line down a dark side street.

SAM

Can't believe I got high score and that asshole didn't let me write my initials.

JJ

Suck a dick. Me and Potter both got hit in the head and now Danny's pissed at us.

SAM

Nobody told you to talk shit.

POTTER

Okay, both of you shut up for a minute.

Potter skids to a stop. JJ and Sam do the same.

POTTER

Who's hungry?

JJ

Step dad jacked my paper route money.

SAM

Mine too. I'm tapped.

Potter holds up a VANS WALLET.

POTTER

No worries. Look what I found... In that skater dick's back pocket while we were rolling on the ground.

They all whoop and holler at this bit of good news.

EXT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

Sparse traffic rolls along a wide street. On one corner is a run down, but packed, fast food joint: **ASTRO BURGER**.

PLANET ROCK by Afrika Bambaataa plays over loudspeakers.

INT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

JJ, Sam and Potter share a plastic and vinyl booth. The shredded remains of burgers and fries in front of them.

SAM

...I totally woulda beat that dude's ass.

JJ

Yeah, I know... But what were you gonna do about the other two?

SAM

Just saying. You don't always have to be so quick to jump in. It's almost like you enjoy getting hit or something.

JJ

At least... At least with those dicks I get to hit back.

Potter glances up from his very obvious task of un-screwing the caps of SALT AND PEPPER SHAKERS, then carefully giving them a half turn so they'll stay in place... For now.

SAM

Mom's gonna divorce that asshole. I'm telling you. She is.

A heavy silence hangs over the table for a moment.

POTTER

Hey. Check it...

Three ATTRACTIVE GIRLS (16-18) step up to the counter.

POTTER

I'm gonna go talk to them.

SAM

And say what?

Potter thinks for a beat. Gets an idea.

POTTER

I'll ask 'em if they cried during E.T.

SAM

How do you even know they saw it?

POTTER

Don't be stupid.

Potter shakes his head and beelines for the girls.

Sam and JJ watch, completely baffled, as Potter engages the older girls and has them laughing within seconds.

JJ

What the-- What could he possibly be saying? I don't understand girls at all.

Sam studies his brother for a beat. His face darkens.

SAM
She's gonna divorce him. She will.

Potter is back at the table now, interrupting the moment.

POTTER
I told the girls they can have our booth.

All three boys clear their trays and dump them in a trash can on the way out the door. Potter calls to the girls.

POTTER
Fair warning. Fries are a little weak on salt. Might need to add some.

GIRL
Oh, you're sweet. Thanks for the table.

POTTER
No... Thank you for the dreams I'm about to have tonight.

He blows a kiss and backs out the door behind JJ and Sam.

EXT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

The boys all grab their bikes and mount up.

JJ
Oh shit, Potter. Did you...

Potter flicks his eyebrows with a wicked grin as they turn to watch through the window as one Girl lifts the SALT SHAKER and tilts it over her fries--

AND THE TOP COMES OFF... Drowning her food in a pile of salt.

The boys pedal away as she yells through the glass.

EXT. DARK STREETS - NIGHT

Super late. Traffic is nearly non-existent at this point.

JJ
You guys go. I'll catch up.

POTTER
Where you going?

JJ suddenly flips a 180 and heads back without answering.

POTTER
What the hell's he doing?

SAM
It's JJ. What do you think he's doing?

INT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

The salt-soaked fries are pushed aside, as the girls eat.
Suddenly a FRESH ORDER OF FRIES slides onto the table.

JJ
Hey. Sorry about my friend.
He spins and walks away, not even waiting for a reaction. As he exits, the girls all melt. Awwwww...

EXT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

JJ exits to find Sam and Potter are there waiting.

POTTER
Bet that was your last dollar too.
JJ shrugs as Potter soft punches him in the arm.

POTTER
Pathetic.
Translation: "I love you." But who's gonna say that?
JJ looks to his brother, who nods. Respect.

EXT. DARK STREETS - NIGHT

The three boys ride on through the night.
They turn onto a block of single story apartment compounds.
The kind sometimes described as "garden apartments."
The "gardens" are mostly dirty concrete separating long rows of connected units that run perpendicular to the street.

SAM
Your dad on duty?

POTTER
Yeah, he's on base all week but-- Shit.

UP AHEAD... Potter sees Danny and a half dozen of his crew lounging on discarded furniture in front of one complex.

Weed and beer being passed between them.

DANNY

Hey! Niños. You should be home in bed.
Shit gets dangerous out here at night.

Danny's boys laugh at that. Ad lib, "that's right" etc...

DANNY

Come on mijos, we got weed, Colt 45.

JJ, Sam and Potter ignore the taunts and speed past.
Whistles and jeers echo behind them as they move through dim puddles of light cast by the buzzing street lamps.

EXT. POTTER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A shitty little bungalow. But not as shitty as JJ's home.

JJ, Sam and Potter drop their bikes and dash into a military style canvas tent that's half-ass erected in the back yard.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Potter uses a FLASHLIGHT to illuminate the space.

Floor mats and sleeping bags are already there. The boys plop down onto their designated spots.

JJ

What did you hit that guy back at the
bowling alley with anyway?

Potter extends the baton and passes it to JJ.

POTTER

Another toy my dad brought home. Beauty
of being a quartermaster. Army always
gets free weapons and shit. He gets to
test 'em out. I get to steal 'em.

JJ feels the weight of it in his hand. A glint in his eye.

POTTER

Don't get any dumb ideas.

Potter grabs it back and tosses it beside his sleeping bag,
before cutting the light and plunging the tent to darkness.

EXT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

JJ and Sam pass the Bowl-O-Drome, where EIGHT PAC MAN GAMES are being wheeled out of a BOX TRUCK and lined up.

The boys ride up to the Manager, who's supervising.

JJ

Hey, what's up with all the new games?

MANAGER

Only like, the best contest ever. Check the deets and sign yourself up.

He points to a FLYER on the glass doors. JJ reads it.

JJ

Dude. Five hundred dollars? You could totally win that shit.

SAM

I don't know...

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

JJ and Sam slide to a stop at side back gate of their house.

JJ

What don't you know? Nobody else at that bowling alley is as good as you.

Sam shrugs, not so sure. They push through the gate.

EXT. REAR PATIO - DAY

A small, concrete patio with an aluminum awning over it.

JJ

I'll do my collection, get some cash, and we can go check it out.

The boys stash their bikes and approach the back door just as Irene emerges in her waitress uniform.

SAM

Mom!

IRENE

Hey, babies.

She squats to hug them and both boys rush into her arms.

JJ

Are you just getting home or...

IRENE

No honey, I have to leave for my day shift. But I'll see you later, okay.

Both boys nod. Bittersweet.

DICK (O.S.)

Is that the kids?

The sound of their STEP-DAD'S VOICE echoes from the house.

JJ, Sam and Irene all stiffen at his voice and she pulls them closer. A look of disdain and resignation on her face.

IRENE

Gimme a minute, I'm saying goodbye.

Irene squeezes her boys tight for several seconds.

IRENE

I'm sorry. I have to go...

Rather than go back through the house, she exits through the gate. Before it closes she peeks back with a final smile.

IRENE

I love you guys so much.

JJ/ SAM

Love you too.

They both deflate as the gate closes on her exit. They turn and look at the open door leading into the kitchen.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Dealing with our step-dick was always like rolling the dice...

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

They find DICK hunched over a bowl of cereal.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

What kind of a mood would he be in? Would he be drunk? What would he be irrationally mad about that day?

DICK

Where've you two been?

SAM

We stayed at Potter's. Mom knew.

DICK

You shoulda left a note. I didn't see her until five minutes ago.

JJ

Yeah, cuz she was working her second job. Where were you?

Dick's body goes rigid. But he doesn't turn around.

DICK

What the fuck did you say?

Sam steps forward. A subtle movement, but a clear one. Putting himself between JJ and Dick.

His hand creeps to POTTER'S COLLAPSIBLE BATON, tucked into the back of his waistband. JJ stops him.

JJ

I got scared here without you, that's all I meant. So we stayed over.

Dick relaxes. Continues shovelling cereal.

DICK

Sweep the patio. I'm having guys over for BBQ later.

JJ

Cool. Can we have hot dogs?

DICK

Did I say you were invited?

The brothers look at each other. Figures. What a dick.

SAM

I'll sweep. JJ has to collect.

JJ grabs his COLLECTION BOOK from the counter. Each page has a payment pouch and tear-away receipt for his customers.

EXT. REAR PATIO - DAY

Sam grabs a broom from where it rests against the wall.

JJ

Won't matter how clean it is, he'll still find a reason to hit you.

JJ gestures at the patio.

JJ

So make sure you leave something obvious.
Then he feels like Mr. Powerful when you
fix it. He doesn't hit as hard.

SAM

As if you didn't learn that from me.

DICK (O.S.)

I don't hear a broom working!

They both flinch at his voice.

SAM

Go. Get outta here.

JJ is torn about leaving Sam. But Sam waves him on. Go!

The driving pop-synth beat of something like ***SITUATION*** by Yaz plays over the next few scenes.

EXT. STREETS - DAY

JJ cruises his neighborhood. In the bright light of day, we note that it is comprised mainly of Mexican families.

JJ's blonde head definitely stands out.

He pulls into the driveway of an APARTMENT BUILDING and leans his bike against the wall as he knocks on a first floor door.

IN A SERIES OF INTERCUT SHOTS:

SAM... Sweeps the patio.

JJ... Goes from one building to another, collecting money.

SAM... Purposely builds a pile of debris on one side.

JJ... Walks down the steps of a two story building.

SAM... Watches as Dick immediately finds the dirty pile.

JJ... Finds TWO MEXICAN TEENS waiting at his bike.

SAM... Tenses as Dick scatters the dirt with his foot.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Stay with JJ now as he cautiously approaches his bike.

The alpha here is VICTOR. His sidekick is EDDIE. They were both with Danny at the bowling alley. Both are 17.

VICTOR

Whassup little man?

JJ tries to ignore them and get on his bike.

EDDIE
What you got there?

He reaches for the collection book, but JJ pulls it away.

JJ
Please. Don't. If you take it, I have
to pay for every paper out of my own
pocket and my step-dad is gonna--

VICTOR
Not my problem.

He pins JJ to the wall and tries to take the book, but JJ
resists until Eddie steps in grabs hold of it.

EDDIE
Let it go, bitch!

Victor palm-strikes JJ's head, causing him to finally let go.
The two older boys exchange high fives.

JJ
You're real tough. Two on one with a
little kid. Fucking pussies.

Victor suddenly FAKES A PUNCH at JJ, expecting him to flinch.

He doesn't.

Victor stares JJ down for another beat, then turns away
laughing as he and Eddie walk off.

EDDIE
Go home and cry to your mommy.

JJ climbs onto his bike and pedals after them.

Victor holds out his hand for the collection book.

As Eddie passes it to him, JJ speeds up and --

SNATCHES THE BOOK AWAY AS HE KNIFES BETWEEN THEM!

EDDIE
Motherfucker!

Eddie and Victor sprint after JJ, who rides like a demon.

The group rushes down the middle of the street.
A HONKING CAR slides past in the opposite direction.

An intersection up ahead is busy with cross traffic.
JJ cuts a hard right into an ALLEY.

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

JJ's tire slides out. Victor and Eddie close the gap.

But the younger boy finds traction again and races away.

As JJ disappears around a turn, Victor and Eddie hop a wall and cut through a neighboring property.

EXT. SIDE STREET - DAY

JJ tears down a new street. Sweat dripping. He glances over his shoulder. The coast is clear.

He exhales in relief and slows down to wipe sweat from --

KA-BLAM!

Victor flies from between two parked cars and LEVELS JJ!

JJ crashes to the pavement. The wind knocked out of him.

VICTOR

Thought you were slick huh, little bitch?

Eddie arrives and KICKS JJ in the thigh, as Victor picks the collection book up from where it fell.

VICTOR

Shoulda gave it up when I asked. Now
I'm'a take your money AND beat your ass.

JJ goes fetal. Ready to absorb the beating.

BIG GERRY

Hey! The fuck you doing, man?

BIG GERRY, a Samoan in his 40s steps out of his parked van.

This dude is five foot nothing with hair slicked back in a pompadour and short sleeves rolled over a pack of cigarettes.

VICTOR

Back off midget. This don't concern you.

The Samoan smiles. Calm as a cucumber.

BIG GERRY

You guys, EST? Run with Danny, yeah?

VICTOR

So?

BIG GERRY

So... You should know then. We got a line. Starts a block that way.

Big Gerry points back down the street.

BIG GERRY

Now, if you see that van. With the naked lady. That shit's mine.

Oh yeah, he has one of THOSE vans. With a bright air-brushed picture of a NAKED WOMAN wielding a sword over a dragon.

VICTOR

I give a fuck, old man.

BIG GERRY

You should. Cuz if you see that van, it means you're on MY side of the line. And that means we got a problem.

Big Gerry smiles. This motherfucker is cool as ice.

EDDIE

Suck a dick. Samoans ain't shit to us.

SHA-BOOM!

The door to Big Gerry's van suddenly slams shut.

Everybody turns to see the biggest, baddest, tattooed motherfucker you can imagine walking toward them.

LITTLE GERRY (30s). Six Feet Five inches of Samoan muscle.

LITTLE GERRY

Uuu-ahhh. Big Gerry. What's the holdup?

Victor and Eddie both take noticeable steps backwards.

BIG GERRY

This is my cousin, Little Gerry.

Little Gerry smiles and throws a "Shaka" hand wave at them.

LITTLE GERRY

'Sup? We don't want no trouble, bruh.

Victor and Eddie stare back, silently. Trying to be hard.

BIG GERRY
Little G. Help the kid up.

Little Gerry reaches one of his massive hands down to JJ and pulls him to his feet.

LITTLE GERRY
You're bleeding, yo.

He touches behind his own ear to indicate the spot and JJ wipes a trickle of blood from his neck.

BIG GERRY
Now give him his shit back.

Victor and Eddie stand tough, staring Big G down...
Until Little G holds his hand out.

VICTOR
Misunderstanding, that's all.

He slaps the book into the big Samoan's hand, then tosses a gang sign, as he and Eddie saunter away.

BIG GERRY
Where you from?

JJ points vaguely in the direction the gang bangers went.

BIG GERRY
Shit... Bet you get hassled a lot, yeah?
Being a white boy in that neighborhood.

JJ shrugs and Little Gerry passes the book to him.

LITTLE GERRY
See that building right there? Number 5?

He points across the street to an apartment complex.

LITTLE GERRY
You drop me a free a paper every day.
Next time you collect. See me first.
And we do the rest together. Nobody fuck
with you then. How's that sound?

JJ looks between Big Gerry and Little Gerry. Two strangers,
but they just saved his ass. So what's he gonna say...

JJ
Fuck you... Then what, I'm supposed to be
grateful. Let you touch me or some shit.

The two men share a surprised look, then burst out laughing.

BIG GERRY

This fuckin' kid, man. You half Samoan or what? That's the way to be, bruh.

LITTLE GERRY

That's right, junior. Don't take shit from nobody. But also recognize when somebody's trying to do you a favor.

