Up in the Air

By

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Based on the book by Walter Kirn

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YOU ARE THE SKY

Aqueous. Azure. Infinite.

But most of all...

BLUE

Crystalline. Clear. Cool.

A MAN'S VOICE

Bleeds through, measured and melodic...

RYAN (V.O.)
By last count, I've killed over 127,000 people in over 33 states...

MOVING DEEPER through the blue tunnel, shades swirling past.

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I'm not apologizing...it's what I do.

MOVING FASTER now, shadows and shapes infect the backdrop...

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And there are many ways to do it...

PULL-BACK to reveal the blue emanates from the EYES of an - -

OLDER WHITE MAN(CAMERA POV)

Staring into us with a sense of dread. Sensing his fate.

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
"The soft sell."

Ryans's voice purrs from OS. Closer. And further away.

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
We've got some great news for you, Ken...I think you're gonna be pleased. Upper management's really valued your service here...

The man's face brightens, his eyes imbued with the perfume of promise as...

...A STACK OF PAPERS slides into frame. Right beneath him.

And the perfume turns poisonous as the man examines the document(os)before glancing back up at us(STILL CAMERA POV). He smiles no more.

KEN
Y-you're here to fire me...?

RYAN (O.S.)
You're losing perspective, Ken...I'm here to *liberate* you.

And there's a POP - as if from a Polaroid or a pistol, as we - -

FLASH CUT TO:

A MATRONLY WOMAN,

Staring at us(CAMERA POV)with sunny insouciance...

(NOTE: Flash cuts should simulate the sharp crack of a gun.)

RYAN (V.O.)
"The scalpel"...

Again Ryan's heard OS. Rapid-fire rhetoric.

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
After careful analysis, upper management's concluded that your skills - while abundant and appreciated - would be better served in a different capacity.

MATRONLY WOMAN
(a beat)
Where?

RYAN
With a different company.

FLASH CUT TO:

A SUITED HIPSTER(CAMERA POV)

Hair slicked back, a soul-patch of fur on his chin, he's the kind of guy who still insists on buying vinyl records. And he snaps his gum as if engaged in a yet-to-be acknowledged Olympic sport. Studiously avoiding eye-contact.

RYAN (V.O.)
And, of course...

HIPSTER
Dude, why'm I here...?

RYAN (V.O.)
..."The hammer".

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You're not. Anymore. *Dude.*

The hipster's wad of gum POPS, as we - -

CUT BACK TO:

THE BLUE SKY

Except this time we actually see a PLANE, a commercial jet-liner, grazing past. So close. So far away.

Insert Legend: ***TAKE-OFF***

The words are swept aside by the diminishing plane as if attached to an indiscernible banner...

Only the barren sky left in it's stead, as we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.)
Reactions, as you might imagine, vary...

CUT TO:

THE OLDER MAN(CAMERA POV)

His breath heavy, his eyes inverting from within. And without a word or a whisper - -

HE ATTACKS US

The camera goes wobbly, as we - -

CUT TO:

THE MATRONLY WOMAN(CAMERA POV)

Her saccharine eyes bleeding in an amalgam of utter confusion and acute cognizance. She swallows her Adam's apple, before - -

SHE BREAKS DOWN AND CRIES

Ryan's hand doesn't even creep into frame. He simply watches from the other-side of the desk, unaffected, as we - -

CUT TO:

THE CHAIR(CAMERA POV)

Where the hipster sat mere seconds before. EMPTY now, only a discarded clip-on tie and an employee ID remain.

RYAN (V.O.)
After a while, none of it really matters. It can't. It's like that great statesman, Joe Stalin, said..."One death is a tragedy, a thousand just a statistic..."

HOLD, letting those words sink in, before we - -

SLAM CUT TO:

BLUE SKY

Where we began. Where we'll end. The alpha. The omega.

SLAM TITLE CARD: "***Up in the Air***"

PULL-BACK to reveal we're watching from the portal-window of - -

INT. BOEING 737 - - MOVING

First-class. 25,000 feet in the air. Heaven.

REVERSE ANGLE to see a chunky BUSINESSMAN in an ill-fitting suit with a worse-fitting hair-piece. He turns from the window to face us(UNKNOWN POV).

BUSINESSMAN
And who do you do this for, this job?

RACK FOCUS TO RYAN BINGHAM(30's)

Whom we see for the first time. Our hero. Sort of.

Trim, tan and telegenetic with a $200 haircut, a 250 watt smile and a $2,000 suit. You'd be tempted to call him slick is he weren't so accomplished in the art of sincerity. But somehow, lurking beneath those glimmering green lids, we see something else. We see pain. He is the man we yearn to be, yet fear we may become.

And we realize Ryan's introductory narrative originated from his aisle-seat...

RYAN
I work for a company called ISM...

BUSINESSMAN
(heard of it)
Sure...

RYAN
...As a VP in the CTC division.

He flicks a CARD out in testament...

BUSINESSMAN
(takes card)
All of which means...?
(off Ryan)
Sorry, the only acronyms I know are IRS and STD...

RYAN
"CTC". Career. Transition. Counselor.

BUSINESSMAN
Which is what, a poetic way of saying you fire people for a living...

RYAN
(yes)
Your personal back-door man...

And the businessman's discomforted by Ryan's *lack* of discomfort. But he's also curious...

BUSINESSMAN
So is, um, business good...?

RYAN
(nods)
A cottage industry if ever there was one. 28,000.

BUSINESSMAN
I beg your pardon - -?

RYAN
28,000. That's the number of people laid of last week - and that's when the economy's good.

The businessman looks at Ryan as if he were the grim-reaper himself - a look with which Ryan is not unfamiliar.

BUSINESSMAN
So you, um, have business in San Francisco...?

RYAN
Uh-huh. Doing a little liposuction...

And suddenly this cat's more nervous than intrigued...

BUSINESSMAN
(a beat)
Oh. What company? - If I may ask...

Ryan sneaks a glance at the businessman's BRIEF-CASE - where an ID card dangles...

RYAN
"Genentech."

The man's teeth are in his testicles. GULP.

BIG. FUCKING. BEAT.

RYAN (CONT'D)
I'm kidding...I'm kidding...

Ryan finds this considerably more amusing than his seat-mate.

CUT TO:

RYAN'S EYES

Bleeding through the darkness, thrumming with ill-defined angst and anticipation...

REVERSE ANGLE to reveal the object of his analysis - -

A DIGITAL ALARM CLOCK: "4:58 a.m".

INT. MARRIOTT HOTEL-ROOM. SAN FRANCISCO -- WIDER VIEW

Ryan sits-up in bed. Restive. Wired. Ready to roll.

WIDEN to reveal a tangle of raven hair and lithe limbs intertwined beside him. A stunning lass for sure.

Ryan's hand shoots out to the alarm clock before it can so much as emit a whine. SMACKING it off, as we - -

CUT TO:

A SERIES OF SHOTS:

- A portable alarm clock barks - a hand clicks it OFF.

- A wrist-watch alarm beeps - a hand stabs it OFF.

- A back-up alarm clock burps - a hand shifts it OFF.

And lastly the digital alarm clock beside the woman's side of the bed wails - Ryan moving for it, as we - -

PICK-UP SCENE:

Fully-dressed now, a vision of sartorial splendor, Ryan reaches for another alarm before the woman wakes. Too late.

She purrs a sexy growl, flipping a curtain of hair from her eyes. Revealing the refined features of an aristocrat. Meet LINDA FAIRBURN(29)

And the way she looks at Ryan would send a lesser man to his knees...Ryan simply smiles. Invites her to - -

RYAN
Sleep, baby...

Tussling her head of hair like the Lothario he is...

LINDA
How can I? - there are more alarms in here than Harry Winston's...

RYAN
I like to be thorough...

LINDA
(purring)
Is that right...?

And she leans up, her lips inches from his when - -

THE PHONE RINGS(OS)

RYAN
Sorry. I been waiting on this call...

He retracts with a stiletto smile. Snags the phone with his best basso profundo:

RYAN (CONT'D)
Hello...
(listens; then)
Okay. Thank you.

He HANGS UP. Stands. Straightens his Sulka tie. Palm presses his Zegna suit jacket. Cutting quite a figure.

LINDA
Who was it?

RYAN
Wake-up call.

Ryan grins big, as we HEAR(in pre-lap):

LINDA (O.S.)
You know I do have an apartment here...

CUT TO:

VRRRRRPPP!

Ryan ZIPS his fastidiously-packed duffel-bag closed. Glancing up to see LINDA, dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt. She pulls it off effortlessly.

INT. HOTEL-ROOM - - WIDER VIEW

RYAN
Does your apartment have room-service...?

LINDA
Yeah, it's called "take-out".

RYAN
Wouldn't you rather I use *their* tooth-brush than yours?
(MORE)

RYAN (CONT'D)
(off Linda)
Think of it like a vacation...

A somber tinge creaks through her voice when she says:

LINDA
...That lasts a night.

RYAN
Several nights. Stretched over the course of a month...

LINDA
How romantic...
(then)
It would just be nice to stay at my place once and a while...

He says nothing, hefting the bag over his shoulder. Deftly switching topics - -

RYAN
So what's the name of this play you're in? - I didn't even know San Francisco *had* a theater district.

LINDA
The whole city's a theater district...
(then)
If you stay another night you could see the performance...

He eats a protein bar, a kinetic creature in constant motion.

RYAN
Love to. Gotta book back. You know you're welcome to stay, we don't have to technically be out of the room 'til noon...

LINDA
I gotta go to work...

Ryan tries not to roll his eyes...

LINDA (CONT'D)
It <u>is</u> actually a job, Ryan. They pay me and everything...

RYAN
(back-peddling)
Absolutely...I think it's great...

LINDA
No, you just always do that...Like, like I hang out in coffee shops all day and read Hamlet waiting for my "big break".

RYAN
Now that's not true.
(beat)
I know you don't read "Hamlet"...
(before she can howl)
I'm joking, I'm joking - -

LINDA
No no, let's talk about <u>your</u> job, shall we? You off to spread some good-cheer now...?

RYAN
Before you start your workers of the world unite speech, I've already heard it. Karl Marx. 1893.

LINDA
So now, anyone who disagrees with you is a communist?

RYAN
<u>No.</u>
(then; light)
Some of them are Fascists and Nazis.

She studies him. As if planning to paint a portrait. Then:

LINDA
I just see goodness in you...

A comment so sincere, so cutting, that Ryan falls uncharacteristically silent.

LINDA (CONT'D)
"The unexamined life is not worth living". Aristotle.

RYAN
"Sometimes neither is the examined one." Ryan Bingham.

LINDA
You always do that...that charm thing...

RYAN
Charm's a bad thing now?

LINDA
When you use it as a force field it is...

RYAN
I'd love to keep going, babe...But I gotta check out.

LINDA
(a beat)
Yeah. Me, too.

One need not be well-versed in metaphor to know what she means. Ryan stops. *Uh-oh.*

LINDA (CONT'D)
This isn't really working, is it...?
(off Ryan)
This "port of call" thing we got going...

RYAN
You feel cheap...?

LINDA
No...

RYAN
Slutty? Skanky? *Easy?*

LINDA
No. Stop it...

And she giggles - but it's a laugh that dies in her throat.

LINDA (CONT'D)
I...I just don't think I can keep doing this...

And he clearly wants to say something, to proselytize or protest - but he doesn't. He doesn't.

RYAN
Okay...well...fair enough.

She stares back. *"You're not even gonna fight for me?"*

RYAN (CONT'D)
Well, I appreciate your, um, honesty.

He pecks her on the cheek, chivalrously holding the door open for her.

LINDA
I, um...I'm gonna freshen up...

RYAN
(wry)
Lay-off the mini-bar and the pay-per-view porn, okay?

He exits, her face plummeting before - he pops back in with:

RYAN (CONT'D)
You know, I'm joking, right?

LINDA
I know.

And she forces a counterfeit smile - a smile which melts as soon as he leaves. For good this time.

INT. HALLWAY. MARRIOTT HOTEL - - MOMENTS LATER

ON RYAN, treading down the corridor. And only now do we see the toll on his forlorn face.

And for a moment it seems as if he might go back, before - -

VOICE (O.S.)
Mr. Bingham!

Ryan glances up. Puts on a happy face.

RYAN
Hey, Earl...

EARL, the bell-hop, eases past with a luggage rack...

EARL
Good stay?

RYAN
(a beat)
Yeah...good stay.

We don't believe him.

INT. MARRIOTT HOTEL. LOBBY -- ELEVATED ANGLE

Ryan disembarks from the elevator, nodding to a gamut of hotel employees. A man of the people.

RYAN (V.O.)
Welcome to "Air-World". *My* world. An endless succession of nearly identical hotel-bars, airport lounges and sleeping pills; the land of hard mints and soft pillows...
(deep breath)
Heaven on earth...

EXT. MARRIOTT HOTEL. DOWNTOWN SAN FRANCISCO -- MORNING

Ryan enters a Chrysler Lebaron at the behest of a doorman...

RYAN (V.O.)
Last year, I traveled 347 days...

TIME CUT TO:

INT. LE BARON -- MOVING

Ryan on the phone, a frenetic ball of angst and adrenaline.

RYAN (V.O.)
...I have no idea how I survived the other 19 days.

We parachute into Ryan's phone conversation...

RYAN (CONT'D)
(into phone)
...It was a walk-in-the-park...these dot-commers expect to get fired. They were waving their white flags before I even walked in. 3 of 'em tried to sell me their stock-options.
(listening; then)
I'm on my way to SFO right now...

And the car blurs past, leaving us in the proverbial dust, the San Francisco bay glimmering beyond, as we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It's a world where your home-town paper's the USA Today...

CUT TO:

THE USA TODAY

As it's snatched off a magazine rack in - -

INT. GIFT-SHOP. SFO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT -- WIDER VIEW

Ryan steps to the counter, scanning the multicolored weather page as he chats up the counter-clerk(os).

RYAN (V.O.)
...Where your lap-top's your living room...

And he swaggers through the terminal, his natural habitat.

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
...Where your cell phone's your home-phone.

Right on cue, Ryan's cell-phone CHIMES just as he spots the appropriate departure gate ahead. **Denver. Flight 178.**

RYAN (CONT'D)
(answers phone)
Ted Koppel...

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. OFFICE

TIGHT ON CRAIG GREGORY(34), smooth where he should be soft, slick where he should be soulful. Handsome in a plastic, leathery sort of way. He's Ryan. Without the conscience.

CRAIG GREGORY
Very professional.

RYAN
It's called caller ID, Japeto. It's only been around about 5 years now.
(then)
I'm 'bout to get on a plane so - -

CRAIG GREGORY
You've been re-routed, pal.
(before he can ask)
LAX.

RYAN
Where are *you?*

CRAIG GREGORY
LAX.

RYAN
(under his breath)
Lucky me.

He slaps the cell OFF, as we - -

CUT TO:

A MANICURED HAND CLUTCHING AN ARM-REST

WIDEN to see an absolutely petrified WOMAN aboard a - -

INT. UNITED AIRLINES SHUTTLE(IN FLIGHT) - - WIDER VIEW

First class. <u>Always</u> first class. The petrified woman's seated beside Ryan - who notes the woman's unease. Grins.

RYAN
You know this airline hasn't had a crash in over 4 years...

She smiles. Until - -

RYAN (CONT'D)
...Kinda' makes you think they're due.

And without warning, the woman EXPLODES IN TEARS. Ryan horrified. And guilt-racked.

RYAN (CONT'D)
I'm sorry...I was teasing, I was teasing...

This wisp of a woman, JULIE, composes herself

JULIE
It's not you...It's my husband...

And now it's Ryan's turn to look uncomfortable. In too deep. A man with severe intimacy issues.

JULIE (CONT'D)
(through tears)
I'm flying in to meet him...to surprise him...we just moved here...and...and now this...

RYAN
(delicately ventures)
Another woman...?

JULIE
He lost his job...he was fired today...I just put our son in private school, paid off the braces...I even flew first-class. We were doing so good...