JJ

You're serious then? You'll help me out?

LITTLE GERRY

It's a fair trade, yeah?

Little Gerry holds out his hand and JJ SMACKS SKIN.

OFF THAT SOUND --

EXT. REAR PATIO - DAY

A BELT SLAPS ACROSS SAM'S BACK.

He tries to block a second hit that slaps across his thigh.

DICK

I told you to do it right the first fucking time, didn't I?

WHACK! He's hit again, up around the shoulder.

DICK

Finish it. Then disappear.

Dick spins and walks back in the house.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

Sam exits through the gate, as JJ arrives, looking disheveled. A trace of blood still on his neck.

JJ

How bad was it?

SAM

Pshh. Belt. Three times. Barely even left a red mark. What happened to you?

JJ

Fucking Victor and Eddie. But you know that Samoan dude with the bitchin' van.

SAM
With the titties on it?

JJ
He chased 'em off.

SAM
Dude's barely bigger than me.

JJ
His cousin is a monster.

Dick calls out from the house.

DICK (O.S.)
JJ. Get your ass in here.

JJ shoves a SMALL WAD OF BILLS into Sam's hand.

JJ
Go. I'll meet you at the alley.

Sam hesitates but JJ shoves him away.

JJ
You want him to take that money too?

Reluctantly, Sam pedals off as JJ pushes through the gate.

EXT. REAR PATIO - DAY

JJ drops his bike and examines the perfectly swept patio, then steps through the rear door with his collection book.

Dick's unintelligible grumbling is followed by the quick -- SLAP-SLAP! Of an open hand hitting skin.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

JJ's face burns red from the hits he just took as he glares at the departing Dick, who is backlit by the door.

A cough from the living room catches JJ's attention.

He approaches Alfred, who's sitting up in bed.

ALFRED
Hey, JJ. Learn anything good today?

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER - DAY

JJ sits on Alfred's bed. The old man is half asleep as JJ reads from the back of one of his STORY OF AMERICA CARDS.

Each one has a picture on one side and paragraphs of text on the back. Color-coded for categories:

HISTORY... ARTS & SCIENCE... BIOGRAPHY... ETC...

JJ

...Kennedy was the fourth U.S. President to be assassinated after Abraham Lincoln in 1865, James Garfield in 1881 and--

Alfred goes into a coughing jag and JJ pauses until the old man catches his breath and waves him on.

JJ

William McKinley in 1901.

Alfred gives a thumbs up, then closes his eyes and drifts off. JJ stands and pulls a blanket tight on the old man.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

JJ joins Sam, Potter and Felix, where they stand in awe of:

PAC MAN ALLEY

EIGHT BRAND NEW... BRIGHT YELLOW PAC MAN GAMES --

Are lined up. FOUR on each side.

A BANNER announces the tournament and its \$500 prize.

As Potter and Felix gape, Sam pulls JJ aside.

SAM

How much did he take?

JJ

Everything. I had 25 bucks left after what I owe for the papers.

SAM

Damn. 25 bucks is a lot.

JJ

Can't collect again for three weeks. All we have is the 10 I slipped you.

They move closer to the games with Felix and Potter.

FELIX

The main competition is in a month.

Just then the Manager passes by.

MANAGER

Only players who pass the qualifying score make it though.

SAM

I'll do that shit right now.

JJ finds a YOUNG KID who's not very good and slaps a half dozen quarters up onto his screen.

JJ

Right here, Sam. This kid's gonna be dead in like... A minute if he's lucky.

YOUNG KID

Uh-uhhh... I'll be here for at least--

Wa-wa-wa-whuuuuuu... Ba-Doink.

YOUNG KID

Dang, man. You distracted me.

JJ

Here. Go play something else.

JJ passes the younger kid two quarters from the ledge and he bounds away happy, as JJ slips a coin into the slot.

JJ

Let's go bro. Kill it.

Sam grabs the joystick and everything around him and the others seems to accelerate into TIME LAPSE SPEED.

Some new wave pop song like *TEMPTATION* by New Order kicks in.

Crowds surge and flow... Lights dim... Levels advance...

Sam is pure concentration. Nothing else exists right now.

Potter and JJ peel off. Felix stays with Sam.

Finally, the row of quarters is gone. Sam types - **SAM** - into the TOP SCORE slot. All 9 scores below are also his.

The Manager verifies Sam's score and writes him down on his clipboard with a thumbs up.

Potter sits at a long counter above the lanes. He watches a FAMILY... MOM and DAD (late 20s) and their SON (6 or 7).

Both parents help the boy toss his ball, then pick him up and twirl him as it rolls slowly down the lane. All smiles.

JJ slides in beside Potter. He follows his friend's gaze.

JJ

You ever wonder... Where your mom is?

It's not exactly silence with music playing over the loudspeakers and pins crashing all around... But it feels very quiet between the boys for a beat.

POTTER

She died... Like four years ago.

JJ

Holy shit, what?

POTTER

Yeah. I never told you, but... One day, some guy calls out of the blue from like bumfuck Texas. Said she's dead. She was a total druggie. My dad checked. Found out it was true. So...

He drifts off. Picks at the counter top.

POTTER

Anyway. I never knew her. My dad's the shit, that's all I care about. Although... A step-mom might be cool.

Potter suddenly smiles big. Sincere moment gone.

POTTER

Like... Dolly Parton. That'd be sweet.

JJ

For a step-mom?

POTTER

Hell yeah. Imagine her walking down the hall. Boinga-boinga-boinga. Bouncing titties while she brings me breakfast.

JJ

You wanna step-mom who gives you a boner?

POTTER

Hey, a boner's a boner. I don't care who gives it to me.

JJ

I am so glad you don't have a sister.

POTTER

Look at it this way. If Dolly was my step-mom. You'd be over all the time... And she wouldn't be YOUR step-mom.

JJ thinks about that. Grinning huge as he nods.

POTTER

Boner city for you, guilt free. Me... I'm okay being creepy.

JJ

My god, dude... You are... GENIUS!

He holds his hand up for a HIGH-FIVE. Potter smacks it.

POTTER

What about you? Ever ask about your dad?

JJ stares at the young Father. Now holding his son on his shoulders as they watch the Mom roll her ball down the lane.

JJ

My mom says he knows where we are. Has our phone number. So fuck him, ya know. If he doesn't want us...

He looks dead square into Potter's face.

JJ

Then we don't want him either.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door pushes open. A sliver of light reveals the boys asleep in bunk beds. JJ on the bottom, Sam on top.

Two well-worn dressers are shoved against the opposite wall.

Between is a narrow strip, littered with dirty clothes, books and toys. These kids do not keep a clean room.

Irene steps in. It's obvious she's been crying.

She strokes Sam's head. He squirms and rolls away from her.

When she bends to gaze at JJ, his eyes are open.

IRENE

Shhh... Your brother's asleep.

She sits on the bed and puts a hand on his chest.

JJ
You just get home?

Irene nods and pulls a couple CANDY BARS from her uniform.

IRENE
Was hoping to make it before you went to bed. But... We got busy. You guys can save these for tomorrow.

She sets the candy on one of the dressers.

JJ
Why are you crying? Did he hurt you?

Irene nudges JJ over and curls up beside him.

IRENE
Don't worry about me, JJ. I'm okay.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
I don't ever remember my mother complaining about our step dick to us.

ANGEL IN THE MORNING by Juice Newton begins as they hold each other. It continues over the next series of scenes.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
She never wanted us to worry about her, even though I know she spent every minute of every day worrying about us.

The door pushes wider open and Step Dick's shadow fills it.

Irene looks up and her face flattens. She rolls away from JJ with one last peck on his head before she exits.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
I never blamed her for the situation we were in... She was trapped too.

As the door closes, JJ flips on a small flashlight hidden in his bed. He shines it onto the wood slats of the bed above.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
A lot of that was on my real dad, who abandoned us. And I didn't give a shit about where he was or what he was doing.

He pulls a hidden slip of paper out from behind one slat and studies whatever's written on it for a long, hard beat.

After several seconds, he leans back on his pillow and closes his eyes as he clutches the paper to his chest.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Except... I actually did.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAWN

The side gate creaks open and JJ eases his bike out as quietly as possible. He glances back at his dark house.

The first light of day bleeds over the horizon.

It feels like JJ is the only person awake in the world.

He takes a deep breath, then pedals into the empty street. A tiny, lonely figure pushing toward an unknown destination.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

The sun is fully up as JJ crests a hill and looks down a narrow street at the beach.

He pauses for a long beat. Considering his next move.

EXT. STRAND - DAY

JJ rolls slowly along the strand, dodging other bikes and pedestrians. His focus is on the LIFEGUARD TOWERS.

Watching the numbers pass... 15... 16... 17...

He stops and stares out at Tower 17.

JJ pulls a slip of paper from his pocket and consults it.

JJ
Tower seventeen.

He turns his gaze to a BEACH SIDE CAFE, thirty yards down.

EXT. BEACH-SIDE CAFE - DAY

JJ sits at a table. A half-eaten cookie and a soda in front of him. His bike beside him.

His eyes are fixed on Tower 17.

A TEENAGE WAITRESS (18) approaches. There's a maturity beyond her years about her. But also vulnerability. A knowing glint in her eye. She sees more than the visible.

We'll come to find out her name is CASEY.

CASEY
You like lifeguards?

He looks up at Casey as she gestures to Tower 17.

CASEY
You've been staring at that tower for a solid hour. And you're kinda bogarting my best table.

JJ
Oh, I'm sorry. I can go.

He starts to scoop up his cookie and soda. Flustered.

CASEY
Whoa, whoa, hang on... It was a joke.

She waves her arm at half a dozen empty tables.

CASEY
You're fine, but... Are you okay?

JJ
What?

CASEY
Out here alone. Drilling a hole in that tower with your eyes, like it ate your dog or something.

At that moment, an actual LIFEGUARD (30s) emerges from the tower. He's tall, muscular. Deeply tanned.

JJ suddenly sits up a little straighter.

CASEY
Oh, do you know Ben? The lifeguard?
He's great with all the kids.

Gut punch to JJ. He literally slouches, as if he just got slugged in the solar plexus.

JJ
Oh... Oh, that's... Cool.

JJ clenches his jaw. Swallows his emotion and stands.

He scoops up his half-eaten cookie and soda. He tosses it all into a trash can, then returns to grab his bike.

JJ

Sorry for hogging the table.

CASEY

Wait. What's your name?

JJ locks eyes with her, then glances at Lifeguard Ben.

JJ

It's... Potter.

CASEY

Okay... Potter. Should I tell Ben you stopped by?

JJ

No. Don't. I mean, he doesn't know me.

He ducks his head. Starts to push his bike away.

CASEY

You guys have the same eyes.

JJ stops and looks back.

JJ

What?

CASEY

Maybe I'm full of shit. But... They're really pretty. So it's... Kinda obvious.

JJ

Please don't tell him I was here.

CASEY

Okay... Okay, Potter. I won't... If you tell me your real name.

She raises an eyebrow at him with a knowing smile.

JJ

JJ.

CASEY

At least Potter was an actual name. Those are just initials.

JJ

Yeah, well... It's what people call me.

CASEY

Fair enough. I'm Casey.

JJ gives her a dubious look. She laughs.

CASEY

Not the letters K and C. Casey.
C-A-S-E-Y.

JJ

Oh, right. Cool.

CASEY

You don't remember me, do you?

JJ looks at her closely now. Really close.

JJ

Oh, shit. Astro Burger. The fries.

CASEY

Your friend, the one actually named
Potter... He's kind of a dick. But what
you did was really sweet. And showed
integrity. Know what that means?

JJ

Do I look stupid?

She laughs at that.

CASEY

Just making sure.

JJ

Alright, well. I gotta go.

CASEY

Hang on. Here's what I'm thinking... If
you and your friends hang out at Astro
Burger, you probably live near there.

JJ

Couple blocks away. So?

CASEY

Well... That's like 10 miles.

JJ

I got my bike.

CASEY

I see that. But... I'm off in fifteen.
And I've got my mom's station wagon.
Since we're going the same direction...

JJ hesitates. Glances one last time at Ben's lifeguard tower

CASEY

I used to be a girl scout, okay so...
This'll be my good deed for today.

SAM (V.O. PRELAP)

Don't do it, bro!

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

Sam and Potter play two different Pac Man machines, side by side. Sam glances over at Potter's screen.

POTTER

I... Just... Don't... Understand...

He moves his body left and right, up and down.

SAM

Told you not to use the tunnel. Go up!

Potter follows the instructions, but is about to get eaten.

Sam shoves Potter aside and grabs his control, so now Sam has one hand on each game. He clears Potter's level, then returns full attention to his own.

Potter starts the next level and is immediately killed.

POTTER

This game is racist. It knows when a
brother is at the controls.

Sam continues whipping through his maze.

POTTER

See, that red motherfucker is not even
going as fast against you.

SAM

Or maybe...

He clears his level. NEW TOP SCORE for this machine.

SAM

You just suck.

Potter punches Sam in the arm, hard but playful.

FELIX

Nice, pendejo. Another top score.

They both turn to see Felix approaching. They all slap skin.

FELIX

Check it. Danny just got back from TJ.
Garage is stacked. More than last year.

POTTER

Hell yeah. M-80s?

FELIX

You know it.

SAM

Roman Candles?

FELIX

Bitch, everything. I'm telling you.
Danny hooked it up. Floor to ceiling.

Potter pumps his fist. Grins all around.

SAM

Anybody know where JJ is?

EXT. STREETS - DAY

Casey drives an old station wagon. JJ rides beside her. His bike in the back area. **OUR LIPS ARE SEALED** by the Go-Gos is on the radio. Casey sings along with abandon.

Her hair dances on the wind through the open windows. JJ stares at the side of her face like she's some kind of exotic creature he couldn't possibly understand.

CASEY

You're not used to people being nice to you, are you?

JJ shrugs. Turns to look out his window.

CASEY

That's okay. Neither am I. Us wounded animals know how to spot each other.

That causes JJ to snap back to her. A question in his face.

Casey touches a spot on JJ's neck we might be noticing for the first time. Barely visible under his collar length hair.

CASEY
Cigarette. Am I right?

Casey lifts the side of her T-Shirt just enough to reveal a constellation of similar marks along her rib cage.

CASEY
Yeah. I know.... I know.

JJ looks up into her face. Their connection solidified.

JJ
Does it get better?

She stares ahead. Drums her fingers on the steering wheel.

CASEY
Do you believe the Russians are ever gonna drop a nuke on us?

JJ
What?

CASEY
Think about it. All our lives we've been doing these stupid duck and cover drills, right? Like it might happen any day. So everybody's afraid. All the time. About something that might never happen.

JJ
But it might.

CASEY
Why be afraid of something that's only a slim possibility. That's no way to live. That's like putting handcuffs on to swim.

JJ
If you say so.

She pulls the car quickly to the curb and turns to him.

CASEY
Here's the thing. Ducking under a desk, if they do bomb us, isn't gonna do shit to protect you. Once I figured that out... Last year... Every time that siren went off at school, and everyone else was down on the floor, I got up and walked right outta the classroom. One time I kept walking straight to the movies.