OFF RYAN, we - -

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. RESTROOM. PLANE - - MOMENTS LATER

Ryan studies his reflection. Regaining his breath.

RYAN (V.O.)
I'm not gonna lie to you...It's not that you don't think about it. You do, you have to...

He ducks his head out of frame, washing his face(os).

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
But after 10 years...you think about it a lot less.

His head pops back into frame. A new man. No sign of turmoil or trauma. Fully reassembled.

He straightens his already straight tie. Flashes his best *Crest* smile. Back in character.

OFF the "fasten your seat belt sign" *PING*, we - -

CUT TO:

WHEELS TOUCHING DOWN ON A RUNWAY...

INT. ARRIVAL GATE. LAX -- LATER

And Ryan's first off the plane, bag flung easily over his shoulder as he bounds through, startled when he spots - -

CRAIG GREGORY

In the flesh. In all his oleaginous glory.

RYAN
Honey, you didn't have to meet me at the gate...
(leans forward)
Big kiss...

CRAIG GREGORY
You're gonna be the one fellating me after today, pal.

A statuesque AIRLINE VIXEN crosses in "fuck-<u>you</u>" pumps, exhibiting a "fuck-<u>me</u>" smile...

AIRLINE VIXEN
(sing-song)
Call me when you check in, Ryan...

Gregory looks at Ryan with a bemused brow. Calls back to the vixen:

CRAIG GREGORY
Actually, Mr. Bingham's not staying overnight...I, however, am at the Century Plaza...
(louder)
Room 2103. A suite. A *luxury* suite.

She keeps walking, feigning deaf. Gregory looks back at:

RYAN
I think she's into men, actually...
(then)
Now you gonna tell me what's up - or we gonna keep trading barbs like a hetero Cagney and Lacey...?

CRAIG GREGORY
You're going on tour.

ON RYAN'S insurgent elation, we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.)
A termination tour, that is...

And they march through the terminal with a sense of promise and purpose...

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Here's how it works...

CUT TO:

TIGHT ON PLAQUE: "*TIKKI TOYS. FOUNDED 1928*"

RYAN (V.O.)
A corporation'll contact my company...

WIDEN to reveal - -

INT. OFFICES. TIKKI TOYS. SANTA MONICA, CA. -- CONTINUOUS

A phalanx of stiff EXECUTIVES encircle a conference table, conferring with Craig Gregory and other ISM execs.

RYAN (V.O.)
...Needing to stream-line, to down-size, to tone up - whatever the most comfortable synonym is...

INT. LIMO - - MOVING

TIGHT ON RYAN, reviewing data on Tikki Toys...

RYAN (V.O.)
They'll bring me in when it's time to slice and dice...

INT. OFFICES. TIKKI TOYS. SANTA MONICA, CA. - - CONTINUOUS

Gregory and Ryan enter - immediately, almost instinctively, shaking hands, chatting.

RYAN (V.O.)
I'm the guy...I'm *your* guy. Depending, of course, which side of the desk you're on...

KAREN GOULD(39)

CFO and resident dictator of Tikki Toys extends a firm hand to Ryan. Glacially gorgeous, she exudes the warmth of a cryogenically-frozen Gestapo agent. At the end of the table we see a GERIATRIC MAN. Inverted from within, a lumpy suit hanging from his bony body...

GOULD
Pleasure to meet you, Ryan...

RYAN
There's a phrase I don't hear too often...

A burst of fake laughter, as we - -

CUT TO:

SAME SCENE - - LATER

Gould prowls around the table, Ryan jotting notes on a palm-pilot, as we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
By definition, a termination tour means you're working for one employer for a transitory period of time, dispensing with an inordinate number of employees...

Gould stops, eyes boring into Ryan. The bottom-line.

GOULD
Six cities. Five days. 2,000 employees.

IN THE LOWER-RIGHT CORNER OF THE SCREEN we see the number *"2000"* BLINK 3 times before disappearing...

GOULD (CONT'D)
We need it done as quickly as possible, avoiding all potential legal pitfalls...

Gregory looks at Ryan, smiles. Jazzed. Ryan keeps his cool exterior, his foot tapping beneath the table...

Abruptly, Ryan stands. Closes his Palm-Pilot. Makes his exit, every eye in the place on him. As he reaches the door - -

GOULD (CONT'D)
Mr. Bingham...Um, where are you going?

RYAN
I've got some work to do, don't I?

He exits as Gould and Gregory share a smile, and we - -

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR - - MOVING

Ryan and Gregory confer, a sense of urgency in the air...

CRAIG GREGORY
Itinerary...

He hands Ryan a folder, ISM emblazoned on the cover...

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
There's something else. Something big. What you might call...a carrot.

That grabs Ryan's attention...

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
Six days from now, guess where you're gonna be...?

RYAN
(with a sigh)
I don't take vacations, we talked about this...

CRAIG GREGORY
You take promotions, don't you? Executive VP, pal. You.

Ryan tries not to beam. But his buoyant eyes give him away.

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
In addition to which, by my assistant's calculations, you'll achieve your much coveted million mile mark. It's nice when you can combine professional elevation with personal obsession...

Ryan lets that comment slide as the elevator PINGS, and we - -

CUT TO:

INT. DEPARTURE GATE. LAX - - LATER

TRACK WITH RYAN AND GREGORY, marching like generals through a conquered battle-field...

CRAIG GREGORY
You'll be working with a trainee on this one...

Ryan's less-than-thrilled, his jaw clenching tight.

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
Young kid, just outta' B-school. Who knows could be the next Buck Bowen...Or maybe even the next Ryan Bingham...

RYAN
(low)
Dare to dream...

CRAIG GREGORY
Either way, he's meeting you in San Diego. See how he does in the pocket.

RYAN
Who am I, Yoda...?

CRAIG GREGORY
(thinking he said "Rhoda")
Never watched the show...
(then)
All set?

RYAN
Any clearer you'd be transparent...

And he strides towards the gate, waving casually over his shoulder. Never looking back.

SFX: An inhuman ROAR bellows.

CUT TO:

THE BELLY OF A PLANE AS IT SOARS OVERHEAD

Tilt Down to reveal - -

EXT. AIRPORT -- DAY

Insert Legend: **San Diego, California.**

A throng of people disseminate, Ryan among them. On the phone. On the move.

RYAN
(into cell)
I couldn't find the kid...I'm already behind schedule...He'll be fine.

AVIS CAR RENTAL - - MOMENTS LATER

Ryan sidles up to the counter with a credit-card and a smile.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Hi...You're new here, yeah? I usually deal with Terry...I'm Ryan. Can you make sure my frequent flyer miles are accounted for...?

The counter-kid nods. Pecks keys on the computer.

COUNTER KID
Your car's already been picked-up, Mr. Bingham...

Ryan blinks. *"Excuse me?"* Before he can summon the words - -

VOICE (O.S.)
Wow. This is such an honor...

Ryan wheels to behold - -

SUTTON SWAY(26)

Boyishly handsome with a winsome smile and an earnest way about him, he's thrumming with small-town ambition and big city dreams. Reposed in a JC Penney suit, a staff tie and Florshiem shoes, he looks like a door-to-door salesman.

SUTTON
(pumping hands)
Sutton Sway...It's great to meet you...really, really great...

Ryan wants his hand back, perturbed as he extricates it from Sutton's GI Joe-grip...

RYAN
We got a problem.

SUTTON
My flight got in early and - -

RYAN
Did you pay for the rental?

SUTTON
(a beat)
Oh. Yeah. They gave me a card, the company did. Should I not have done that?

RYAN
No, you should not have done that.
(to counter kid)
Run it through with *my* card please.

But Ryan's charm returns when he pivots back to Sutton. Clapping him on the back like a long-lost prep-school chum.

RYAN (CONT'D)
So how the hell are you, Sutton Sway?

And it's a question he'll regret because(in pre-lap),we HEAR:

SUTTON (O.S.)
So when I got out of high-school I knew I wanted to be a businessman...

CUT TO:

INT. RENTAL-CAR (MOVING) - - LATER

Sutton drives. Ryan copes.

We get the feeling Sutton's been talking a while...

SUTTON
I just knew, you know...

RYAN
What'd you do after B-school? You're 26?

SUTTON
Actually, I just graduated. Took me longer 'cuz I had to work my way through...

RYAN
The best experience of all...

Sutton grins big with that approving sentiment...

SUTTON
Well, then I interviewed with ISM and they told me you were gonna be, maybe, training me. *The* Ryan Bingham. I mean, wow. The sultan of stream-lining...I mean - - I'm talking too much, huh?

RYAN
No, it's informative...

SUTTON
(overlapping)
You're a pioneer, Mr. Bingham.

RYAN
Not to mention flattering... Ryan, call me Ryan, please.

SUTTON
(tries it on for size)
Ryan...

RYAN
So you like to learn...?

SUTTON
That's why I'm here.

RYAN
Well buckle up, young squire, and let the schoolin' begin...

CUT TO:

INT. OFFICE BUILDING -- MOMENTS LATER

Ryan strides through, Sutton struggling to keep pace, juggling an armful of files...

RYAN
What floor, chief?

Sutton fishes through paperwork, unprepared for the break-neck pace at which this is occurring. Practically out-of-breath when he stops beside - -

THE ELEVATOR

SUTTON
(off sheet of paper)
Four, fourth floor...

Ryan hits the "UP" button. Straightens his tie.

RYAN
My friend, you're about to see the dark-side of humanity...

And we're not sure if he's referring to the folks we're about to meet. Or himself.

CUT TO:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

A windowless, bleak space. Ryan commands a Leviathan desk, Sutton seated in a rickety chair, unable to get comfortable. Crossing and uncrossing his legs, not quite sure what to do with his hands, he's a ball of ill-defined energy.

Ryan jots notes in a legal-pad as he addresses Sutton...

RYAN
Just relax, all ya' gotta do is watch.

Sutton stops shifting, slightly embarrassed. Wanting so badly to make a good impression...

A TAP ON THE DOOR(OS)precedes an elfin WOMAN with a clip-board and a head-set...

WOMAN
Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'll be your facilitator this afternoon...

Ryan goes back to jotting notes, uninterested. Leaving the FACILITATOR to address Sutton - who nods aimlessly along...

FACILITATOR
Okay, well...I'm gonna be bringing in the Executive Sales staff now...
(off clip-board)
First up is Tommy Lewis - -

RYAN
(head shooting up)
No first names.
(off woman; softening)
Just Mr. or Mrs. please...

And he's writing again, leaving the facilitator slightly shaken by his manic incarnations...

Ryan relinquishes the pen. Shoves the pad to the edge of the desk, closer to Sutton.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Okay, let's rock and roll.

He CLAPS his hands, startling both the facilitator and Sutton. Psyching himself up for the task ahead.

The facilitator flees as Sutton studies the legal pad, marked: *"What I Need to Know"*. Beneath it there are dozens of pointers, suggestions and random thoughts...

RYAN (CONT'D)
(to Sutton)
Mark down when anyone makes references to legal or any other kind of threat.

Sutton nods, a thought taking hold...

SUTTON
"Any other kind of threat" - -?

RYAN
You pack heat?
(off Sutton)
A piece. A firearm. A gat. A gun.

SUTTON
(gulp)
Is that, um, necessary - - ?

And, yes, Ryan's joking and, no, Sutton doesn't realize it. But there's little time for clarification because - -

FACILITATOR (O.S.)
Gentlemen, this is Tom - - Mister Lewis.

And we'll STAY ON RYAN and SUTTON as the scenes play out...

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
(incredibly affable)
Call me Tommy. Please.

The magic number **2,000** materializes in the lower corner of the screen as Ryan nods, and we - -

CUT TO:

RYAN

Staring at us(CAMERA POV), exuding an ease and alacrity.

RYAN
Tikki recognizes your years of devotion...

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE - ANOTHER VICTIM(OS)

RYAN
...Your year of hard-work...

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE - ANOTHER VICTIM(OS)

RYAN
Your...month of intensive labor...

(NOTE: As the scenes progress we'll see the number in the lower-right corner decrease exponentially.)

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE - ANOTHER VICTIM(OS)

RYAN
And we're quite confident...

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE- ANOTHER VICTIM(OS)

RYAN
...We're sure...

CUT TO:

ANOTHER ANGLE - ANOTHER VICTIM(OS)

RYAN
...We're certain you'll find the terms of your departure more than fair...

MAN'S VOICE
My departure? My dismissal.

RYAN
Mr. Dobkins, I think you're looking at it through the wrong lens. You're not being fired...

And before he can deliver his trademark line, we - -

CUT TO:

SAME SCENE - LATER

CAMERA POV - And now an enervated Sutton's in frame to Ryan's right. The number **1,881** pulses in the right-hand corner.

RYAN
...You're being *liberated.*

A different VOICE responds to Ryan's "release-line".

DROLL VOICE (O.S.)
Yeah, I feel like Nelson fucking Mendela...

Suddenly, Sutton shoots to a stand, hurriedly excusing himself. Head bowed as he shuffles from the room.

DROLL VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
What's he gonna go get the baseball bats so you guys can finish the job?

Off Ryan, watching Sutton go, we - -

CUT TO:

INT. MEN'S ROOM. OFFICE BUILDING -- LATER

Ryan enters the copasetic confines to see Sutton, hunkered over a sink. Vomiting?

Ryan stops. Exhales. Not entirely surprised. His voice echoes off the hollow walls when he says:

RYAN
S'not for everyone, Sutton...Don't be too hard on yourself...

Bent-over the sink, Sutton can barely hear him...

RYAN (CONT'D)
I know, I know, you're dying to ask me, "how can you do that?"

Sutton shuts the sink off. Spies Ryan through the mirror, spinning to face him, euphoric.

SUTTON
Not how can you do that...How can I do that? *Whoooooeeeeee!* That was fucking awesome...Incredible...the way you dealt with each person differently...I mean, it was surgical. Yet sensitive. Sensitive yet savage...Now I know why they call you "the existential exterminator"...

A BEAT.

RYAN
Who does...?

SUTTON
When I interviewed for the job.
(unaware of the irony)
You've got a lot of fans...

Ryan's jaw clenches, his eyes twitching...

RYAN
Speaking of...we might wanna get outta' hear before they have time to form a lynch party...

Sutton skips past, jazzed by Ryan's "performance"...

OFF RYAN, examining Sutton the way x-ray machines examine luggage, we - -

CUT TO:

THE "DOWN" BUTTON ON AN ELEVATOR

As it blinks in neon recognition, and we - -

WIDEN TO REVEAL Sutton and Ryan entering the - -

INT. ELEVATOR. OFFICE BUILDING - - WIDER VIEW

The dynamic duo embark, hitting "lobby", a quiet sense of urgency at work here as the doors close - -

VOICE (O.S.)
Hold the door, please...

Sutton complies - the doors reopening to reveal - -

A ROW OF TIKKI EMPLOYEES

On the other-side. Each carrying a BOX OF BELONGINGS and a shell-shocked expression - until they see Ryan. And suddenly, their melancholy turns...mad.

RYAN
Sorry, we're going down - -

And with that, he stabs the "close" button, the doors SLAMMING shut on the recently terminated.

Insult. To injury.

Ryan and Sutton exchange a beleaguered glance, as we HEAR:

SUTTON (O.S.)
You see this...?

CUT TO:

INT. MARRIOTT HOTEL-ROOM - - LATER

And we're back in Ryan's fastidious room, Sutton seated on the bed, a BASEBALL MITT in hand.

Ryan - freshly showered, his hair-slicked back in a sharp black suit and a crisp white shirt - appears from the bathroom(os). Spotting the mitt, he wryly assesses:

RYAN
You play your cards right, little fella', I'll toss the ball around with you after dinner...

SUTTON
(re: mitt)
It's Tikki's biggest product...Throw me something...
(off Ryan)
Come on, I'm serious...

Ryan reluctantly grabs a paper-weight off the desk, chucking it to Sutton. As soon as the it hits the mitt, we hear:

ELECTRONIC VOICE (O.S.)
Great catch!

SUTTON
Isn't that cool...?

RYAN
The coolest...

SUTTON
You got kids?

RYAN
Nope.

SUTTON
Married - -

RYAN
(moving on)
Listen, do me a favor and call downstairs. Tell Rebecca that we're coming down for dinner. Usual table.

Sutton grabs the phone, ready to dial before realizing:

SUTTON
You wanna eat in the hotel...?

Ryan primps in the mirror as he speaks...

RYAN
They got a filet mignon that would make a vegetarian prematurely ejaculate...

Sutton sits on the edge of the bed, phone-in-hand...

SUTTON
Let's get out, go see the town...do some exploring.

RYAN
Do me a favor, Magellan, just call downstairs...

Sutton blinks. Dials.

SUTTON
(into phone)
Hi, I'm calling for Ryan Bingham...yes. We'd like to "come down" for dinner...Two. Really? You sure? Okay, thanks.

He HANGS UP. Turns back to Ryan.

SUTTON (CONT'D)
All booked up. Convention. Rebecca says "hi" though...

And you'd think Ryan just lost his favorite cocker-spaniel...

RYAN
Totally full?

SUTTON
Totally. Completely. Utterly.

RYAN
Even for me?

Sutton nods, watching Ryan flounder...And Sutton stands. And says. With conviction:

SUTTON
I got an idea...

CUT TO:

EXT. MAIN STREET. SAN DIEGO -- TO ESTABLISH

A cluster of trendy and populous restaurants...

INT. ENRIQUE'S -- NIGHT

Sutton and Ryan enter, an attractive HOSTESS greeting them...

And as we see him now, Ryan is dazed and disoriented. On unfamiliar terrain outside of "air-world".

HOSTESS
Hey, guys...

And she's addressing Ryan - who stares back, unsure how to proceed...

HOSTESS (CONT'D)
Bar or table...?

Ryan's stumped. These questions are traditionally answered *for* him.

SUTTON
(stepping in)
Table's great...

And she shepherds them off, Ryan calling after her...

RYAN
You guys take the Discover Card...?

INT. TABLE. RESTAURANT -- MOMENTS LATER

Ryan grumbles as he examines the menu across from Sutton.

RYAN
You know why they call it the discover card...? - 'Cuz you've gotta "discover" who the hell takes it...I think there's a Texaco Station outside of Lubbick Texas that honors it...But only on Tuesdays...

SUTTON
(slaps credit card down)
It's on me.

RYAN
That's not what I'm saying...

SUTTON
(realizing)
Oh, your frequent flyer miles thing...
(then)
You wanna go somewhere else?

And Ryan seriously considers the offer, before - -

RYAN
No...No, that's fine.

SUTTON
(standing)
If the waiter comes, could you order me a chunky cheeseburger with frisky fries and a milk-shake?
(Ryan nods)
Gotta go call the wife...

And Ryan watches him go...

Flustered, he puts the menu down. Surveys the scene.

RYAN POV - And through Ryan's eyes it resembles the bar scene from "Star Wars". *Who the fuck are these people?*

BACK ON RYAN, wiping a rivulet of sweat from his forehead, his lids fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird.

RYAN
(sotto)
We're not in Kansas anymore...

OUTSIDE THE RESTROOMS - - CONTINUOUS

Sutton huddles ON A PAY-PHONE, scratching something(os)into the wooden wall with car-keys as he talks to his wife...

SUTTON
(into phone)
Sweety, it's amazing...I mean, getting paid to travel...I miss you so much...I don't wanna say that now...come on...*Now?* Maybe you can meet me in one of the cities...Seriously...

And he laughs. A boy deeply, desperately, in love...

SUTTON (CONT'D)
I love you *more*... I'll call you when I get back to the room.

He HANGS UP, giddy with excitement, striding off, as we - -

STAY ON THE WOOD WALL

Where we see "*Sutton Loves Abby*" chiseled beside the slightly less romantic "*Big dicks rule*".

INT. RESTAURANT -- CONTINUOUS

Sutton returns to AN EMPTY TABLE, his burger and fries waiting for him. No sign of Ryan.

His face contorts as the waiter sidles up...

WAITER
The gentleman said he had pressing business...but dinner's on him.

He raises Ryan's credit card in gesture, as we - -

FADE TO:

EXT. MARRIOT HOTEL - - MORNING

To establish - -

INT. HALLWAY. MARRIOTT HOTEL -- MORNING

Fully reposed, Ryan stands outside Sutton's room. Knocking. Finally the door opens to a groggy Sutton. Frantic:

SUTTON
Oh, shit - did I oversleep?

RYAN
Hustle up. I already checked out...

Sutton ambles hurriedly inside, Ryan following him into - -

THE HOTEL ROOM - - CONTINUOUS

Sutton's concave, boxer-clad, body frantically packs a bag until he notices the time. BEAT.

SUTTON
It's 5 a.m.

RYAN
(hurry, hurry, hurry)
Chop-chop-chop.

CUT TO:

EXT. SAN DIEGO AIRPORT - - MORNING - - TO ESTABLISH

A blur of yellow cabs and passing pedestrians.

SUTTON (O.S.)
So where'd you go last night...?

INT. CONCOURSE. SAN DIEGO AIRPORT

Ryan and Sutton pace at a rapid-clip, conversing. As always Ryan waves to a sea of familiar faces as they go...

RYAN
I ran into Rebecca downstairs. She said the restaurant was empty all night...

Before Ryan can malign Sutton - his cell-phone CHIMES...

RYAN (CONT'D)
I'll leave you to think about that...
(answers cell)
Edie Ahmean...

SPLIT SCREEN WITH:

TIGHT ON CRAIG GREGORY

CRAIG GREGORY
Is there no end to your wit...?

RYAN
Not to be confused with my patience...

CRAIG GREGORY
How'd we do?

RYAN
Peachy.

CRAIG GREGORY
And the kid...?

Ryan looks at Sutton, quietly distancing himself from the lad before appraising:

RYAN
He's no Clubber Lang.

CRAIG GREGORY
How's that...?

RYAN
No eye of the tiger...

CRAIG GREGORY
Not everyone can do the voodoo that you do so well, ace...By the way, I happened by your future corner office. Two words, pal: Personal. Bathroom.

RYAN
Save the teasing for underage coeds and small animals, Gregory...
(then)
Gotta jump. I'm pretty sure if the cell-phone doesn't give me cancer, talking to you *will.*

And before Gregory can offer a witty retort, Ryan clicks OFF. Returns to Sutton.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Piece of advice?
(Sutton readies his pen and pad)
Never trust a man with interchangeable names.
(then)
You wanna learn...?

SUTTON
Fuck yeah...

RYAN
Every-time you say the F-word, I feel like I should ground you...
(then)
Wait right here.

And Sutton watches as Ryan makes his way over to the GIFT SHOP, making nice with the counter-chick before sashaying back, a just-purchased DVD in hand...

RYAN (CONT'D)
(hands DVD over)
Here.

ON DVD

The picture of a beaming man with bleach-white teeth and a perfectly coifed head of hair. Anthony Robbins. Without the edge. And above the man's fastidious image, we read:

"BUCK BOWEN'S KEYS TO BUSINESS VICTORY"

SUTTON (O.S.)
He was your mentor, right?

RYAN continues walking, a freshly galvanized Sutton pursuing.

RYAN
Man revolutionized business and the way we do it.

Sutton studies the cover, a kid with a new toy.

SUTTON
He kinda' fell off the face of the earth... Whatever happened to him?

Ryan pops an Altoid in his mouth. Hesitant. But committed.

RYAN
I fired him.

Off Sutton, we - -

CUT TO:

BLACK SCREEN

Insert legend: ***TURBULENCE***

The word rattles, tumbling from screen as if atop an invisible Scrabble board...

And over the DARKNESS, we HEAR:

BUCK BOWEN (O.S.)
The key is humanity...

CUT IN:

BUCK BOWEN(CAMERA POV)

In the flesh. Staring at you with intense eyes. This guy could sell "Fiddler On the Roof" tickets to Yassar Arafat.

BUCK BOWEN
The Golden Rule is the <u>only</u> rule. At the end of the day, we all gotta sleep with ourselves.

He offers a buoyant "thumbs-up", as we - -

PULL-BACK to reveal the image on Sutton's LAP-TOP. Aboard a - -

INT. 737(IN FLIGHT) - - WIDER VIEW

Flying the friendly skies, Ryan resides in the aisle-seat, Sutton by the window...

SUTTON
You miss the 80's...?

RYAN
(a beat)
What, do I look like a big Kaja-goo-goo fan or something...?

SUTTON
I'm saying, the salad years. You know, when the unemployment rate sky-rocketed...

RYAN
Our job's easier during the good times. Think of it this way: You gotta be an 18 karot fuck-up to get heismaned in this marketplace. I can do my job with the confidence that I'm simply vetting out the insufferable and incompetent...

Sutton jots notes on the legal pad Ryan gave him...

RYAN (CONT'D)
How come I feel like you're interviewing me for your school paper?

SUTTON
(re: legal pad)
You want me to put it away...?

RYAN
Nah, it's fine. Your turn on the petard.

Ryan slides paperwork back inside a folder. Turns to face an earnest and exuberant Sutton.

RYAN (CONT'D)
You're married?
(Sutton nods)
How long?

SUTTON
4 years in March. Abby's five months pregnant. 3 days, and I miss her already...
(then; a thought)
'Lotta travel, huh?

RYAN
You'd be amazed what you can get used to...

SUTTON
Is that what happened? Why you got divorced? Your ex couldn't get used to it?

(MORE)

SUTTON (CONT'D)
(off Ryan)
I read it in that *Business Week* profile...

CLOSE ON RYAN. Blank face. Unblinking. No comment.

SUTTON (CONT'D)
Okay, okay...moving on...Abby's going to visit her mom in South Carolina. I was gonna try and have her meet me in the lay-over in Denver...Only I don't have the cash, you know. Not yet.
(hint-hint)
Or the miles.

Ryan nods, focused on the CENTER-SCREEN of the plane - playing a Jennifer Lopez video. Not taking Sutton's bait...

RYAN
(re: Jennifer Lopez video; like Jell-o)
There's always time for J-Lo...

And he's about to place his head-phones on, before - -

RYAN (CONT'D)
This is the last time we sit together...

SUTTON
(alarmed)
Why - what - - ?

RYAN
No, no, it's nothing you did. Some of the best contacts you're gonna make are on the plane. See, you gotta think of this like a confessional booth in the sky. Up here people are at their most vulnerable, they're more apt to let you in; tell you intimate details they wouldn't anywhere else.
(then)
It expedites the bonds between people.

SUTTON
This is you at your most vulnerable?

RYAN
I'm not most people.

And with that and a wink he dons his head-phones, shutting the world out, as we - -

CUT TO:

WHEELS SCREECHING ACROSS THE TARMAC...

Insert Legend: **Seattle, Oregon.**

EXT. FREE-WAY -- MORNING

OVERHEAD SHOT: A sea of cars buzz by...

RYAN (V.O.)
Every trip, every tour, has a pace, a rhythm, all its own...

EXT. RENTAL CAR - - MOVING

TRACKING ALONGSIDE, we spy the dynamic duo inside...

RYAN (V.O.)
And for whatever reason - the kid, the carrot, I dunno - I had yet to find that rhythm...

SUTTON (O.S.)
You like this music...?

INT. RENTAL-CAR - - MOVING

Bubble-gum pop plays from the radio...

RYAN
I'm not gonna get back-stage passes to the next show if that's what you're asking...

And we realize that Ryan always has the TV, radio, or walkman ON. Addicted to noise. So he needn't think.

RYAN (CONT'D)
(nods to map)
How we doing, skipper?

SUTTON
Easy. A to B.

RYAN
My experience? A to B is never easy...

Sutton folds the map up. Looks at the passing country-side.

SUTTON
You ever talk to Bowen? After...?

RYAN
Aside from Christmases and Summer vacations together...no.
(off Sutton)
Sarcasm.
(changing topics)
So why ISM?

SUTTON
To get chicks, what else?
(off Ryan)
I'm joking.

RYAN
Good. Good. Just make it funny next time.

EXT. PARKING LOT. TIKKI TOY FACTORY -- DAY

Ryan and Sutton disgorge from the rental-car, an anomaly in an ocean of pick-up trucks and Harleys.

RYAN
Welcome to the blue-collar portion of our tour...

Sutton swallows. Something stirred inside.

SUTTON
(low)
Reminds me of home...This probably would'a been me if I hadn't gone to college...

Ryan doesn't want to get into it, his game face on as he leads them towards the edifice, tendrils of noxious gas spewed in the air like something out of an Upton Sinclair novel.

RYAN (O.S.)
There are two ways to do this. The one-on-one route...

INT. TIKKI-TOY FACTORY -- CONTINUOUS

They bound through the eerily empty space. No one in sight. Nothing but the sound of heels on hard-wood.

RYAN
...And the seminar. Which is what we have today. It enables you to liquidate fast.
(snaps fingers)
I've held seminars for as many as 3,000 people...

FLASH CUT TO(B&W):

Ryan stands before a sweltering mass of employees. HOLD.

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
It's like Jonestown. Without the Kool-Aid.

RESUME SCENE:

CLOSE ON RYAN

Focused dead-ahead, staring at his distorted image reflected off shiny elevator doors, as we HEAR:

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I wanna thank you folks for coming here today...

CUT TO:

TIGHT PANNING SHOT

Across the faces of Tikki employees. Hundreds of 'em. Listening raptly to - -

RYAN (O.S.)
The title of today's seminar, "Adjusting to a rapidly changing market-place" may not seem applicable to you...

STOP PAN ON RYAN,

Occupying a prominent podium - which he straddles like a politician or preacher. Standing atop a stage in a...

...A converted factory-floor, 300 men and women arranged in folding chairs. SUTTON sits to Ryan's right.

RYAN (CONT'D)
But it's has meaning for all of us...
(grappling the microphone)
Before we delve into why I'm here, it's important to remember why we're all here.

A murmur ripples across the crowd. These folks have highly-attuned bullshit meters...

Sutton shifts in his seat, unable to get comfortable.

RYAN (CONT'D)
It's called a social contract, an agreement between employee and employer, and - -

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
(from the crowd)
Why doncha' just do it?

Like a stand-up comic with a heckler, Ryan feigns deaf. Forges ahead.

RYAN
It's predicated upon - -

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Don't take our jobs and our time.

Ryan stops. Unable to ignore that. Discerning the culprit...

VAUGHN HAYES

An obsidian mountain, he exudes authority. Commands respect. A man only Steinbeck or Springsteen could conjure up.

RYAN
Sir, if you like, I'll answer whatever questions you have after...

VAUGHN
My guess is you'll be doing your best Carl Lewis impression *"after"*.

Ryan shifts a glance Sutton's way before focusing back...

RYAN
Sir, I'm on your side.

A great rumbling resonates through the crowd. The preamble to an insurrection.

VAUGHN
(to co-workers)
He's here to fire us, folks. 'Cuz the powers that be don't have the balls to do it themselves.
(to Ryan)
Tell them I'm wrong...

Ryan screeches the mic closer, reverb assaulting the ether.

RYAN
You're *misunderstanding.* I'm here to help.

VAUGHN
You gonna tell us about the endless opportunities for 26 year employees with 3 kids, a mortgage, a GED and a rapidly growing debt?

RYAN
I have pamphlets - -

VAUGHN
Oh, he's got pamphlets! Praise the lord! Hallelujah!

Ryan fusses with his notes, sliding them into a folder. Ready to flee if need be. Preparation that seems warranted when a barbaric CHANT resonates through the hall...

WORKERS
Kill the messengers...kill the messengers...kill the messengers...

SUTTON
(low)
Messenger.

Workers on their feet now, defiant fists pumping when - -

VAUGHN
SHUT UP.

And the crowd falls silent at the behest of their de-facto leader - who stalks closer to the stage. Peering up at Ryan the way David must have beheld Goliath.

VAUGHN (CONT'D)
You gonna stay behind the podium...or you gonna be man enough to come down and fraternize with the unwashed masses...

ON RYAN, swallowing more than spit.