JJ

Wow. That's... Pretty bad ass.

CASEY

Well, it was certainly a fast ticket to detention. But... It was MY CHOICE. So, you wanna know if it gets better...

Casey leans back in her seat, gathering her thoughts.

CASEY

Yeah... Minute I stopped hiding under my desk, it got better. I'm older, so I could do that. Hell, end of summer, long as I earn enough cash, I'm off to college and my dad'll never touch me again. You might have to duck under that desk for a bit... But... When you're ready to ignore the sirens, make your own decisions, then yeah... It gets better. Your life isn't decided yet, JJ. Not by a long-shot.

JJ

Nobody in my family ever went to college.

CASEY

Shit, mine either. But if that's what you want... Somebody's gotta be first, right? So make it happen.

JJ nods at that. Looks at Casey, dead serious.

JJ

I'm glad I bought those fries.

Casey beams at the younger boy and tousles his hair.

CASEY

Me too, JJ... Me too.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

JJ pulls his bike from the back of the station wagon.

CASEY

Hey.

JJ approaches her window and she hands him a slip of paper.

CASEY

Ever need a friend to talk to, a ride to the beach... Someone to pull you out from under a desk. You go ahead and call me.

JJ

Thanks but... You don't even know me.

CASEY

Well that's not true at all, is it?

She gives him a wink and pulls away, leaving JJ staring after the station wagon as it disappears down the block.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

JJ walks in and stops short. His grandpa's bed is empty.

His face shows concern, until the sound of a toilet flushing draws his attention to the bathroom door.

Alfred steps out and shuffles to the kitchen.

JJ

Damn old man, what'd you eat? I can smell it from here.

ALFRED

You're about to eat a knuckle sandwich if you keep up that smart mouth.

Alfred takes a boxer's stance. Weak and unsteady on his feet as he may be. JJ mimics, and they trade a couple soft blows.

ALFRED

Golden Gloves look out.

The old man lights a burner on the stove, then pulls a slice of bread from a bag on the counter and drops it on the flame.

ALFRED

Keep an eye on that.

JJ flips the bread as Alfred leans against the counter.

JJ

How old were you when you met grandma?

ALFRED

Sounds like one of those questions a boy asks after he meets a girl.

He pins his grandson with a look that makes JJ flush.

JJ

No. It's just... You and grandma are the only ones I ever knew who really loved each other. When did you know?

Alfred smiles. Thinking back on the memory.

ALFRED

To be honest, about five minutes after I met her. It was after the war, 1946...

JJ

Wait. But... If mom was born in 1954 and uncle Johnny is ten years older...

JJ flips the bread again and ponders that.

ALFRED

Your math is right. She was already married. Some guy named Red. What kinda asshole calls himself Red, for fuck's sake? Put some cinnamon sugar on that.

JJ

So you're not Johnny's dad?

JJ turns off the flame and grabs a shaker of cinnamon sugar.

ALFRED

Thing about Red... He used to beat your grandma and Johnny terribly. So... One day I kicked down their door and walked right on in. Few seconds later, Red exited right on out... Through a window.

Alfred smiles at the memory.

ALFRED

I gave your grandma five minutes to grab anything she cared about. I carried Johnny outside and I told Red, "Say goodbye you sonofabitch cuz this is the last time you'll ever see any of us. And if I see you again, I'll kill you." I meant it, and he believed me.

JJ lifts the cinnamon toast and takes a bite.

JJ

I went and saw my real dad today. Didn't talk to him. Just... Saw him.

ALFRED

The people who matter most in life are the ones who show up, JJ.

JJ

That can't be true, step Dick shows up every day. Most of 'em he's drunk.

ALFRED

No. He's here every day. Just like Red was there with your grandma. I'm the one who showed up. Your mom... She's the one who shows up. Don't you forget that.

SAM (O.S.)

Yo! JJ! You in there?

He whips his head to the back door. Sam cracks it and pokes his head inside.

SAM

Dude. Danny's got fireworks. Let's go.

EXT. STREETS - DAY

Felix holds onto Sam's bike, pulled along on his skateboard.

Potter and JJ ride beside them as they turn up the driveway of the apartment complex where Felix lives with Danny.

EXT. APARTMENT GARAGE - DAY

Danny sits on a plastic lawn chair beside an open garage --

PACKED FLOOR TO CEILING... With fireworks from Tijuana.

Victor and Eddie -- the two guys who tried to rob JJ, collect cash from a NEIGHBORHOOD CUSTOMER who walks away with a box.

Felix hops off his board and slaps skin with Danny. JJ, Sam and Potter straddle their rides a few feet back.

FELIX

Come on, it's all good. Right Danny?

Danny stands up and spreads his arms in a welcoming gesture.

JJ hangs back as Victor and Eddie stare death daggers at him, but Potter tosses down his bike and marches into the garage.

POTTER

Fourth of July is gonna be so rad.

He walks between an aisle of boxes trying to read the labels.

POTTER

All this shit's in Mexican though. How do I know what's in each box?

VICTOR
It's Spanish you dumb fuck.

POTTER
You guys went to Spain? I thought you
got it in Mexico.

JJ
Dude. They speak Spanish in Mexico.

Danny smacks Potter upside the back of his head.

DANNY
Food is Mexican.
(smacks him)
People are Mexican.
(smacks him)
We speak Spanish.

MAMA MENDEZ
Aye! Mijo! No!

Everyone turns to find Felix and Danny's GRANDMA stalking
toward them. MAMA MENDEZ is 60 and gives zero fucks.

She smacks Danny with a FLY-SWATTER from her apron.

MAMA MENDEZ
I told you not to pick on your brother's
friends, didn't I?

By the way, her English is fucking perfect. So is her
Spanish. She's a full on native Angeleno. Born and raised.

DANNY
Damn, woman.

Mama Mendez raises the fly swatter. Danny flinches.

DANNY
Lo siento, abuela. I'm sorry.

MAMA MENDEZ
It's getting dark. Lock up and everybody
come eat. Your mom is working late.

DANNY
Lemme finish with the kids.

MAMA MENDEZ
I said everybody come eat.

Mama heads back to the house. As she passes by Victor she
"no look" back-hands his cheek with the fly swatter!

VICTOR

Oww! The hell Mama M? What I do?

MAMA MENDEZ

I don't know yet, but I'll find out.

Victor rubs his cheek, embarrassed, then turns to find JJ looking at him with a shit eating grin.

Victor cocks his head and bugs his eyes out, "Really?" JJ quickly loses his smile and turns away.

DANNY

A'ight. You heard her. Felix take your friends inside.

EDDIE

She meant us too right? We get to eat?

Eddie looks at Danny like the hungriest puppy ever.

INT. MENDEZ APARTMENT - NIGHT

An open living room/ kitchen.

JJ, Sam, Potter and Felix are seated around a small table.

Danny, Victor and Eddie are on a couch with TV TRAYS.

In a WHEELCHAIR parked in front of the TV is MR. MENDEZ (40). Half paralyzed from a stroke. He wears HEADPHONES that are plugged into the television, so the room is fairly quiet.

Everyone eats from paper plates.

Food is beans and rice that they're scooping up with homemade tortillas. A jug of chocolate milk on the table.

JJ watches Danny kneel forward from the couch. The young thug uses his hand towel to gently wipe his father's chin.

Then he holds a rolled tortilla for the man to bite.

Danny wipes his father's chin again, and gets a shaky thumbs up in return, before Mr. Mendez pivots back to the TV.

Mama Mendez enters with more fresh tortillas.

MAMA MENDEZ

You guys get enough?

SAM

Yes, thank you.

JJ

Thank you Mama Mendez.

MAMA MENDEZ

Where's your mom, tonight? Working?

JJ

Yeah, probably. I mean, usually.

MAMA MENDEZ

Who makes you dinner? Usually.

Sam and JJ glance at each other. Don't say anything.

MAMA MENDEZ

It's hard, mijo. Being a mom. When you're all alone.

JJ

She's not alone, it's just...

She puts a hand on JJ's shoulder.

MAMA MENDEZ

I know. I know... Like Felix and Danny's mom. She works nights too. And she's not alone. But she is...

She turns and glances at her own crippled son.

DANNY

Hey. Change the subject.

Danny locks eyes with her. A moment between them.

His face slackens... A slight mili-second quiver in his chin.

DANNY

Please.

Mama Mendez nods and forces false brightness into her voice.

MAMA MENDEZ

Okay, everybody out. Go back to your fireworks so I can feed Danny Senior.

EXT. APARTMENT GARAGE - NIGHT

The crowd of boys all shuffle back to the garage in silence.

Danny pulls a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocks it. As the door rises, Danny pauses. His back to the group.

DANNY

My dad had a stroke, okay? You understand what that is?

He turns and faces them. Victor and Eddie glance away.

Felix stares at his older brother with wide, pooling eyes.

JJ, Sam and Potter freeze. Unsure how to react.

DANNY

He did construction his whole life, y'know... Then one day, some asshole forgets to tighten the right bolts and a pile of scaffolding crashes down on him.

JJ

I'm sorry.

DANNY

Don't be sorry. That's life. That's not even the part that fucked my dad up. Huh Felix? Motherfucker was strong.

FELIX

You know it.

Danny looks back toward his apartment.

DANNY

Finished his shift. Woke up with a headache. They said his carotid artery. In his neck. Got torn when shit hit him.

Danny returns his glare to the boys.

DANNY

He had the stroke from that. Now he is what he is.

SAM

Hey man, look...

DANNY

No, you look. I'm only telling you so you don't go spreading around the neighborhood that he's retarded or something. Cuz he ain't. Understand me?

All three boys nod their heads. Yeah. They get it.

DANNY

Alright then. Let's do some business!

POTTER

How much for M-80s and Romans?

DANNY

Buck a piece for 80s. Three for Candles.

POTTER

Those are the only things worth getting.
I got three bucks.

JJ

I have five.

Sam shrugs. He's got nothing.

FELIX

That's like 2 cherries and 2 Romans. You
can do 3 each, right? For friends.

VICTOR

They're not OUR friends.

Danny snaps a look to Victor. Pissed he answered for him?

POTTER

Okay, how bout a wager then. You get our
eight bucks no matter what. If I win, we
get five each. You win, we get nothing.

DANNY

What're you thinking?

Off Potter's crazy smile.

The haunting bass notes and screaming "ALL ABOARD" of Ozzy
Osborne as **CRAZY TRAIN** begins on the soundtrack...

EXT. RAILROAD TRACKS - NIGHT

Potter and Victor are face to face on the rail road tracks.

Sam stands behind Victor and Eddie is behind Potter.

Danny, Felix and JJ are off to the side as "Crazy Train"
continues in the background, building toward the chorus.

VICTOR

This is bullshit. Why I gotta do this?

DANNY

Don't tell me you're gonna punk out from
this little panocha over here?

Danny steps closer to Victor and whispers.

DANNY

Or maybe you wanna talk to the Samoans
about it.

Victor's eyes go wide as Danny steps back.

DANNY

Yeah, vato. We have rules for a reason.
So that's... why you.

Danny steps back and raises his hands in the air.

DANNY

Nobody lights until I say go.

Sam and Eddie both hold up a lighter in one hand and in the
other, an M-80. (often called a 1/4 stick of dynamite)

JJ

Potter. You don't have to do this.

DANNY

Too late little man. It's happening.
Ready. 5... 4... Go!

Eddie was clearly anticipating the cheat and strikes his
lighter. But struggles to ignite the fuse of his M-80.

Sam snaps his lighter to life and gets his fuse going just as
Eddie does on his second try.

Sam places his M-80 on top of Victor's head and Eddie puts
his on top of Potter's head.

DANNY

Remember. If they fall you lose.
Whoever holds out longer wins.

Potter and Victor stare each other down.

Eddie moves beside Danny and Felix. Sam and JJ huddle.

EDDIE

Come on Victor, you got this.

POTTER

Only thing Victor's got is my nutsack in
his mouth.

Everybody groans. "Oh, burned motherfucker" etc...

Victor flinches like he might step forward to punch Potter. Stops himself before the explosive falls from his head.

VICTOR

When this is done, I'm gonna shove an M-80 up your ass.

POTTER

Ain't gonna happen, esse! No matter how much you might enjoy it.

Another chorus of snickers and "burns" ripple through the other boys. Victor is flushed. Getting pissed.

VICTOR

Bitch please. You should see how short your fuse is already.

POTTER

Do me a favor. Let me know when it gets as small as your dick.

DANNY

Oh, fuck. Negro has huevos. Bro, I'ma have to high five you when this is over.

THE FUSES ARE BOTH GETTING REALLY SHORT.

FELIX

Potter, let it go. I'll get you stuff.

He reaches for Potter's M-80, but Danny pulls him back.

DANNY

Bullshit. We made a deal. No going back.

POTTER

Don't worry Felix. I'm all good.

Potter stands even straighter. Calmly crosses his arm.

Both fuses are getting awfully close to ignition.

EDDIE

Shit's gonna explode, Victor. Fuck it.

POTTER

You should listen to your boyfriend.

Victor's breathing intensifies. He's getting nervous.

SAM

Potter, toss it now.

JJ

Potter come on!

POTTER EDDIE
Stay back. I got this. Victor, forget it--

DANNY
Eddie shut the fuck up!

Everyone starts backing away!

VICTOR
Why you guys backing up?

Nobody answers. But they continue moving further back.

Danny covers his ears. It's about to get loud.

VICTOR
Eddie come on, man. Why you backing up?
Potter still has his arms crossed. Big ass grin.

POTTER
Cuz your shit's about to--

Fuuuuckk!

VICTOR

Victor reaches up and grabs the M-80... Tosses it as far down the tracks as he can.

But Potter remains frozen in place. Still smiling.

SAM
Jesus Christ, throw it!

The Mexican kids back off. "Loco pendejo"

JJ
Potter! Please.

POTTER
Not yet... Not Yet...

That fuse is to the -- BOOM!

The M-80 Victor threw explodes!

Everyone ducks and cringes...

EXCEPT FUCKING POTTER.

JJ leaps forward. Swipes the M-80 from his head...

AND THROWS IT AS HARD AS HE -- KA-BOOM!

It explodes a mere three feet away from his hand.

JJ is knocked back on his ass. Sam and Potter both flinch and stumble away from the concussion.

SAM

Holy shit! You crazy motherfucker!

Aaahhhhhh! They turn to JJ on the ground. A roar of pain echoes from his mouth as he rises to his knees and turns.

The side of his shirt, under his armpit is shredded. A bunch of M-80 fragments blasted through the fabric.

The skin underneath is raw and bleeding from a bunch of hits.

SAM

SHIT! JJ are you okay?

JJ

No I'm not okay. Oh god, it hurts.

Potter finally looks concerned.

POTTER

Oh man, I'm sorry JJ. I'm sorry.

Danny steps up beside Potter.

DANNY

You are one crazy asshole.

JJ rises to his feet. His hand covering his wounds.

JJ

Five M-80s and five Roman Candles.

Danny smiles and nods his head. A deal's a deal.

EXT. APARTMENT GARAGE - NIGHT

Eddie and Victor pass the booty over to Sam and Potter. Felix slaps skin with his friends. We did it.