ON SUTTON: *"Don't go, don't go, don't go..."*

Without further deliberation, Ryan hops onto the factory floor, stumbling to his knees. Yanked up by Vaughn.

RYAN
T-thank you...thanks...

Vaughn nods, anxious to hear what this cat has to say...

RYAN (CONT'D)
The reason I have a job is because I know the work-place...
(shouts over crowd)
And I believe, cliché though it may be, everything happens for a reason...
(disapproving shouts)
I believe there's better out there, better for you, and better for me...

And so passionate is he that the crowd hushes with tacit interest - all but Vaughn who stares at Ryan with the stoicism of a shaman. A look that rattles Ryan, forcing him to glance elsewhere as he regains rhetorical momentum...

ON SUTTON, feeling the collective shift in temperament, astounded by Ryan's gifts...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Just because corporate America's lost its soul doesn't mean it can have ours!
(over crowd)
Together we can do more than persevere, we can - we *must* - <u>prevail.</u>

A CHEER ERUPTS, hearts and minds co-opted.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Now, my assistant has pamphlets and business cards that will help us do just that...

And he gestures towards Sutton before a phalanx of workers stampede past...

And Ryan watches them go, startling even himself. He offers a quick-wink to Sutton - who's already deluged with applicants...

But when Ryan whirls back around, he sees - -

VAUGHN HAYES

Just where he left him. Expression unchanged. Eyes unblinking. Peering into Ryan's very soul.

As if staring into the sun, Ryan averts his eyes...

VOICE (O.S.)
Very impressive work, Mr. Bingham.

INT. OFFICE. TIKKI FACTORY -- LATER

Overlooking the desolate factory floor, Ryan pumps hands with an unctuous Tikki exec, WADE, Sutton close by.

RYAN
My dad, God rest his soul, loved pick-up basketball 'cuz he said it was like life. You've got 2.3 seconds to size up your opponent and adjust your game accordingly. Same idea.

He looks at Sutton as he says it, embracing the role of mentor

RYAN (CONT'D)
You come down to it, we're all working men...

Wade grins agreement - he of the Prada shoes, the leased Jag, the summer in the Hamptons...

WADE
What did your father do...?

RYAN
He, um...
(touchy subject)
He was a businessman.

WADE
Well, see that? Good business sense is genetic...

Off Ryan's sidewinder smile, we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT. TIKKI TOY FACTORY -- NIGHT

Ryan and Sutton slog towards the rental-car, the lot decidedly less populous than when they arrived. And Ryan's gait isn't quite so swaggering, his chin tucked to his chest...

SUTTON
What kind of business?
(off Ryan)
Your father?

RYAN
(evasive)
Business-business...

Sutton lets it go, moving on with - -

SUTTON
So what happens now?

RYAN
You go back to the hotel, buy a $30 cheeseburger, maybe order a soft-core porn movie that's about as arousing as a - -

SUTTON
To them, I'm saying...What happens to them...?

RYAN
(terse)
They get another job.

SUTTON
And when they call our "hot-line"?

He asks in a non-judgmental fashion. Simply curious.

RYAN
You don't wanna know, Japeto, you don't wanna know...

Before Sutton can ask anyways, he spots - -

VAUGHN HAYES

Leaning against the rental. Arms akimbo. Brows furrowed.

CLOSE ON RYAN

And what else is there to say, but:

RYAN (CONT'D)
(to Vaughn)
I'm sorry...

Vaughn doesn't shift. Doesn't budge. Doesn't blink. Those piercing eyes searing into Ryan's soul. He speaks in a hyper-eloquent manner, defusing concerns of violence.

VAUGHN
I just have one question: Do you know the history of this company? And I'm not talking about it's IPO price, its P/E ratio. I'm talking history. Roots. Origins.

Ryan stays quiet, strangely captivated. And Sutton shifts on the balls of his feet, intrigue doing battle with fear.

VAUGHN (CONT'D)
When they hired you, there was probably some geriatric fella' in the corner of the room, right? His name's Norm Tikki. He started this company in 1928, in his garage; in the middle of the depression. He hired me personally with a hand-shake and a promise. He made toys by hand - the way I do...the way I *did*...He made them with passion and love and joy.

RYAN
I understand that, but - -

VAUGHN
Lemme finish.

The hitch in his voice is enough to render Ryan compliant...

VAUGHN (CONT'D)
In fact, you know what? - I got something for you...

And he reaches into a satchel strapped across his torso...Ryan's heart-beat galloping, his imagination running wild with possibility, until Vaughn pulls out(SLO-MO)...

A WOODEN TOY SOLDIER

Hand-crafted. A tiny hand frozen in a tiny salute.

Ryan defuses with an inaudible sigh of relief.

VAUGHN (CONT'D)
See here at Tikki? We *create*. *I create*.
(pointing back)
The people in there create. With their hands, with their hearts, with their souls. And you, sir, what do you create? What do you create other than misery...?

And with that he hands the soldier to Ryan. Turns on his heels. Treads off. Chin up.

And it's not the first time Ryan's been rebuked...but this one seems to sting a bit more, as we - -

SLOW FADE TO:

EXT. BACKROADS. OREGON - - NIGHT

On the road. Ryan's rental negotiates the winding path.

SUTTON (O.S.)
Okay. I got a surprise for you.

INT. RENTAL-CAR - - MOVING

RYAN
Lemme guess: You brought *two* mitts?

Sutton drives, hanging a sharp right through a wooded area, intermittingly eying a MAP spread across his lap...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Put the map away. I can get back to the hotel.

He proceeds to punch data into the Navigation System - which appropriately responds:

ELECTRONIC VOICE (O.S.)
You are lost.

Judging from the look on Ryan's face, the symbolism doesn't escape him. He shuts the device OFF, slightly frazzled.

SUTTON
We're not going to the hotel.

Ryan clocks the poorly-lit landscape...

RYAN
I'm getting some serious "Deliverance" vibes here, so - no offense but - -

SUTTON
I tracked Bowen down.
(off Ryan)
From the video. He lives, like, right by here. It's too big a coincidence not to call fate.

RYAN
"Fate"? Fate is something perpetuated by Oprah Winfrey and Entertainment Tonight, okay? Fate is, quite possibly, the biggest fallacy perpetrated on the American public since "Olestra".

But there's a question tugging at him, so...

RYAN (CONT'D)
You talked to him? To Buck?
(Sutton nods)
What'd he say?

OFF Sutton, knowing he's hooked his fish, we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS -- NIGHT

TIGHT ON A LEAFY PILE of soil and sediment, a pair of TOD loafers crunching into frame. An unholy alliance of nature and fashion.

RYAN (O.S.)
This is a mistake...

SUTTON LEADS RYAN

Through a maze of tree and brush, deeper into the abyss.

SUTTON
No, no...I think this is right...
(off sheet of paper)
188 Maple Way...

RYAN
No, being here is the mistake. We shouldn't be here.

Sutton sweeps aside a cluster of foliage to reveal - -

A CABIN

In the distance. Radiant with decay.

SUTTON
(turns back to Ryan)
But, we already are...

MOMENTS LATER...

And they're a mere 30-yards from the windowless edifice, Ryan's every step growing more skittish.

SUTTON (CONT'D)
Something else...A confession.

RYAN
I don't need to know the deep, dark secrets that dwell in the heart of Sutton Sway - -

SUTTON
- - I didn't talk to him...

RYAN
(a beat)
Talk to...?

SUTTON
Bowen.

Ryan stops. Scowls. Secretly relieved because now - -

RYAN
I'm outta' here.

And he turns in retreat when - -

CHA-CHUNK(OS)

The indelible sound of a racked rifle.

VOICE (O.S.)
Don't fucking flinch.

Heads bowed, hands thrust asunder in symbolic surrender, their breaths mist in the frigid air...

RYAN
(low; to Sutton)
I hope he sodomizes you first...

VOICE (O.S.)
Turn around. *Slowly.*

Ryan complies, eyes squinty to see that the shadowy figure on the porch is none other than - -

BUCK BOWEN

Except as we see him now, he's an echo of his former self. Nearly bald, his bloated body in baggy sweats.

BUCK BOWEN
What're you doing on my property?

Ryan freezes upon sight of the firearm...Sutton prods him with a sharp elbow.

RYAN
Buck...it's me...Ryan. Ryan Bingham.

BIG. FUCKING. BEAT.

SUTTON
(to Ryan)
How come he's not lowering the rifle?

CUT TO:

EXT. THE CABIN PORCH - - MOMENTS LATER

Buck rests the RIFLE - now revealed to be plastic - against the wall. Eying Ryan with understandable apprehension.

SUTTON
(offering hand)
I'm Sutton...Big fan, sir, big fan...

BUCK BOWEN
(shakes hand)
Buck, call me Buck, son.

But his dashing smile fizzles when he locks eyes with Ryan.

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
<u>You</u> call me "sir".

INT. CABIN - - MOMENTS LATER

A minimalist but cozy abode, Buck boils water in the kitchen, Sutton and Ryan perambulating the grounds.

BUCK BOWEN
Still living the lie, huh, Ryan?

RYAN
What's that, capitalism?

Buck hands Sutton a cup of tea("*Thanks*").

BUCK BOWEN
And you're reaping the fruits of "capitalism"? - Christ, I bet you don't even <u>own</u> a home.

RYAN
(wry)
Oh, you *own* this...that changes everything - -

BUCK BOWEN
(petulant)
Why're you here?

Ryan swallows, unsure of the answer himself. Caught in the cross-hairs.

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
You remember what you said to me? When you did the deed?

Ryan remembers - knowing better than to say. Buck helps:

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
"The world doesn't need heroes. They need *closers.*"

Lip-bit, teeth-clenched, Ryan restively eyes the door...

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
You still believe that...?

RYAN
(a beat)
I <u>believe</u> I've overstayed my welcome.

And he bolts for the exit, Sutton apologizing with his eyes.

INT. RENTAL-CAR - - STATIONARY

Ryan triggers the ignition as Sutton hops in. About to speak before the Navigation System pipes in - -

ELECTRONIC VOICE (O.S.)
You are lost...you are lost...you are lost...

Over and over again...

Ryan beats the shit out of the dash-board before stopping. Recomposing. Straightening his tie, as we PRE-LAP an all too familiar ROAR(os), and - -

CUT TO:

THE BELLY OF A BEAST ENGULFS THE SCREEN...

A BOEING 737 swallowing the sky as it passes overhead...

SUTTON (O.S.)
He doesn't hate you...

INT. PLANE - - IN FLIGHT

Ryan and Sutton assume their respective positions, Ryan's head buried in an "In-Style" magazine. Ignoring Sutton.

SUTTON
I think he...pities you.
(off Ryan)
In a good way.
(Ryan returns to his magazine)
You don't wanna talk about it?

RYAN
You picked up on that, huh?

He flips the magazine closed, opening his lap-top in one fluid motion...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Stay focused. We're half-way there.

Only we're not sure if he's talking to Sutton. Or himself.

CUT TO:

AN AIRPLANE

In a little boy's hand. Zooming across a pretend sky in the - -

INT. AIRPORT. ARRIVAL GATE - - WIDER VIEW

Insert Legend: **Denver, Colorado.**

SUTTON (O.S.)
You gonna try to hustle home while we're here...?

IN THE TUNNEL

Ryan and Sutton lead the exodus of disembarking travelers...

RYAN
My home's a storage closet and an ever-changing but strangely identical hotel suite.
(then)
This may be ISM's home-base...but it's not mine.

SUTTON
So where do you live?

RYAN
(sweeping gesture)
Welcome to my living room...
(then)
We only have an hour and a half 'til our connector, so use your time wisely.

And now it's Sutton who speeds ahead, towards the mouth of the interminable tunnel as he assures:

SUTTON
Oh, I intend to...

Ryan watches as Sutton exits into

THE TERMINAL

Running into the open arms of a pretty red-head. His wife, ABBY. They hug for what seems like an eternity, hands held tight when they finally disengage.

Sutton makes the appropriate introductions(AD-LIB)...

And it's a new side to Sutton. Quixotic and confident, he bends to kiss his wife's burgeoning belly as Ryan spots a sultry Latino woman waiting for him outside the concourse. Reposed in a ticket-agent uniform, this is NATALIE.

RYAN
(to Sutton)
I'll leave you two to catch up...
(a reminder)
Hour and a half...

We FOLLOW RYAN as he slides into the bucket-seat beside Natalie, his hand resting on her shapely knee with a sexy:

RYAN (CONT'D)
(by way of greeting)
Gorgeous...

NATALIE
(knows the routine)
How much time we got?

RYAN
(salacious smile)
With you, alas, it's never enough...

And his hand moves progressively north, Natalie giving the tower clearance...

NATALIE
(purring)
We can always delay your flight like last time...

RYAN'S HAND STOPS,

His gaze fixed elsewhere...

RYAN POV - Sutton canoodles with Abby in a corner, his arms wrapped lovingly around her belly, his head nestled comfortably in the nook of her neck. The epitome of love.

NATALIE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Ryan...?

Ryan's affected by the sight, belatedly turning to Natalie.

RYAN
I'm sorry...

NATALIE
Come on, handsome...

And she stands, ready to move onto more lascivious pursuits. Ryan remains seated.

RYAN
Darlin', I, uh, I made the mistake of having the chicken on the flight and, well, I'm feeling a bit shell-shocked...

She studies him. *"Where's the real Ryan?"* Finally:

NATALIE
You're sure?

RYAN
Yeah, I'm sure...

NATALIE
Next time?

RYAN
(a nod; low)
Next time.

She tenderly kisses his forehead as if sensing something amiss before sashaying off...

And Ryan glances back at the loving couple, sharing stories(os), giggling and cooing in delight. A language endemic to the love-lorn.

Ryan averts his eyes. As if pained. Pulls his CELL-PHONE from a pocket, settling into the seat as he punches digits.

We HEAR(OS)the CLICK of a machine, before - -

WOMAN'S VOICE
Leave me a message...

As it BEEPS, we - -

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. LINDA'S APARTMENT. SAN FRANCISCO - - CONTINUOUS

TIGHT ON AN ARCHAIC ANSWERING MACHINE:

RYAN (O.S.)
(on machine)
Hey, um...Linda. Ryan. Um...just thought...

Floundering, Ryan presses a finger to his temple as if in the throes of a hideous migraine. Already regretting this.

RYAN (CONT'D)
I was just wondering if I left my Palm Pilot there...

WIDEN to reveal LINDA at the kitchen table, relishing Ryan's difficulties, a grin on her face.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Call me if it's there. Or if it's not. Call me.
(then; business-formal)
Thank you.

She permits a laugh, familiar with Ryan's modus operandi.

And Ryan CLICKS OFF with an exasperated sigh, the protective tarp that covers his soul fluttering slightly, as we - -

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. PLANE - - MOVING

And for the first time we see Ryan in the window-seat, plugging away on a palm pilot. To his right, in the coveted aisle-seat is a fastidious man in a fastidious suit(BOB JONES)

Through the space between the seats we see SUTTON snoozing...

And Ryan can't seem to get comfortable, crossing and uncrossing his legs before snagging the AIR-PHONE. Dialing.

INT. ANOTHER AIRPORT - - CONTINUOUS

CRAIG GREGORY hustles through an anonymous terminal. Answering the chime of his CELL-PHONE as he goes.

CRAIG GREGORY
Craig Gregory.

SPLIT-SCREEN:

RYAN
Bingham. Sorry, It took me a while to get back to you...

CRAIG GREGORY
That's okay. I get updates from the Tikki staffers.
(then)
You in Chicago yet?

RYAN
En route.

CRAIG GREGORY
When you get there, you'll find a gift I left for you at the front desk.
(then)
You okay? You sound different.

RYAN
Bad connection.

CRAIG GREGORY
Okay, well...keep up the good work. See you on the flip-side.

RYAN

Clicks OFF. Fits the phone back in its perch before taking note of Bob Jones - a lapidary grin on his face, consumed in a PAPERBACK BOOK.

RYAN
'Scuse me...
(Bob turns)
Howdy. Good book?

BOB JONES
Inspiring.