Danny is back in his plastic lawn chair. JJ stands near him.

JJ

You do a good job. With your dad. I saw you.

Danny shoots a look. "Don't go there."

JJ
I know it's not easy. Because of my
grandpa... It's not easy.

Danny stares the younger boy down for a long beat. Nods.

DANNY
Get some hydrogen peroxide or some shit
on those cuts.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - NIGHT

CLOSE ON -- A SINGLE QUARTER... Held in Sam's fingers.

SAM
The absolute last quarter we have.

He slots it into a Pac Man game as JJ and Potter watch.

POTTER
At least we got some kick ass fireworks.

JJ glances at the PAC MAN ALLEY BANNER.

JJ
Can you guys even imagine what 500
dollars looks like?

SAM
Probably pretty awesome, but if we don't
figure out a way to find some money to
practice with, we're never gonna see it.

JJ looks around the arcade area. Notices all the quarters
getting dropped into games. Spots a kid slipping a bill into
a CHANGE MACHINE that dispenses quarters in return.

JJ
Actually, I might know how to fix that.
Tomorrow morning, our house. Tell Felix.
And everybody bring a screwdriver.

Sam and Potter grin at JJ's certainty. Oh yeah. He's on it.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

JJ steps outside to find Irene behind the wheel of that
battered Cordoba, still parked at the curb.

She tries to crank the ignition, but the car chokes and half
turns over a couple times before dying out.

JJ

Hey. What are you doing?

He opens the door and slides in beside her.

IRENE

I don't know. Was hoping it might start
but... I think it's dead.

Irene grips the wheel. Shakes her head sadly.

IRENE

Probably have to sell it to the junkyard.

JJ

But it's grandpa's!

IRENE

Yeah, well... Not like he's gonna be
driving again, is it.

JJ

Still... You can't just throw it away.

IRENE

It's only a car, JJ. Metal and plastic
and rubber... It can't be saved.

They sit in silence for a moment, then JJ pushes his door
open. Can't get out fast enough at this point.

JJ

I gotta go.

Irene grabs his hand and holds him in place.

IRENE

Wait. I need you to know something...

JJ half sits back in the car. One foot touching the ground.

IRENE

You and Sam are the most important things
in the world to me.

JJ

Yeah, okay.

IRENE

Your grandpa and I... We didn't always
get along. Last few years were better.
Since grandma died. But... There's still
one thing I've never heard him say.

JJ

What's that?

Irene stares into her son. Her face tightens up.

IRENE

All I see when I look in the mirror is the mistakes I've made. Especially the ones that hurt you and your brother.

JJ

You've never hurt us.

IRENE

Yes I have, JJ. It's my decisions that have made your life so hard. And the thing I never heard from my dad, that I never bothered to ask him... I think because I was afraid of the answer...

Her chin quivers, tears flowing now.

IRENE

Did I make him proud. And I worry I've never done anything to earn that. But you and your brother... The way you fight through what this life throws at you. You're my heroes... You make me proud every single day to be your mom. I don't want either of you to doubt that, ever, for even one second. You hear me?

JJ nods. Doesn't know what to say to that. He crawls across the seat and buries himself in his mother. They hold tight to each other for a few seconds until --

DICK

Hey! Come on, let's go!

Dick smacks his palm on the roof to break up the hugging.

IRENE

Be safe today.

She nudges him out of the car and he tries to side-step Dick who cuffs the back of JJ's head for no particular reason.

Dick yanks Irene from the car by the arm and slams the door.

DICK

Told you I didn't wanna be late.

He shoves her toward his truck. She's barely in the cab before he pulls away, nearly hitting Potter and Felix who roll towards the house, as Sam steps out to join JJ.

SAM

Asshole. It's not even nine o'clock and he already drank two beers.

JJ stares after the departing truck with hate in his eyes.

JJ

It's a day that ends in Y isn't it? Come on, I'll show you guys how to play as many free games of Pac Man as we want.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY

JJ, Potter, Sam and Felix all roll their bikes through a peeled back chain-link fence onto a construction site.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

One thing about never having money...

A large apartment building is mid-build.

INT. HALF-BUILT APARTMENT - DAY

With only the studs, sub floors and wooden stairs assembled, the place looks like a jungle of 2x4s and plywood.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Is you figure out creative ways to get what you need.

The boys walk through the first floor.

JJ

We're looking for any place with a little metal box attached.

Felix kneels between a forest of studs.

FELIX

Like this?

The other boys move close to see Felix has his hand on a METAL OUTLET BOX, where electrical lines and sockets will go. It's screwed into a wall support, just above the floor.

JJ

Exactly.

JJ pulls a SCREWDRIVER from his pocket and gets low.

JJ

These circles. They're punch holes.
Where electric lines will come through.

BREAKING THE LAW by Judas Priest drives through the scene, as JJ places his screwdriver over a CIRCULAR SPOT on the outside edge of the box. It's already been machine scored perfectly.

He pops the end of his screwdriver with his other hand and...
A PERFECT METAL SLUG is punched out of the pre-cut hole.

SAM

Exact same size as a quarter.

He pulls a quarter from his pocket to measure up.

IN A SERIES OF CUTS:

They all race through the structure, popping slugs free.

JJ finds a cardboard box filled with dozens of metal discs.

JJ

Jackpot!

FINALLY... THEY ALL CONVERGE AT THE ENTRANCE.

Where their treasure is combined into a plastic bucket.

FELIX

Duuude! I'm never paying for a video
game again.

POTTER

That is seriously more than we could
possibly use all summer.

SAM

Should we each take like a handful?

A big grin spreads across JJ's face.

JJ

No. Take it all.

SAM

Uh-oh. My brother has a plan.

POTTER

Which means we're all gonna die. Or...

EXT. ALPINE VILLAGE - DAY

A BACK PACK... Plops to the ground with a jingle of coins.

JJ

...We're gonna make a shit ton of money.

A wider shot reveals ALPINE VILLAGE.

A kitschy landmark in Torrance, that's designed to resemble some Disney-fied version of a small German village.

Restaurants, shops, batting cages and...

ARCADE -- where the boys are huddled around the backpack.

JJ unzips the pack and pulls THREE SOCKS from a larger pile. All tied off at the top and filled with blank slugs.

Sam, Potter and Felix each take one.

JJ

There's 120 in each of those. We're gonna sell six for a dollar. Or a whole sock for twenty. It's a fair price. They get two extra games. We get...

FELIX/ POTTER/ SAM

A SHIT TON OF MONEY!

They all slap fives.

POTTER

How many socks do you have?

JJ

Nine. Plus another 100 slugs each at home for you to play games with or sell.

They split off in different directions.

JJ sets up his "command post" at an outdoor table where he lays out a pen and pad alongside a stack of history cards.

QUICK TIME LAPSE...

Of Sam, Felix and Potter pulling kids aside. Trading six slugs for a dollar instead of four quarters.

SAM -- Pops one into PAC MAN to prove they work. Several KIDS around him immediately offer up dollar bills.

POTTER -- Chats with a pack of TEEN GIRLS. Waves the bulging sock from his crotch as if he's John Holmes or something.

Their boyfriends return with sodas. After a quick, awkward conversation, he gets a 20 DOLLAR BILL for a full sock.

FELIX -- Delivers a handful of cash to JJ at the table.

SAM -- Is still playing Pac Man instead of selling.

JJ approaches his brother and watches him play for a moment.

JJ

You get high score on this machine?

SAM

Hell yeah. Of course I did.

JJ

Cool, cool... That's totally rad, bro.

He punches Sam in the thigh and hands him his last sock.

JJ

So maybe go sell some more!

BACK AT THE TABLE -- JJ takes cash from Potter and Felix. He shoves it inside and shows them how much they've earned. Their eyes all bulge, but before they can celebrate --

SAM

Ruuuunnn! Run!

They all look up to see Sam racing toward them. A DUMPY SECURITY GUARD bumbling after him.

JJ slings the pack over his shoulders and they all bolt!

EXT. POTTER'S HOUSE - DAY

Bikes and skateboards are haphazardly scattered in the back yard around the canvas tent. Laughter bursts from inside.

INT. TENT - DAY

JJ, Sam, Felix and Potter are seated in a circle.

A PILE OF CASH... Rests in the middle. JJ is dividing it.

JJ

Final count is One hundred and sixty.
Which means, forty each.

JJ divides the money into equal shares.

Potter picks up his pile and kisses it.

POTTER

There once was a man from Nantucket, whose
dick was so long he could suck it. He
said with a grin as he wiped off his chin
if my ear was a buck I would fuck it.

He shoves a wadded up bill into his ear, sending all of them
into a riot of laughter.

JJ

Not bad considering we did completely
lose that last sock.

Everyone glares at Sam, who shrugs.

SAM

Not my fault. Boss Hogg snuck up on me.

POTTER

Bitch, please. Only thing that lard ass
ever snuck up on was a piece of pie.

FELIX

Did you not feel the ground shake when he
was coming? Thought it was an earthquake.
Motherfucker still almost caught you.

SAM

I was running slow to mess with him.

POTTER

Bull... SHIT. That's the fastest I've
ever seen you run.

Everyone (except Sam) laughs and exchanges high-fives.

SAM

Look at my shoes, man. It's a miracle I
could run at all.

He lifts his foot to reveal a pair of shoes that are riddled
with holes and a rubber sole that's halfway peeling off.

SAM

I know exactly what I'm buying first...

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

CLOSE ON A NEW PAIR OF CHECKERED VANS.

Dangling from Dick's hand.

DICK

Who the fuck gave you permission?

JJ stands a few feet away, back pressed against the wall.

JJ

He used his own money.

DICK

Did I ask you? Huh? Did I ask you a
fucking thing? Get out.

JJ hesitates, and Dick stalks toward him.

DICK

Are you fucking deaf?

He raises the shoe like he might hit JJ when Sam pipes up.

SAM

Maybe he couldn't understand you. You
know JJ doesn't speak dumb ass.

JJ

SAM!?

Dick pauses. His whole body goes rigid as he turns to Sam.

And Sam... He fucking smiles. Big as the sun.

SAM

Go on, JJ. We'll be done in a minute.

JJ shakes his head. He won't leave, can't leave...

SAM

GO! GET OUT!

Dick shoves him out the door and slams it closed.

JJ backs into the hallway and sinks down to the floor. He
covers his ears with his hands...

Seconds... Drip... Ever so slowly...

Until the door is yanked open and Dick steps out. He still
has one shoe in his hand which he throws back into the room.

JJ rushes in after it. Sam is leaning against the dresser.

JJ

Sam...

Sam turns around. Fighting tears. One cheek is BRANDED WITH DIAMONDS, from the pattern on the sole of his shoe.

DICK

Look... I'm sorry okay.

They both spin to find Dick back in the doorway.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

It wasn't unusual for Dick to apologize after he hit one of us.

DICK

But... You kinda made me do it. It's your own fault, really.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

I don't think he ever meant it. Not a single, fucking time.

A silent tension hangs over the room. Then Dick steps closer. Trying to be a good guy now.

DICK

Your mom has tomorrow off. It's the Fourth. We'll do something fun okay?

Neither boy responds and Dick exits, closing the door.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

That was the strangest part. He could be so cruel to us one minute...

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

FIREWORKS are going off all through the neighborhood.

Spinners, Cones, Bottle Rockets, etc...

1999 by Prince provides the party time soundtrack.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Then, it was like the world was our playground. And he was suddenly the coolest dude in it.

Dick is in the middle of the street, setting a PLYWOOD BOARD against a couple CINDER-BLOCKS to create a RAMP.

JJ and Sam rip through on their bikes, hit the board and hop through the air--

AS A FOUNTAIN OF SPARKLES ERUPTS FROM A FIREWORK BENEATH IT!

IN A SERIES OF SHOTS...

The boys laugh and cheer as Dick and Irene light more fireworks, along with the neighbors.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
As miserable as our lives were for most
of the time... We weren't unhappy.

Sam and JJ stick SPARKLERS in their handlebar grips and jump over erupting explosions of light and fire.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
We always found a way to have fun.
Sometimes even with that asshole.

As JJ leaps off the ramp one more time, Dick steps out and offers a HIGH-FIVE to the boy as he lands it perfectly.

JJ pulls his bike onto the sidewalk and glances up and down the neighborhood. Sam pulls alongside of him. Everywhere they look is an explosion of color and sound.

Sam glances up at the sky where streams of color dance against the blackness as ROMAN CANDLES are launched.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
And in our minds, going hungry sometimes
or getting the snot beat out of us...
That was barely a blip on our radar.

The DIAMOND PATTERN from his shoe still on his cheek.

Hold on the boys, enjoying the activities of the night.

They glance to where Dick holds a beer in one hand and Irene tight with the other. It almost looks like a loving couple.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
But the good times... Like summer itself,
never lasted long enough.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

JJ steps up to his grandfather's bed. The old man is asleep. He grabs Alfred's dangling hand and squeezes it.

Then he lifts the arm and tucks it under the blanket.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
That's why we learned to make the most of
either before they disappeared.

EXT. BUNGALOW - DAY

JJ rolls down a street on the "other side of the tracks" from his own neighborhood. The homes here a little nicer.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

One of the ways we did that, was paying attention to houses for sale...

He passes a few places with FOR SALE or SOLD signs.

His newspaper bag is half-filled on his handlebars.

He approaches a house with a freshly installed FOR SALE SIGN.

A REAL-ESTATE AGENT is resplendent in her Century 21 outfit, circa 1982... SHIT BROWN and PUKE YELLOW blazer and skirt.

JJ slows down, as he observes her from across the street.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

There were two things we looked for...

She attaches a small placard to hooks under a FOR SALE SIGN.

VACANT.

JJ slams his brakes she places a second placard --

POOL.

JJ

Jackpot!

He rolls toward the middle-aged woman.

JJ

Ahhh. Did they already move out?

AGENT

The Baxters? Yes, they did.

JJ

Darn it. They were great customers.

JJ puts on his best innocent pouty face.

JJ

Welp, I guess I have an extra paper now.
Would you like one?

He thrusts one at her before she has a chance to decline.

AGENT

Sure. Thank you.

JJ

Wow, I never met a real life real estate agent before. I've seen those Century 21 commercials though. Your outfit is amazing. Just like on TV.

The woman blushes. JJ can be a little charmer.

AGENT

It's only a job, dear.

JJ

An important one though. Helping people make their dreams come true. How long's it take to sell a house. I imagine you're really good at it.

AGENT

This one's really nice. So hopefully in a month or so.

JJ

If you're here every day, I can toss you a paper. The Baxters already paid.

AGENT

Oh no. I'm only here Tuesdays and Sundays for open houses. So Sundays... I'd definitely appreciate that.

JJ

Nobody else comes all week?

AGENT

Gardener comes Thursday, pool man on Saturday to keep it nice. But I'm not sure they'd want the paper, and I don't want 'em piling up. Especially since no one's here--

INT. TENT - DAY

JJ

Monday, Wednesday and Friday!

JJ stands in the tent as Sam, Potter and Felix all look up at him. Sam still has a Vans imprint on his cheek.

JJ

Three days a week with unlimited access.

POTTER

Fuck. Yes! Time to bust out the trunks!

FELIX

CANNON...

EXT. POOL - DAY

WHIP IT by Devo kicks in and carries over the next several shots, including Felix flying through the air --

FELIX

...BAAAAALLLL!

Before he splashes down into a nice, kidney shaped pool.

Sam, JJ and Potter are already in the water. Laughing and splashing each other. About as happy as we've seen them.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

That year, was probably the best pool we ever had the luck of finding...

All four boys stand at the edge and jump in together, holding hands as they fly through the air and splash down.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

We hit that thing every chance we could over the next couple weeks.

As the boys emerge from the water, tans are deeper, the marks on Sam's face are gone. They're in different trunks.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

In between, Sam spent every waking hour at the bowling alley...

AT THE BOWLING ALLEY -- Sam is at the doors as they open in the morning. The Manager ushers him inside with a grin.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

I even found the balls to invite Casey.

AT THE BEACH CAFE -- JJ is at the counter, talking to Casey through the window. They're both laughing...

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Although that didn't go exactly to plan.

A CUSTOMER steps up behind JJ and Casey freezes. JJ turns to see BEN THE LIFEGUARD. They lock eyes for a beat, then JJ quickly spins away and jumps on his bike and rides away.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
 So I avoided the beach after that.

AT THE POOL -- The boys lounge around the deck, getting tan.

SAM -- Cranks through one Pac Man screen after another, as JJ holds a HOT DOG for him to bite. Soda to drink.

IN THE POOL -- Sam holds up his hand to show off A BLISTER.

SAM
 Damn, I've been playing so much I got a blister on my palm.

POTTER
 Yeah right? That's from playing Pac Man.
 Sure. Good story, bro.

Sam splashes Potter who dunks Sam under in response. When Potter lets Sam up, JJ splashes him. And Felix adds to it.

FELIX
 Hey, you guys ever see Caddyshack?

Felix grabs a BABY RUTH from the deck and unwraps it. He pushes it underwater toward Potter, doing the JAWS THEME.

FELIX
 Awesome flick. Dun-Dun, Dun-Dun, Dun-dun.
 Dunna nunna nuhhh...

POTTER
 Bill Murray's the best. He should be president. I'd vote for him.

FELIX
 Actors can't be president.

JJ
 Uh, dumbass. Ronald Reagan was totally on TV for years. And he did movies.

SAM
 Damn. Lucky. Two best jobs in the world. Being on TV and being president.

POTTER
 Yo, check it. You know who should be president... Lou Ferrigno. Think about it. He's the motherfucking Hulk. Don't make me angry, Russia. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry. Aarrghh...

Everyone splashes Potter, laughing. Carefree.

CASEY

Hey, JJ!

They all stop and turn to see Casey entering from side gate.

JJ smiles and waves as the other boys glare at him.

JJ

Hi. You came.

CASEY

Miss out on a free pool. No way.

Sam slips close to his brother as they tread water.

SAM

JJ, who the fuck is that?

The opening drums and guitar of *I KNOW WHAT BOYS LIKE* by the Waitresses suddenly crashes onto the soundtrack.

Casey drops a shoulder bag at the side of the pool and pulls her T-Shirt off to reveal a tight-fitting bikini.

SAM

Never mind.

As all the boys stare as she slips her Daisy Dukes off.

CASEY

You said it was cool to bring a couple friends, right.

The gate opens and TWO MORE 18-YEAR-OLD GIRLS in bikini tops and short shorts skip into the area.

POTTER

Abso-fucking-lutely cool! Come on in, ladies. The water is fine. Although not as fine as what I'm looking at.

The girls all strip down to their bathing suits.

All four boys drift closely together.

POTTER

Anyone gets a boner, just keep it pointed away from me.

FELIX

This is like the best day of my life.

SAM

I love you little brother. So--

COLLEGE BOY

KICK ASS!

Three COLLEGE BOYS suddenly surge into the area.

The boys in the pool deflate.

Casey drops in and waves JJ over.

CASEY

I'm sorry, Lisa asked if she could bring her boyfriend. Then he invited two friends. I don't even know any of them.

JJ

No, it's cool. It's not my pool to say who can and can't come.

CASEY

Well thanks for inviting us.

JJ floats away and huddles with his disgruntled friends who watch the College Boys get all the face time with the girls.

POTTER

I was ready to bounce anyway.

SAM

Yeah, me too. I should probably get some Pac Man practice in.

As they all drift toward the steps--

LOUDSPEAKER (O.S.)

Everybody out of the pool now!

Potter glances down the side of the house to the driveway, where he spots A POLICE CAR.

POTTER

Shit. Cops! RUN!

Everyone mad scrambles from the pool, as TWO PATROL OFFICERS stride up the side of the house toward the back.

The College Boys straight up abandon the girls, flipping over the back fence and disappearing.

Sam, Potter, JJ and Felix race for the opposite side of the house, but Casey grabs JJ by the arm as he blows past her.

CASEY

Stop. Don't run.

JJ tries to pull away, as her friends follow the other boys.

JJ

We have to get out of here.

CASEY

Trust me. Stay.

The Cops spot all the kids bailing and start to give chase. Casey keeps a tight hold on JJ, and smiles in a way that captures him more than her grip.

CASEY

JJ... Trust me.

As the two Cops blow by, one pauses.

COP

You two don't move!

CASEY

Yes, sir, officer. Whatever you say.
We're sorry.

He points a stern finger at them, then follows his partner as they chase the rest of the kids around the far side.

As soon as the cops are out of sight, Casey lets go of JJ and starts calmly walking out the way the cops came in.

CASEY

They always chase the runners.

JJ stares after her with wide eyes. HO-LEEE FUCK!

JJ

You're the most awesome person I ever met.

CASEY

I know. Follow my lead.

And they casually stroll away.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

Casey and JJ sit in her station wagon, half a block away.

They watch as the POLICE OFFICERS walk Sam to the door.

JJ opens his door, but Casey grabs him.

CASEY

JJ, please don't go.

JJ
He's my brother.

CASEY
I know but...

JJ
It'll be worse for him if I'm not there.
No hiding under the desk, right?

Casey's eyes well with tears. She knows what JJ is about to walk into. Been there. Done that.

CASEY
I'm sorry JJ.

He pushes out and moves toward the house.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dick swings NUN-CHUCKS at Sam, who ducks into the lower bunk. The weapon cracks against the bed frame.

DICK
Fucking police bring you home and when I ask what you were thinking, all you can say is "I don't know!?"

JJ stands paralyzed beside the bed as Dick grabs Sam by the throat and yanks him off the mattress, and into the air.

Sam chokes and kicks his feet wildly.

JJ
Stop! You're hurting him! Let him go!

Dick holds Sam aloft for a few more seconds, then --

TOSSES HIM INTO A WALL!

The drywall dents and fractures around Sam. He slumps and covers up on the floor as Dick kicks him, hard in his ass.

Then Dick rears his arm back, ready to swing his nun-chucks.

JJ leaps forward and grabs Dick's arm. It takes every ounce of strength JJ has to hold on.

Dick uses his free hand to SMASH HIS PALM across JJ's face.

It is ugly. Grotesque. Frightening...

But JJ still clings to the man's arm. Refusing to let go.

He roars from somewhere deep. A scream that's been building his entire life -- UNTIL DICK BODY SLAMS him TO THE FLOOR!

JJ gasps, with horrible desperation. The wind knocked completely from his body.

Dick stands over him, raises his Nun-Chucks to swing

Sam lurches up from the floor --

AND PULLS POTTER'S EXPANDABLE BATON FROM UNDER HIS MATTRESS.

He flicks it to full length and slashes it across Dick's arm, knocking the Nun-Chucks from his grip.

Dick roars in pain and turns on Sam.

DICK
You little shit!

Sam tries to swing the baton again, but Dick catches him by the wrist and pushes him back against the dresser.

Dick's knuckles go white as he squeezes with all his might --

AND BENDS SAM'S WRIST BACK SO FAR...

BONES SNAP!

Like the sound of a bat striking a baseball.

Sam drops to the floor and howls in tremendous pain.

Howls... And howls... And howls... Until he chokes it back.

Dick steps back. Breathing heavy. His manic energy deflated. But there's no regret or sorrow.

DICK
That's what you get.

JJ is rasping, wheezing. Can't speak. Tries to say his brother's name, but it only comes out as a gasp.

He slides along the floor and the two boys cradle each other.

DICK
Grab a jacket. And you better hope our insurance covers this.

Dick leaves the two wounded boys huddled there on the floor.

DICK (V.O. PRELAP)
That's right... Bunk bed.

INT. HOSPITAL - EXAM ROOM - NIGHT

A skeptical young DOCTOR molds the plaster of an ARM CAST around Sam's wrist, then glances at JJ's swollen face.

YOUNG DOCTOR
How high are these bunk beds?

DICK
Regular height.

The Doctor looks up at Dick. A long moment. Turns to JJ.

YOUNG DOCTOR
And what about your face? You fall off
the bunk bed too.

DICK
No, that one fell off his bike delivering
newspapers. Gets cocky, tries to ride
with one hand. Are we done here?

The Doctor looks from Sam to JJ, then steps closer to Dick.
His face burning with anger.

YOUNG DOCTOR
I'd like to speak with their mother.

DICK
She's working.

YOUNG DOCTOR
Tomorrow, then.

DICK
Still working. Come on kids, let's go.

Dick gestures for the boys to follow and they obey.

YOUNG DOCTOR
If you boys have other injuries... From
falls, or anything else... I can help
you. But you have to tell me.

JJ glances back. Locks eyes with the Doctor.

Dick shoves him out the door before the boy can say anything.

The Doctor stares after them. Helpless. Ashamed. Cuz 1982.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

JJ raps on the plaster of Sam's cast with his knuckles, as his brother wiggles his fingers.

SAM

I'm never gonna win that tournament now.

JJ

You can totally play left handed. You'll just need extra practice.

SAM

I have two days. Fifty people qualified and we all have to clear level one. Only the fastest thirty two advance.

Sam ducks his head. Stares at the cast for a long moment.

SAM

What do you think he's gonna tell mom?

DICK

I'm gonna tell her the truth.

They both snap their heads to the door, where Dick stands in the frame. Silhouetted by light from the living room.

DICK

That you fell off the bed.

Dick steps further into the room.

DICK

Same thing you're gonna tell her.

JJ and Sam both stare down at the floor. Scared.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

It's easy to look back and see how he controlled us. All of us...

DICK

Otherwise... I'll break her fucking arm too and do worse to both of you.

He steps out, slamming the door as he goes.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

He'd tell us he'd hurt our mom...

JJ slips out of bed and inspects the dented-in dry wall where his brother's body smashed into it.

SAM
What're you doing?

The younger boy silently turns to a ROCKY BALBOA POSTER on another wall and carefully peels it off.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
And he'd tell her he would hurt us...

Then he uses the poster to cover the damaged wall.

BANG! The door kicks open and JJ dives into his bed.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
And it all seemed... Normal isn't the right word.

Dick stalks into the room and grabs JJ's box that contains his Story of America Cards, before exiting again.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
But it was all we knew. To us, it was... Life... What else was there?

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

JJ pulls his newspaper collection book from the counter and something in the sink catches his eye.

He lifts a handful of black and charred paper...

IT'S ALL THAT'S LEFT OF HIS STORY OF AMERICA CARDS.

ALFRED
The thing about bullies is...

JJ turns to find his grandfather standing in the doorway.

ALFRED
They convince themselves they're invincible by picking on weaker people.

JJ
How do you fight back when someone is so much stronger?

ALFRED
With patience. His time will come. And like all bullies, he won't even realize it until it's too late.

Alfred smiles, then shuffles away. JJ turns back to the sink and shakes the burnt paper from his hand.

IRENE

How did Sam break his arm?

JJ spins back to the door, caught off-guard by Irene entering. She squats down before him.

JJ

What did Sam say?

IRENE

He said he fell off the top bunk.

JJ considers that for a long moment.

JJ

Yeah. He fell.

Her hand goes to the welt on JJ's face.

IRENE

I don't know what to do, baby.

She pulls him into a hug, feeling helpless. Lost.

JJ

I have to go collect.

JJ exits and Irene is left alone in the kitchen. She looks at the sink and sees the burnt remains of his cards there.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

When you have no power in a situation,
sometimes surviving is the best you can
hope for... So you lie to yourself... You
lie to the people you love, and they
accept those lies knowing what they are.
Because it's the only way to survive.

EXT. LITTLE GERRY'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

JJ rides up to Little Gerry's building and pauses on the sidewalk in front. He stares up at UNIT # 5.

An internal debate raging as he looks up and down the street.

EXT. UNIT # 5 - DAY

JJ tentatively raises his hand and knocks on the door.

Something old school like *THE MESSAGE* by Grand Master Flash, kicks off in time with the beats of JJ's knock.

He stands there for a long moment. When nobody answers, he ducks his head and turns away, just as the door swings open.

Little Gerry peeks out, in board shorts and nothing else.

The two of them appraise each other. JJ holds up his book. Little Gerry gives a nod and holds up a massive hand.

LITTLE GERRY

Gimme a sec to get dressed proper.

He pivots inside, then returns after a quick beat, tugging a TANK TOP over his head. FLIP FLOPS on his feet now.

He closes the door and grabs a BASEBALL BAT from beside it.

LITTLE GERRY

Okay. Let's roll, Junior.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

Felix and Potter flank Sam as he plays Pac Man left-handed, stopping as soon as he clears the first screen.

POTTER

Eighty five seconds.

FELIX

I only counted eighty.

POTTER

Bitch you can't count that high, who you kidding?

Sam shakes his head as he kills the next two Pac Men.

SAM

Either way, it's not fast enough.

He pops another slug into the machine and starts again.

EXT. BUNGALOW - DAY

JJ is at the door of a bungalow, collecting from a CUSTOMER.

JJ

No tip? Really?

CUSTOMER

Yeah, really. Get outta here.

Little G peers around the doorway from the opposite side where he's lounging with the baseball bat on his shoulder.

The customer suddenly gets generous. Pulling an extra bill out of his wallet. Looks to Little G who flashes two fingers. The Customer complies, giving JJ another bill.

As the door closes, JJ smiles up at the big Samoan. But that smile runs away as A LOWRIDER slowly cruises by with Victor in the passenger seat. Eddie behind the wheel.

Everybody goes dead-eyed... Staring at each other.

Until Eddie smashes the gas and speeds away.

The big Samoan gives JJ a nod. "It's all good."

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The sun has disappeared as JJ arrives home. Little Gerry tosses a Shaka wave, then ambles off without a word.

CASEY

Hey! JJ.

He turns to find Casey crossing the street toward him.

CASEY

What happened last night? I was worried.

JJ looks around nervously.

JJ

I can't talk. I have to take this in.

He holds up the collection book.

JJ

But... Gimme five minutes?

Casey nods and he disappears through the gate.

She glances around and her eyes fall on that smashed up Cordoba still parked at the curb in front of JJ's house.

She steps close and runs her hand over the damage.

JJ

It's my grandpa's.

Casey turns to see JJ approaching.

JJ
He had an accident.

CASEY
Is he okay?

JJ stares for a beat without answering, then pivots.

JJ
Can we get outta here. I got lucky.
Step dick's passed out.

INT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

JJ and Casey share burgers and giggles in a corner booth.

CASEY
...No way! Uh-uh. Bo Duke is the cool
one. All the girls I know love him.

JJ
Please. Number one Luke Duke is a cooler
name. And number two, he was a Marine so
he knows how to kick ass better than Bo.

CASEY
But Bo is cuter and he's the driver.

JJ
And Luke always has to get him outta
trouble. Plus Luke always does that
gnarly slide across the hood of the car.

Casey pauses to study the boy for a moment.

CASEY
That is pretty cool. Plus... He is the
older one, right. Puts himself in danger
to protect Bo, who looks up to him.

JJ
Exactly.

CASEY
Kinda like... How your brother tries to
look out for you, huh.

JJ's smile drops from his face. He stares at the table.

CASEY
What happened last night?

The boy's jaw tightens. His eyes glisten, but he won't cry.

JJ

He broke Sam's arm.

Casey's hand goes to her mouth.

CASEY

Oh my god, JJ.

JJ

He always hits him harder. And Sam
always takes it so I won't have to.

They sit there in a long silence. Casey reaches across the
table and wraps her fingers around his forearm.

CASEY

That lousy motherfucker.

JJ

I hate that asshole so much.

CASEY

Dickhead.

JJ

Shit faced donkey cock.

Casey's eyebrows arch. A smile twitches as her voice rises.

CASEY

Dong munching cowardly sonofabitch!

JJ starts to smile now too. His own voice going louder.

JJ

Stupid piss stained ballsack fucknut!

JJ and Casey laugh as everyone around them stares and Casey
stands up now. Shouts at the top of her voice.

CASEY

Fucking douche cunt ass clown pecker
headed twat waffle!

COOK

Hey! What the hell?

They look over to the counter where the COOK stares.
Everyone else in the joint has gone silent.

CASEY

Trust me, the guy we're talking about
deserves it.

COOK

Well I don't want it in here.

He points his spatula at the door and Casey reaches her hand out for JJ. He slides from the booth and they exit.

JJ

By the way, what's a twat waffle?

Casey practically doubles over laughing as they push outside.

EXT. ASTRO BURGER - NIGHT

They stand on the patio, bathed in the neon glow of the Astro Burger star shining above them.

CASEY

You're a good kid, JJ. You don't deserve to be treated that way. Your mom or your brother either.

JJ shrugs. Shuffles his feet.

JJ

What's the worst thing that ever happened to you?

Casey's face goes rigid. She looks away from JJ.

CASEY

Nothing I'd ever want you to know. It's just... There are some things I wish I could keep you from ever knowing. But someday when you're older you'll probably remember this conversation and you'll figure it out. And that... That scares me because you might think less of me.

JJ shakes his head.

JJ

Why are some men so bad to people they're supposed to love.

CASEY

I don't know, JJ. I don't know. But I want you to make me a promise right now. When you meet a girl. And you have kids. You'll never, ever hurt them. Okay? If I can live my life with that promise in my pocket, it will always make me happy.

JJ
I promise. I promise.

He holds up a pinky and Casey links hers with his.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Casey pulls her station wagon up in front of JJ's house.

JJ
You're really leaving for college soon.

CASEY
I have to. If I don't escape now, I'll
never get out. Of course, I'm still a
few hundred dollars short of what I need.

JJ's face alights with an idea.

JJ
What if--

TAP TAP TAP! They're both startled by knocking on the window.

IRENE
JJ?

JJ
It's my mom!

JJ and Casey exit on their respective sides of the car.

JJ
Mom, you gotta meet Casey.

Irene drapes her arm over JJ's shoulder protectively. She
stares at Casey, a young woman barely ten years her junior.

IRENE
Hello, Casey.

Casey remains in the street. Feeling awkward.

CASEY
Hi. I just... Gave him a ride.

IRENE
Okay. Thank you for that.

JJ ping pongs between the women. Confused.

JJ
Mom. Casey's cool. She's my friend.

IRENE

You have a lot of friends who are eleven
year old boys, Casey?

Casey turns away. Oh shit. But she stands strong.

CASEY

Actually, only one. JJ's a special kid.

IRENE

I know. Since he's mine.

CASEY

Okay then, I should go... Later JJ.

He waves as Irene shuts the passenger door and pulls JJ
closer. Casey climbs behind the wheel and drives away.

JJ

Why were you mean to her? She's nice.

IRENE

JJ, there are some things I can't protect
you from. And some I can. And I just--

JJ

You don't get it. She's like us. She's
a wounded animal too. She talks to me.
And you sent her away just like you did--

IRENE

JJ!

JJ

You make the wrong people leave and let
the one person who hurts us stay!

He storms off to the house, leaving a guilt ridden Irene in
the street to watch the tail lights of Casey's car fade away.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

Felix, Potter and JJ are gathered around Sam as the Manager
uses a STOPWATCH to time him clearing Pac Man, STAGE ONE.

POTTER

Come on, come on, you got this!

A few quick, final turns... He puts his entire body into it.
Left, right, up, down... BOOM.

SAM

Done.

The Manager clicks his watch.

MANAGER

Sixty seven seconds. You're 21. But...
I still have 17 players left to time.

He steps toward another game where the next player waits.

SAM

Shit. That's it. I'm out.

Potter and Felix grumble in sympathy, "Sorry bro, good try, etc..." But JJ has a huge grin.

JJ

What are you dumb asses talking about?

SAM

If there's twenty people already faster --

JJ

And seventeen to go.

SAM

Right. So if they all beat me, then I'm
thirty eight. Only thirty two count.

JJ

Bro. Do you not understand math or
probability at all.

The three other boys all look at each other like WTF?

JJ

I'll make it simple for you. Seventeen
players left. You only need to be better
than six of 'em and you're in.

FELIX

So which six assholes we gonna mess with?

PLAYER (O.S.)

DONE!

They turn to see another PLAYER finish his round.

MANAGER

Sixty nine, bro! My favorite number.

JJ

Which FIVE assholes?

BLACK BETTY by Ram Jam wails, as the boys get up to mischief.

A SERIES OF SHOTS:

POTTER... Uses a STRAW to blow a plastic bead at one player, distracting him as he rubs the injured spot.

PLAYER

Oww! Shit.

He tries to regain his composure and finish the screen, but--

MANAGER

Seventy. Not looking good.

AT ANOTHER GAME... JJ approaches, but before he can do anything, the TEEN yells "DONE" and JJ spins away.

MANAGER

Seventy two seconds.

JJ pumps his fist. Yes!

AT ANOTHER GAME... Felix angles a small mirror, to shine a distracting light into the eyes of A CONTESTANT.

AT ANOTHER GAME... Danny is at the controls. Potter starts to approach, realizes who it is, and does a 180.

AT A FINAL GAME... Sam, JJ, Felix and Potter are all in a semi circle watching THE LAST PLAYER attempt to qualify.

JJ

You're number thirty two right now, but he's the last guy. He can knock you out.

POTTER

I can talk shit in his ear.

FELIX

I'll dump a coke on him.

SAM

No. Let him play. If I make it, I make it. If not... Don't be dicks.

The other boys look at him like: "That's a terrible idea."

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Irene steps into the room with a basket of Clean clothes. She sets one pile on Sam's bed and one on JJ's.

She looks around the small space, sadness in her eyes. One wall has a RECTANGLE OF LIGHTER PAINT.

It's the spot where the Rocky poster used to be. She approaches the wall and examines the discoloration.

Then she turns to its new position. Her hand reaches ever so slowly for a corner of the print. She peels it aside...

At the sight of the crumpled wall, her knees buckle. She sits down on JJ's bed. Knowing in her heart what caused it.

Irene covers her mouth and cries. Shoulder shaking sobs.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

The boys all stare with desperate anticipation. Watching, waiting for that last kid to finish the screen.

He finally does... The Manager checks his watch...

MANAGER

Sixty eight seconds.

There's a slight pause where our boys stand quietly.

Then they erupt, jumping up and down, pumping fists.

EXT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

JJ, Sam, Potter and Felix exit. All ear to ear smiles...

VICTOR

Wassup little vatos?

Until they find Victor and Eddie are waiting for them.

EDDIE

So Felix. Me and Victor were wondering.
How come your brother is over there
playing in this contest, but you're
standing next to this *guero*?

Eddie gestures at Sam.

FELIX

Bite me. He's my friend.

Victor steps aggressively toward Felix, but Eddie puts a warning hand on his shoulder. Shakes his head.

VICTOR

Ya'know you get away with a lotta lip
because who your brother is. But even
Danny knows... The time is coming, mijo.

EDDIE

You're either gonna get jumped in and
you'll be WITH US... Or if you don't...

Victor lifts his shirt. A HANDGUN tucked in his waistband.

VICTOR

We'll have to consider you against us.
Believe that.

He drops his shirt and strolls off through the parking lot.

Felix stares after them. Clearly bothered.

EXT. PARK - DUSK

JJ, Sam, Felix and Potter are 40 feet off the ground inside
the TOP SECTION of a STEEL ROCKET SHIP SLIDE.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

None of us wanted to go home that night.
As if somehow we knew, no matter what
happened the following week, this was the
end of our unrestrained freedom.

They stare out over the park and neighborhood beyond.
Sipping soda and enjoying the cool summer evening.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

It wasn't even about school starting. We
had just all reached a tipping point.
Felix had his issues with Danny. We had
our step Dick. And Potter...

POTTER

We're moving to Nevada.

The other boys all sit up, surprised.

POTTER

Dad got a new assignment.

FELIX

Damn. That sucks, man.

JJ

When?

POTTER

Two weeks. Dad wants to make sure we're
settled before school starts.

SAM

Jesus, Potter. I mean nothing really makes sense around here as it is... If you're gone, then what the fuck...

He trails off and turns away from Potter.

POTTER

Come on now. Don't let me catch any of you bitches crying.

But it's Potter whose eyes brim over with tears, as he turns away from his friends, hiding his face in the dying light.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

The encroaching creep of August was always the saddest part of the season. No matter how great summer might've been, and that year was one of our best...

They all sit back against the bars. The horizon ablaze with the fire of sunset and the fading light of summer.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Knowing the end was near weighed heavy on our shoulders and our hearts. The joy of its beginning lost in the shadows of its ending. And of course, it always ended.

Their silhouettes trapped within the cage of that steel rocket-ship, pointing to a darkening sky above.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Sam and JJ roll up on their bikes to find their Step-Dick tossing a LARGE DUFFEL BAG into the back of his truck.

Irene stands by the front door. Arms crossed.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Though... Not all endings were unwelcome.

Dick moves to the driver's side door and pauses there.

DICK

This is a mistake. And we both know it's only temporary anyhow.

Irene stares back in silence. He opens his door and tosses a glance at the boys, before he climbs in and screeches away.

SAM

What's happening?

IRENE

He's going away for a bit. And if that works for us... For you guys, then I have to think about making that permanent.

She stares after the truck. Guilt and fear dancing on her face. So uncertain about so much. But she smiles for them.

IRENE

Come on, I got spaghetti on the table.

Irene gestures for the boys to follow as she steps inside. They pause to share a quick smile and slap high fives.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

That was one of the best, happiest weeks we ever had in that house...

A SERIES OF CUTS:

JJ -- tossing papers on his route...

SAM -- practicing Pac Man at the Bowling Alley...

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

For the first time I could remember, I wasn't afraid to go home.

JJ -- arriving home with an empty paper bag to find Sam, Potter and Felix all dancing around the sidewalk as Irene sprays them with a hose. He drops his bike and jumps in...

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

But even still. There was a falseness about it all...

DINNER IN THE KITCHEN -- JJ, Sam and Irene laughing. The PHONE RINGS and everyone goes still... Until it stops...

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Like summer itself, that week felt like a mirage. Shimmering bright for a moment.

The boys stare at the phone with fear, as it rings again. Irene stands up and pulls the line from the back.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Destined to disappear.

THE RUINED CORDOBA -- Is lifted by a TOW TRUCK. The DRIVER hands Irene an envelope as JJ watches from the front door.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Consumed by a reality that was filled
with disappointment and loss.

JJ IN BED -- As Irene sits beside him and rubs his back.

JJ pulls his pillow over his head. Tuning her out.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
But those last days of summer still had
some surprises left. Wonderful and
horrible in equal measure.

Something funky like *ATOMIC DOG*, by GEORGE CLINTON, plays
over the next few scenes.

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

The doors fly open. Sam and JJ flanked by Felix and Potter
strut through the crowd like little bosses.

The arcade is rearranged so EIGHT PAC MANS are in a circle,
with LED COUNTDOWN CLOCKS mounted on top of each.

The Manager, half baked, stands in front of a crowd.

MANAGER
Alright dudes and dudettes, today we trim
the field from 32... To four... Tomorrow,
they go head to head for the grand prize.

As a cheer goes up, Sam scans the competition:

The Skater Teens they tussled with at the beginning of the
summer are there. So is Danny and his boys.

MANAGER (V.O.)
Opening round is a ten minute blitz.

IN A SERIES OF SHOTS:

Sam and Danny step up to machines next to each other.
Danny glances over and locks eyes with the younger boy.

Danny gives the slightest nod of respect. Let's do this!

THE COUNTER STARTS... AND THEY'RE OFF.

All eight machines are occupied as the Manager walks around
them. A clear space between players and observers.

MANAGER (V.O.)
After all 32 play, top 16 move on...

A DIFFERENT SET OF PLAYERS -- As the timer ticks down...

Sam, Danny and other hopefuls wait on the side.

THE TIMER HITS ZERO.

The game screens all freeze and players step back, as the Manager and his Attendants mark down scores.

MANAGER (V.O.)

Round of sixteen will have 20 minutes.

Disappointed players step back. Remaining entrants, take up positions again. Sam and Danny are still standing.

JJ, Potter and Felix are among the anxious observers. JJ takes a beat to scan the crowd. Clearly looking for someone.

When time is called, the boys rush forward to check scores.

MANAGER (V.O.)

And the top eight will go for 30.

Manager and Attendants confer as they usher the kids back.

Names are circled on a piece of paper, then the Manager pulls a piece of gum from his mouth and sticks the sheet to a game.

MANAGER

Last game of the day folks. Top four scores live on to fight tomorrow.

Players surge forward to check. A mix of fist pump celebrations and head-hanging defeats.

Danny raises his hands in the air like, "That's right!"

Skater Teen does a little dorky dance.

Sam hangs back with JJ as Felix and Potter check the sheet.

POTTER

Fuck yeah, dude. You're in!

JJ punches his brother in the good arm.

JJ

Yes. One more round. You got this!

The Manager pushes everyone back and holds up his hands.

MANAGER

Okay. Looks like we're rocking full speed ahead. Ocho muchachos left to go.

ANNIE

Uh, hello. It's not all dicks up here.

An Asian girl, ANNIE, (17) steps up and snaps her fingers.

MANAGER

And I for one feel better for it.

Alright then. Let's rock some Pac Man!

Sam, Danny, Teen Skater, Annie and the four other random Players all take their positions.

MANAGER

Three... Two... One... Go!

The 30 minute round begins. All the players are focused on the screen in front of them. Pure concentration.

As they play, JJ keeps looking around, scanning the crowd.

POTTER

Who you looking for?

JJ

What? Nobody.

POTTER

That girl from the pool, I bet.

JJ

Yeah but... It's not like that.

POTTER

I mean she's fine, so if it's not "like that" what's the point?

JJ shakes his head, disgusted and waves him off.

JJ

You wouldn't understand.

IN TIME LAPSE, the clock ticks down...

One of the eight dies out and drops to his knees. Defeated.

Danny tosses an elbow into the player next to him. The guy loses a life and turns to complain, but Victor and Eddie are right in his line of sight behind the Manager.

They throw up their hands like, "Whatcha gonna do?" The guy turns back to his game, rattled. Danny smiles.

Sam whips through screen after screen...

The Crowd counts down as we hit the final 10 seconds.
10... 9... 8... 7...

Everyone's desperate for the last points they can gobble.
6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

THE BUZZER SOUNDS! The players step back.

Members of the crowd, including JJ, Potter and Felix, all surge forward to check the scores for themselves.

The Manager checks the machines, then waves for silence.

MANAGER
Final eight line up.

All eight players stand in a line as he checks his board.

He points to the guy who died before time.

MANAGER
Obviously you... Choked big time... So
feel free to take a seat, bro.

The crowd laughs and jeers him as he steps away.

MANAGER
The highest score is... Here.

He points to Skater Teen.

SKATER TEEN
Like I didn't already know that.

His boys all pat his back as he preens for the crowd.

MANAGER
Next is... My personal favorite

He blows a kiss at Annie.

ANNIE
Like, barf. In your dreams.

Manager waves his pointer finger at the remainders.

Everyone feeling nervous. He stops on Sam for a beat, then continues moving down the line to... Danny.

MANAGER
You... Did not choke. You're in.

Danny's boys pound his back and punch his arms. He lifts his chin and nods, like it's no big deal.

MANAGER

And the final player tomorrow is...

Everyone holds their breath. It's dead silent when --

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

Sam and JJ burst into the back patio and drop their bikes. Buzzing from the excitement of the day.

JJ

That was so awesome! You did it!

SAM

I barely made it.

JJ

Yeah but, tomorrow there's no clock. You didn't even lose a life. You got this.

SAM

Maybe. We'll see.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

I can't even describe how great that moment felt. Knowing Sam was moving on to the finals. Believing we could reach out and touch something so impossible...

They push open the back door into the kitchen and freeze.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

And then... Just like a mirage, as we dared to reach for it... It disappeared.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Sam and JJ cautiously step in to find Dick at the table. Several empty beer cans scattered.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

One thing I never mentioned about our step dick.

He's cleaning and fidgeting with A SPEAR-GUN.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Is that after he got out of the navy, he took up scuba diving. Except it wasn't the diving that he loved.

Dick holds the spear-gun up. Locks and loads it.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

He just liked disappearing underwater and killing things when no one was looking.

DICK

Where's your mom?

SAM

We don't know.

Dick lurches upright, his chair scrapes across the floor. He looms over the boys, his spear-gun dangling at his side.

DICK

Why's that always your first fucking answer to every goddamned question I ask?

He THUMPS Sam on the forehead with a sharp knuckle. Sam covers up, with his hands and Dick slaps him sideways.

Irene suddenly appears in the still-open back door.

IRENE

What the hell are you doing?

DICK

He's fine. Fuckin' little baby.

If looks could kill, the glare Irene flashes at Dick woulda dropped him dead in a heartbeat.

IRENE

Get. Out. Now.

She steps in front of Sam protectively.

Everyone stares at each other around that small table in that small kitchen. Years of fuse burning toward an explosion.

DICK

Why don't you try and make me leave.

Dick raises his spear-gun in a threatening way toward Irene.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

People always said I was a smart kid. I like to think I was. But what I did next was probably the dumbest thing possible.

JJ's hand inches across the table, where three more unloaded spears are scattered among the beer.

HE SUDDENLY GRABS A SPEAR AND STABS DICK IN THE THIGH!

Dick howls in pain and backhands JJ, knocking the boy's head against the stove. He staggers, dazed.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Everything after that... Was pretty much
a blur...

JJ'S POV: goes hazy as Dick tries to grab him, but the boy dodges, and uses the table as a shield.

A CACOPHONY OF SCREAMS AND VIOLENCE ENSUES...

Dick chases JJ around the table...

Irene attacks, choking and clawing at Dick...

He slams her against the refrigerator...

The table is flipped and JJ is cornered...

Dick rips the spear from his leg and lifts the boy...

DICK
You think you're a man now, is that it?
You think you're a fucking man?

SAM
More of a man than you.

Sam swings his CASTED ARM -- Breaking Dick's nose...

Dick drops JJ and stumbles back over the table...

Irene rises and ushers both boys out the door...

EXT. REAR PATIO - DAY

JJ pushes open the gate with Sam and Irene behind him.

Before they can escape, Dick lunges out and grabs Irene by the hair. He holds the spear-gun in his other hand.

He smashes her against the wooden fence beside the gate.

IRENE
Run, boys. RUN!!

But they don't. They stand their ground.

SAM
Let her go!

Dick drags Irene through the gate, still holding her hair.

Everyone is out on the sidewalk now.

DICK

You want her? Take her.

He shoves her at the boys, they all crash to the ground.

DICK

You're nothing but a whore. I can't believe I wasted so many years taking care of you and your pathetic kids.

Dick raises his spear gun and points it down at them.

IRENE

You never took care of anything. You're a useless piece of shit, drunk.

JJ lurches up from the ground and charges, but Dick swats him aside, leaving JJ on his hands and knees, even more dazed.

His step dad aims at him. All JJ sees is his black outline, blown out by light bleeding in from a setting sun behind him.

DICK

Let's see you outsmart this.

His finger squeezes the trigger.

IRENE

Noooooo!

The tension lines on the gun snap free...

The spear races down the rail and off the edge of the gun...

IRENE LAUNCHES HERSELF IN FRONT OF JJ.

The spear impales her stomach!

She crashes down on top of JJ, smothering him.

JJ

Mom!

Sam crawls toward them, as JJ looks up to see Dick pulling a second spear from a clip on the side of the weapon.

BEHIND DICK...

The hazy, out-of-focus shape of his GRANDPA ALFRED --

Rises through the diffused light of JJ's altered vision...

AND ABSOLUTELY SMASHES THE EVER LIVING SHIT OUT OF DICK!

He bashes him upside the head with A PIECE OF LUMBER.

The board splinters as Dick crumples to the pavement.

JJ blinks his eyes several times, trying to clear his vision.
But he's drawn to his mother beside him as Sam cries out.

SAM

Mom! Mom! Are you okay?

She lifts her hand. A patch of blood on her apron.

IRENE

It's just... It's...

She grabs the protruding spear and yanks it free.

Then she pulls a THICK ENVELOPE from her apron. She opens it
to show JJ... IT'S A NEW BATCH OF STORY OF AMERICA CARDS.

IRENE

I found these at a bookstore for you.
Since he burned all of yours.

The stack of cards is pierced through, but stopped the spear
from fully entering her body, leaving only a minor wound.

IRENE

It's a small cut. I'm okay.

JJ looks up again into the bright sun at his grandfather.

JJ

Grandpa...

But as his vision clears, the image resolves itself to...

NOT HIS GRANDFATHER --

It's Danny!

A NEIGHBOR from across the street calls out.

NEIGHBOR

Hey! I called the cops!

DANNY

Holy fuck man. I had to do it. He was
gonna kill you.

Danny drops the piece of wood and backs away in a panic.

The sound of POLICE SIRENS can be heard approaching.

IRENE

Wait. Thank you... Thank you....

Danny gives her a curt nod, then locks eyes with JJ for a beat, before he spins and runs away.

Irene grabs both her boys and squeezes them tight, crying into their heads as she stares at Dick's unconscious form.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Dick is handcuffed to a gurney and being shoved into an AMBULANCE as a POLICE OFFICER climbs in beside him.

A few LOOKY-LOO NEIGHBORS gather on the sidewalk.

Irene, JJ and Sam sit together on the hood of a car where another OFFICER finishes taking their statement.

OFFICER

...Neighbor says it was a local gang banger who took him out.

IRENE

Didn't really see. But... Whoever it was... He probably saved our lives.

The Officer glances toward the ambulance.

OFFICER

He's ummm... Saying it was an accident. The spear-gun going off.

IRENE

And him beating the shit outta me and my boys before hand, that was what?

The Officer takes a deep breath, tilts his hat back.

OFFICER

Pretty sure that was a fuckin' coward who's not gonna have a very good night if I have anything to say about it.

He looks down at Irene and the boys.

OFFICER

Unless I've misinterpreted the situation.

Irene stares back at him. But it's JJ who speaks.

JJ
No... You haven't.

The Police Officer gives JJ a nod and heads for his car.

IN QUICK DISSOLVES...

BOYS DON'T CRY by The Cure plays, as police and neighbors fade away. JJ, Sam and Irene sit on the hood of a car.

A TRAIN RUMBLES PAST on the tracks visible from their house. The three of them quietly watch it pass.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Finally, they come back inside and Irene stops to stare at her dad's hospital bed... HIS EMPTY HOSPITAL BED.

IRENE
JJ... Out there on the sidewalk...

JJ
I just... I miss him so much, sometimes I like to pretend he's still here.

Irene considers her son for a beat, then pulls him close.

IRENE
Me too, JJ. Me too.

Sam folds himself into the hug.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Okay, so... I didn't exactly lie about those conversations with my grandfather.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

That first time Alfred rolls over with vampire teeth.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Some variation of them really did happen... Just not that summer.

As JJ stands at the fridge, we see he's looking at a note from his mom: **TAKING A NAP BETWEEN SHIFTS - MOM.**

He glances to the living room to reveal Alfred's empty bed.

CUT TO:

JJ sits on his grandpa's bed, reading from his Story of America cards to the old man.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
I know it sounds a little silly. Maybe
even slightly mental.

JJ grabs another card. As he sits back up, Alfred is gone.

CUT TO:

In the kitchen... JJ makes his hobo toast on the stove.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Before he died, I thought my grandfather
was the only one I could ever count on.

Sam pokes his head in the back door and we see JJ is alone.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
And I wanted to hold onto him as long as
I could. Even after he was gone.

He glances to a spot on the wall where a PHOTOGRAPH of his grandfather and GRANDMOTHER hangs.

CUT TO:

JJ staring at that damaged Cordoba parked at the curb.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
The day he died, my mother had asked him
to go stay with my aunt for a while.

CUT TO:

Alfred gives JJ a smile and a wave as he pulls away from the house in his Cordoba. Undamaged at that point.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
She was so tired, she needed a break. It
was the first day of summer.

CUT TO:

JJ runs his hand over the damaged Cordoba.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
He was at a railroad crossing when he had
a heart attack. His foot hit the gas and
he drove right into a passing locomotive.

CUT TO:

JJ's hand reaching towards the speeding train in the opening.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
We buried him the same morning I tried to
race that train...

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

JJ stands beside his grandpa's bed.

IRENE
He'll always be with you, JJ.

Irene sits on the bed and he climbs up and leans into her.
Just as he did with his grandfather so many times.

IRENE
We may not be able to see him, touch him,
talk to him. But as long as you remember
him, his spirit will never leave.

JJ considers that. Then asks.

JJ
And what about...

IRENE
He's not coming back. Don't you worry.
I'm sorry he was here as long as he was.

She squeezes the boy close.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

A somber breakfast of cereal. JJ, Sam and Irene all bearing
the scrapes and bruises of the previous night.

There's a knock at the door. Everyone tenses.

Irene gestures for the boys to stay, but they both get up and
move with her to the door.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Turned out, grandpa had one last magic
trick hiding up his sleeve...

She opens the door to find a YOUNG LAWYER IN A SUIT.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
A military life insurance policy, that
none of us knew about.

The Lawyer hands Irene a LARGE ENVELOPE, then quickly departs. She closes the door and stares at it, confused.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

When it was divided between my mom and her siblings, they each were left with about thirty thousand dollars.

Irene moves to the kitchen and extracts a sheaf of papers.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

It wasn't getting rich money, but it was definitely moving on money.

Irene cups her mouth with her hand as she reads over the insurance policy and pulls out THE CHECK.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

And suddenly a five hundred dollar prize for playing Pac Man didn't really matter.

INT. JJ'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Sam is busy cleaning the room. Trying to make it nice.

SAM

Seriously. After everything, I can't even think about that stupid game right now. Besides, mom's got the day off. I don't want to leave her alone and... Wouldn't you rather spend it with her?

IRENE

Well maybe we should spend it at the damn bowling alley then.

They turn to see Irene stepping in.

IRENE

Sammy. You earned this, baby. Win or lose, who cares? I want to watch you do something you enjoy. Something you're good at. And no matter how it ends, I am still going to be so proud of you.

The boys share a look. Awww fuck yeah. Let's do this!

BACK IN BLACK by AC/DC cranks to 11 on the soundtrack as--

INT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

The camera moves through a decent crowd, toward the game.

THE FINAL FOUR MACHINES ARE LINED UP IN A ROW.

Sam, Annie, Skater Teen and finally Danny are all at their respective controls. Clearly been here for a while.

Sam dares a glance over his shoulder to smile at Irene and JJ, holding hands. Potter and Felix beside them.

Someone taps JJ's shoulder. He turns to find Casey.

CASEY

How long have they been going?

JJ

About two hours now.

Potter gives her the once over and gives a big THUMBS UP.

Irene and Casey lock eyes and Irene lets go of JJ's hand.

IRENE

Hello, Casey. I'm Irene.

She offers her hand to Casey, who hesitates, then shakes.

IRENE

The first time we met... I was rude. I haven't always been great about keeping my son safe.

CASEY

And that's all you were trying to do, I understand.

Irene opens her arms and pulls Casey in for a hug.

IRENE

I think he really needed someone this summer, and from what he's told me, you were the perfect person.

POTTER

Yo, JJ how sweet would it be if they started making out right now.

JJ has a look on his face like he's about to be sick.

POTTER

What? They're both hot.

FELIX

Look. Homegirl's out.

They all turn to find Annie stepping back.

ANNIE

Ahhh, that's bullshit.

She kicks the game, then spins and storms into the crowd.

Danny glances left and right at Sam and Skater Teen.

DANNY

Check it... You motherfuckers didn't know
I was a real player did you?

Danny suddenly tenses. Tries to make a couple of sharp moves, but then HIS PAC MAN IS DEVOURED...

DANNY

Aye. Chingada madre!

Skater Teen laughs and steals a quick sideways glance.

SKATER TEEN

Adios Amigo.

Danny balls up his fists. Ready to pound this fool.

SAM

Danny. Come on. Let us finish.

The gang banger inhales sharply. Smiles.

DANNY

Make sure YOU finish it. You got this
guero. Fuck him up.

Danny pats Sam on the back and retreats to his homeboys.

Irene leans over and whispers to JJ.

IRENE

We do need to talk about the people you
and your brother seem to hang out with.

Everyone turns to look at Potter.

POTTER

Why y'all looking at me?

Everybody laughs, but JJ's attention is drawn to Danny.

Victor whispers something that makes Danny's face go dark,
before he spins for the exit. His crew following with speed.

JJ turns to Felix, who's also watching the situation break.

FELIX
I think... I think I gotta go.

JJ
No. Don't.

Felix shrugs. His eyes welling with tears.

FELIX
It is what it is. Familia primero.
He disappears in the crowd as JJ and Potter watch. Helpless.

IRENE
Oh... No...

Sam's shoulders slump at his game. He ducks his head for a beat, then turns around with a shrug and approaches.

POTTER
Shit, bro. Look how far you got.

JJ
With your left hand, even.

IRENE
You did good. Real good.

A ROAR, as Skater Teen steps from his game with arms raised.

SKATER TEEN
Yes! Number one, baby. Right here.

As his friends congratulate him, the Manager huddles with an attendant who checks the games, then shouts the crowd down.

MANAGER
OK! OK! We have verified the scores.
And I am happy to present this envelope
with five Ben Franklins inside to...

The crowd cheers and Skater Teen reaches for the envelope, but the Manager yanks it back. Skater Teen shrugs WTF?

MANAGER
Not so fast board boy. The rules clearly
state, the person with the highest score
in head to head is the winner.

SKATER TEEN
Yeah, exactly. And I lasted the longest.

MANAGER
But you didn't have the highest score.

Everyone realizes what's happening and turns to Sam.

POTTER
Oh hell yeah, son!

A huge cheer goes up, as JJ pushes Sam forward to grab the envelope. Potter and Irene join them in a group hug.

IRENE
That's a lotta money. Whatcha gonna do with it?

SAM
I'm not sure. We kinda all did it together. What do you guys think?

He looks at JJ and Potter, who both smile.

SPACE AGE LOVE SONG by A Flock of Seagulls kicks in, and plays over the next couple scenes.

EXT. BOWL-O-DROME - DAY

Casey and Irene are chatting outside the entry. JJ, Sam and Potter are huddled several yards away.

JJ
You're sure?

SAM
Yeah. Of course.

POTTER
I never did nothing good for nobody.
Might as well start now.

Sam hands the envelope to JJ and they all march over to where Casey and Irene are standing. JJ locks eyes with Casey.

EXT. PARKING LOT - CASEY'S CAR - DAY

Moments later, JJ and Casey are alone by her car.

CASEY
JJ, no. I can't take it. I won't.

JJ
Why not? You said yourself, you were still a few hundred short for college.

Casey grabs his little shoulders and squats down.

CASEY

If I take that, I'll spend the next three days feeling sick with guilt. And I need to focus on getting my shit together.

JJ

Okay... Okay... You're gonna say goodbye before you leave though, right?

CASEY

I can't believe you'd even ask.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

JJ takes a last look at his empty room, then spins to the living room where boxes and furniture are stacked.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

It was pretty amazing how so much had changed so fast.

Irene tucks Grandpa's dismantled hospital bed into a corner.

EXT. STREETS - DAY

Sam, JJ and Potter ride along the railroad tracks. They slow down to witness a group of gang-bangers, kicking and punching some helpless soul somewhere in between all the bodies.

Danny steps away and stares down at his hands. Conflicted.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

We were moving away. In a week, Potter would be gone too. But Felix...

Felix staggers from the scrum. Bruised and bloodied. But standing strong. Now dressed like the others. He spots his friends... And for a moment, his posture deflates. But then he straightens up and turns back to the bangers.

Danny locks eyes with JJ and stands in a crucifix pose. This is it. This is who we are. *Familia Primero.*

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

Felix would be stuck, just like Danny. Born into a cage he could never escape.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

JJ stands at the curb, shielding his eyes from the sun, as Casey pulls up and leans out her window.

CASEY

Sorry I'm late. Took a little longer to pack than I thought.

JJ approaches. Notes her things piled into the back.

JJ

You're leaving now? Like right now?

CASEY

Figure I'll drive through the night until I'm tired. Avoid traffic that way.

He nods with an overwhelming sadness.

CASEY

And you get to be the last person I spend time with in this city. So get in. Let's grab a burger.

JJ

Actually... There's something else I think I need to do.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

The sun is dropping behind the Pacific, to create one of those magical sunsets Southern California is so famous for.

LIFEGUARD TOWER #17 is backlit, like some kind of dark sentinel standing watch over its patch of sand.

But Summer is ending and night is falling, so the beach is practically empty as BEN THE LIFEGUARD locks the tower down.

He zips his windbreaker and walks down his ramp, stopping at the bottom to appreciate one last, long gaze at the sunset.

JJ

It's the best part of the day.

Ben turns, slightly startled to find someone stepping out from under the shadow of the structure.

But more surprised to see it's JJ.

JJ stares out at the ocean as he speaks.

JJ

I like watching the sun drop over the water. Makes me feel... I don't know...

BEN

Small?

JJ

Yeah. Like. There's so much out there.
The world is so much bigger than us, it
hurts to think about it.

Ben nods. Looks out at the water.

"Father" and son side by side. Two tiny silhouettes facing
the enormity of the world in front of them.

They stand like this for a long moment. Then JJ holds a
piece of paper out to Ben who hesitates before taking it.

JJ

We're moving. That's our new phone
number. Mom already set it up.

And just like that, JJ spins and walks away.

BEN

Wait... Please.

But JJ isn't waiting. And he's not looking back.

The mournful strains of *CRIMSON AND CLOVER* - Joan Jett
version - build and play over the next few scenes.

He leaves his father and the now dark ocean behind, as he
marches across the sand to where Casey waits for him.

Ben stands, impotent. Small. Insignificant. A lonely
figure surrounded by an endless ocean of sand and water.

JJ reaches Casey and she puts an arm around his shoulder as
they move toward the parking area where her car is.

INT. STATION WAGON - NIGHT

They drive through dark streets in silence.

JJ glances at her, then out his window.

After a long moment, he pulls his feet onto the seat and
buries his face in his knees and just fucking cries.

This little fucker who's kept his shit together through
threats and beatings and the loss of friends...

HE CAN'T TAKE ANOTHER FUCKING MINUTE OF THIS LIFE.

Casey pulls to the curb and slides over beside him. She hugs the younger boy close and lets him cry.

CASEY

I read something in a book once. I can't even remember the name of it... But there was a line I think about a lot.

JJ wipes his snot and tears on the hem of his shirt.

CASEY

Went something like... Wounded as I am, still I smile. And still I laugh. Why do you laugh asked a friend who knew how great my troubles were. I laugh I told him, because sometimes the pain is so great I'm afraid if I don't laugh I'll start crying and never stop. I keep a smile on my face because if it slips, I may lose it and never find it again.

They stare at each other in that dark car. City lights and those of passing vehicles washing over them.

CASEY

For a long time I thought that sounded like me. I didn't have anything to laugh about. But I forced myself to keep a smile on my face so I wouldn't go crazy... And then I met you. And you reminded me that I could still smile for real. Driving you home that day wasn't about helping you. It was about helping myself. I thought. Hey, I could do a good deed, something nice for someone. And then I got to know you and...

JJ

I wish I was eight years older.

Casey leans close and gives him a sisterly peck on the cheek.

CASEY

In eight years, you're not even gonna remember me. But I will never forget you, JJ. You've got a heart bigger than the world. And you're so smart. Just stay true to yourself. That's all you gotta do and you'll be okay.

JJ nods. Not even sure what to say anymore.

Casey slides back to her seat and cranks the ignition.

She gives him one more huge smile.

CASEY
Feels good to smile for real.

JJ smiles back.

JJ
Yeah. It does.

Casey pulls away from the curb and joins the flow of traffic.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Casey's car pulls up to the curb.

Her and JJ sit silently in the front seat. Engine running.

JJ
I'm gonna miss you.

CASEY
JJ... You gotta get outta this car right now, I mean it.

JJ
But I just...

And Casey loses her shit. Like JJ minutes before, this is her tipping point. She cannot DO THIS.

CASEY
JJ, please.

Her voice cracks. Her face fractures into a million tiny wrinkles. Desperate not to break down in front of him.

But there is no holding back the tears now.

CASEY
I need you to get out right now. And don't you dare say goodbye. You walk into that house. Don't you watch me leave. And know you are always gonna be in my heart. I'm escaping JJ. I am finally escaping but I have to leave right now or I may never go.

JJ pulls the handle on his door and pushes it open. He puts one foot on the ground outside.

Knows that it's all over as soon as he stands up.

JJ
I love you. I don't mean that in any way
except... I LOVE YOU.

Casey lunges across the seat and grabs him tight. She holds him for a long beat, then shoves him out the door.

She pulls the door closed and drives away.

JJ stares down at the ground, using every ounce of will power he possesses not to turn and watch her leave.

After a moment, he looks up and sees Irene at the door.

She holds her arms out and JJ rushes to them.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
I never did see Casey again.

EXT. HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Casey's station wagon rumbles down a lonely stretch of desert road. Heading east out of California.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Casey's got the windows down. Singing along to some pop song on the radio. Her hair whipping in the breeze.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
I like to imagine she's had a good life.

A flutter of movement on the seat beside her catches her attention. She reaches down and pulls something that's jammed in the crevice between the seat and back cushion.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
And I'd like to hope that maybe I helped
her as much as she helped me.

IT'S THE ENVELOPE WITH FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS!

Casey shakes her head. A smile spreading on her face.

CASEY
Of course you did, JJ. You little shit.

EXT. JJ'S HOUSE - DAY

JJ pushes his bike into a TOW-BEHIND U-HAUL TRAILER that is crammed full of belongings already.

Sam stands beside the trailer trying to make it fit.

The sound of POLICE SIRENS catches their attention.

DON'T FEAR THE REAPER by Blue Oyster Cult plays as --

A LINE OF FOUR POLICE CARS SCREAMS AROUND THE CORNER.
They blow past with lights and sirens blazing.

POTTER

Did you guys hear?

JJ and Sam turn to find Potter rolling up on his bike.

POTTER

Mexicans and Samoans. Shit went off big
time last night.

SAM

Damn. Like a fight?

Potter looks over his shoulder. Shakes his head.

POTTER

Worse. Danny... He's dead.

JJ

What about Felix? Where's Felix?

POTTER

I don't know... I don't know...

They all stand in silence, letting that settle.

POTTER

So this is it.

JJ

This is it.

SAM

When do you leave?

POTTER

Three days.

What else to say? They all stand there as the camera rises
and drifts across the neighborhood.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

I saw Potter once, years later. Making
an ass of himself on some TV dating game
show. But he had learned to be a little
more charming. And he did get the girl.

EXT. LITTLE GERRY'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Where crowds of onlookers stand in shocked silence.

BLOOD... Lots of it. Drying into sticky brown drops and puddles, up and down the sidewalk.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Felix survived that day...

Various weapons are marked by EVIDENCE CARDS:

A LARGE KNIFE/ BOARD WITH NAILS/ BIKE CHAIN/ Etc...

ONE SHEET COVERED BODY --

Remains in the street as POLICE question witnesses.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
But I'm not sure how many more he did.
How much of a chance he ever really had.

Mama Mendez stands with a protective arm draped over Felix as she speaks to a Detective.

Felix stares out at the sheet covered body of his brother.

He shrugs his grandmother's arm away and saunters toward where the other gang members are gathered. With them now.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
We never even got to say goodbye.

Police escort a handcuffed and struggling Little Gerry into a patrol car. It takes four cops to shove him in.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
But like Casey... And Potter... Me and Sam... We did escape.

INT. NEW APARTMENT - DAY

An open floor plan where the small living room is separated from the eat-in kitchen by a breakfast bar.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)
Our mom made sure of that. For all the pain and bad memories we'd all endured, she found a way to build us a future that swept all the bullshit away.

The building is new so everything is freshly painted and full of promise. Also full of moving boxes scattered about.

Irene is in the kitchen putting dishes into cupboards.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

But everything after that summer is a
separate story. A separate life, really.

JJ and Sam enter from the open entry door, each carrying a
box. Sam kicks the door closed as he sets his load down.

JJ

Last boxes!

He stacks his on top of Sam's and they high five as Irene
glances over her shoulder at them.

IRENE

Great. Bed frames are in your rooms.
You just have to put them together.

JJ and Sam share a look, before stepping into a hallway that
runs behind the kitchen and living room.

Each moves in a separate direction.

After a few seconds, they both return to the center point and
Sam points a finger back to where JJ just came from.

The younger boy nods and follows Sam back to his room.

A few seconds later they emerge, carrying Sam's headboard and
taking it to what was supposed to be JJ's room.

Irene notices and steps out of the kitchen.

IRENE

Hey! Whatcha doing? The whole point of
three bedrooms is so we each get our own.

JJ

Well... If it's okay with you...

He looks to his brother.

SAM

Maybe we could still share... For a
little while anyway.

JJ

You know, until we get sick of each other
or something.

Irene smiles to keep herself from crying.

IRENE

Yeah... Yeah that'd be okay.

The boys continue on their way, and Irene tries to choke back her emotion, but tears begin to fall.

THE PHONE SUDDENLY RINGS.

After a deep breath to compose herself, Irene wipes away her tears and steps to where it rests on the counter and answers.

IRENE (INTO PHONE)

Hello...

Her posture goes rigid at what she's hearing. Her hand flies to her mouth. Chin quivering, as new tears form.

After several seconds, she nods her head and forces herself to speak. Her voice is cracked and quiet.

IRENE

It's up to them at this point. Okay...
Uh-huh... Alright... Hold on a second.

She clutches the receiver to her chest as she calls out.

IRENE

Boys! Come here, please.

JJ and Sam emerge from the hall. She holds out the phone.

IRENE

It's ummm... It's your father.

The boys look at each other for a beat. Then JJ stalks forward. He takes the phone from his mom --

AND HE HANGS IT UP.

IRENE

JJ!?

He glances up at her. Swallows hard.

JJ

If he really means it... He'll call back.

Irene stares down at the phone. Sam steps up beside his brother and the two boys clasp hands.

And the phone sits idle... And sits idle...

Irene closes her eyes. Please ring... Please ring...

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' kicks in to play us out and carry over credits. But here, we go with the modern, SIA version.

The fingers of JJ and Sam's hands go white as they squeeze each other with every ounce of strength they possess.

Several seconds elapse Before Irene finally opens her eyes.

Years of pain and guilt etched onto her face.

IRENE

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

JJ

It's okay...

SAM

We love you, mom.

IRENE

I love you, too.

JJ

The people who matter most in life are the ones who show up, right?

Irene nods and squats down to hug both boys tight.

IRENE

That's what your grandfather used to always say.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

I know that moment must've hurt my mom deeply. But in the end, we had each other. And that was more than enough.

As the three of them hold tight to one another --

THE PHONE RINGS!

They all glance up at it.

As JJ reaches for that ringing phone.

SMASH TO BLACK.

ADULT JJ (V.O.)

But I answered the phone anyway...

AND THE SUMMER OF 1982 WAS OVER