RYAN
(who cares?)
Fantastic.

And Jones tilts the book-cover, enabling us to read its title: *"The Rock of Gamohra. By Reed Rogers"*

BOB JONES (O.S.)
Have you found Him?

RYAN
"Found" - -?
(off book)
Reed Rogers?
(realizing)
Oh. Christ.
(Jones nods)
Didn't know he was lost...

Ryan laughs. Bob Jones doesn't.

And Ryan clears his throat. Recomposes.

RYAN (CONT'D)
I was wondering if you wouldn't mind switching seats...

BOB JONES
(simple)
No. I don't think that'd be possible.

Simple and curt, his response activates something in Ryan...

RYAN
You don't think - -? Well, let's talk about something, shall we? Let's ask ourselves something, okay? What would Jesus do? Do you think Jesus would refuse another man's reasonable request? Do you think he'd scoff like some poor man's Jim Baker wanna-be who probably cheats on his wife ten minutes after Sunday services? Should we discuss that?

And Sutton's awake now, two curious orbs peering through the crack as Bob Jones reaches beneath his seat for a pair of collapsible CRUTCHES. Propping them into place before levereging himself up with discernible difficulty.

And only now do we see why he couldn't switch seats: Bob Jones has TWO PROSTHETIC LEGS. He ambles off, stung.

And if Ryan could jump from the plane he would, his head in his hands, his body coiled. When he looks up again - -

SUTTON'S BESIDE HIM

RYAN (CONT'D)
Didn't we discuss this? - -

SUTTON
I have a question.

RYAN
(sotto)
Good timing...

SUTTON
Why the miles? Why the obsession with the miles?

RYAN
It's not an obsession.
(softening)
It's a...a symbol.

SUTTON
A symbol...?

Discomforted, Ryan peers outside the portal. Only his reflection looking back. As if addressing the clouds.

RYAN
A symbol of me...of what I've done with my life...of who I am.

Sutton stares back, another layer of the onion that is Ryan Bingham being unpeeled.

RYAN (CONT'D)
It's tangible documentation of my job...
(trailing off)
The miles give it meaning...a million miles is like the pinnacle. Proof, you know...?

And Sutton's caught-off guard by Ryan's uncharacteristic confession. Searching for the appropriate response - -

SUTTON
You've impacted thousands of lives...

And that hangs in the ether. A complement? An accusation?

RYAN
(low)
Yeah...I know.

Ryan glances back at his reflected prism, as we - -

DISSOLVE TO:

DRESS-SHOES CLACKING ACROSS A MARBLE-FLOOR...

Insert Legend: **Chicago O'Hare International**

INT. AIRPORT -- WIDER VIEW

Ryan and Sutton hustle through at break-neck speed...

And Ryan's absorbed in thought, studying the BILLBOARDS which line the concourse wall as he passes. A vault of memories unearthed. Finally, a' propos of nothing, blurting out:

RYAN
My ex lives here.

SUTTON
(a beat)
Oh, yeah?

RYAN
(a nod)
Stephanie.

And the name pains him, wincing on reflex as he surges ahead as if embarrassed by the outburst.

Sutton watches him go, brows arched in amusement.

INT. RENTAL-CAR - - MOVING

Ryan drives. Sutton listens.

RYAN
She called me two days ago, left me a voice-mail.

INT. CHECK-IN DESK. MARRIOTT HOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

Ryan slides his credit-card across a counter. Sutton listens.

RYAN
She said she's been thinking about me. A lot. She says this on the voice-mail.

INT. ELEVATOR. MARRIOTT HOTEL - - CONTINUOUS

Ryan eyes the floor monitor, a bell-hop beside him. Sutton listening close by.

RYAN
I mean, you can't be with someone for 7 years and not think about them, right?

INT. RENTAL-CAR - - CONTINUOUS

Freshly-shaved and showered, reposed in different suits, Ryan drives. And, yeah, Sutton listens.

RYAN
Sometimes I wonder if we waved the white-flag of surrender too soon, you know?

INT. OFFICE TOWER -- CONTINUOUS

Ryan and Sutton wait for the elevator, standing amidst a sea of starched suits.

RYAN
Not like you can change the past...

His voice trails off, Sutton summoning the courage to retort:

SUTTON
Not like you can't try.

The elevator arrives, suits shepherded in...

SUTTON (CONT'D)
You should call her.

They squeeze into the cluster of humanity(os), as we HEAR:

RYAN (O.S.)
Don't be ridiculous.

The elevator doors close, as we - -

TIME CUT TO:

THE ELEVATOR DOORS OPENING...

INT. OFFICE TOWER -- LATER

Ties undone, jackets not quite so perfectly pressed, Ryan and Sutton disembark, leaving us to only wonder what transpired upstairs.

And they walk in silence, enervated, as we hear(in pre-lap):

RYAN (O.S.)
Just 3 more stops...

EXT. DOWNTOWN CHICAGO -- DAY

They traverse the city streets, subsumed in a world of skyscrapers, lost amongst the pedestrian parade.

RYAN
Boston...D.C...New York...

Ryan defuses the rental-car alarm...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Now's when it really gets fun for you...

He unfolds into the rental, Sutton moving towards the passenger-side door, wondering:

SUTTON
Why's that?

RYAN (O.S.)
'Cuz no more standing on the side-lines. From here on out, my boy, you get to participate...

ON SUTTON, not sure how to feel about that, we - -

CUT TO:

INT. RENTAL CAR - - MOVING

Our fearless duo are collectively consumed in thought. Silence save the ubiquitous sound of the RADIO(OS). Until:

SUTTON
Where we going?

RYAN
Just driving.

SUTTON
Aren't we on a schedule here?

Ryan remains silent, still battling internal forces as he peers outside the glass. Studying streets signs.

SUTTON (CONT'D)
This came for you. They put it in my mail-box at the hotel by mistake.

He produces a bone-white envelope from his inside pocket, offering it to Ryan - who promptly opens it, a glint in his eye until he realizes whom it's from...

SUTTON (CONT'D)
Is it from her? Your ex?

RYAN
It's from Gregory.
(off Sutton)
AKA: The prince of darkness, Beezulbub, Lucifer, or for the religious among us, the Anti-Christ.

Ryan halts at a red-light, pulling a blank sheet of paper and a BUSINESS-CARD from inside the envelope.

SUTTON
What is it?

Ryan commences driving as he hands the card to Sutton.

ON BUSINESS CARD:

"ISM SERVICES. RYAN BINGHAM. EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT."

SUTTON (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Wow. Congratulations.

He hands the card back, Ryan sliding it into the inside-pocket of his Palm Pilot. Continuing to drive aimlessly about...

And Sutton pulls an ITINERARY SHEET out, a finger tracing the page as he collects data.

SUTTON (CONT'D)
We have time ya' know...

RYAN
Time for what - -?

SUTTON
We should go see her. Stephanie.

RYAN
"We?"

CUT TO:

EXT. APARTMENT -- DAY - - TO ESTABLISH

A monolithic residential building.

RYAN (O.S.)
What the fuck am I doing here...?

INT. HALLWAY. 15TH FLOOR

Ryan and Sutton slog through the corridor, Ryan's every step growing less assured...

SUTTON
You need to know, man...

Ryan halts outside apt #1511. *Inhale...Exhale.*

RYAN
What're you, my shrink?
(reeling)
Christ, I feel all out of whack.
I'm not thinking straight...

He paces in concentric circles as Sutton steps to the door - -

SUTTON
You'll thank me for this.

KNOCK-KNOCK

Ryan's eyes explode. Shit. Fight or flight? He hunkers low, honestly considers running, until - -

THE DOOR OPENS

A blonde with luminous blue eyes and a radiant glow on the other-side. Meet STEPHANIE BINGHAM(34)

She only sees Sutton, a bit befuddled when she asks:

STEPHANIE
Can I help you? - -

She stops. Spots Ryan - who steps skittishly out. Shrinking before our very eyes.

RYAN
Sorry. I should'a called.

CUT TO:

INT. STEPHANIE'S APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

She leads Ryan and Sutton into the spacious confines. An awkwardness informs the air like musky cologne.

RYAN
We've just been traveling non-stop, and wound up here and...Well...
(beat)
It's good to see you.

Stephanie's eyes drift to Sutton - who stands to the side, arms folded before him like a toy soldier.

RYAN (CONT'D)
This is Sutton Sway. He works with me.

STEPHANIE
(shakes hands)
Hi...Can I get you something to drink?

SUTTON
No, I'm fine. Thanks.

And he steps back, trying to inconspicuously meld into the atmosphere...An excruciating beat, before:

RYAN
I wanted to see you.

We see how hard that was for him, Ryan's lip quivering ever-so slightly...

STEPHANIE
I wanted to see you, too.

Sutton can't help but smile at that - until:

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Steph...did you hear the door?

A JOCULAR MAN (CHRIS)

In shorts and a t-shirt steps errantly into the room. Stopping in the doorway. Startled. Still as stone.

Awkward. Awkward. Awkward.

STEPHANIE
This is Chris...
(left to explain)
Chris and I are getting married next month...

He slides his arm around the small of her back, beaming. And together, they look like the picture of the couple that comes with a newly purchased frame. A Kodak moment.

RYAN
That's terrific. Man, I had a feeling when you called it was something big...

And he grins, even patting Chris on his shoulder. And if we didn't know Ryan so well we might not suspect that his heart's somewhere around his ankles...

And maybe Stephanie knows, too, a hint of contrition in her voice when she says:

STEPHANIE
I wanted you to know...

RYAN
Yeah...wow. Kinda' took me by surprise. Must've been sudden.

CHRIS
We've been dating for three years.

RYAN
See, maybe you kids oughta' think this out before you just jump in...

He laughs his best fake laugh - Sutton joining-in, supportive.

But the laughter fades...And the awkwardness endures.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Well, we gotta get to the airport...

He hurriedly makes his retreat, Sutton leading the charge - -

STEPHANIE
Ryan...

She scampers after him, Ryan signaling Sutton to go ahead...

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
You okay? - -

RYAN
You seem happy. Really happy.

STEPHANIE
I am.

We believe her. So, unfortunately, does Ryan.

RYAN
He's a good guy?

STEPHANIE
He is.
(before he can go)
You are too.

He forces an obligatory smile, anxious to be elsewhere.

STEPHANIE (CONT'D)
I only wish you believed it...

Unsure how to respond, he simply looks back. And exits.

INT. HALLWAY. 15TH FLOOR -- MOMENTS LATER

Sutton waits for a slightly rattled Ryan with empathetic eyes. Ready to speak, to comfort, when - -

RYAN
(low)
Not a fucking word...

FADE TO:

BUCK BOWEN(CAMERA POV)

And it's the old Buck, full of vim and vigor, he speaks directly to you, blinding us with his bleach-white teeth.

BUCK BOWEN
If you don't love yourself, how you gonna love anyone else? That's the key to success...*Sincerity.*

PULL-BACK to reveal we're being indoctrinated on Sutton's lap-top, Bowen's video down-loaded aboard another - -

INT. PLANE(IN FLIGHT) - - WIDER VIEW

Sutton gently closes his lap-top, eyes shifting, before we - -

RACK FOCUS TO SEE RYAN - -

In the aisle-seat. Head-phones fastened, lap-top open, data spread on his pull-down tray. Beside him, inhabiting the window spot, is a distinguished man of obvious affluence. ART LAVENDER(50's).

He delicately taps Ryan on the shoulder. Points to the coffee-cup about to take a dive off the edge of his tray...

...Ryan snags the cup before it can sully his pants, removing his head-phones...

RYAN
Thanks. That could'a been ugly.

ART
Us frequent flyers gotta stick together.

And Ryan looks at Art for the first time, recollecting.

RYAN
Yeah, I think we've shared some of the same oxygen. Absolutely.
(offers business card)
Ryan Bingham.

Art reciprocates with a business card of his own. A perfunctory rite-of-passage, neither man bothering to inspect the card content.

ART
Business in Boston?

RYAN
Yeah. In the middle of a ball-breaker of a six city tour. You?

Art stares back, momentarily catatonic.

RYAN (CONT'D)
Business?

Art clears his throat, made suddenly, inexplicably, emotional.

ART
(low)
No.

And he glances out the window. Sniffling in emotion. Recomposing himself with palpable difficulty.

ART (CONT'D)
(terse)
I'm seeing family.

RYAN
(with a laugh)
So somewhere between business and pleasure...

And Art composes a smile so sad we know not whether to laugh or cry...Ryan intuits that something's wrong...

ART
I'm going to see my son...to bury my son.

Huh? Did he say *"bury"?*

Ryan guffaws on reflex. Blind-sided.

ART (CONT'D)
I'm sorry...I...I'm not one of those people, you know? The ones who vomit out stories like we served in the same platoon in Vietnam or something...I just...I dunno, I'm not myself...

Ryan stares back, engaged. Not quite sure what to say.

ART (CONT'D)
16 years old. I hadn't seen him in 6 months. Since Summer. He goes to prep-school...to Exeter.
(fighting tears)
I sent him there, thought it'd be good for him...

Ryan watches as Art swipes stubborn tears with his forearm.

ART (CONT'D)
I never got to know him...my own son...A car accident. He just got his license, too...I didn't even know *that*...the coroner had to tell me.

Art tucks his chin to his chest, twisting tears from his eyes in embarrassment. Reassembling himself, as we - -

FAVOR RYAN

And he wants to say something. To do something. To offer a kind word or a soft hand. But he doesn't. He simply sits there, priorities placed into perspective, as we HEAR:

BUCK BOWEN (O.S.)
Self-pity's masturbation without the lubricant...

FADE TO:

BUCK BOWEN

Enthroned behind his desk, eyes alive.

BUCK BOWEN
If you got time to feel sorry for yourself...you got too much time.

HOLD on his challenging eyes, as we - -

FADE TO BLACK:

Insert Legend: **Logan Airport. Boston, Mass.**

Muffled sounds of chaos and commotion permeate, before we - -

FADE IN:

UNKNOWN POV - - PANNING SHOT

Across the panorama of people assembled all about the - -

INT. ARRIVAL GATE. AIRPORT

STILL PANNING until we spot a rather curious sight...

"The Wall Street Journal"

Held high to conceal the identity of the person framed behind it. And we watch as the paper slowly lowers to reveal - -

CRAIG GREGORY

Ryan screeches to a halt upon sight of him...

SUTTON
W-what is it?

RYAN
(a nod; a low mutter)
Evil...

MOMENTS LATER...

And Sutton, Ryan and Gregory bound through the populous terminal, Gregory's arm wrapped around Ryan's neck as if his prize pupil. And the only person who looks more disjointed than Sutton is Ryan...

We parachute into Gregory's manic monologue...

CRAIG GREGORY
...So when I saw our flights coordinated - which, trust me, is decidedly different than coinciding, or, God forbid, <u>colliding</u> - well,
(MORE)

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
how could I miss out on seeing our future exec VP and his newly anointed protege...?

RYAN
(not in the mood)
Where you staying?

CRAIG GREGORY
I am.

RYAN
(huh?)
Come again?

CRAIG GREGORY
Staying.
(off Ryan)
Here. Now.
(checking watch)
Connector to lovely and lascivious Miami Beach in one hour. Translation: You guys get to entertain me...

Off Ryan, trying to contain his "enthusiasm", we - -

CUT TO:

INT. AMERICAN AIRLINES VIP CLUBHOUSE -- MOMENTS LATER

A quiet, serene space - made a bit less so by the presence of a certain someone...

His 3rd cocktail in hand, Gregory regales the fellas...

CRAIG GREGORY
...See great terminators aren't born, they're *conceived*...

He addresses Sutton, gesturing towards Ryan with his glass...

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
He tell you his tale...?

RYAN
(terse)
He's familiar...

CRAIG GREGORY
Oh, don't be modest, Bingham, it doesn't fit you.
(to Sutton)
What I'm about to tell you is purely speculative, but I believe explains the psychological make-up of one Ryan James Bingham...

RYAN
(overlapping)
As qualified as you are to dispense psychological advice - -

CRAIG GREGORY
Shut-up, Bingham. Your superior has the floor.

And he means it to sound flip - but it comes out sharp. Ryan clenches his jaw, swallowing anger.

Craig Gregory continues...

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
So Bingham's 21. Just out of college.
(to Ryan)
Skidmore?

RYAN
(in pain)
Vassar.

CRAIG GREGORY
Yeah, yeah...one of those 2nd tier schools...and he takes a job selling computer memory - something everyone has and everyone wants more of, right?

Seeing Ryan's discomfort, Sutton's made angry and empathetic.

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
He's there, like, 2 and a half months, and what happens?
(loud clap)
Bingo. He's fired.

He tosses his head back, cackling like a comic-book villain.

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
Oh, but our story doesn't end there, no. Fast forward 5 years and our fearless hero gets fired yet again - this time by his wife, his high-school sweetie. Kicked to the curb. The big D.
(off Sutton; duh)
Divorce.
(big grin)
You sensing a pattern here?

More mean than drunk, he continues as Ryan grips the arms of his chair as if aboard a harrowing roller-coaster ride.

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
But here's the pay-off: First year at ISM, who does Ryan get to personally fire...?
(nods to Ryan)
Tell him...tell him...

Ryan inhales more than oxygen, wanting to balk but - -

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
Come on, I'm trying to educate the lad here.
(then)
Tell him who you got to fire...

RYAN
(flat)
The first guy who fired me.

CRAIG GREGORY
Whoooooeeeee! And they say there's no such thing as justice!

Annoyed travelers glance disapprovingly over...

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
The greatest energy of all is <u>anger.</u>
(a toast)
To anger, gentlemen...

He drains his glass, drinking alone. Feeling snubbed by Sutton, he zeroes in on the young lad...

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
How 'bout you, kid...You *angry* enough?

SUTTON
(pointed)
I'm getting there...

Gregory squints at him, a doctor inspecting a patient.

CRAIG GREGORY
Nah...didn't quite sell me on it, pal.

He stands like a shot, galvanized. Smacks Ryan on the thigh.

CRAIG GREGORY (CONT'D)
Walk me to my gate...

Sutton notices that Gregory's left his credit card, as we - -

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPORT -- MOMENTS LATER

Ryan escorts Gregory to yonder gate...

CRAIG GREGORY
Fire him.

RYAN
Excuse me - -?

CRAIG GREGORY
The kid, Sutton, whatever the fuck his name is...*Fire. Him.*

And we're tempted to think he's joking, if not for the twisted glimmer buried not so deeply in his eye...

RYAN
What? - Why...?

CRAIG GREGORY
You said it yourself, Bingham. No eye of the tiger, no anger. Heisman him. Sooner the better.

RYAN
We haven't even given him a chance.

Gregory stops in his tracks. Ryan's not one to argue with this kind of order. Not usually.

CRAIG GREGORY
You're not getting sentimental, are you...?
(off Ryan's silence)
Good.
(a pat on the back)
You're my hero, Bingham...my personal fucking hero...<u>The terminator.</u>

And he strides right onto the flight, waving over his shoulder before offering his ticket to the agent.

BUCK BOWEN (O.S.)
Life is choices...

FADE TO:

BUCK BOWEN,

Hands carving up the air as he speaks emphatically to CAMERA.

BUCK BOWEN
Right and wrong...good and evil...left and right. These choices inform the businessman you wanna be, the man you already are.

He leans back in his swivel-chair, satisfied, as we - -

FADE TO:

EXT. STRAW-HAT PIZZA -- NIGHT

A cobble-stoned corner on the North Side, its bright red awning concealing the tension within...

SUTTON (O.S.)
This is a departure from the world of Ryan Bingham, no?

INT. STRAW-HAT PIZZA

Seated in a cushy back-booth, Ryan stares solemnly at the cold slice of pie on his plate...

RYAN
(low)
I'm trying to branch out...
(then)
I bet it was nice to see your wife, huh...

And it's a curious comment, Sutton immediately on alert...

In the BG we notice a kid's birthday party underway. Streamers. Top hats. Cup-cakes. The whole nine.

Ryan shifts from the party to Sutton, consuming a greedy breath before launching away...

RYAN (CONT'D)
You know when I started, 10 years ago, like you, I wanted to be a businessman...And, Buck, well, he thought like a businessman - which, in the end, proved to be his undoing...

He speaks in a controlled and forced fashion. As if reading from invisible cue-cards...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Now it's not about learning, it's about liquidating. We don't expand, we *exterminate*...

And he falls momentarily silent. Pensive.

SUTTON
I'm not following...

RYAN
Nor should you. You should <u>lead</u>.
(MORE)

RYAN (CONT'D)
(then)
Listen to me, okay? You come in here with ideals and dreams and a plan; a solid plan. And it all goes to shit - and it will. It will. You got a wife, you got a future, a little baby...cut loose of this, Sutton. Flee. Fucking flee.
(low)
Or you'll turn out just like me...

And Sutton begins to sense where this is headed. Leaning forward, intense.

SUTTON
Which is how...?

RYAN
A fraud.

SUTTON
Where's this coming from, man...?

And Ryan engages his eyes for the first time, conveying an Almanac of information without a word or a whisper...

SUTTON (CONT'D)
...You're firing me?

RYAN
I'm - -

SUTTON
(anticipating)
"Liberating" me? At least, come up with new material. I've read the manual, remember? You gotta be kidding me...

RYAN
I'm not happy about it...

SUTTON
This is bullshit - -

RYAN
(overlapping)
I know...

SUTTON
No. This. You. You're trying to be a martyr, trying to convince me, convince yourself, that you're saving my soul, saving me pain. You're saving yourself.
(MORE)

SUTTON (CONT'D)
Trying to soothe *your* conscience. This is an exercise in self-survival, that's what this is. And I'm supposed to feel, what? Sorry? Thankful? No...I'm not giving you that luxury.

He stands, his body racked with emotion, his skin flushing red. And he begins to stride off - -

RYAN
Sutton - -

Sutton stops. Bee-lines back. Plops something on the table.

SUTTON
Maybe <u>you</u> need to watch this...

And he storms off for good as Ryan glances down to see

THE BUCK BOWEN VIDEO(RYAN POV)

Bowen's grinning visage staring us down as the kids break out in a rousing rendition of "*Happy Birthday*"(os)...

And he slumps into the booth, deflated, the cheerful celebration taunting Ryan, as we HEAR:

RYAN (O.S.)
There's no easy way to put this...

CUT TO:

RYAN(CAMERA POV)

Progressively haggard as we run through a series of shots...

RYAN
You're fired.

CUT TO:

<u>ANOTHER ANGLE(CAMERA POV)</u>

Ryan, his lids hanging languorously over his eyes as he says:

RYAN
You're terminated...

CUT TO:

<u>ANOTHER ANGLE(CAMERA POV)</u>

Pillowy bags under his eyes, Ryan struggles to stay focused. Unable to meet our gaze. Mumbling when he says:

RYAN
You're gone.

SPLASH! Hot-tea tossed in his face...But Ryan barely flinches, the liquid dripping down as if in absolution...

RYAN (CONT'D)
(droll)
Thank you...thanks a lot...

TIME DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HALLWAY -- LATER

His work done, a tattered Ryan exits a glass-encased conference room, hurriedly ambling down the hall, brief-case in hand, before - -

VOICE (O.S.)
Mr. Bingham.

He stops. Shit. There goes his clean escape.

Ryan whirls to see a GAUNT EXEC in a black suit. He looks, appropriately enough, like a mortician.

GAUNT EXEC
How'd it go?

RYAN
(in retreat)
Great. Super. Really good.

And he cranes back, still walking before - -

WHACK! Ryan smacks into a clear glass-patrician. Staggering around like a weeble-wobble before reassuring:

RYAN (CONT'D)
I'm okay, I'm okay...

But Ryan seems anything but "okay", as we - -

FADE TO BLACK:

Insert Legend: **Crash Landing**

And the phrase tilts down before doing a noose-dive, disappearing from view, leaving nothing but DARKNESS, as we - -

HARD CUT IN ON:

AN OXYGEN MASK

As it plops from the over-head compartment aboard a - -

INT. 737(IN FLIGHT) - - WIDER VIEW

First class. Taxiing down the runway.

And we see the oxygen mask in a little boy's chubby hands. TOMMY, an 8 year old ball of bile, sits beside Ryan - who's clearly annoyed by the lad's violation of flight protocol.

Ryan dismisses it, closing his eyes in forced meditation as he faces forward. To the absolute amusement of Tommy.

Feeling eyes upon him, Ryan peers down at his seat-mate. Offering a weak smile. An awkward BEAT, the boy's unblinking gaze ruffling Ryan's not-so-cool exterior. Finally:

RYAN
Hey. How's it going?

TOMMY
(pointed)
Not as well as I'd hoped.

Realizing the little bastard's referring to him, Ryan cracks:

RYAN
Hoping for Christie Turlington were you...?
(off Tommy)
Super-model?

TOMMY
I *know* who she is...

He resumes mangling the oxygen mask - to Ryan's repugnance.

RYAN
Hey, um, maybe you shouldn't do that, buddy...

TOMMY
(simple)
Fuck you.

A beat. Ryan shakes his head as if warding off a blow.

RYAN
Put it away...Come on...

But beneath Ryan's smile we see he's beginning to flare...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Let's just relax. Come on, I'll buy you a soda...

TOMMY
You don't have to "buy" 'em, dummy, they're free.

RYAN
I know. I was joking.

TOMMY
Next time make it funny.

Ryan swallows. Glares. At the proverbial cross-roads. A thin layer of control holding him together.

RYAN
Listen to me, okay? I like to fly. I *enjoy* it. And I don't like people, *little* people, detracting from that enjoyment, okay?

Tommy stares back. Motions for Ryan to come closer. Close enough so that he might whisper:

TOMMY
Fuck. Off.

RYAN
You little - -

Ryan snags the oxygen mask, wrenching it from Tommy's grip in an absurdist game of tug of war, when - -

TOMMY BEGINS TO CRY

And Ryan knows why when he spins to behold - -

THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT(RYAN POV)

Glaring down at him. Aghast.

Ryan grins guiltily, oxygen mask in hand, Tommy's bawling bray echoing down the aisle, as we - -

JUMP CUT TO:

RYAN

As he's led down the center-aisle by the horrified flight attendant. Further and further back towards - heaven forbid - -

RYAN
Coach...? Isn't this a little excessive?

The flight attendant remains silent, Ryan continuing THE WALK OF SHAME as we hear a rhapsodic DRUM-BEAT over the soundtrack. As if a prelude to an execution.

JUMP CUT TO:

TIGHT ON RYAN

His eye-balls swimming inside his head as the primordial drum-beat continues(os), and we - -

WIDEN

To see that he inhabits the center-seat of aisle 39. Between an OBESE WOMAN and a HARE KRISHNA. With alligator arms and a cramped neck, Ryan's trapped in the coffin-like confines.

The Krishna leans in. Close enough to swap DNA when he says:

HARE KRISHNA
You are on a long journey, yes?

Before Ryan can muster a response - -

THUNK!

The plane's swept up in a tsunami of turbulence, tossing Ryan between the seats like a wet-sock stuck in spin-cycle. Amazingly, the obese woman - her tree trunk arm and its abundant flesh resting on Ryan - remains fast-asleep.

PUSH IN ON RYAN

A frenetic SCREAM resonating(os), before we - -

PULL-BACK from Ryan's eyes to see he's exiting the tunnel to - -

INT. AIRPORT

Insert Legend: **Dulles Airport. Washington, D.C.**

And we see the screaming emanates from A BABY reunited with his daddy as Ryan - hair, tie and psyche askew - staggers out. Resembling a soldier returning from a losing campaign.

And he slogs off, lost amidst the masses, as we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. K STREET. DOWNTOWN, D.C. -- DAY - - TO ESTABLISH

In the epicenter of power, skyscrapers loom like bureaucratic monsters...

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM. OFFICE TOWER

5 rows of executives already assembled as Ryan ambles in...

RYAN
(by rote)
Everyone have a seat.

But, of course, everyone's already seated. Ryan belatedly notes this fact, cracking:

RYAN (CONT'D)
Very good.

Ryan takes his place behind an elevated podium...

He clears his throat. Hacks a cough. Sniffles. Peering out at the crowd as he fusses with paperwork, hands slightly atremble. Trying like hell to hold it together.

RYAN POV - PANNING ACROSS the eager, even urgent, faces. Men and women clueless as to what's about to befall them.

STILL POV - We TILT DOWN to see the contents of Ryan's brief-case, nothing staring out so prominently as a small GOLD HAMMER inscribed with his name. A trophy that no longer holds much weight.

And we're not sure if the sight of it emboldens or discourages him as people skittishly shift in their seats. Finally:

RYAN (CONT'D)
We call this a...a seminar.

He grips the podium tightly. As if to balance himself.

RYAN (CONT'D)
That's what it says on the board outside, right?
(off pamphlet)
"How to be an entrepreneur" seminar. Creative, doncha' think? 'Cuz it's true. And it's not.

Befuddled looks infect the assembled...

RYAN (CONT'D)
The good news is you *are* all about to become entrepreneurs...The bad news is, it's not gonna be at Tikki Toys.

And the crowd's incoherent MURMURS grow more coherent as Ryan sifts through his brief-case, finally discovering what he's looking for...

A CRISP WHITE SHEET OF PAPER

Tikki stationary atop it, it's a termination letter.

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
If you'd all be so kind as to open to page 3 of the packets we've so thoughtfully provided you...

Indeed, we see shiny BLACK FOLDERS atop each employees lap - from which they produce the aforementioned "page 3".

RYAN (CONT'D)
(re: page)
Funny, you'd think it'd be pink...
(then)
Feel free to read along if you like...

He slides designer specs over his aquiline nose, reading in exaggerated and mechanical fashion:

RYAN (CONT'D)
(off paper)
"Due to trends and economic forces in the marketplace, the Tikki Corporation and its attendant board members have elected to make a difficult, even excruciatingly painful, decision -
(Ryan snickers to himself)
"We're consequently forced to part with 10% of our domestic work-force."

Ryan carefully folds the piece of paper up before giving into desire and crumpling it under fist. He dramatically peels off his specs.

RYAN (CONT'D)
That's a run-on sentence by the way...

And every eye-ball in the place is on him...

RYAN (CONT'D)
It essentially means, folks - in a phrase that tends to attract a crowd - *"you're fired".*

And there's SILENCE - the kind of silence that invariably follows tragedy. And as reality sets in, confusion turns to anger. Silence turns to shouting.

And it's a disturbingly powerful feeling from RYAN'S POV. Looking down upon the helpless horde. Servants to a king.

And Ryan clicks his brief-case closed, feigning deaf to the cacophony of questions hurled his way. Exiting stage left with a guttural:

RYAN (CONT'D)
Good luck.

He ducks out before the crowd can coalesce, the chaotic din, the detritus of his deed, echoing, as we - -

FOLLOW RYAN

Down the barren hallway. Past a slew of propaganda-like POSTERS of children playing with a medley of Tikki Toys...

The door finally closes behind Ryan, truncating all sounds from the adjoining conference room.

LONG SHOT:

Ryan disappears in the distance, as we - -

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

RYAN,

Eyes closed, arms cast-wide as if nailed to an invisible cross. And he begins to timber forward, as we go to - -

SLO-MO - Ryan falling face-forward onto his bed in the - -

INT. MARRIOTT HOTEL-ROOM(RESUME SPEED) - - WIDER VIEW

Exhausted, he remains sprawled across the bed until he hears something. Something which grates his very soul...

SILENCE

He springs up. Clicks ON the TV - which of course only produces a field of black and white static. Broken.

Not wanting to be alone with his thoughts, he stares at the TV, sizzling with static, an idea taking root...

He pulls THE BUCK BOWEN VIDEO from his jacket-pocket, sliding it into the DVD attachment...

And miraculously, thankfully, the disc boots up as Ryan paces in concentric circles, a melancholic mess...

He stops. Eyes fixed on the cell-phone in his hand.

CUT TO:

INT. LINDA'S APARTMENT. SAN FRANCISCO

TIGHT ON ANCIENT ANSWERING MACHINE as it does its thing...

LINDA'S VOICE (O.S.)
Leave me a message...

BEEP!

Ryan contemplates, ready to abort when - -

LINDA (O.S.)
Hello...?

LINDA enters frame, tossing her jacket on a chair, as we - -

INTERCUT WITH:

RYAN
Linda...?

She grins. Plays it cool.

LINDA
Ryan.

RYAN
Right. Yeah. Listen: I'm calling because, um...

...Why is he calling?

LINDA
Your Palm Pilot.

RYAN
(a beat)
Right, my Palm Pilot...

He glances over at his PALM PILOT atop the night-stand...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Did you, um, find it...?

LINDA
Yeah, I did. It's right here.

RYAN
Oh, well, thanks for - - You did?
(recovering)
Well, good. Terrific. Good to know.

He sits on the edge of the bed. MUTES the TV(Bowen's video running), his breath staggered and staccato...

LINDA
You okay, Ryan?

RYAN
Yeah, sure.
(then)
Tough day. Lots of...stuff.

LINDA
"Lots of stuff?" Hate it when "stuff" gets in the way of a good day.

RYAN
How 'bout you? - How's the play?

LINDA
Now I know something's wrong...

Because traditionally, of course, Ryan wouldn't ask...

RYAN
I gotta go...I gotta sleep...I gotta...Okay. Bye.

And before Linda can summon a syllable, the apian drone of the empty phone-line filters through(os). Brows furrowed, she belatedly HANGS UP. Amused. And concerned.

IN THE HOTEL ROOM - - CONTINUOUS

RYAN SLEEPS, head buried beneath a pair of pillows, as we - -

TIME DISSOLVE TO:

RYAN TOSSES AND TURNS,

Sleep eluding him...

TIME DISSOLVE TO:

A RESTIVE RYAN

Arms flung all about until his hand errantly hits the REMOTE CONTROL, inadvertently BOOSTING THE VOLUME, and - -

RYAN ROCKETS UP,

Instantly awake, eyes affixed to the TV and Bowen's sage image. And Ryan does something strange. Despite the already daunting decibels, HE BOOSTS THE VOLUME, enamored by - -

BUCK BOWEN
(on TV)
You've got to remember one thing...one very important thing...

ANOTHER ANGLE. Closer. More intimate. As if Bowen's talking to us and us alone.

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
You're a salesman...But you're not selling people on what they *are*...you're selling them on what they can <u>become.</u>

CLOSER STILL

Buck Bowen's LIPS whispering in our ever-attentive ears:

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
You're not here to destroy jobs...you're here to *create* them.

TIGHT ON RYAN

Eyes agog. Enlightened. A light bulb might as well appear over his head...

And he blinks, acutely awake, as we - -

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT

A lovingly, but modestly, decorated middle-class abode. Peppered with a decided woman's touch.

THE PHONE CACKLES TO LIFE(OS),

A pretty redhead enters frame, negotiating her newly blossoming body towards the kitchen...

And only as she answers the phone, as she turns, do we recognize her as Sutton's wife...

ABBY
(into phone)
Hello...?

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. DULLES AIRPORT. WASHINGTON, D.C.

Ryan stands beside the departure gate, pacing excitedly as he talks on his cell-phone.

RYAN
Hi. Sutton please.

ABBY
Can I tell him who's calling?

RYAN
Ryan.
(off her silence)
Please, I need to speak with him, it's important. *Please.*

And there's something in Ryan's voice that defuses Abby's anger. Desperation. Sincerity. Whatever it is, Abby complies with a less than collegial:

REBECCA
Hold on.

SUTTON, clad in paint-splattered overalls, takes the phone...

SUTTON
Hello...?

RYAN
(purring)
So you wanna learn how to be a real businessman...?

Buoyant MUSIC kicks in, as we - -

CUT TO:

INT. PLANE - - MOVING

Ryan sits in the aisle-seat, energetically scanning phone numbers on his Palm Pilot, when he notices - -

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW SEAT

Matronly and impish, she's petrified, clinging to the arm-rest. And Ryan watches this suffering lass for a moment before instinctively

OFFERING HIS LEFT HAND

A beat. The woman squints before placing her trembling hand into Ryan's. Forming a clenched and unified fist.

And they travel together, these strangers, comforting each other, as we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. HOUSE. OREGON, WASHINGTON -- DAY

VAUGHN HAYES builds a see-saw for his daughter - who loiters near by, giggling at the difficulty he's encountering.

VAUGHN'S DAUGHTER
Daddy, I thought you were good at this...

VAUGHN
Daddy's been out of practice, darlin'.

Vaughn's wife, EMILY, hollers from the porch...

EMILY
Hey, Mr. Goodwrench...phone-call.

He lays his hammer down, secretly relieved, as we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. ARRIVAL GATE. AIRPORT

Insert Legend: **John F. Kennedy Airport. New York.**

Ryan patrols the curb-side, oblivious to the cavalcade of people around him as he jaws into his CELL-PHONE:

RYAN
Buck...I need you to call me back. Please. It's important. I'm not one to beg but...this is me, <u>begging.</u>

He clicks OFF, trekking towards the rental-car shack up ahead with righteous determination, before - -

A HORN HONKS(OS)

Intent. Focused. Heedless. Ryan keeps walking, until - -

THE HORN BLARES(OS)

One long, obnoxious WAIL that gives Ryan little choice but to whirl and see - -

A CHRYSLER LEBARON

Shadowing him along the curb, a familiar face inside...

SUTTON SWAY

Waving to Ryan like an unmedicated air-traffic controller. The passenger-side window peels down, Sutton leaning across the seat to shout:

SUTTON
Hope it's okay, me putting the rental on my credit-card...?

Ryan grins, happy to see a friend, as we - -

CUT TO:

INT. RENTAL CAR - - MOVING

Sutton drives, coursing through moderate FDR Drive traffic...

SUTTON
(offering up company credit card)
You forgot to repossess this...
(off Ryan; re: card)
It's your pal, Gregory's...

RYAN
Use it in good health.

Ryan settles in. Barely able to stay still. Remembering:

RYAN (CONT'D)
By the way: Thanks for coming...

SUTTON
And miss finding out what you'd use your miles to fly me in for?

RYAN
Not to worry, young squire...By my calculations, I've got 'em to give. I'm still on target to hit the magic number...

He punches re-dial on his cell, jawing into the phone:

RYAN (CONT'D)
Buck, it's Ryan. Again. I'm gonna keep calling...

Ryan huddles closer to the window, his voice a sibilant whisper as he continues...

RYAN (CONT'D)
I'm trying not to...live the lie anymore.

Hearing that, Sutton does a double-take. Regarding Ryan through squinty, incongruous, lids...

Ryan HANGS UP. Feels Sutton's eyes upon him.

RYAN (CONT'D)
What?

SUTTON
It's like...

His voice trails off, unspoken words dying in his throat.

RYAN
What - -?

SUTTON
It's like you're...*human.*

And Ryan stares back before permitting the ghost of a grin.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK PLAZA HOTEL. MID-TOWN MANHATTAN -- DAY

The rental-car pulls under the red awning, a platoon of doormen, bell-hops and valets fluttering into action like a school of unfed fish...

TRACK WITH RYAN AND SUTTON

As they move towards the hotel entrance...

SUTTON
How 'bout you give me the head's-up now, before my wife calls a lock-smith and a hit-man...

RYAN
It's simple really...

And they're swept through the revolving doors, spewed into - -

INT. LOBBY. PLAZA HOTEL -- CONTINUOUS

RYAN
Why did Tikki hire me...?

SUTTON
'Cuz you're the best...?

RYAN
I'm not fishing for a complement, Sutton...It was rhetorical.
(then)
They hired me because by streamlining 2,000 employees - 1700 of which we've already obliterated - they're trying to make the company appear more attractive...

SUTTON
Attractive for what?

RYAN
Now you're getting the hang of this Q&A thing...
(then)
A buy-out. Tikki's on the market.

SUTTON
(so?)
Okay...

RYAN
I found a buyer.
(before Sutton can ask)
Us.

OFF Sutton's stunned expression, we - -

CUT TO:

INT. PLAZA HOTEL -- MOMENTS LATER

The dynamic duo trundle up a flight of circular stairs...

RYAN
But none of this works unless a certain someone calls me back...

They reach the top of the steps, veering right to see none of the other than - -

VAUGHN HAYES,

Reposed in a shiny shark-skin suit.

VAUGHN
Y'all wanna tell me what's going on...?
(re: suit)
I feel like I'm doing a cameo on "the Sopranos".

RYAN
Very sharp...

VAUGHN
(tugs at suit)
S'not everyday you get to see a deathbed conversion...

INT. BALLROOM -- MOMENTS LATER

Packed with Tikki employees, unknowingly awaiting their execution...

Ryan, Sutton and Vaughn enter, huddling in a corner. And it's clear that Ryan's buying time...

SUTTON
He hasn't called...?

RYAN
(no)
I may possess the will, but Bowen's the guy who knows the *way*...

Vaughn beholds the throng of employees with an empathetic gaze before turning back to Ryan...

VAUGHN
How is it after your scorched earth campaign, these people still think they're here for a seminar...?

RYAN
(simple)
It's like what they say about second marriages: The victory of hope over experience.
(almost to himself)
There's no turning back once I go in there...

And he's conflicted. At the crossroads. Pacing energetically about as is his wont.

SUTTON
(incongruous)
You're having second thoughts...?
(off silence; angry)
You bring us all the way here and - -

RYAN
It doesn't work without Bowen - -

SUTTON
It doesn't work without you committing to something besides a million miles - -

Ryan whirls back, ready to return fire when - -

VAUGHN
Shut the hell up.

They stop, deferring to Vaughn's baritone burr...employees crane back, responding to the commotion...

VAUGHN (CONT'D)
(low)
Can we at least *look* like we know what we're doing...?

Ryan and Sutton collectively nod, regaining composure as Vaughn peers deeply into Ryan's soul...

VAUGHN (CONT'D)
Life is choices. You can make them...or they can make *you*.

Ryan treads towards the awaiting throng...

Vaughn and Sutton trade unknowing glances...

Ryan stops. Consumes a deep breath - the sound of his voice replaced by - -

THE CHIME OF HIS CELL-PHONE(OS)

RYAN
(to employees)
Excuse me...

Huddled tight, Ryan turns his back on the crowd, answering:

RYAN (CONT'D)
Buck.

VOICE (O.S.)
(filtered)
Cute. S'not enough you fired the old bastard, now you gotta mock him?

But, of course, it's not Buck, it's - -

RYAN
Craig.

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.)
(filtered)
Very good, Columbo. You do the deed?

RYAN
Did I...?

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.)
Fire Opie.

And Ryan glances at Sutton across the room when he says:

RYAN
3 alarm blaze.

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.)
That's my motherfucker.

CALL-WAITING BEEPS on Ryan's line...

RYAN
Thanks for checking in - -

And before Gregory can respond, Ryan clicks over, and we - -

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. PAY-PHONE - - CONTINUOUS

Stuffed inside a cramped booth, rain batters the glass...

BUCK BOWEN
What're you, stalking me, Bingham?

RYAN
I need you, Buck.

BUCK BOWEN
You run outta' people to fire?

RYAN
I'm trying to engineer a coup. Buy a company.

BUCK BOWEN
This before or after you get out of rehab...?

RYAN
(a beat)
"Rehab"...?

BUCK BOWEN
For whatever drug you're clearly in the throes of...
(then)
What the hell you know about buying a company...?

Ryan lets his silence speak for him...

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
Oh, I get it. That's where 'yer new buddy, Buck, comes in...

RYAN
The world needs heroes...

BUCK BOWEN
Apparently not as badly as it needs psychiatrists...

Ryan paces, a finger in his ear to block out the ambient noise. And the employees watch him along with Sutton and Vaughn, wondering what's going on...

RYAN
No bullshit, Buck. I need your help here...
(beat; wrenching)
I'm asking for your help...

Bowen sighs loudly(os), before - -

BUCK BOWEN
Riddle me this Batman...What's your ultimate objective?

CLOSE ON RYAN. A long, introspective beat. Finally:

RYAN
Redemption.

And Buck chews on that before a big grin swallows his face.

BUCK BOWEN
Alright, I'm in.

And Ryan bows his head in relief, as we go to

SUTTON AND VAUGHN POV

And from this perspective it looks as if Ryan's lamenting.

SUTTON
(re: Ryan)
Shit...It's not happening...

BACK TO RYAN ON THE PHONE

RYAN
I need the name of a venture capitalist. The best you can recommend.

BUCK BOWEN
(immediate)
Art Lavender.

RYAN
(floored)
Excuse me...?

BUCK BOWEN
Art Lavender. "Dominion Ventures". Guy's a machine. But be warned, he's hard core.

Buck flips through a wallet thick with business-cards...

BUCK BOWEN (CONT'D)
I'll get you the number...

Ryan emerges with a CARD of his own.

RYAN
I already have it.

ON THE BUSINESS CARD

"ART LAVENDER. CEO. DOMINION VENTURES. 212.777.3030"

OFF RYAN, newly indoctrinated into the world of fate, we - -

SMASH CUT TO:

MOMENTS LATER

Ryan smacks the phone OFF, a bounce in his step as he blazes towards the front of the stage...

RYAN
My name's Ryan Bingham and I came here to fire you. All of you.

A collective GASP echoes through the ether...

ON SUTTON AND VAUGHN, faces dropping in disappointment...

RYAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
That's what I do. It's what I've always done...

BACK ON RYAN,

Soaking the moment for all it's worth, until - -

RYAN (CONT'D)
But that's not gonna happen today.

He continues, as we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK AVENUE -- DAY - - TO ESTABLISH

FAVOR a classic brownstone of brick and ivy...

RYAN (O.S.)
We're here to see Mr. Lavender...

INT. RECEPTION AREA. DOMINION VENTURES

Ryan addresses a RECEPTIONIST, Sutton and Vaughn behind him...

RYAN
Bingham. Ryan Bingham.

RECEPTIONIST
He's waiting for you in the conference room down the hall, Mr. Bingham.

And she stands, unfurling a hand in the general direction of the room like Vanna White motioning towards a letter...

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
How many of you will be there all-together...?

RYAN
We've got a few more coming...

And we HEAR the faint PING of arriving elevators from down the hall. Followed by the trundling of feet. Many feet.

DOZENS OF TIKKI EMPLOYEES

Squeeze into the reception area. It's like watching an endless stream of circus clowns disgorge from a Volkswagon...

The receptionist beholds the 50 or so people cramped inside the austere space before gamely asking:

RECEPTIONIST
Can I get anybody something to drink?

An ocean of hands shoot up, as we - -

CUT TO:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM. DOMINION VENTURES

ART LAVENDER stands from behind the head of a long, mahogany table, greeting Ryan, Sutton, Vaughn and 10 or so Tikki employees...

RYAN
(a shrug)
We brought some friends...

ART
Never have too many of those in a room...
(shaking hands)
Good to see ya'...

And Ryan warmly greets Art with a half-hug, leaning in to quietly ask:

RYAN
How ya' doing?

And for all the times we've heard Ryan ask that question, it's the first time he seems to truly care about the answer.

ART
(a sad smile)
One slightly less painful day at a time...

Ryan nods, Art already discerning the change in him, addressing one and all when he says:

ART (CONT'D)
So what can I do for you, folks...

INT. RECEPTION AREA. DOMINION VENTURES -- CONTINUOUS

30 or so workers stand, sit, read and recline in the tight space. It resembles a casting call for the role of a repressed office worker...

BUCK BOWEN ENTERS,

Startled to see the throng of people. Gingerly ambling up to the receptionist...

BUCK BOWEN
I'm not sure I'm in the right place...

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Art takes everyone through the paces...

ART
...I've done some checking and you're right, Tikki *has* been trying to find a buyer for the past 3 months. These last cuts were enacted to make them look all the more edible...

Sutton pulls THE BASEBALL MITT from a satchel, depositing it on the conference table for symbolic motivation...

ART (CONT'D)
But what we're talking about is a hostile takeover. An LOB in street parlance. And it's gonna require both will and wallet. Meaning we need to find a benevolent buyer...

Buck Bowen enters - every eye gravitating to him despite his best attempt to appear inconspicuous...

BUCK BOWEN
Don't let me interrupt.

Ryan and Buck share a meaningful nod as Art continues...

ART
I have a number of suggestions which we'll go through together...

Before he can expand, a voice echoes over the INTERCOM:

ART'S ASSISTANT (O.S.)
Mr. Lavender, we've got a call for Mr. Bingham...

RYAN
(to Art)
I hope it's okay, I had my calls forwarded from the hotel...

ART
Fine - but the phone's broken, only the speaker works...

RYAN
(a shrug)
Nothing to hide.

ART
(into intercom)
Patch 'em through...

And over the INTERCOM, his voice as sonorous and sinister as a supersonic jet, we HEAR:

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.)
Ryan...

ON RYAN. A reflexive gasp. Shit.

RYAN
Craig...

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.)
Am I on speaker?
(moves on)
I'm gonna cut right to it, pal...I'm hearing things...troubling things...

And every eye's on Ryan, sweat trickling down his cheek...

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I'll lay it out for you, chief. If you are, in fact, engineering some kinda' half-assed coup on behalf of Tikki employees, you need to be aware of few things...One: Your immediate termination from ISM and possible - hell, *probable* legal proceedings. Two: Your beloved frequent flyer miles - a decade in the making - will perish. Gone. Ka-put. It's a company account, remember? That'd be a shame, don't you think...?
(off silence)
Ry, you there, pal?

RYAN
(low)
I'm here.

CRAIG GREGORY (O.S.)
Do the right thing, buddy. It's a little late to grow a conscience.

CLICK. The apian drone of the empty phone-line fills the room, tormenting Ryan before Art clicks the speaker OFF.

ON RYAN, eyes fixed on his sphinx-like expression. Deliberating.

And no one utters a word or whisper, the tension palpable as Ryan begins to aimlessly amble about the room like a little boy with a terrible burden...

He stops beside the electronic baseball glove, staring at it as he produces something from a pocket...

THE WOODEN TOY SOLDIER

And without further adieu, his expression unchanged - -

RYAN SLAMS THE TOY SOLDIER DOWN ON THE BASEBALL GLOVE

In a symbol of vigilance and defiance. A primitive but effective measure that makes the

EMPLOYEES ROAR WITH APPROVAL

Even the baseball mitt, its electronic voice rendered defective, emits its chirpy countenance...

BASEBALL MIT (O.S.)
(electronic voice)
Great play...great play...

The employees CHEER until the voice sours, whining:

BASEBALL MIT (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You made an error...you made an error...

ON RYAN,

A flicker of doubt registering across his face as the electronic voice drones on(os), and we - -

CUT TO:

INT. ANOTHER CONFERENCE ROOM. DOMINION VENTURES -- LATER

And now Art is joined by a crack team of economic analysts who've posted charts and graphs by the front of the room...

Ryan watches, slightly befuddled. Musing to Sutton:

RYAN
Christ, I knew I should'a paid better attention in school...

SUTTON
It's simple. The PE ratio reaches sub-par 5 only if the competing bid we offer is above value market share - in which case our purchase price would provide the most utility.

RYAN
(huh?)
Oh. Of course...

SUTTON
(smiles; translates)
We can buy out Tikki whether they like it or not...

And Ryan casts an admiring glance Sutton's way. The kid knows his shit.

Art stands, presiding over the assembled...

ART
Ideally, the contracts we draw up will make the employees - those fired and those untouched - the sole owners of the company. Not unlike the re-organization plan United Airlines put into place in '99.

But he sees the blank expressions on Ryan and Vaughn's faces.

ART (CONT'D)
All you guys need to know is we're gonna do our best - with the short amount of time provided - to bring Tikki back to what it was intended to be.

SUTTON
What about Norm Tikki...?
(off Art)
The founder of the company.

ART
I didn't know there was such a man...

RYAN
(low; overlapping)
You and Tikki Toys...

SUTTON
(to Art)
He's a minimal stock-holder but with his support, well...

VAUGHN
I can tell you a lot of workers would rally around Norm. We might be the body, but what's a body without a soul?

Art ponders this, twirling a Mont Blanc pen in hand as he perambulates the room...

ART
(to Vaughn)
Can you get to him...?

VAUGHN
I believe I can, sir...

Art nods. "Good."

ART
Any other questions...?

RYAN
Do we need to be in LA?

ART
Only if you wanna see the looks on their faces when this goes down...

Ryan trades mischievous eyes with his crew. Then:

RYAN
That's a good enough reason for me.

Smiles abound, as we - -

CUT TO:

A FREQUENT FLYER CARD

As it's slid across a counter in the - -

INT. CHECK-IN GATE. DEPARTURES. J.F.K AIRPORT -- WIDER VIEW

And we see Ryan at the desk across from an indifferent TICKET-AGENT with a huge pompadour of hair. Sutton, Buck and Vaughn stand behind him, eager to assist in the revolt...

RYAN
I need four tickets to LAX. To be charged on my account please...

The agent smirks before punching data up on a computer.

We HEAR an electronic BEEP emitted from the computer, the agent turning back to Ryan...

TICKET AGENT
I'm sorry, sir...We're not showing any miles on your account.

And there's a moment of mourning, Ryan's gaze drifting off into the distance. A decade's worth of hard-work eliminated in the blink of an eye.

Sutton sidles up behind Ryan, a supportive hand clasped on his shoulder...

SUTTON
That wasn't your life's work, Ryan...

The intimation, of course, being that perhaps this *is*.

And Ryan's left to helplessly watch as Sutton steps up to the counter with a certain CREDIT CARD in hand.

TICKET AGENT
(off credit card)
Thank you, Mr. Gregory...

Sutton winks at Ryan, as we - -

CUT TO:

EXT. OFFICE TOWER. DOWNTOWN L.A. -- DAY - - TO ESTABLISH

A hulking monolith in tribute to corporate indifference.

VOICE (O.S.)
The stock's going through the roof...

INT. KAREN GOULD'S OFFICE

Gould listens to a company ANALYST as she buffs her nails...

ANALYST
Word on the street is there's a highly motivated buyer on the horizon...

GOULD
Terrific.

ANALYST
Not quite.

She looks up, unaccustomed to defiance in any form. The analyst continues with considerably less confidence.

ANALYST (CONT'D)
We don't know who it is yet...

GOULD
We don't know who's trying to buy us...? How is that possible?

ANALYST
Looks to be of a hostile nature.

And Gould's skin flushes fire-engine red, ready to articulate her considerable fury when - -

INTERCOM VOICE (O.S.)
Ms. Gould, there's an Art Lavender on line one...And there's some people here to - -

GOULD
(into intercom)
I'll take it. Put him through.
(to analyst)
Art Lavender. Corporate raider and all around douche-bag...Master of the leveraged buy-out.

And with that she takes a deep breath, snagging the PHONE:

GOULD (CONT'D)
This is Karen Gould...

And she inadvertently SNAPS the nail-buffer in her hand, every tendon pulsing in her body, as we - -

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. ART'S OFFICE. NEW YORK CITY - - CONTINUOUS

Art leans back in his chair, hands propped behind his head.

ART
Karen, how are you, darlin'?

GOULD
Cut the shit, Lavender. You wanna tell me what's going on...?

Art eyes the FRAMED PHOTO on his desk as he speaks - a photo of a grinning boy with a man who looks very much like Art.

ART
Never one for the tactful approach, huh Karen...?
(then)
I'm representing some people who have taken quite an interest in your little company...

GOULD
So I've heard. Who?

ART
Why doncha' step outside...

GOULD
Excuse me...?

ART
Outside. They're waiting for you.

She jumps to her feet, stomping through her capacious office and pulling open the double-doors to see - -

THE MULTITUDES OF TIKKI EMPLOYEES(POV)

An uprising. Hundreds in all. Sutton, Ryan and Vaughn among them. But most of all we notice the ancient and elfin man towards the front...

MR. NORM TIKKI

Who hobbles forward with the certitude and authority of Zeus. Looking Gould square in the face when he declares:

NORM TIKKI
I want my company back. Bitch.

Gould stares back, catatonic as

A CHEER ERUPTS

From the assembled, echoing through to - -

INT. ART'S OFFICE. NEW YORK CITY -- CONTINUOUS

Art beams, inspired by the applause coming through the phone.

INT. OUTSIDE GOULD'S OFFICE -- CONTINUOUS

And we watch from an ELEVATED ANGLE as Gould's rendered helpless to the mob. The scene resembles a revolution.

OVER it all we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.)
So we did it...the employees with the help of Art, with the spirit of Norm Tikki, with the soul of the disenfranchised and under-appreciated, bought back the company.

DISSOLVE TO:

RYAN

Waiting outside a tiny THEATER COMPANY, hands tucked into his pockets, chin tucked into his chest.

RYAN (V.O.)
But for me, it wasn't over. Hell, it felt like it'd just begun...

LINDA FAIRBURN emerges from the dilapidated building, screeching to a halt when she spots Ryan.

Off their loaded look, we - -

CUT TO:

INT. COFFEE SHOP -- MOMENTS LATER

Ryan sits across from Linda. And for the first time, he could actually tell you the color of her eyes...

RYAN
I have some, well, stuff to take care of...But I'd like to call you when I get my house in order.

LINDA
Your house...?

RYAN
Literally. And figuratively...
(then; bottom line)
I'd like to see you. More than 3 times a month.

She pauses, her gaze interlocked with his, before cooing:

LINDA
I'd like that.

OFF Ryan's satisfied grin, we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.)
But the first time in my life, I didn't have an itinerary - due in large part to the fact that I didn't have a job...And I wasn't sure how to feel about that...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MARRIOTT HOTEL. LOS ANGELES -- CONTINUOUS

Ryan slogs through the lobby, emotionally exhausted.

RYAN (V.O.)
So this is what it's like to be liberated...

He stops, taking note of something(os), face contorted, as we REVERSE ANGLE to reveal - -

A HOTEL PLACARD reading:

"*Tikki Toys Re-Organization Meeting. Grand Ball Room 1*"

An ARROW helpfully points us in the proper direction.

A perplexed Ryan follows, as we - -

CUT TO:

INT. HALLS. MARRIOTT HOTEL -- MOMENTS LATER

TIGHT ON SIGN: "GRAND BALL ROOM 1"

TILT DOWN to see - -

Ryan hovering beneath it, his hand resting on the door-knob. Slowly, he WHEEZES the sizable door open to see...

NOTHING.

Rows of unfilled chairs. An empty stage. Only a "Tikki" banner tells us that we're in the right place. But wait, there's something atop the podium...

Ryan enters...

INT. GRAND BALL-ROOM -- ON RYAN

Slogging tentatively closer, the tiny item coming clear as

THE TOY SOLDIER

Ryan hefts the toy in his hand with appreciation, as we - -

WIDEN to see --

THE 100 OR SO TIKKI EMPLOYEES

Behind him. Sutton. Art. Buck. Tikki. A sea of familiar faces. And all at once, they begin to APPLAUD. Not raucous or even exuberant. Reverent.

PAN ACROSS the many beaming faces, giving heartfelt praise to the man responsible for it all.

SLOWLY PUSH IN ON RYAN,

Ineffably touched by the gesture, as we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.)
And suddenly, just like that, I didn't feel so lost anymore...

And Sutton steps from the pack, hugging Ryan triumphantly as a reception line forms behind him. Everyone eager to make contact with their savior...

CUT TO:

PANNING SHOT OF ASSEMBLED - - MOMENTS LATER

A collective gaze cast asunder(os)...

And as we TRACK PAST Sutton, we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.)
Sutton Sway took a job as an executive with Tikki, fulfilling his life-long dream of becoming a businessman and providing his new-born baby boy with all the toys he could ever ask for...

ON BUCK BOWEN

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Buck went back to Eugene, Oregon, where he serves as a business consultant for Tikki; an unapologetically simple man leading an unapologetically simple life...

ON VAUGHN HAYES

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Vaughn became Director of the "Human Resources Department". His first act as director was to do away with the phrase "Human Resources Department"...

ON ART LAVENDER

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And Art returned to Manhattan where he spends every ounce of free time with his 14 year old daughter, Karen...

STOP PAN ON RYAN

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And as for me, well...

Ryan unplugs the microphone, the room silent enough for him to speak in a conversational tone:

RYAN (CONT'D)
In my former life, I prided myself on never being at a loss for words...
(sporadic laughter)
But now, strangely, I don't have a clue what to say...And it's not because of a lack of thought or feeling - but an abundance of them...
(thoughtful beat)
I don't possess the vocabulary to say what I need to...but I'll try anyways...
(clears throat)
When I was a kid, I wanted to be a rock star...
(errant chuckles)
I wanted to be the lead singer *and* the lead guitarist...And then gradually you decide it'd be okay to be the guitarist. Then, maybe, the bass player. Then, hey maybe, just the drummer...

And his levity takes on a heretofore unseen gravity...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Then one day you're just content holding the cymbals. And that becomes your life. You don't sing...you don't play.
(MORE)

RYAN (CONT'D)
You just...*exist*. Never digging deeper...never stepping outside the circle. 'Cuz it's comfortable...'cuz it's safe...

He stops. Regroups. Then:

RYAN (CONT'D)
My dad sold apples. Sometimes pears and bananas. On a street corner. From a cart. And I used to look at him and think, "that'll never be me"...Now I <u>pray</u> I can be that man. Have half his happiness, half his *spirit*. People ask me what my dad did for a living...
(turns to Sutton; proud)
He was a businessman.

Tears flow freely down his face now, Ryan letting them fall. Wearing them like a badge of honor.

RYAN (CONT'D)
I went on a six-day tour that turned into an odyssey and I found more than I could have ever imagined...

He pauses, offering the most heartfelt praise he can muster...

RYAN (CONT'D)
Thank you...

An EXPLOSION OF CHEERS, over which we HEAR:

RYAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
The good folks of Tikki came together to get me a gift, too...

TIME DISSOLVE TO:

SAME SCENE - - LATER

Sutton steps forward, ceremoniously handing Ryan

A PLANE TICKET

Ryan takes it, flipping the cover open, wondering aloud:

RYAN
Where are you guys sending me...?

MATCH CUT TO:

THE PLANE TICKET IN RYAN'S HAND

INT. DEPARTURE GATE. LAX -- WIDER VIEW

So early that darkness reigns outside the ambient glass.

Ryan sits in the desolate confines, gandering at the ticket. And for the first time since we've known him, he's clad in casual-wear. Slacks. A golf shirt. Sneakers. The look of a man at peace with himself and his place in the world.

VOICE (O.S.)
What flight you waiting on...?

RACK FOCUS to see A BUSINESSMAN SEATED BEHIND RYAN

In fact, it's the same businessman who rode alongside Ryan on the first trip into SFO. Bearing all the accouterments of the professional traveler. The cell-phone. The lap-top. The sleep-deficient eyes.

For Ryan it's like looking in the mirror and seeing the ghost of Christmas past...

BUSINESSMAN
Do we know each other...?

A beat.

RYAN
Maybe in a past life...

BUSINESSMAN
You spend enough time in these places and everybody starts to look the same, you know?

Ryan nods, knowing all too well...

BUSINESSMAN (CONT'D)
So where you headed...?

And Ryan once again buries his head into

THE PLANE TICKET

Which we now see is completely EMPTY. An open ticket.

And Ryan glances back up, declaring with the ghost of a smile:

RYAN
I have no idea.

And off this image of self-satisfaction and impending exploration we cue Tom Petty's "*Free Falling*", and - -

SLOWLY PULL-BACK

To discern it all from a vaunted view, the music growing louder, as we - -

PULL-BACK MORE

Until we're, once again, a part of the sky. Above it all. Our options unlimited.

Ending where we began.

FADE OUT: