

WONDER BOYS
BASED ON THE NOVEL BY MICHAEL CHABON
Screenplay/Steve Kloves

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All IS A BLUR. . .

...then WORDS appear, twisting and vaguely transparent,
reflected on the window GRADY TRIPP stands before as he reads
from a sheaf of NEATLY-TYPED PAGES.

GRADY

'The young girl sat perfectly still in the
confessional...

INT. CLASSROOM - UNIVERSITY - AFTERNOON

Grady--45-year-old novelist, professor, and insomniac--is in
the midst of reading a story to the dozen college STUDENTS who
make up his Advanced Writing Workshop.

GRADY

...listening to her father's boots scrape
like chalk on the ancient steps of the
church, then grow faint, then disappear
altogether.'

As he finishes, GRADY ponders a PAIR of MAINTENANCE MEN,
perched on ladders in the quad below, stringing a LARGE BANNER
between two bare trees. The BANNER reads:

WELCOME TO WORDFEST

GRADY turns, peers at his students. They look as if they've
been on a field trip to the DMV.

GRADY (cont'd)

(a wave of the pages)
So. .Anyone?

A GIRL with jet-black hair turns to a PALE YOUNG MAN sitting at
a desk in the back of the classroom. He is JAMES LEER, 19. Like
GRADY a moment before, he is staring out the window.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

Let me get this straight. The girl with the
big lips is depressed because, each night,
when her father goes off to work at the
bakery, her mother sneaks some mysterious
lover into the house. Not only does this
girl have to listen to her mother working
this guy in the next room, she has to wash
the sheets each morning before Daddy gets
home. After a few weeks of this, she starts
to go a little nutty/ so Daddy takes her to
confession--only, once she gets in the box,
she gets a whiff of the priest and realizes
he's the mother's secret lover. Is that it?

James Leer says nothing, huddling lower in the PATTY OVERCOAT he wears.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

I mean, Jesus. What is it with you Catholics?

GRADY

All right. Let's try to keep it constructive, shall we? Howard, what about you?

HOWARD

I hated it.

GRADY

That's not exactly what I meant by constructive, Howard.

HOWARD

I think James should try to be more constructive. This is my second semester with him. His stories are brutal, man. They make me want to kill myself.

GRADY glances at James, but his face remains impassive. Then-- with a visible sense of relief--GRADY notices the raised hand of the achingly beautiful HANNAH GREEN.

GRADY

Yes, Hannah?

HANNAH GREEN

I think maybe we're missing the point. It seems to me James' strength as a writer is that he doesn't take us by the hand. He treats us like adults. He respects us enough to forget us. That takes . . . courage .

GRADY nods, smiles subtly. Appreciative.

GRADY

Well put, Hannah. And a good note to end on, I think.
(as the students rise)
Don't forget about WordFest this weekend. And remember: those of you driving V.I.P.s to tonight's cocktail party need to have them at the Chancellor's house no later than 5:30.

Hannah Green gathers her things, pauses by Grady.

GRADY

Thanks for that. He all right?

HANNAH GREEN

I think so. ..What about you?

GRADY

Me? Sure. Why?

HANNAH GREEN
Just checking.

GRADY watches her glide away in her CRACKED RED COWBOY BOOTS,
then starts to exit himself.

JAMES LEER
Turn out the light, please.

GRADY pauses, studying the wan figure sitting at the back of
the classroom, then--reluctantly-hits the switch on the wall,
leaving James Leer alone in the DARK.

INT. STAIRWELL/CORRIDOR - AFTERNOON (MOMENTS LATER)

GRADY hurries down the steps, then spies SARA GASKSLL, standing
below. She is talking to a BOY with an armful of SLICK
PROGRAMS.

SARA
(calm but firm)
No, Elliot, I said five hundred programs
for today. This means we have no programs
for the weekend. This means that tomorrow
morning, at several hundred people will
walk into Thaw Hall and have absolutely no
idea where they are going.
(shaking her head)
It's all right, Elliot. I'll take care of
it.

GRADY watches Sara take the programs, turn, and spot him. There
is the slightest of hesitations, then....

SARA
Professor Tripp.

GRADY
Chancellor.

SARA
I got the message you called.

GRADY
I got the message you called too.

This hangs in the air, awkward somehow, then both nod and
continue on, without so much as a backward glance.

INT. GRADY'S CAR - MOVING

The RADIO BLASTS as GRADY pops the glove box, removes a JOINT
as big as his pinky, and wheels his DARK MAROON '66 GALAXIE
RAGTOP away from campus, cruising under another BANNER:

WELCOME TO WORDFEST FEBRUARY 26-28

EXT. GALAXIE - MOVING.. - PITTSBURGH

GRADY cruises past the three rivers and modest skyscrapers of
downtown, sipping at the weed.

INT. PITTSBURGH AIRPORT

GRADY rides the long, automated treadmill that runs half the length of the terminal, until...

INT. ARRIVAL GATE - PITTSBURGH AIRPORT

...TERRY CRABTREE--Grady's editor and friend-exits the tunnel with a STUNNING YOUNG WOMAN in a skin-tight black dress, bright red topcoat, and three-inch spike heels. Grinning devilishly, Crabtree whispers something in the woman's ear, then spots Grady.

CRABTREE

Tripp!

GRADY

How are you, Crabtree?

CRABTREE

Brimming. Say hello to my new friend, Miss Antonia. . .uh. . . .

WOMAN

Sloviak.

CRABTREE

I took the liberty of inviting Antonia to tonight's festivities. You don't mind, do you. Trip? ?

GRADY

(a slight beat)
The more the merrier.

MISS SLOVIAK

Terry was telling me about you on the plane. It was ail so interesting.

CRABTREE

I was explaining to Antonia how a book comes to be published. What you do as a writer, what I do as an editor...

GRADY

I sweat blood for five years and he checks for spelling.

MISS SLOVIAK

(indicating Crabtree)
That's exactly what he said.

CRABTREE

We know each other pretty well.
(to Grady)
So where's Emily?

GRADY

Emily?

CRABTREE

Your wife.

GRADY

Oh. We're picking her up. Downtown.

CRABTREE

Perfect. Well then, shall we?

GRADY nods, but lingers briefly--studying the architecture of Miss Sloviak's ankles as she CLICKS off in her spike heels, arm in arm with Crabtree.

INT. BAGGAGE CAROUSEL - AIRPORT - MOMENTS LATER

GRADY and Crabtree watch suitcases tumble as Miss Sloviak sits across the way, inspecting her face in a compact.

CRABTREE

Do you know how many times I've boarded an airplane praying someone like her would sit down beside me? Particularly while I'm on my way to Pittsburgh.

GRADY

Lay off Pittsburgh. It's one of the great cities.

CRABTREE

If it can produce a Miss Sloviak you'll get no argument from me.

GRADY

She's a transvestite.

CRABTREE

You're stoned.

GRADY

She's still a transvestite.

CRABTREE

Mm.

GRADY

Isn't she?

Crabtree ignores Grady's question, smiling placidly as he watches the carousel spin.

CRABTREE

So how's the book?

GRADY stiffens. He had been expecting this, but not so soon. He tries to act casual.

GRADY

It's fine. It's done. Basically. I'm just sort of. ..tinkering with it.

CRABTREE

Great. I was hoping I could get a look at it sometime this weekend. Think that might be possible?

GRADY

CRABTREE

Yeah, between a bookie and a pair of broken legs.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

A YOUNG WOMAN with a crumpled PITTSBURGH STEELERS UMBRELLA exits the building and-seeing GRADY parked in front of a fire hydrant--stops, a puzzled expression on her face. As she approaches, GRADY roils down the passenger window.

GRADY

Hi, Tanya.
(to the others)
This is Tanya. My wife's secretary.

CRABTREE and MISS SLOVIAK smile and nod. Tanya smiles and nods back, her eyes passing uneasily over Grady's joint.

TANYA

Grady.. ..Emily's not here.

GRADY just smiles, nods.

TANYA (cont'd)

Is there anything I can do for you?

GRADY watches a tiny stream of water trickle through Tanya's sad umbrella.

GRADY

You're leaking, Tanya.

Tanya nods--at a loss--then turns away into the rain.

CRABTREE

Trip? ?

GRADY

She left me. Crabs.

CRABTREE

Left you...? Who? Emily?

GRADY

This morning. I found a note in the kitchen.

CRABTREE

But. ..why didn't you say something, Tripp?
I mean, what are we doing here?

GRADY gazes at the glittering scene beyond his windshield, turns on the ignition.

GRADY

I thought maybe I made it all up.

EXT. GASKELL HOUSE - EVENING

Through the windows, a rabble of writers, faculty and select students can be SEEN, mingling under a haze of cigarette smoke.

GRADY brings the Galaxie to a lurching halt across the street, parks in front of another fire hydrant. As the trio steps out. MISS SLOVIAK notices a GREENHOUSE, shimmering quietly in the chill night air.

MISS SLOVIAK
That's a nice greenhouse.

GRADY
It's Mrs. Gaskell's. Her hobby.

CRABTREE
I thought you were Mrs. Gaskell's hobby, Tripp.

GRADY
Piss off, Crabs. I lost a wife today.

CRABTREE
Oh, I'm sure you'll find another. You always do.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - GASKELL HOUSE

As the front door swings open, Sara Gaskell appears, riding a wave of jagged party CHATTER onto the porch.

SARA
Well, hello, everyone. Terry, good to see you again.

CRABTREE
Chancellor. Don't you look ravishing.

SARA
Aren't you sweet to say so. I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to--oh!

As Sara steps forward, her heel-catches and she pitches forward ...into Grady's arms.

GRADY
Easy there.

SARA
I'm sorry. It's these goddamned shoes. I don't know how anyone actually walks in these things.

MISS SLOVIAK
Practice.

Sara looks at Miss Sloviak, a faint glitter of scientific curiosity in her eye.

SARA
I don't believe we've met...

MISS SLOVIAK
Antonia. Antonia Sloviak--

Just then, a THICKLY-MUCSCLED DOG with very strange EYES skitters around the corner, BARKING SAVAGELY in the general

direction of Grady.

SARA
Poe!

CRABTREE
(mildly)
This wouldn't be Walter's dog, would it?

Poe continues to rage, his paws doing crazy eights on the hardwood floor, until he's spun himself completely around and is barking at the living room.

MISS SLOVIAK
Who 's he barking at now?

GRADY
He's still barking at me. He's blind.

SARA
Poe' Hush! Now stop this. Honestly.

As Poe simmers to a deep growl, GRADY leans forward.

GRADY
I need to talk to you.

SARA
That's funny. I need to talk to you, too.
(strategy in her tone)
Perhaps you could put some of these coats
in the upstairs guest room, Professor
Tripp.

GRADY
(reading her)
I don't believe I know where the upstairs
guest room is.

SARA
Well then. I'd better show you. Terry--

CRABTREE
We'll just make ourselves at home.
(kneeling by Poe)
Won't we, Poe? Yes, yes....

INT. UPSTAIRS ROOM

GRADY enters a room swimming in BASEBALL MEMORABILIA. AUTOGRAPHED BASEBALLS abound, as well as PHOTOGRAPHS of famous big-leaguers. In one somewhat-dated PHOTO a TRIM MAN IN HIS FORTIES (a younger Walter Gaskell) stands with PITTSBURGH PIRATE BILL MAZEROSKI at an old-timers game. As Sara eases the door shut, GRADY nods to a 1951 YANKEE'S PENNANT hanging over the mantle.

GRADY
New?

SARA
(nodding)
Walter just got it back from the framer

today.

Sara takes Grady's hand, drawing him away from the pennant and down onto the coat-covered bed.

SARA
You go first.

GRADY
All right. This morning--

SARA
I'm pregnant.

A flash of LAUGHTER flutters from the living room below. GRADY starts to speak.

SARA
I'm sure.

GRADY
Well. This is...surprising. Does Walter...
?

SARA
I think Walter would find this a little more than surprising.

GRADY nods, getting her drift, then roils onto his back.

GRADY
Emily left me this morning.

SARA
She's left before...

GRADY
She's left the room before. She always came back.

Sara nods. Considers this.

SARA
So. I guess we just divorce our spouses, marry each other, and have this baby, right? Simple.

GRADY
Simple.

GRADY and Sara stare at the ceiling. Sara sniffs the coat lying beneath her. Miss Sloviak's coat.

SARA
Is that Cristaile?

GRADY
Hm.

SARA
(weary)
My God, I wear the same scent as a transvestite. She IS a transvestite, isn't:

she?

GRADY

If she's not now, Terry will make sure she is by the end of the evening.

SARA

Has he asked to see the book yet?

GRADY

Yes.

SARA

And? Are you going to tell him?

GRADY

No. Maybe. I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do.

SARA

(distantly)
Neither do I.

GRADY starts to pull up, but his arm is underneath Sara.

GRADY

Sara, my arm. I'm stuck, honey.

SARA

I guess you're going to have to chew it off then.

INT. LIVING ROOM - GASKELL HOUSE

Poe noses blindly through a forest of legs, pauses by Miss Sloviak's high heels and scores a Rye Krisp. Crabtree, returning with a pair of DRINKS, tiptoes around him, finds MISS SLOVIAK chatting with a trim MAN in his 50's.

CRABTREE

Walter! I see you've met my friend.

WALTER GASKELL

Yes. She's charming.

MISS SLOVIAK

(taking her drink)
Walter's been telling me the most fascinating things about Marilyn Monroe and...who was it?

WALTER GASKELL

Joe DiMaggio. Simply put, Antonia, it's my contention that their marriage tapped into the very id of American popular culture. Joe DiMaggio represented, metaphorically speaking, the Husband as Slugger.. And, though it may be controversial, I personally believe every woman, in some way, desires to be Marilyn Monroe.

MISS SLOVIAK

Oh, I couldn't agree more.

NEW ANGLE

GRADY works his way through the crowd, spies Walter, and changes course. Directly ahead is an oddly commanding MAN ("Q"). From the behavior of the people in his vicinity it's clear he is someone of interest. Presently, he is putting the make on Hannah Green.

Q

And while my latest has been on the New York Times bestseller list for 40 weeks, I can't help but lament that my first book, which contains what I consider my finest writing, was remaindered in less than five. So, I find myself conflicted.

GRADY

Ask him if he's conflicted about his house in the Hamptons.

HANNAH GREEN

(brightening)
Grady.

Q eyes GRADY over his wine glass.

Q

Hello.. .Professor.

GRADY

Q,. Hannah's had two stories published in The Paris Review. You'd best dust off the 'A' material for her.

As GRADY moves off, he sees Poe sniffing, and goes the other way, heading directly into the crosshairs of a MAN IN TWEED, who is talking to another, shorter MAN.

MAN IN TWEED

(to short man)

A supermarket for the mind, my ass. I'm telling you, they're nothing but a big, fat mob laundry. Have you ever been to Davenport, Iowa? Let me tell you, they need a 30,000-square-foot bookstore like they need another goddamn cow.

(as GRADY passes)

Grady!

GRADY

Hello, Nathan.

MAN IN TWEED

My God, I haven't seen you since, what? The PEN/Faulkner Awards. That was a big night for you, Grady.

(to his friend)

GRADY was there for Arsonist's Daughter,

The short man blinks, impulsively takes Grady's hand.

SHORT MAN

Douglas Triddly, Amherst. I kid you not when I say Arsonist's Daughter belongs in the pantheon of late twentieth century fiction. I've had it on my Graduate Studies syllabus three years running.

GRADY
(pulling away)
No wonder it's still in print.

As GRADY flees, he passes a WOMAN holding a cigarette.

WOMAN WITH CIGARETTE
...can take my word for it, writer's are lousy fucks. Poets aren't bad, but then you've got to deal with the sweater thing. They'll discover the cancer in your heart every time, but God forbid they find a decent dry cleaner.

EXT. REAR GASKELL HOUSE - NIGHT

GRADY comes out the back: door and ferrets a JOINT from his pocket, lights it. He takes a long draw, walks around the side of the house. As he passes a window, a VOICE accosts him.

MAN'S VOICE
There you are.

GRADY starts, but when he looks through the window, he sees that the VOICE belongs to WALTER GASKELL and the person to whom he's talking is Sara. They are standing in the kitchen, near an elaborate WINE RACK.

WALTER
I could swear I had a '63 Chateau Latour in here. You haven't seen it, have you?

SARA
I doubt I'd recognize a '63 Chateau Latour if I was sitting on it.

WALTER
You'd recognize it if you tasted it.

SARA
I doubt it, darling.

WALTER
(angling & bottle to the light)
Well, Q certainly will. And, given that he will be addressing 500 people in little over an hour...

SARA
You want to keep him happy.

WALTER
If he's happy. . .
(kissing her as he exits)
I'm happy.

As Walter goes, GRADY studies Sara as she stands alone in the

quiet little room, looking small and tired. Finally, she takes a breath, steeling herself, and moves off, returning to the clamor inside her house.

GRADY sighs, guilt-stricken, then detects a FLICKER of LIGHT coming from the darkness beyond. A FIGURE is watching him from the retaining wall that leads to the Gaskell's garage. GRADY blinks, chagrined that he's been caught eavesdropping, then his eyes narrow and he steps off the porch.

GRADY
James?

James Leer wears the same nasty overcoat from class, a GREEN KNAPSACK hanging off one shoulder. GRADY looks at what appears to be a sliver of moonlight in James' palm.

JAMES LEER
It's fake.

James' face betrays his own fragile chagrin and GRADY peers more closely at what lies in his extended hand. The sliver of moonlight is, in fact, a shiny PEARL-HANDLED PISTOL.

JAMES LEER
It was my mother's. She won it in a penny arcade in Baltimore when she was in Catholic school.

GRADY
It's very convincing.

JAMES LEER
It used to shoot these little paper caps, but they don't make them anymore. The caps.

GRADY reaches for the gun, but James closes his fingers and slips the tiny thing back into his overcoat.

JAMES LEER
It's just. ..for good luck. Some people carry rabbits' feet...

GRADY
...You carry firearms.

As GRADY exhales a plume of smoke, James' eyes pass briefly over the jay. GRADY notices, offers.

JAMES LEER
No, thank you. I don't like to lose control of my emotions.

GRADY nods, accustomed to James' weirdness.

JAMES LEER
I'm not supposed to be here, in case you were wondering. I crashed. I mean, not intentionally...

James nods toward the house, where Hannah Green can be seen in a window, still fending off the determined Q.

JAMES LEER (cont'd)

...but the other night, Hannah and I were together, at the movies, and she asked me. Since she was coming. So I ended up coming. Too.

GRADY nods, ponders this over-elaborate explanation.

GRADY

Are you and Hannah seeing each other, James ?

JAMES LEER

No! What gave you that idea?

GRADY

Relax, James. I'm not her father. I just rent her a room.

JAMES LEER

She likes old movies like I do, that's ail. (glancing back at the window) Besides, she doesn't really know me. She thinks she does, but she doesn't. Maybe it's because she's Mormon and I'm Catholic.

GRADY

Maybe it's because she's beautiful and she knows it and try as she might to not let that screw her up, it's inevitable that it will in some way.

James looks away from the window, at Grady.

JAMES LEER

You're not like my other teachers, Professor Tripp.

GRADY

You're not like my other students, James. So what was the movie you two saw?

JAMES LEER

Huh? Oh. Son of Fury. With Tyrone Power and Frances Farmer.

GRADY

She went crazy, Frances Farmer.

JAMES LEER

So did Gene Tierney. She's in it too.

GRADY

Sounds like a good one.

JAMES LEER

(a crooked smile)
It's not bad.

GRADY considers James' fragile face.

GRADY

Listen, James, about this afternoon. In

workshop. I'm sorry. I think I let things get a bit out of control.

JAMES LEER

They really hated it. I think they hated it more than any of the other ones.

GRADY

Well...

JAMES LEER

It doesn't matter. It only took me an hour to write.

GRADY

(truly impressed)
Really? That's remarkable.

JAMES LEER

I have trouble sleeping. While I'm lying in bed I figure them out. The stories.

As James gazes off at the gloaming greenhouse, GRADY looks down at the left front POCKET of James' overcoat. Like a nervous tic, James' hand- hidden-twitches against the modest bulk of the cap gun.

GRADY

You cold, James?

JAMES LEER

(distant)
A little.

GRADY

So what are you doing out here?

JAMES LEER

It's colder in there. -

GRADY

(laughing)
You're right.

James blinks, startled by Grady's laughter, startled that he's said something funny. He looks back to the greenhouse

JAMES LEER

Actually, I saw the greenhouse. So I thought ...I thought I'd come out here and take a look at it. You don't see one of those every day. It looks like heaven...

GRADY

Heaven?

JAMES LEER

I saw a movie once. Part of it took place in heaven. Everyone wore white and lived in crystal houses. Like that. At least that's the way I remember it...

Abruptly, James glances at his watch.

JAMES LEER
I should be going.

James turns away, then stops. He stands like this a moment,
then turns back. Holds out his right hand.

JAMES LEER (cont'd)
Goodbye, Professor Tripp.

GRADY hesitates, then shakes James' hand. James moves off then,
leaving the light of the house behind.

GRADY
James.
(as he stops)
Don't leave just yet. There's something I
think you ought to see.

JAMES LEER
I'll miss my bus.

GRADY
This is worth it.

James looks conflicted.

GRADY (cont'd)
Trust me.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

It's quieter now, the party winding down, as GRADY sneaks James
past the departing guests and toward the
stairs.

HANNAH GREEN
Hey, you two.

GRADY stops, sees Hannah slipping on a coat in the foyer.

HANNAH GREEN (cont'd)
Are you riding with me, James?

JAMES LEER
No, I'm going ho--

GRADY
He's going with me. You take Crabtree. And
his friend. All right?

HANNAH GREEN
Ail right. By the way, his friend...?

GRADY
The answer's yes. I think. Yes. I don't
know. Where are they exactly?

CRABTREE
Here we are!

CRABTREE appears at the top of the landing with Miss Sloviak.
Her lipstick is blurry.

CRABTREE
(spying James)
Nell, hello there.

CRABTREE steps down the stairs, hand extended. James Leer's pale fingers rise as if on a string.

GRADY
James. This is my editor, Terry Crabtree.

HANNAH GREEN
James'll know about George Sanders.

JAMES LEER
George Sanders?

HANNAH GREEN
Mr. CRABTREE was saying how George Sanders killed himself, only he couldn't remember how.

JAMES LEER
Pills. August 25, 1972. In a Costa Brava hotel room.

The few people within earshot glance oddly at James, but Crabtree's eyes glitter with intrigue.

CRABTREE
How comprehensive of you.

HANNAH GREEN
Oh, James is amazing. He knows all the movie suicides. Go ahead, James. Tell them who else.

JAMES LEER
There's so many...

HANNAH GREEN
Just a few then. The big ones.

James glances at the loose group of people around him, watching, then...

JAMES LEER
Pier Angeli, 1971 or '72, also pills.
Charles Boyer, 1978, pills again. Charles Butterworth, I think. In a car. Supposedly it was an accident, but, you know. . .
(a trace of irony)
He was distraught. Dorothy Dandridge, she took pills in, like, 1965. Albert Dekker, 1968, he hung himself. He wrote his suicide note in lipstick on his stomach. Alan Ladd, '64, more pills, Carole Landis, pills again, I forget when. George Reeves, Superman on TV, shot himself. Jean Seberg/ pills of course, 1979. Everett Sioane-- he was good--pills. Margaret Sullavan, pills, Lupe Velez, a lot of pills. Gig Young. He shot himself and his wife in There are more

but I don't know if you would have heard of them. Ross Alexander? Clara Blandick? Maggie McNamara? Gia Scaia?

HANNAH GREEN
I haven't heard of half of those.

CRABTREE
You did them alphabetically.

James turns, finds Crabtree's laser eyes on him. James blinks, as if he had forgotten about Crabtree, then shrugs shyly, looks away.

JAMES LEER
That's just how my brain works, I guess.

CRABTREE
Fascinating. Listen, why don't you come out with us after the lecture. There's a place on the Hill I always get Trip to take me.

JAMES LEER
Actually. ..I just want to go home.

CRABTREE
Oh, don't be silly. No one your age just wants to go home. Besides, faculty will be present. Just think of it as a field trip.

As he exits, CRABTREE raises an eyebrow to Grady, as if to say: "Bring him." MISS SLOVIAK follows, eyeing James glacially as we CUT TO:

BLACK

The dull PURR of a COMBINATION LOCK is HEARD, a DOOR opens, and a triangle of LIGHT falls on a PHOTOGRAPH of MARILYN MONROES JOE DIMAGGIO on their wedding day.

INT. CLOSET - GASKELL HOUSE

GRADY and James Leer stand in the doorway. Just below the photograph of Marilyn and Joe--hanging next to a PINSTRIPED JERSEY bearing the number 5--is a SHORT BLACK SATIN JACKET trimmed with an ERMINE COLLAR.

JAMES LEER
Is that really it?

GRADY
That's really it.

JAMES LEER
The one she wore on her wedding day?

GRADY
So I'm told.

James, in the presence of the holy grail of suicide garments, stands speechless.

GRADY

(cont'd)
Go ahead.

JAMES LEER
Really?

GRADY
Really.

James swallows, then'-goes to the jacket. Carefully, he reaches out his fingers and touches the yellowed collar, barely making contact, as though it might crumble to dust.

JAMES LEER
They're glass. The buttons.

GRADY
Like the lady herself.

GRADY says this airily, ironically, riding his buzz a bit, but James nods solemnly, eyes transfixed on the jacket, as if Marilyn herself were inside it.

JAMES LEER
She was small. Most people don't know that.
The shoulders are small.
(touching the satin)
It looks so perfect. I bet it's the only
time she wore it. That day. She must've
felt so ...happy.

GRADY studies James as he takes the fringe of the jacket, lifts it lightly.

JAMES LEER
It's feels unreal, like butterfly wings
or... something. It must've cost Dr.
Gaskell a lot.

GRADY
I guess. Walter never tells Sara the truth
about how much he pays for these things.

JAMES LEER
You're really good friends with the
Chancellor, aren't you?

Grady's eyes slide, paranoid, but James' face remains unchanged, consumed with the jacket.

GRADY
(carefully)
Pretty good. I'm friends with Dr. Gaskell,
too.

JAMES LEER
I guess you must be, if you know the
combination to his closet and he doesn't
mind your being here in their bedroom like
this.

GRADY
Right.

A DOOR SLAMS downstairs and GRADY and James jump. The CLICK of a woman's HIGH HEELS sends GRADY to the bedroom window, where he watches Sara slide into a WHITE CITROEN DS23, turn on the ignition, and motor away.

GRADY

We, better skedaddle. Close that closet--
James? You ail right?

James is slumped on the Gaskell's white linen bed, knapsack between his knees, head in hands.

JAMES LEER

I'm sorry. Professor Tripp. Maybe it's seeing that jacket that belonged to her. It just looks...really lonely. Hanging there. In a closet. Maybe I'm just a little sad.

GRADY

Maybe. I'm feeling a little sad myself tonight.

JAMES LEER

You mean, with your wife leaving you and ail?
(off Grady's look)
Hannah mentioned something about it. About a note.

GRADY

Yes. Well. It's complicated, James. I think we should go now.

Without thinking, GRADY flicks out the bedroom light, leaving James Leer in the dark for the second time today.

James just sits there, a shadow in a room of shadows.

INT. HALLWAY

A LOW RUMBLE freezes GRADY as he enters the hail. A few feet away, Poe lies belly to the ground, his blind blue eyes trained, more or less, in Grady's direction.

GRADY

Okay. Easy now. Eee-zy. . . .

GRADY starts to take a step, when.... Poe shoots forward and sinks himself deep into Grady's ankle.

GRADY

Jesus!

GRADY hops gracelessly, momentarily lifting Poe off the ground as he swings his leg up. Poe, countering, rolls his head in a snapping motion and drops GRADY in a clumsy heap.

GRADY

Get off of me, you son-of-a-bitch!

Poe regains his feet, but doesn't let go, whipping his head back and forth, back and forth, over and over, growling low,

dark, and hideously from the back of his throat, until there is a sharp...

CRACK! CRACK!

Poe YELPS, goes perfectly still, then topples heavily onto Grady's legs. GRADY turns. James Leer stands in the doorway, posed with the little pearl-handled pistol like Steve McQueen.

GRADY looks at James. Then Poe. Then back to James.

GRADY

Shit, James. You shoe Dr. Gaskell's dog.

JAMES LEER

I had to. Didn't I?

GRADY

Couldn't you've just pulled him off me?

JAMES LEER

No! He was crazy. I didn't-he looked-- I thought --

GRADY

Okay, okay. Take it easy. Don't freak out on me.

GRADY roils down his sock. Apparently, Poe went through life with a slight overbite.

JAMES LEER

Do you have a mirror? It's the best way to see if someone's breathing.

GRADY

He's dead, James. Believe me, I know a dead dog when I see one.

James looks miserably at Poe.

JAMES LEER

What are we going to do?

GRADY rises awkwardly, holds out his hand.

GRADY

First you're going to give me that little cap gun of yours.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING

GRADY and James stare gloomily out the windshield.

JAMES LEER

Professor Tripp? Can I ask you a question?

GRADY

Yea, James.

JAMES LEER

What are we going to do with...

James glances in the backseat, where Poe lies, strange blue eyes gleaming.

GRADY

I don't know. I'm still trying to figure out how to tell the Chancellor I murdered her husband's dog.

JAMES LEER

You?

GRADY

Trust me, James, when the family pet's been assassinated, the owner doesn't want to hear one of her students was the triggerman.

JAMES LEER

Does she want to hear it was one of her professors?

GRADY

I've got tenure.

EXT. PARKING LOT -- THAW HALL (CAMPUS)

As sporadic APPLAUSE wafts from the high windowpanes of Thaw Hall, GRADY leans into the Galaxie's trunk, creates a space between the tuba and a ZIPPERED SUITCASE.

GRADY

Okay.

James totters forward, arms hooked under Poe's front legs looking like a sorry marathon dancer. GRADY frowns, limps forward, and takes the hind legs.

JAMES LEER

He's still a little warm.

They lay him down, push him deep into the trunk--until there is a SOUND like a pencil SNAPPING.

JAMES LEER

Yuck.

GRADY grabs Crabtree's garment bag, frisks the pockets.

JAMES LEER

That's a. big trunk. It fits a tuba, a suitcase, a dead dog, and a garment bag almost perfectly.

GRADY

(searching)
That's just what they used to say in the ads. Come on, Crabtree, I know you're holding...

JAMES LEER

Whose tuba is that anyway?

GRADY
Miss Sloviak's.

JAMES LEER
Can I ask you something about her?

GRADY
She is. Ah. Here we go...

GRADY unravels a pair of boxer shorts, finds an airplane-size bottle of JACK DANIELS, then grabs another pair of boxers.

JAMES LEER
Oh. So. Is--is your friend Crabtree-- is he--gay?

GRADY
Most of the time he is, James. Some of the time he isn't. Now what do we have here?

GRADY rattles a prescription bottle, then shakes out a pair of WHITE PILLS, each etched with a tiny numeral 3.

GRADY
Looks like ...our old friend Mr. Codeine. That should take the pinch out of my ankle. (handing the bottle to James)
Have one.

JAMES LEER
No thanks. I'm fine without them.

GRADY
Right. That's why you were standing in the Chancellor's back yard twirling that little cap gun of yours tonight. You're fine, all right, you're fit as a fucking fiddle.

GRADY opens the tiny bottle of Jack with his teeth, drinks down two number 3's, then looks at James.

GRADY
I'm sorry, James. I'm sorry I said that.

Recklessly, James takes a pill, tosses it in his mouth, and tips back the tiny bottle of Jack. Half a second later, he spits it all out. GRADY looks down, peels the soggy pill from the lapel of his jacket.

GRADY
How 'bout we try that again.

INT. AUDITORIUM - LATER

On the stage. Walter Gaskell stands alone at a podium.

WALTER
...really needs no introduction. Walk down the aisle of any airplane or by the pool of any hotel and you'll see his face beaming back at you. You all know the name, you all know the books, so welcome if you will, the

man those of us who know him simply call..
.Q.

As the audience THUNDERS, GRADY and James slink into the auditorium. It's standing room only. As they head for an open space against the back wall, GRADY squeezes past a KID with a GOATEE .who regards him warily.

Q
Good evening.

GRADY stares, over the gleaming sea of heads before him, watching as Q pauses, ..for a very long moment... waiting until the auditorium is consumed in a heavy, anticipatory hush. Finally, he speaks again.

Q
I am a writer.

As the audience EXPLODES with glee, GRADY frowns. He glances to his right, sees James' left brow crinkled with a similar look of bafflement.

Q (cont'd) As a writer, one thing you learn is that everyone you encounter has a story. Every bartender, every taxi driver, everybody has an idea or a story that would make a "great book" or a "great movie." Presumably, each of you has an idea. (gestures to the audience) But, how do you go from there to here? How do you go from having an idea to having a book? How do you get across? What is the bridge, the bridge that allows you to walk on air from the shoreline of inspiration to the terra firma of accomplishment? Faith. Faith that your story is worth the telling, faith that you have the wherewithal to tell it, faith that the carefully woven structure you create won't collapse beneath you...

GRADY glances at James, sees that his eyes are unblinking and glazed, then sees, beyond him, Sara standing by the far EXIT. A blink later, she is gone.

Q (cont'd) ...and faith that when you get to the other side someone will be waiting who gives a damn about the tale you have to tell.

GRADY leans back, listening to the BEATING of his own HEART, the soft GLIMMER of the chandeliers hanging by a thread forty feet above his head...

Abruptly, James LAUGHS OUT LOUD--some private amusement: bubbling up from the bottom of his brain and out into the auditorium. As Q looks and four hundred other heads turn, James ducks down--mortified. Crabtree, sitting a few rows away, studies James with amusement, then winks at Grady.

GRADY blinks, turns to James.

GRADY
I'll be right back.

INT. LOBBY

GRADY bursts through the auditorium doors and into the lobby. A PAIR. of local BOOKSELLERS, chatting quietly behind a table

GRADY

I don't think I really have a choice in,
that. Emily left me.

SARA

She'll come back. That's why I'm going to.
..to not have this baby.

GRADY watches her flip her hand up, bring the cigarette to her
lips, and inhale ...then grimace and drop it to the floor.

GRADY

Not have it.

SARA

No. There's no way. I mean, don't you think
there's no way?

GRADY

Well, no, I don't see any way.
(taking her hand)
And I know how hard it is for you to-- to
lose this chance.

SARA

(jerking away)
No you don't. And fuck you for saying you
do. And fuck you for "saying. . .
(quietly)
...for saying there's just no way. Because
there could be a way, Grady.

Somewhere deep in the building, APPLAUSE swells.

SARA

(composing herself)
He must be finishing. We should go.

GRADY looks sadly at Sara then stoops to retrieve his
coat. As he grabs it, James Leer's little pistol CLATTERS
to the floor.

SARA

Who's gun is that?

GRADY

It's-it's a souvenir. Of Baltimore.

Before GRADY can close his hand, Sara has it in her own.

SARA

Heavy. Smells like gunpowder.

GRADY

Caps.

She points it-at Grady's chest. He smiles nervously.

SARA

Pow.

GRADY

You got me.

her lap. Onto the open tray of the glovebox, she places a JAR of COLD CREAM, a BOTTLE of NAIL POLISH REMOVER, and a cloud of COTTON BALLS.

MISS SLOVIAK
Couldn't he have just thrown a shoe at the poor thing?

GRADY
James is. ..I don't know...

MISS SLOVIAK
Disturbed. And when your friend CRABTREE gets done with him, he's going to be even more disturbed.

GRADY
I'm not sure that's possible.

MISS SLOVIAK
Sure it is.

GRADY watches MISS SLOVIAK peel the wig from her forehead.

GRADY
Listen, Antonia--

MISS SLOVIAK
Tony. Now that I'm home.

GRADY
Tony. I'm sorry if things didn't work out so well for you tonight. With Terry.

MISS SLOVIAK
Forget it. I should've known better. Your friend is just, I don't know, into collecting weird tricks. Mind?

Tony angles the rearview mirror toward himself.

GRADY
He's writing his name in water.

MISS SLOVIAK
What's that?

GRADY
Like most editors, he really wants to be a writer, but he's too busy living a novel to bother writing one.

MISS SLOVIAK
That sounds like a fancy excuse for being a shit.

GRADY
He'd call it habit. But now. ..I get the feeling he's going through the motions a bit.

Tony peels off a pair of false eyelashes, blinks.

MISS SLOVIAK
You mean because his career's ruined and
all?

GRADY
Jesus. Is that what he told you?

MISS SLOVIAK
He said he hasn't had a success in ten
years and everyone in New York thinks he's
kind of .a. . .

As Tony re-sets the rearview mirror, GRADY gets a glimpse of
his own swollen eyes.

MISS SLOVIAK
...loser. But I'm sure your book is so good
that he'll be able to keep his job.

Hearing this, GRADY looks troubled. MISS SLOVIAK points.

MISS SLOVIAK
(cont'd)
Turn here.

EXT. SLOVIAK HOUSE

GRADY pulls in front of a small brick house. On the front lawn,
a small statue of the BLESSED VIRGIN stands under a little
white BAND SHELL painted with stars.

GRADY
That'' s nice. All we have is a Japanese
beetle trap.

MISS SLOVIAK
It's a bathtub. What she's standing under.

The PORCH LIGHT conies on and a SMALL, WHITE-HAIRED MAN squints
through the screen door.

MISS SLOVIAK
There's Pop.
(turning)
Let me see it. The gun.

GRADY reaches into his pocket, hands it over. Tony smirks.

MISS SLOVIAK
Figures. It's like the kind of gun Bette
Davis would carry. In a little beaded
purse?

GRADY studies the gun in Tony's hand, then glances at the front
screen door. Pop is still there.

GRADY
I'd better go. I think I may have to rescue
James Leer.

MISS SLOVIAK returns the gun, .steps out of the car, and peers
in at Grady.

MISS SLOVIAK

You know, Grady, if I were you. I'd think about going home. You look like you need a little rescuing yourself.

EXT. PARKING LOT - HI-HAT CLUB

GRADY parks near a VAN that has KRAVNIK'S SPORTING GOODS stenciled on the side. He watches a BOUNCER frisk a patron in the PINK LIGHT of the Hi-Hat Club's entrance, then slides - James Leer's little PISTOL into the glovebox.

EXT. ENTRANCE - HI-HAT CLUB

As GRADY steps to the door, the bouncer gives him a perfunctory pat-down.

BOUNCER

(kidding him)

Clean tonight, hub, Professor?

GRADY

As a whistle.

INT. HI-HAT CLUB

Hannah Green is dancing with a sweat-drenched Q as GRADY enters this SMOKE-FILLED RHYTHM AND BLUES club. She beckons with a finger, but Grady--Nervous at the sight of her glistening Mormon skin--merely pantomimes an exaggerated shrug and she points.

CRABTREE and James Leer sit at a dark corner table. James slouches, eyes half-closed, while CRABTREE stares in the general vicinity of the dancers, his hand extended beneath the table, in the general vicinity of James' lap.

Grady, looking a little alarmed, grabs a passing WAITRESS.

GRADY

Double Dickel on the rocks.

INT. BOOTH

As GRADY arrives, CRABTREE withdraws his hand delicately and James' eyes flutter open .briefly, ..then close.

GRADY

Is that just beer?

CRABTREE

Primarily. Although I gather you two staged a little raid on the CRABTREE pharmacopoeia. You missed a few bottles, by the way.

GRADY

I'm sure. Where is everyone?

CRABTREE

Sara and Walter declined. Guess they wanted to go home and curl up on the couch with the dog.

GRADY cuts James a glance, trying to determine if he's copped on Poe, but James is winking out. His head drifts back against the wall, settles with a gentle ...thunk.

GRADY
Jesus. He's out.

CRABTREE glances over, nods.

CRABTREE
He has a book.

GRADY
I know. He started it Fall semester.

CRABTREE
He finished it Winter Break.

GRADY looks up, unable to disguise his surprise. He glances at James' slack face tilted against the wall.

CRABTREE
So. Is he any good?

GRADY
No. Not yet he isn't.

CRABTREE
Well, I'm going to read it anyway.

GRADY
Come on. Crabs. Don't do this. He's . one of my students, for Christ sake. I'm not even sure if he's-

CRABTREE
He is. Take my word for it.

GRADY
I think it's more complicated than that. Besides, he's a little...scattered. He almost ...did something stupid tonight. At least, I think so. Anyway, he doesn't need sexual confusion thrown into the stew right now.

CRABTREE
On the contrary, it 'could be just the ticket.

WAITRESS
(ducking in)
Double Dickel.

GRADY
Thanks.

GRADY notices the waitress's nametag (OOLA) and realizes she is conspicuously PREGNANT. He watches her disappear beyond the blur of bodies on the dancefloor, where Hannah Green's slinky form seizes his attention.

CRABTREE

No sexual confusion there, eh, Professor?

GRADY

Shut up and drink.

CRABTREE grins, brings his bottle up, then stops.

CRABTREE

Oh my goodness. Do you see what I see?

GRADY follows Crabtree's glance and finds Oola again, but it's not Oola CRABTREE is eyeing, it's her CUSTOMER.

GRADY

President of the James Brown Hair Club For Men.

Sitting alone in the dark booth is a SMALL BLACK MAN with big hands, a face peppered with scar tissue, and--most noticeably-- a tsunami of hair sprouting from his scalp.

GRADY

(initiating an old game)
He's a boxer. A flyweight.

CRABTREE

Huh uh. A jockey. His name's, um, Curtis..
.Curtis Hardapple.

GRADY

Not Curtis.

CRABTREE

Vernon, then. Vernon Hardapple. The scar's are from a--from a horse. He fell during a race and got trampled.

GRADY

And now he's addicted to painkillers.

CRABTREE

He can't piss standing up anymore.

GRADY

He lives with his mother.

CRABTREE

And he had a younger brother who . . .was .
. . a . . .

GRADY

Groom. Named Claudell. And his mother blames Vernon for his death.

CRABTREE

(stumped)
Because. . .because. . .

JAMES LEER

(sleepily)
.. .he was killed, when a gangster named Freddie Nostrils tried to shoot his

Hh-uh. Last time I saw it was...

GRADY glances at the idling Galaxie across the street. CRABTREE and Q huddle inside.

GRADY
Shit. He must've left it back at Thaw. In the auditorium.

JAMES LEER
(delirious, but insistent)
Mmrrmmm.. .KNAP SAP!

GRADY frowns in annoyance, opens the passenger door.

GRADY (cont'd)
All right. Take him to my place. He can crash on the sofa.

HANNAH GREEN
The one in your office? It's the best one .for naps.

GRADY
I don't think it really matters, Hannah. We could probably stand him up in the garage with the snow shovels at this point.

As GRADY lowers James into the seat, he WHIMPERS, curls into a ball. Hannah turns her puppy dog eyes on Grady.

GRADY
Ail right. In my office.

As GRADY starts to turn away, Hannah's fingers graze his face.

HANNAH GREEN
Hey. If you want to talk later...I'll be up.

GRADY watches her fold her lovely self into the car and drive away. He sighs, crosses to the Galaxie, and just has his hand on the doorhandle when a TINY FIGURE appears.

Vernon Hardapple.

VERNON HARDAPPLE
You driving this car?

GRADY
Excuse me?

VERNON HARDAPPLE
This 1966 maroon Ford Galaxie 500. You driving this car?

GRADY
It's mine.

VERNON HARDAPPLE
Bullshit. It's mine, motherfucker.

GRADY

amazement as Vernon materializes from behind the high wooden fence that runs parallel to the Galaxie.

As GRADY pinches the brakes, Vernon grins.

GRADY
Now what?

Q
(mischievously)
You could always go over him.

Then, as the three men watch, Vernon rocks back on his heels and--with a gymnast's precision--pitches himself onto the Galaxie's big hood. He -lands on his ass, slides smoothly off, then takes a deep bow and disappears into the night.

Q
What just happened?

GRADY peers at the wrinkled asterisk on his hood.

GRADY
I just had my car jumped on.

EXT. THAW HAIL - NIGHT (TWENTY MINUTES LATER)

Grady stops the car in the red zone and gets out.

GRADY
Wait here. I'll be right back.

CRABTREE
Where would we go?

INT. LOBBY

The JANITOR, the same shaggy-haired kid GRADY saw rigging the WordFest banner earlier, is struggling with a balky FLOOR WAXER as GRADY steps up to the double doors and slaps his hand against the glass.

JANITOR
It's open.

GRADY pushes on the door and it opens.

JANITOR (cont'd)
Hey, Professor Tripp.
(off Grady's look)
Traxler. Sam. I took your class freshman year. Then I dropped out of school.

GRADY
I hope it wasn't my fault.

TRAXLER
(taking him seriously)
No. I guess you're here for the backpack.

GRADY
Oh.. .yeah.

the MINIATURE BASKETBALL HOOP that crowns the rim of the WASTE BASKET across the room.

All net.

A 9-VOLT CROWD ROAR belches from the hoop and, without further ceremony, GRADY turns to the blank page curling from his IBM SELECTRIC and SPACES to the top right corner, TYPES:

(beat) 2611

In other words: Page 2611.

CLOSE UP - THE TYPEWRITER PAPER -- darkening with WORDS, the KEYS SNAPPING faster and faster, a CRAZY CLAMOR that grows and grows until, finally, it justStops.

GRADY
James I

GRADY awakes with his back to the floor, James leer's quizzical face floating like a cloud above him.

GRADY
I'm okay. I just lost my balance.

JAMES LEER
I put you on the floor.

GRADY
Oh.

JAMES LEER
I thought you might--I don't know-- swallow your tongue or something.
(nodding to Grady's robe)
I guess you really miss her, huh?

GRADY peers down at the geraniums blooming on the pockets of the robe, its overall fuzziness.

GRADY
Huh? Oh, no. This isn't Emily's. I just write in it.

JAMES LEER
I guess there's probably a story behind that.

GRADY
There is, but it's not that interesting.

James nods. Down the hallway, in another room, the TELEPHONE RINGS.

JAMES LEER
Want me to get that?

GRADY
Sure.

As James shuffles away in the sleeping bag, GRADY rises delicately and turns toward the window, ..just in time to see a

POLICE CAR roil slowly by on the screen below.

JAMES LEER
(returning)
He didn't give his name.

GRADY
Who?

JAMES LEER
The guy on the phone.

GRADY
What'd he say?

JAMES LEER
He wanted to know if a GRADY Trip? lived
here and drove a dark maroon 1966 Ford
Galaxie 500 with black interior.

GRADY
What'd you tell him?

JAMES LEER
Yes.

GRADY
Good, James. If the Zodiac killer calls, be
sure to mention the back door pops open
with a couple hard shakes to the right.

JAMES LEER
I thought maybe you'd won a radio contest
or something. Is that single-spaced?

James has noticed the towering stack of 20 Ib. bond on Grady's
desk.

GRADY
Afraid so.

JAMES LEER
That's a big book you're writing.

GRADY
I think it's sort of writing itself at this
point.

JAMES LEER
Wow, Hannah always swore you were working,
but--

GRADY
But . . . ?

JAMES LEER
Nothing, it's just that,, well, it's been
awhile since Arsonist's Daughter, and some
people--some of the kids in workshop--
thought maybe you were...

GRADY
Washed up?

JAMES LEER
Blocked.

GRADY
Ah. I don't believe in writer's block.

James takes another glance at the mammoth manuscript.

JAMES LEER
No kidding.

A LOUD HACKING is HEARD. GRADY and James turn, watch Crabtree, wearing only a pair of striped boxers, materialize in the hallway.

CRABTREE
Good morning, boys. James.

James waves feebly from beneath the sleeping bag.

GRADY
(re: James' "attire")
If-you 're planning on staying for
breakfast, I'd put on something a little
less comfortable if I were you.

As GRADY moves to his desk to reacquaint himself with the page curling from the typewriter, James continues to stare into the emptiness of the hallway. The sight of CRABTREE seems to have made him suddenly queasy.

JAMES LEER
Professor Tripp?

GRADY
Hm.

JAMES LEER
How did I get here last night?

GRADY
No one seems to know where you live, James.
Hannah thought you'd like my couch.

JAMES LEER
And ...and before that. Did I do anything?
Anything bad?

GRADY
Well, James, you did shoot the Head of the
English Department's dog and steal his most
prized piece of memorabilia.

As James contemplates this, the DOORBELL RINGS. GRADY looks up, sees the POLICE CAR he noticed earlier, now parked at the bottom of his driveway.

GRADY
Do yourself a favor, James ...Hide.

EXT. FRONT PORCH

GRADY
The perpetrator.

OFFICER PUPCIK
No, the dog.

GRADY
Just kidding.

Pupcik nods slowly, as if re-filing GRADY under "Dealing With Assholes."

OFFICER PUPCIK
One other thing. About this kid, this student of yours- Leer--James Leer. You wouldn't know how I could get in touch with him, would you?

GRADY
I might have his number on campus.

OFFICER PUPCIK
That's all right. We'll find him.

Pete Pupcik smiles, tips his big blue police hat, and turns away. GRADY frowns, starts to close the door...

HANNAH GREEN (O.S.)
There you are...

GRADY stiffens, then turns to find Hannah Green across the room in her t-shirt and cowboy boots, looking ail dewyeyed and delectable.

HANNAH GREEN
I thought we were going to talk. Last night.

GRADY
Oh. Well. I...

Hannah stretches and the t-shirt slides dangerously up her thighs.

HANNAH GREEN
It's okay. ..I'm here when you want me.

GRADY stands frozen as Hannah smiles sleepily, pushes through the swinging door into the kitchen. A THUMPING is heard as James, tangled in the sleeping bag, hitches down the last few steps of the stairway. He watches Pete Pupcik drive away in his big police car.

JAMES LEER
What do we do now?

####Before GRADY can reply, .the TELEPHONE sitting on the table next to him ####RINGS.

GRADY
Hello?

SARA'S VOICE

Grady, it's Sara. Thank God you're there.
You won't believe what's happened.

GRADY

Could you hold on a minute, honey?

With a look of wonderment, GRADY watches his hand everso-
gently ...hang up the phone.

GRADY

How 'bout we get the hell out of here?

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - MORNING (MOMENTS LATER)

James, now wearing one of Grady's flannel shirts beneath his
ratty overcoat, follows Grady-to the Galaxie, knapsack swinging
from his shoulder. GRADY tosses him a ring of KEYS.

GRADY

You start her up.

As GRADY runs a plastic WEDGE over the GLAZE of ice blanketing
the windshield, James stares curiously at the keys, as if they
were some strange artifact, then slides behind the steering
wheel.

JAMES LEER

(as the engine roars)
How's that?

GRADY

Well done, James.

As GRADY works, James' face comes into view, then ...the wedge
SNAPS, splintering into the flesh of Grady's hand.

GRADY (cont'd)

Shit!

James blinks, pokes his head out the window.

JAMES LEER

You're bleeding. Professor Tripp.

INT. AISLE - MARKET - MORNING (LATER) &

GRADY and James stand in the sundries aisle of a neighborhood
MARKET. GRADY has a TIN of BAND-AIDS open and is presently
plastering his ragged thumb.

GRADY

Where exactly do you live, James?

James, in the midst of chugging from a 64-OUNCE JUG of ORANGE
JUICE, stops.

GRADY

Apparently not even Hannah Green has a clue
as to the location of your apartment.

GRADY tosses the tin of band-aids into a small plastic hand
basket, begins to move down the aisle.

JAMES LEER
I got kicked out. Well, not exactly kicked out. I was asked to leave.

GRADY
I guess there's probably a story behind that.

JAMES LEER
There is, but it's not that interesting.

GRADY
So where have you been staying?

JAMES LEER
(a long pause)
The bus station.

GRADY stares incredulously at James.

JAMES LEER
It's not -so bad. I know the night janitor. And there's a broken locker I can put my stuff.

GRADY
(trying to fathom this)
But James. I mean. ..How long?

JAMES LEER
A couple weeks. That's why... that's why I had the gun. For protection.

GRADY
Jesus, James, you should've told someone.

JAMES LEER
Who?

GRADY
I don't know...
(unconvincingly)
Me.

GRADY drops the basket at the check-out counter and, abruptly, finds himself face to face with a BABY, lolling on the shoulder of the woman before him. The baby is staring, spellbound, at a display of...Q'S LATEST PAPERBACK. GRADY frowns, then detects the true source of enchantment: a spray of SHINY MYLAR GIFT BALLOONS.

A thought evolves.

GRADY (cont'd)
(the balloons)
What do you think of these?

James takes another chug from his jug, nods.

JAMES LEER
Nice.

EXT. GASKELL HOUSE - MORNING

Grady, squinting through the ten-inch panel of cleared ice on the windshield, roils slowly up onto the curb in front of Walter and Sara Gaskell's house ...then off.

INT. GALAXIE - CONTINUOUS

GRADY pops the glovebox, takes out a PEN, and scratches something on the GIFT CARD attached to the BALLOON. James glances briefly at a plump ZIPLOC OF POT stashed in the glovebox, then peers at the house.

JAMES LEER
(the house)
Isn't this...?

GRADY
Hm.

GRADY gets out, then pauses, glancing at the giant orange juice jug between James legs. It's about half-down.

GRADY
You better ease off that stuff, James. It's pretty acidic.

James takes a powdered donut that lies on his coat, studies it curiously.

JAMES LEER
I can't help myself. I don't know what's the matter with me.

GRADY
Shit, James, you're hungover. What do you think's the matter with you?

As GRADY turns away, James ponders this, then considers the ring of white sugar imprinted on his coat and re-sets the donut in precisely the same place.

INT. GREENHOUSE - MOMENT LATER

Through the steamy panes, we SEE GRADY approach with the balloon, enter. He crosses to a high table, sets the balloon down, and steps back, considering the placement.

SARA O.S.)
Feeling guilty?

GRADY jumps--startled--and turns. Sara has materialized behind a ficus, large POTTING GLOVES on her hands.

SARA (cont'd)
I can't believe you hung up on me, you dick.

GRADY
Totally. I'm sorry. A lot was happening this morning. Can you talk?

Sara nods, moves the ficus to another table.

SARA

Walter's on campus, being the good soldier for WordFest. But he's a basket case. Someone stole Marilyn's jacket last night. And Poe's missing, too.

GRADY

I-heard.

SARA

You heard? How?

GRADY

A twelve-year-old policeman came by the house this morning.

SARA

Did you confess?

GRADY looks up, mildly alarmed.

SARA

Your fingerprints were all over the bedroom.

GRADY

Really? That was fast.

SARA

(frowning)
I'm kidding. Hello?

GRADY

Oh. Right. Ha. Listen, about last night. There is something I need to tell...

SARA

Are you limping? Why are you limping?

GRADY

Hub? Oh, well, that's part of what I need to .

SARA

Did you pass out again, Grady? Did you fall somewhere?

GRADY

No. I mean. Well, actually, yes. Sort of. I don't remember. Listen, Sara, I have to tell you something.

SARA

All right.

Sara settles back, folds her arms. Waiting.

GRADY

I...

As GRADY stares into Sara's eyes, things begin to blur.

GRADY (cont'd)
...want to be with you.

Sara looks at him.

SARA
Gee, Grady, that sounded so
heartfelt. I don't know whether to
swoon or smirk.

GRADY
Really, Sara, I...

Sara holds up one gloved hand.

SARA
I believe you. I believe you want to be
with me. But this is not just about me
anymore.

GRADY
I know that. I know what's at stake here...

SARA
No, I don't think you do. And besides... I
haven't decided yet.

GRADY
About the baby.

SARA
That ...and you.

GRADY goes still, watches Sara strip off the gloves, drop them
on a table.

SARA
I'm not going to draw the map for you on
this one, Grady. Times like these you have
to do your own navigating.

Sara turns to leave, then stops, squinting far down the street.

SARA
Who's that sitting in your car?

GRADY
James Leer.

SARA
What's he doing out there?

GRADY
I'm sort of helping him work through some
issues.

Sara raises an eyebrow, then pushes through the door.

SARA
Isn't he lucky.

GRADY watches her ripple across the glass, head for the house,
and wave. James, slumped low in the Galaxie, offers a limp hand

in return, but it's too late.

She's already gone.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING - LATER 54

GRADY cradles the wheel in his bandaged paw, while James sits stiffly, the orange juice jug bobbing between his thighs.

JAMES LEER

She seemed to take it pretty well.

GRADY

Yeah, well, actually. . .

James looks over.

GRADY (cont'd)

The moment didn't really present itself.

James nods, unsurprised, then turns back to the window, staring at the landscape, still sitting oddly still. GRADY glances at him. At the orange juice jug.

GRADY (cont'd)

You' re not planning on puking in my car,
are you, James?

Nothing.

GRADY

Don't be proud, James. We're in Sewickley
Heights. We could find you a nice golf
course to barf on.

JAMES LEER

(sharply)
No.

GRADY looks over, surprised by the James' tone. James blinks, looks embarrassed.

JAMES LEER (cont'd)

I mean. I'm fine. I'm sorry. I just...

James peers out the window at passing landscape.

JAMES LEER (cont'd)

I've got a thing about, ..places like this.
I know what those houses are like. I know
what the people are like.

GRADY

Your aunt ?

James turns, eyes flashing with surprise.

GRADY (cont'd)

Hannah mentioned something about an aunt.

James nods vaguely, then reaches into the ashtray, takes a JOINT between his fingers, sniffs it.

JAMES LEER
Humboldt County?

GRADY
(surprised)
Maybe...

JAMES LEER
It's my father. He gets it from his doctor.

GRADY
Glaucoma?

JAMES LEER
Colon cancer.

GRADY
Jesus, James. Wow.

James puts the joint back in the ashtray.

JAMES' LEER
It's a bit of a scandal. My parents live in
a small town.

GRADY
Where's that?

JAMES LEER
Carvel.

GRADY
Carvel? Where's Carvel?

JAMES LEER
Outside Scranton.

GRADY
I never heard of it.

JAMES LEER
It's a hellhole. Three motels and a
mannequin factory. My dad worked there for
thirty-five years.

GRADY
Your father worked in a mannequin factory?

JAMES LEER
Seitz Plastics. That's where he met my
morn. She was a fry cook in the cafeteria.
Before that, she'd been a dancer.

GRADY
What kind of dancer? .

JAMES LEER
Whatever kind they wanted her to be.

GRADY
(in disbelief)
James Leer, are you telling me your mother
was a stripper?

JAMES LEER

I'm telling you what I was told by my uncle. And he should know. He ran half a dozen men's clubs in Baltimore before he skipped town on a bad debt.

GRADY

Didn't you say your Mom went to Catholic school?

JAMES LEER

When we fall, we fall hard.

GRADY

Amazing.

GRADY takes the joint from the ashtray, lights it, then notices--with surprise--James has his hand out.

GRADY (cont'd)

I thought you were the guy who didn't like to lose control of his emotions.

JAMES LEER

Maybe I just needed the moment to present itself.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD (KINSHIP) - DAY .(ONE HOUR LATER)

GRADY glides down the graceful, tree-lined streets of a modest, but well-kept neighborhood. James still has the JOINT--now only a tiny nub--pinched between his fingers.

JAMES LEER

This is so nice. It's like where Andy Hardy would live. What's it called again?

GRADY

Kinship.

JAMES LEER

Kinship. And what's here?

GRADY

Unless I miss my bet...my wife.

James' heavy eyelids flutter with surprise.

JAMES LEER

The one that left you?

GRADY

That's right. That one.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - WINTERS FAMILY HOUSE

GRADY RAPS on the front door, then cups his hands against the glass of the living room window, squints inside. Nothing. As he turns away, GRADY sees James sitting on the hood of the Galaxie with the box of powdered donuts. He's sitting in the indentation.

JAMES LEER
Someone jumped on your car with their butt
..-

GRADY
How can you tell?

JAMES LEER
You can see the outline of a butt.

As GRADY nods, James holds out the donut box.

JAMES LEER (cont'd)
Want one. They're incredible. Incredible.

GRADY
Smoke the rest of that joint, James, and
you can start on the box.

EXT. BACK PORCH - BACK YARD (MOMENTS LATER)

As GRADY steps onto the back porch, James follows.

JAMES LEER
Maybe she didn't come here.

GRADY
She came here. We'll just wait. In the
meantime, I need you to shimmy through.

James stares at the "Doggy Door"; cut into the back
porch door.

GRADY
Relax. Emily hasn't carried a house key
since she was twelve years old. And your
hips are as slim as hers.

JAMES LEER
It's not that. It just reminded me of-- you
know-of what's in the car. In the trunk.

GRADY
(a pang of guilt himself)
Oh. Right. Well, let's try not to think
about that.

James takes another sad glance at the little door, then drops
onto all fours.

INT. LIVING ROOM - WINTERS HOUSE - MOMENTS
LATER

GRADY leads James through the house. Everything about it speaks
of family. Even the furniture seems arranged so that people
will gather together, light a fire, talk.

JAMES LEER
It feels really... good. ..here.

GRADY
I know. It's the house you want to wake up
in on Christmas morning.

(moving off)
Make yourself at home. I'll be right back.

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM 60

Grady, laboring badly on his ankle, enters and finds a DUFFEL BAG open on the floor, its contents a tangle of quickly-packed clothes. Everything else in the room feels of another time. PHOTOGRAPHS are everywhere, documenting a PRETTY GIRL'S life, from first recital to cap and gown.

One photograph lies face down. GRADY turns it over and finds the pretty girl grown into a beautiful young woman, standing in a white gown next to a younger Grady--on their wedding day.

INT. DEN

James enters, FRENCH ROLL in hand, and sees a REMOTE CONTROL atop the BAR. Taking it, he points it at the WIDESCREEN TELEVISION imbedded in the opposite wall and, seconds later, GEORGE SANDERS walks into his CLOSE-UP.

GEORGE SANDERS

There's no such thing as a good influence,
Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral...

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Grady, a PINK PRINCESS PHONE to his ear, lies on the bed next to a huge TEDDY BEAR.

GRADY

(into phone)

Yes, I'm looking for the Chancellor... I don't know. She should be in the main hall... Thank you.

INT. DEN

James runs through the channels, pauses on MARTIN MILNER and GEORGE MAHARIS, riding in their curvy Corvette.

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - SAME TIME

A Nelson Riddle's THEME FROM ROUTE 66 BOOMS from below, GRADY cups a hand over his ear.

GRADY

Sara? Hi. It's Grady.

SARA'S VOICE

Where are you, Grady? An elevator?

GRADY

I'm in Kinship. Listen, Sara, there's some things we need to talk about...

SARA'S VOICE

(evenly)

You're in Kinship?

GRADY

Yes. But that's not why I called...

GRADY

Yes. He's a good kid. Maybe a little messed up.

HANK

Well, I'm sure with the proper guidance he'll be fine.

GRADY tries to read Hank's face---is he messing with him?--but Hank gives nothing away. GRADY nods to the book.

GRADY

What made you pull out that old thing?

HANK

(shrugging)

I was thinking of you.

GRADY

And?

HANK

It's no Arsonist's Daughter, but I guess you know that. It's a young man's book. It got me remembering how it felt to be young.

GRADY

Maybe I should read it.

HANK

Oh, I don't think there's any danger of you aging prematurely, Grady.

GRADY doesn't have to read Hank's face this time.

GRADY

Where's Emily, Hank?

HANK

I 'don't know if she'd want me to tell you that, Grady.

GRADY

I'm not going to stalk her. Hank. I just..want to know where I stand.

Hank looks up, incredulous.

HANK

Where you stand?

GRADY

(embarrassed)

l-just want to say I'm sorry.

HANK

She's in Philadelphia seeing Linda Aahby. The neurologist.

GRADY

Neurologist? Why? What's wrong?

HANK

(frowning)
Nothing's wrong. They went to Wellesley together.

GRADY
(sheepishly)
Oh. Right. Linda ...I haven't been doing a lot of sleeping lately. My editor's in town and I have the book to finish and--

HANK
Ah, right. The book.

GRADY starts to continue, then stops, cowed by something in Hank's tone, something dismissive. Instead, he looks away, toward the living room, and catches sight of James again, sitting alone now with his big cup of cocoa.

GRADY
Listen, Hank, I'm sorry about all this. I didn't come here to upset you and Irene. I want you to know that.

HANK
Why did you come here, Grady?

GRADY gestures vaguely.

GRADY
I -just wanted to see her, I guess-- Emily. And to see you too-you and Irene. And to let everyone know that, even though it may be difficult to comprehend now, this-everything that's happening-it's not forever. It doesn't mean
"Goodbye."

HANK
Give me a break, Grady.

Hank snaps off the tape, slaps Grady's ankle.

HANK
You're done.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING - DUSK 71

GRADY glowers darkly at the road, then puts his hand up against the HEATING VENT which, apparently, is not putting out any heat.

JAMES LEER
I'm having a really good time, Professor Tripp.

GRADY glances over, sees James burrowing into the Ziploc.

GRADY
I'm really happy for you, James. But do me a favor, will you? Lay off my dope. That stuff's not for amateurs.

James looks at Ziploc as GRADY fiddles with the heat LEVER.

JAMES LEER

I just wanted a little sip.

GRADY

(squinting at him)
I just wanted a little sip? Tell me, James,
exactly what point was it that you turned
into Serpent Boy?

JAMES LEER

Probably about the time you gave me the
codeine pills last night.

GRADY stops with the heater, glances over at James, whose face
bears not the slightest trace of irony.

GRADY

Jesus...
(thinking, then. . .)
Look, James, you appear to possess-like
many an aspiring writer before you, by the
way-a rather ardent affinity for the stuff
of which dreams are made. However, I 'think
it's best if, for the moment at least
(taking the Ziploc)
...we abstain.

JAMES LEER

You're mad at me, aren't you?

GRADY

What?

JAMES LEER

You're mad because I shot your girlfriend's
dog.

GRADY

It wasn't her dog. It's her husband's--
(stopping)
Who said anything about girlfriend?

James eyes shift slowly, as if to 'say: Who are you kidding?

GRADY

Okay, James, I wish you hadn't shot my
girlfriend's dog. Even though Poe and I
weren't exactly what you'd call simpatico,
that's no reason for him to take two in the
chest. Still, the fact remains that I'm the
one who took you up into the Chancellor's
bedroom. I'm the one who has to take the
blame. I- don't know what the hell I was
thinking.

JAMES LEER

Sure you do. You were thinking: 'That's no
cap gun in that kid's overcoat.' You were
thinking 'I can't let that kid get on the
bus alone-he might never get on the bus
again.' You were thinking: 'I've got to
find a way to distract this kid. ' So you

did. It was--in its way--a noble act.

GRADY

Thanks for the halo, James, but I've .
never done that much thinking ahead in
my" life-ever.

James looks -out the window, pondering this.

JAMES LEER

So, why did you take me up there?

GRADY

(feeling for the heat again)
I -don' t know, James . I don' t know why I
do half the things I do. Who does?
(looking over)
Why do you wear that coat?

James looks down, a little defensive.

JAMES LEER

It's warm.

GRADY

James, fall semester, first day of class,
it was 95 degrees and you were wearing the
coat.

James just blinks, no ready answer-available.

GRADY

That's why they all give you such a hard
time in workshop.

JAMES LEER

Because of my coat?

GRADY

Because you act like a goddamn spook all
the time. Not to mention the fact that
every last one of them is jealous of you.

JAMES LEER

(smirking)
Jealous? Of me?

GRADY

Not you. Your talent.

James' face hardens. He looks away.

JAMES LEER

You're lying.

GRADY

The hell I am.

JAMES LEER

Yes you are. My stuff stinks. I know it.
You said so yourself.

GRADY

I never said that.

JAMES LEER

Yes you did. Last night. To your friend Crabtree. "Is he any good?" he said. And you said: "Not yet he isn't." I heard you myself.

GRADY

I didn't mean it that way.

JAMES LEER

It's okay, Professor Tripp. Carrie, Howard, the others--they 're right. My stories are annoying. They go on and on and on, and the longer they go on the more annoying they become, until finally you just want to grab something heavy and--

GRADY

Shut up, James. You're annoying. Carrie and Howard don't know what the fuck they're talking about, okay? The entire class combined including the lovely Hannah Green has about one tenth of one percent the talent you have, okay?

James stares blankly at Grady, then turns his face to the window. He ponders Grady's words, the praise inherent in them. A hint of pleasure glints in his eyes.

JAMES LEER

But, last night...

GRADY

Who cares what-. I said last night, James I was drunk, I was stoned. I'd been bitten by a dog. My wife had left me. How 'bout cutting me some slack?

JAMES LEER

(quietly)
I'm sorry.

GRADY

And don't be so goddamn sensitive. Who cares what anybody thinks anyway? You want to .be a good writer? You want to be-a great writer? Then stop giving a damn what other people think. Most of them haven't thought in .years.

James turns, studies Grady's face as it flickers in the first headlights of the evening.

GRADY

Let me spell it .out for you, James. Books don't mean anything. Not to anybody. Not anymore.

JAMES LEER

Arsonist's Daughter meant something.

GRADY smiles contemptuously.

JAMES LEER

I mean it. It means something to me. It's one of the reasons I came to school here. To be in your class. To be taught by you. (quietly)
It's one of the reasons I wanted to become a writer.

GRADY stares ahead, watching the darkness tumble away before the wide sweep of the Galaxie's headlights.

GRADY

Well, for that, if nothing else, James, I'm sorry.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP/MOTEL - OFF THE HIGHWAY - EVENING

GRADY rolls into a space near the coffee shop and James slides out. GRADY stays put, hands still on the wheel.

JAMES LEER

You coming?

GRADY

In a minute. Get us a table.

James nods, pushes past the glass doors into the coffee shop, and a big REDHEAD in a waitress cap leads him to a table with a view of the highway. GRADY watches James-- stick figure in black brogues--slide into the booth and open his big, laminated menu.

Finally, as if concluding some internal debate, GRADY kicks open his door, steps out.

EXT. PHONE BOOTH - PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

GRADY rests his forehead against the PAYPHONE as he speaks.

GRADY

C-a-r-v-e-I. That's right, Carvel. Yes, I'm sure. It's outside Scranton.

GRADY straightens up, takes a peek at James, sitting by himself on the far side of the coffee shop.

GRADY

You have no listing. Okay, well, lady-- at this very moment, as we speak, I'm looking of a resident of Carvel, Pennsylvania. I think he'd be pretty interested to learn that the good people of Bell Atlantic have misplaced his entire hometown. It's not like I'm making this up as I go along--

GRADY stops, his own words ringing in his head.

GRADY (cont'd)

Never mind. My mistake.

EXT. GALAXIE - PARKING LOT 74

GRADY upends James' knapsack, sifts through: An AUTOGRAPHED POSTCARD of FRANCES FARMER. A wrinkled box of CHICLETS. Nothing. Then he notices ERROL FLYNN'S eyebrows peeking at him from the knapsack's side pouch.

He takes the book, opens it. Bingo. A library notice: James Seiwyn Leer is three weeks overdue. Under ADDRESS it says only: "On File." But if one was to dial the PHONE NUMBER, odds are it won't be the night janitor at the Greyhound depot who picks up.

INT. BOOTH - COFFEE SHOP - NIGHT (LATER)

The remains of a FRIED CLAM SANDWICH sit before James as he turns his attention to a GIANT PIECE OF LEMON MERINGUE PIE. GRADY sips only coffee, stealing glances at the cars that whip by on the highway beyond the window.

JAMES LEER
Want a bite?

GRADY
No thanks.

JAMES LEER
That's why you're having them. Your spells.

GRADY
Spells? Jesus, James, you make it sound like we're in a Tennessee Williams play. I don't have spells.

JAMES LEER
What would you call them then?

GRADY
I don't know. ...'Episodes.'

James shrugs, spears a fluffy chunk of pie.

JAMES LEER
It's because you don't eat.

GRADY
I eat.

JAMES LEER
When?

GRADY
When nobody's looking.

GRADY watches a pair of headlights approach...

JAMES LEER
(mouth full, garbled)
I just worry about you, that's all.

...then pass. James' words finally register. GRADY looks at him.

GRADY

family this weekend.

FRED LEER

Well, of course, we can understand that.

GRADY considers the two glittering ghosts before him. They seem to be waiting. Just waiting.

GRADY

Well. Let me go get him.

GRADY turns for the coffee shop, then stops, looks back.

GRADY (cont'd)

I "hope you won't consider this forward of me, Amanda, but I wonder if I might ask. ..did you ever attend Catholic school?

Amanda Leer's eyes narrow ever-so-slightly.

AMANDA LEER

Excuse me?

INT. BOOTH - COFFEE SHOP77

James is glowering at the parking lot as GRADY returns.

JAMES LEER

I'm not going with them..

GRADY

James. Listen. Things-things are a little weird with me right now and I-- well--I have enough blame to shoulder these days without having to take the blame if something bad happened to you. And if you hang around me long enough, something bad is going to happen, trust me. That's why I need you to go home. Understand?

JAMES LEER

I'm not going, with them.

GRADY

James, like it or not, they're your parents.

JAMES LEER

Parents? They're not my parents. They're my grandparents. My parents are dead.

GRADY stares at-James wearily.

JAMES LEER

I swear. My father had his own airplane he used to fly up to Quebec. One Christmas, he and my mom were flying up to our house in the Laurentians when the plane went down. It was in the newspaper.

GRADY doesn't flinch, unpersuaded.

As Fred Leer SLAMS the back door of the Mercedes, GRADY waves vaguely, peers into the darkness of the back seat.

FRED LEER

Thank you. Professor Tripp.

GRADY

Take care of him.

AMANDA LEER

Oh, don't worry. We'll take care of him.
You can be sure of that.

Fred Leer hits the gas and swings the Mercedes around in a tight little arc, feathering Grady's pants--from the knee down--with a pudding of ICE and MUD. GRADY glances down at his spattered self, then notices, sitting on the front passenger seat, James' knapsack. GRADY grabs it, turns.

GRADY

Hey!

GRADY'S POV - REAR WINDOW as the Mercedes begins to pull away and James turns, elbows on the back dash, his pale face slack. Spying Grady, he raises one limp hand, and then-as if it were held by a string-lets it drop.

GRADY (cont'd)

(softly)

Hey.

EXT. PARKING LOT - MOTEL/COFFEE SHOP - A. BIT LATER

GRADY sits in-the GREEN GLOW of .the radio dial, smoking a joint. He glances at the knapsack, sees James' MANUSCRIPT:

The Love Parade

He reaches in, takes the manuscript and, in the light that rains from the PARKING LAMP overhead, begins to read.

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

(LATER) 80

Grady's HOUSE looks like a three-dollar whore on a block full of nuns. MUSIC BLARES, LIGHT BLAZES from every window, and there are so many CARS GRADY is forced to leave the Galaxie in the middle of the street.

GRADY

(knowingly)

Crabtree.

INT. GRADY'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Times Square before the ball drops. GRADY enters, scans the room, then shoulders his way to the stairs.

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE

Hannah Green sits on the sofa, twisting a long strand of hair around her finger as she reads a THICK MANUSCRIPT.

GRADY
(entering)
Hey.

HANNAH GREEN
Grady!

She slaps the page she is reading back onto the stack at her thigh. GRADY stares. The manuscript. It's his.

HANNAH GREEN
(embarrassed)
I know I shouldn't have, but there it was,
just sort of lying out, and I couldn't
resist and-and--I suck.

GRADY
No, it's okay. I just can't believe I left
it out in the open like that. CRABTREE
hasn't been in here, has he? Poking around?

HANNAH GREEN
I don't know--maybe- I don't think so.

Grady's mind races with unfortunate possibilities, but only briefly: his immediate thoughts are elsewhere.

GRADY
Listen, Hannah. You don't remember where
that aunt worked, do you? James' aunt.

HANNAH GREEN
He shot the Chancellor's dog, didn't he?
The blind one.

GRADY
Actually, He's not the Chancellor' s--What?

HANNAH GREEN
At first the police thought he just ran
away, but this afternoon Dr. Gaskell found
some blood spots on the carpet -

GRADY
Jesus.

HANNAH GREEN
CRABTREE said it sounded like something
James would be messed up in.

GRADY
Crabtree? He doesn't even know James.

HANNAH GREEN
Who does?

Just then, Crabtree's VOICE bellows in the hallway outside.

CRABTREE (O.S.)
Trip?! Where are you'

GRADY looks anxiously toward the door.

Gee, I don't know. Crabs. I don't seem to remember you actually asking me if you could invite 200 people over to trash my living room.

CRABTREE
Sometimes we have to improvise.

GRADY
(ignoring him)
Think, Hannah. Does James have any friends. I mean, besides you and. ..me?

CRABTREE
James? My James? What's happened?

GRADY
Nothing, he's just been sort of, I don't know.. .kidnapped.

CRABTREE
Kidnapped? By who?

GRADY
His parents.

CRABTREE
Good God. Let's go rescue him.

GRADY
Good idea. Crabs. Only one problem. I don't know where they live.

CRABTREE
Ah. Wait a minute. The university must know where he lives.

GRADY
It's a little late to call Admissions.

CRABTREE
Is it a little late to call the Chancellor?

GRADY
Maybe ...I don't know.

HANNAH GREEN
Two-sixty-two Baxter Drive.

GRADY and CRABTREE turn, see Hannah sitting on the corner of Grady's desk with the WHITE PAGES open on her lap.

HANNAH GREEN (cont'd)
They're in the book.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING - TEN MINUTES LATER

CRABTREE snaps James' manuscript closed.

CRABTREE
You know--based on what I've read-- this is a very exciting piece of material, this Big Parade.

GRADY

Love. It's Love facade--and what do you mean 'based on what you've read'? You skimmed two chapters at 80 miles an hour while gargling methamphetamines.

CRABTREE

I've been doing this a long time, Tripp. I feel this kid in my bones.

GRADY

Only in your bones?

GRADY smirks, glances at Crabtree, but gets a surprise; CRABTREE offers no snappy come-back, no antic wordplay. He just stares out the window, his voice distant.

CRABTREE

No. I think I might be right. I've felt it before...

As Crabtree's voice trails off, GRADY studies him.

GRADY

How bad is it for you?

CRABTREE

Bad enough. And God knows I don't exactly fit the new corporate profile.

GRADY

Which is?

CRABTREE

Competence.

GRADY and CRABTREE look at each other a moment, then CRABTREE smiles, gives a little shrug, and picks up James' knapsack, rummaging through the contents.

CRABTREE (cont'd)

So tell me about you and the Chancellor.

GRADY

What's to tell?

CRABTREE

Plenty, I'm sure. But, for what it's worth...

CRABTREE fishes out the biography of Erroll Flynn, gives it a look.

CRABTREE

...I like her.

GRADY peers at the stars, his voice barely audible.

GRADY

Me too.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - SEWICKLEY

to: see him, shuffling into the room like
an aging prizefighter. Limping. Beaten.'
(with an amused smile)
Sound like anyone we know?
(resuming)
But it was later, when the great man
squinted into the bitter glow or
twilight...
(frowning)
Bitter glow of twilight? This kid
definitely needs an editor.
(resuming)

...and muttered simply, 'It means nothing. All of it.
Nothing,' that the true shock came. It was then that the
boy understood that his hero's true injuries lay hidden in a
darker place. His heart...'

CRABTREE stops abruptly.

GRADY
Yes? 'His heart...'

CRABTREE hesitates, then... reads on:

CRABTREE
'His heart, once capable of inspiring
others so completely, could no longer
inspire so much as itself. It beat now only
out of habit. It beat now only because it
could. '

GRADY nods, his face unreadable, then James returns.

JAMES LEER
I'm ready...

James stops, sees the two men looking at him.

JAMES LEER
You all right, Professor Tripp?

CRABTREE
He's great. Come on, let's blow before ol'
Gran decides to boil your bones for
breakfast.

JAMES LEER
Oh, well, that's just it. She's been coming
down here, every half hour or so, to, sort
of, check on me. If I'm not here, she might
...call the police or.. something.

CRABTREE
Hhuh. So we decoy her. Stick a couple
pillows and one of your teddy bears under
the spread and she won't know the
difference.

JAMES LEER
(brightening)
Yeah. Like in Against All Flags. Only they
use a couple big hams.

GRADY

No.

CRABTREE and James turn.

GRADY

I've got something better than a teddy bear.

CUT TO: POE -- as he's lowered delicately onto James' bed.

INT. JAMES' ROOM - BASEMENT (A FEW MINUTES LATER)

GRADY strategically arranges the coverlet, gently adjusting Poe's head so only a TUFT of FUR shows. He steps back, joining CRABTREE and James for an assessment.

GRADY

Sweet dreams, Jimmy.

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - LATER

The lights are still blazing, the front door is wide open, but not a soul remains.

INT. LIVING ROOM

A quiet disaster, the only sound an LP playing meekly on the STEREO. James passes through first, ignoring the TORTILLA CHIPS POPPING under his shoes, then CRABTREE and GRADY appear.

CRABTREE

Things must've picked up after we left.

CRABTREE pats Grady's cheek, heads upstairs.

INT. HALLWAY

Crabtree's door is closing as GRADY hobbles into view.

GRADY

Crabtree.

CRABTREE

(sticking his head out)
Ye-es?

GRADY looks down, sees James Leer's black brogues sitting on the floor outside Crabtree's door.

GRADY

Nothing.

The door closes, the LATCH CLICKS, and GRADY is left alone, the bossa nova floating softly in the air.

INT. HANNAH'S ROOM

Hannah Green lies tangled in the sheets, surrounded by little colonies of Grady's manuscript. GRADY studies her, then detects something on the floor. The red boots.

Delicately, he lifts the sheet. Hannah Green's feet--finally revealed in ail their naked glory--prove to be thick, wide, and ordinary. GRADY sighs.

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE

The TV is on. GRADY steps to the doorway, pauses.

VOICE

Hey.

A HEAD cranes over the sofa. It's the Goatee Kid from Thaw Hail.

GRADY

How are you--is it Joe?

GOATEE KID

Jeff. Sorry. I didn't even know this was your house until about an hour ago.

GRADY

Don't sweat it. Well. 'Night, Jeff.

GOATEE KID

Oh, Professor Tripp? You know, last semester, what I said that time in office hours--I hope there's no hard feelings.

GRADY

No...

GOATEE KID

I mean, I was breaking up with this girl at the time and my car was ail fucked up and--well--I was pretty bent in general.

GRADY

It's cool, Jeff. Really.

GOATEE KID

I just want you to know that's why I dropped your class and said all that shit about the university stealing my money and you being a pseudo-Faulknerian nobody.

EXT. PORCH - GRADY'S HOUSE - NIGHT (A BIT LATER)

GRADY sits quietly on the porch steps, a joint burning in his fingers. To his left, perched atop a Haagen-Dazs container, is a TELEPHONE. As he pulls it into his lap, a LAMP in the living room pirouettes clumsily, spins free of the cord, and SHATTERS on the floor.

GRADY blinks, looks away, and DIALS, just as. ..the CLATTERING COUGH of an ENGINE is HEARD and a VAN appears. Stenciled on its side panel is:

Kravnik's Sporting Goods

The van slows, almost coasting, then abruptly bursts past Grady's house and disappears around the corner. GRADY frowns, then realizes a MAN'S VOICE is coming from the RECEIVER in his

lap.

MAN (O.S.)
Hello? Hello...?

The VOICE is groggy. It is Walter Gaskell's voice.

GRADY
Walter?

WALTER'S VOICE
Yes?

GRADY says nothing, as if wondering what he's doing.

WALTER'S VOICE (cont'd)
Who's this ?

GRADY
It's Grady, Walter.

WALTER'S VOICE
Grady?

GRADY
GRADY Tripp. English Department.

WALTER'S VOICE
I know it's you, Grady, I just... Christ,
Grady, do you know what time it -is?

GRADY
(looking at his watch)
I have ...eight-fifteen. That's not right,
is it?

WALTER'S VOICE
It's three-thirty, Grady.

GRADY
This is important.

WALTER'S VOICE
Oh?

GRADY
I... I...

WALTER'S VOICE
What is it, Grady?

GRADY
I'm in love with your wife.

WALTER'S VOICE
Excuse me?

GRADY
Sara. I'm in love with her.

Silence. Then Walter's VOICE returns: even, administrative.

WALTER'S VOICE

Are you drinking. Professor Tripp? Right now.

GRADY sips on his roach, responds in a pinched voice.

GRADY

No.

WALTER'S VOICE

Nevertheless, I'd like to see you in my office Monday morning.

As the line goes dead, GRADY stares at the phone, wondering if he has, in fact, just done what he thinks he's just done.

EXT. GRADY'S NEIGHBORHOOD - SUNDAY MORNING (NEXT DAY)

A CAR rattles down the street, NEWSPAPERS pinwheeling from-the window.

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE - SAME TIME

A heavy THHNK hits the driveway outside and GRADY blinks. Sitting in his pink robe, bleary-eyed, he reconsiders the piece of paper curling from his typewriter.

GRADY'S POV - of THE PAGE

It's obvious he's been sitting like this for some time. Just then, the DISTINCTIVE PURR of an ENGINE is HEARD. GRADY peers through the window, watches a CAB. glide to the curb below. A Citroen DS23. Sara.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - GRADY'S HOUSE

GRADY steps onto the porch, unintentionally punting a BOTTLE of Iron City Beer onto the front lawn..

GRADY

Sara.

SARA

I tried to call, but apparently there's something wrong...

Sara leans down, replaces the uncradled phone.

SARA (cont'd)

...with your phone. Unfortunately, mine was ringing loud and clear this morning.

GRADY doesn't know what this means, but he's pretty sure it's not good.

GRADY

Oh?

SARA

It seems one of our students is - missing and his parents found a dead dog in his bed.

GRADY

(slumping to the porch)
I'm sorry, Sara. I've been trying to tell
you. It's all my-

Sara raises her hand, silencing him.

SARA
I'm not very happy with you right now,
Grady. But more importantly, Walter's not
very happy and he's gotten the police
involved. They seem to think James Leer is
somehow responsible for all of this. You
wouldn't happen to know where James is,
would you, Grady?

GRADY
Inside.

SARA
And the jacket?

GRADY
Over there. In the backseat of the...

Grady's hand hangs in mid-air, gesturing pointlessly to the
driveway, where the only thing that exists is an oil stain
roughly the shape of North Dakota.

GRADY (cont'd)
Someone stole my car.

SARA
Grady.

GRADY
Honestly. Someone stole my car. I parked it
right there last night.

SARA
Are you sure you parked it there?

GRADY
Of course, I'm sure. Ah, Christ, the
puberty police are back.

Sara turns, sees Officer Pupcik cruising to the curb.

SARA
I'll deal with this. You dig up James.

INT. CRABTREE'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

CRABTREE sits in bed, flipping through the pages of The Love
Parade while stroking a tiny TUFT of HAIR that is the . sole
visible part of .James Leer.

GRADY
(swinging in)
Is he awake?

CRABTREE
I'm afraid he's pretty worn out, poor kid.

GRADY

Nevertheless. There's a police officer standing on the porch and I don't think he's going away.

JAMES LEER

(from under the covers)
That same guy?

CRABTREE peels back the blankets and James Leer opens one eye.

JAMES LEER

You snore.

CRABTREE

So I hear.

JAMES LEER

(studying Grady)
No offense, Professor Tripp, but you look sorta crappy.

CRABTREE

He's right, you look horrible.

GRADY

Thank you, Frankie and Annette.

James swings his pale little legs to the floor and walks bare assed across the room to retrieve his BVDs.

JAMES LEER

It's the Chancellor.

CRABTREE

Ah, right. Well, I gave you my opinion.

GRADY

And we both thank you for that, but we're... we're... fine.

JAMES LEER

I'm fine, right. Fit as a fucking fiddle.

GRADY squints at James as he pulls on his pants.

GRADY

Shut up, James.

CRABTREE

So what's the problem?

GRADY

(a tad tense)
There is no problem. Did I say there was a problem?

As James' head pops through Grady's fully-buttoned flannel, he and CRABTREE exchange a knowing glance, at once referring to and excluding Grady.

SARA (O. S.)

How's it coming back there, Professor

GRADY

Don't worry, James, I'll figure something out.

JAMES LEER

I'm not worried. You're not worried, are you. Professor Tripp?

GRADY

I'm a little worried, James.

JAMES LEER

Don't be. I don't care if they expel me. I probably should be expelled.

GRADY

Well, let's see if we can keep that from happening.

James nods and GRADY starts to step back from the car.

JAMES LEER

Professor Tripp...?

GRADY

Yes, James.

JAMES LEER

Even if I end up going to jail....

James smiles his crooked grin.

JAMES LEER (cont'd)

You're still the best teacher I ever had.

On this, Pete Pupcik pulls away, leaving GRADY standing on the curb, watching the back of James' head, framed in the rear window of the police car, growing smaller.

SARA

This is not what the university has in mind when it promises a liberal education, Grady.

GRADY

Would Walter really press charges?

SARA

It's within the realm. He takes his souvenirs pretty seriously. And he was just a wee bit prickly this morning.

Grady, detecting something in Sara's tone, turns, watches her take a drag on her cigarette.

SARA (cont'd)

You didn't happen to call the house last night, did you, Grady?

GRADY

I think I might have.

SARA

And what do you think you might have said?

GRADY

I think I might've said I was in love with you.

Sara's face remains unchanged.

GRADY (cont'd)

He told you.

SARA

He told me.

GRADY

And what did you say?

SARA

I said it didn't sound like you.

Sara tosses her cigarette in the gutter, gets into her car, and dives away. GRADY looks after her sadly, then turns, sees CRABTREE standing on the porch wearing a shirt which claims "Ativan Chases the Clouds Away."

CRABTREE

So- what do we do now? ,

GRADY

Find the jacket.

CRABTREE

Oh' huh. Exactly how do we do that?

GRADY

First I see if Hannah will let me borrow her car.

CRABTREE

It seems to me that girl would let you borrow her pancreas.

INT. HANNAH'S ROOM - 100

Hannah, wrapped loosely in cotton sheets, SMILES as she listens to the Goatee Kid, who sits cross-legged at the foot of her bed, fully clothed.

GOATEE KID

I'm telling you, the tango is all about latent homosexual love. Look at the way they dance--it's sodomy.

HANNAH GREEN

(laughing)
Stop it.

Hannah looks up, sees GRADY in the doorway and blushes. She pulls the sheet up, gives an oddly formal wave.

HANNAH GREEN

Grady. Hi. What's up?

Jeff eases off the bed, past GRADY uneasily.

GOATEE KID

I'll be ...somewhere else.

GRADY

Hey, Jeff. If you're really interested in discussing that business with the tango, try the guy at the end of the hall.

Jeff nods--puzzled--then goes. GRADY smirks.

GRADY

He cribbed that from Borges.

HANNAH GREEN

It beats 'What's your major?'

GRADY nods, detecting a new aloofness in her voice.

GRADY

Right. Anyway, I was wondering if I could borrow your car. Mine's sort of out of commission.

HANNAH GREEN

Sure. The keys are on the dresser next to ..to your book.

The hitch in Hannah's voice hangs in the room like a cloud.

HANNAH GREEN

I uh, I didn't finish, I ...fell asleep.

GRADY

That good, hub?

HANNAH GREEN

No, it's not that, it's...

Hannah glances at the huge stack of paper sitting on her dresser, then, hesitantly, looks back to Grady.

HANNAH GREEN

It's just that, you know, I was thinking about how, in class, you're always telling us '-that writers make choices--at least the good ones. And, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the book isn't really great-I mean, really greatbut at times it's, well, very detailed, you know, with the genealogies of everyone's horses and ail the dental records and so on-and I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but it sort of reads, in places, like, well, actually, like...

(with trepidation)

...you didn't make any choices at all. And I was wondering if it might not be different if, maybe, when you wrote, you weren't always ...under the influence.

GRADY

(stung)

Hh huh. Well, thanks for the thought, but, as shocking as this may sound, I'm not the first writer to sip a little weed. And furthermore, it might interest you to know that one book I wrote, as you say, 'under the influence, ' happened to win a little something called the PEN award which, by the way, I accepted 'under the influence. '

Hannah nods, averts her eyes, and immediately GRADY feels ridiculous. He starts to say something, but instead gathers his manuscript and exits.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER &

Crabtree, dressed now, studies the freight 'in Grady's arms as he reaches the bottom of the stairs.

CRABTREE

Want some help with that?

GRADY

(passing by)

Don't touch it.

INT. HANNAH'S RENAULT - MOVING &

CRABTREE sucks on a Kool, driving Hannah's rattling Renault too fast, shifting gears apparently at random. GRADY rides shotgun, still wearing the robe over his clothes, the Wonder Boys manuscript sitting like a watermelon on his lap-looking, all in all, fairly pathetic.

CRABTREE

Let me get this straight. Jerry Nathan owes you money. So, as collateral, he gives you his car.

GRADY

Only now I'm starting to think the car wasn't exactly Jerry's to give.

CRABTREE

So whose car is it?

GRADY

My guess-Vernon Hardapple.

CRABTREE

The hood jumper?

GRADY

He said a few things that lead me to believe the car's his.

CRABTREE

Such as.

GRADY

'That's my car, motherfucker.'

CRABTREE

Hh hub. So. We find Vernon, we find the car. We find the car...

GRADY

...we find the jacket.

CRABTREE

There's only one problem, Tripp. We don't know his real name. We just made it up. In fact, we made the whole guy up.

GRADY

No wonder he screwed us over.

CUT TO:

BILL MAZEROSKI legendary Pittsburgh Pirate second baseman, large as a Macy's Day float, his weathered image scaling three floors on the BRICK face of a RIVERFRONT STOREFRONT.

INT. HANNAH'S CAR

CRABTREE takes a corner recklessly, immediately slows, and blinks in amazement.

CRABTREE

Christ, Tripp. How did you know?

GRADY

Call it a hunch.

Parked in front of KRAVNIK'S SPORTING GOODS is the white van. A few feet behind, the battered Galaxie.

CRABTREE

I'd call it genius.

GRADY steps out, strips off the robe, and drops the lumpy leviathan that is his manuscript on the front seat.

GRADY

It's good to know I'm still talented at something. Keep the motor running.

EXT./ INT. GALAXIE 104

GRADY peers into the backseat, squinting against the WIND that swirls around him. Errol Flynn's face leers back at him. But no jacket. GRADY slides in, pops the glove box, and frowns at the ZIPLOC of Humboldt County. He pockets it anyway, then spies something else.

James Leer's little PEARL-HANDLED PISTOL.

GRADY takes it, rotates it-in his palm. SUNLIGHT GLINTS off the chrome barrel and everything slowly turns to a SWEET, SOFT BLUR...

INT. HANNAH'S RENAULT

CRABTREE stomps on his Kool. GRADY looks very much like a man who has pulled off the road to take a nap.

CRABTREE
What the hell...

INT. GALAXIE

As GRADY lolls behind the steering wheel, a CLOUD appears, hovering, then slowly mutates, and GRADY realizes it's not a cloud at all, it's

MARILYN MONROE standing by the side mirror, wearing a bright pink dress under her wedding jacket.

MARILYN
I know you. . .

Marilyn's face swims before Grady's eyes, but there's something wrong with it. This girl's eyes are brown and besides, she's ...fat.

MARILYN (cont'd)
Double Dickel on the rocks.

The last of the fairy dust evaporates and GRADY finds standing before him in a pink jersey dress and Marilyn Monroe's wedding jacket--Oola, the pregnant waitress from the Hi-Hat Club.

GRADY
Oola.

OOLA
I never forget a drink.

GRADY
I never forget an Oola.

Suddenly, there is a HEAVY CLICK.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Forget me?

GRADY starts to turn, but his head won't move: largely because the BARREL of a GERMAN NINE is pressed to his temple. Grady's eyes slide.

GRADY
Vernon.

VERNON
(to Oola)
Move away, cupcake. He's got a gun.

GRADY
Who's got a gun?

VERNON
You've got a gun, motherfucker. Drop it!

GRADY
Relax, Vernon...

OOLA
Why's he calling you Vernon?

VERNON

Why's he sitting in my car? He's crazy, that's why. He probably calls everybody Vernon.

GRADY

Not true. You're the only Vernon I know. Actually, I'm wrong. I once knew a Vernon Peabody at Penguin U.K.

VERNON

Shut up.
(to Oola)
Cupcake. Please. Inside.

OOLA

You're not going to shoot him, are you?

VERNON

I'm going to shoot him. If he doesn't put that gun down.

GRADY

It's just a souvenir. They don't even make the caps anymore.

VERNON

Bullshit. I know a gun when I see one. And that's a gun.

GRADY

No, really....

GRADY lifts his arm, points the little pearl-handled pistol to the DARK CLOUDS overhead.

INT. HANNAH'S RENAULT

CRABTREE jumps as the tiny pistol at the end of Grady's arm FLASHES, makes a FEEBLE POP in the wind.

CRABTREE

Holy shit.

EXT. KRAVNIKS

Vernon stands half-hunched, stunned.

VERNON

Are you crazy!

The gunshot seems to have cleared Grady's head. He stares at the gun, watches Vernon wrest it from his hand.

VERNON (cont'd)

Get out! What's the matter with you? Can't you see the condition my girl's in?

As GRADY gets out of the car, Vernon places his hand on Oola's tummy.

VERNON

You all right, cupcake?

OOLA
Who's Vernon?

A rude SQUEAL breaks the silence--rubber scratching asphalt--and Grady, Oola, and Vernon turn to see Hannah Green's rattling Renault lurching awkwardly toward them.

VERNON
What the...?

Gears GRINDING, tires smoking, CRABTREE fish-tails wildly, then kicks open the passenger door.

CRABTREE
Tripp! Run!

GRADY doesn't move an inch, watching in mute amazement as CRABTREE whistles by, proceeds halfway down the block, then turns back for another pass.

VERNON
Who the hell is that?

GRADY
A Manhattan book editor murdering a Mormon girl's clutch.

The car bucks crazily, picks up speed, and Crabtree--swiping aside a flutter of MANUSCRIPT PAGES that have taken flight inside the car--begins to veer right toward Grady, Vernon, and Oola.

VERNON
Woah.

Vernon steps into the street, levels the German Nine.

VERNON (cont'd)
Pull off, you crazy motherfucker!

Frantic, GRADY steps between Vernon, the German Nine, and the oncoming Crabtree.

GRADY
No! Don't shoot! He's just a lousy driver.

CRABTREE fans the wheel wildly, goes into a slide and the passenger door snaps wide, releasing what looks to be a FLOCK OF WHITE DOVES into the wind-whipped sky.

Only, these ain't birds. • - ^

GRADY
Oh... my... God!

These are PAGES. Seven years of-pages.

CRABTREE goes into another slide, one-hops the curb, and smashes flat into the weathered GLOVE of BILL MAZEROSKI painted on the front wail of KRAVNIK'S SPORTING GOODS.

As Hannah Green's RADIATOR EXPLODES, CRABTREE steps free of the car and looks skyward. It's a ticker-tape parade all the way down the street, ending in the frigid waters of the Ohio River.

GRADY (cont'd)
(to Vernon)
I take it back. Shoot him.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING

Vernon drives, Oola at his side. In-the back, CRABTREE puffs philosophically on a Kool while GRADY sits grimly with the sad remains of his manuscript: SEVEN RUMPLED PAGES, one of which bears the watermark of a shoe print.

CRABTREE
Naturally you have copies.

GRADY
I have an alternate version of the first chapter.

CRABTREE
You'll be all right then. Look at Carlyle, when he lost his luggage.

GRADY
That was MacCaulay.

CRABTREE
Or Hemingway, when Hadley lost all those stories.

GRADY
He was never able to reproduce them.

CRABTREE
Bad examples. Look, Tripp, I don't want to depreciate the loss here, but perhaps--in a sense- this--
(nodding to the pages)
is for the best.

Grady's eyes shift, study Crabtree.

GRADY
Kind of a sign, you're saying.

CRABTREE
In a sense.

GRADY
I don't think so. In my experience, signs are usually a lot more subtle.

VERNON
Let me get this straight. All that paper that went into the river. That was the only copy?

GRADY
'Fraid so.

VERNON

(glowering at Crabtree)
And you're saying it's some kind of sign?
What the fuck's the matter with you?

CRABTREE

I'm just saying that sometimes,
subconsciously, a person will put
themselves in a situation-perhaps even
create that situation in order to have an
arena in which to work out an unresolved
issue. It's a covert way, if you will, of
addressing a problem.

Vernon stares at CRABTREE as if he's from another planet.

VERNON

I'll tell you the problem. You behind the
wheel. There's your fucking problem.

CRABTREE

That's pretty simplistic, don't you think?

VERNON

Hey, pal, you don't start doing crazy
eights in the middle of the street none of
this happens.

CRABTREE

Excuse me. Did you, or did you not, have a
gun to his head?

VERNON

He was trying to steal my car!

GRADY

Ail right, all right It's done. There's no
need to talk about it. It's done.

They ride in silence for a moment, then Oola turns, glances at
GRADY and his little sheaf of pages.

OOLA

So what was it about?
(as GRADY looks up)
Your book. What was the story?

GRADY stares into Oola's sweet, brown eyes.

GRADY

I don't know...

Oola's brow wrinkles. CRABTREE glances at his old friend,
genuine compassion in his eyes.

CRABTREE

What he means is, it's difficult to distill
the essence of a book sometimes. It-lives
in the mind.

VERNON

Yeah, but you gotta know what it's about,
right? I mean, if you didn't know what it

was about, why were you writing it?

GRADY
I couldn't stop.

EXT. CAMPUS ENTRANCE

Grady, James Leer's hollow knapsack in hand, stands with CRABTREE at the campus entrance as Vernon and Oola prepare to leave in the Galaxie.

GRADY
Hey, Vernon. Can I ask you a question?

VERNON
Shoot.

GRADY glances at little round Oola.

GRADY
Boy or girl?

VERNON
As long as it looks like her, I don't care.
You know what I'm saying?

GRADY watches Vernon give Oola a kiss on the forehead.

GRADY
Right. Well, thanks. For the lift.

VERNON
No sweat. Only do me a favor?

GRADY
Sure.

VERNON
Stop calling me Vernon.

CRABTREE leans into Grady, WHISPERS.

CRABTREE
The jacket, Tripp. We need the jacket.

GRADY (cont'd)
Oh, right. Oola. About that jacket...

OOLA
Yea?

GRADY looks at the waitress in her pink jersey dress, snuggled up in the silk wedding jacket.

GRADY
It used to belong to Marilyn Monroe. She had small shoulders, like you. Most people don't know that.

As Oola smiles, pleased, Vernon shakes his head.

VERNON
Man, that book of yours must've been one

nutty motherfucking ride.

Vernon points an imaginary gun, fires a friendly cap into Grady, and pulls away. CRABTREE stands stunned.

CRABTREE

You mind explaining what you just did?

GRADY watches the shrinking Galaxie sail under a drooping NORDFEST BANNER, lost in thought.

GRADY

Came to my senses. CRABTREE

Ah. Well. Congratulations. Meanwhile, what is James supposed to do? Pray for Walter Gaskell to come to his?

GRADY

Walter Gaskell isn't going to send James Leer to jail, Crabs. I know that.

CRABTREE

Do you know he won't expel him?

GRADY

No. But I don't think that matters.

CRABTREE

That's very enlightened, Professor. It's comforting to know that America's children have you for a teacher.

GRADY blinks, ponders this briefly, then looks toward the buildings of the campus, his VOICE still distant.

GRADY

Nobody teaches a writer anything. You tell them what you know. You tell them to find their voice and stick with it, because that's all you have in the end. You tell the ones who have it to keep at it and you tell the ones who don't to keep at it, too. Because that's the only way to get where you're going.

(ruefully)

Of course, it helps if you know where you want to go.

(thoughtfully)

Maybe that's the only thing--that and Sara--that's made the last seven years worthwhile.

GRADY slides James' knapsack off his shoulder, smiles cryptically as he considers it. -

GRADY (cont'd)

As for James, he doesn't need me anymore...

Without warning, GRADY tosses CRABTREE the knapsack.

GRADY (cont'd)

He's got you.

CRABTREE stares at the saggy green canvas in his hands, watches GRADY walk away.

CRABTREE
Me? What can I do?

GRADY
Gee, I don't know, Crabs...
(over his shoulder)
Improvise. You're good at that.

GRADY continues on, leaving CRABTREE to stand alone, as he walks toward the buildings in the distance.

CRABTREE
I'm sorry, Tripp.

GRADY stops, turns.

GRADY
You peeked, didn't you?

CRABTREE
I peeked.

GRADY considers this. Nods. It-doesn't seem to matter anymore

CRABTREE
It really had the makings, Tripp. There was
a lot to admire. I've ...never read
anything quite like it.

If there was a Kentucky Derby for editorial bullshit, Crabtree's last three utterances would finish win, place, and show. And GRADY knows it.

GRADY
You're not just trying to make me feel
better?

CRABTREE looks directly at Grady, his old friend.

CRABTREE
Scout's honor.

CRABTREE and GRADY stare into each other's eyes. Both are acutely aware of the subtext of this conversation.

GRADY
Well, thanks for that, Crabs.

INT. HALLWAY - ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Dead quiet. Gradually, STEPS are heard, coming from the stairwell, then GRADY limps into view.

INT. GRADY'S CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

GRADY surveys the room. Empty chairs. Empty desks.

He walks to a WINDOW, the same window he stood at two afternoons ago when reading James Leer's story. A chill breeze pitches the fabric of his shirt as he studies the barren

benches and icy walkways of the quad. Finally, he-. turns away, settles behind his desk and, reaching into his pocket, removes the seven remaining pages of his manuscript. He considers them, then folds them in half length-wise. He continues, folding the top right corner down into a triangle along the first crease...

EXT. QUAD

A moment. Then-from the third floor window-a PAPER AIRPLANE glides into view, soaring then dropping, soaring then dropping, again and again, graceful as a dove.

INT. LOBBY - THAW HALL - LATER

GRADY hobbles into the lobby just as one of the auditorium doors swings open. APPLAUSE SWELLS and he spies Sara standing inside, talking to a STUDENT USHER.

GRADY

Sara!

Sara turns ...as the door glides shut. As GRADY hustles forward, Q, wine glass in hand, intercepts him.

Q

Grady. I have to tell you. I took another look at Arsonist's Daughter the other night. There's a description of a bald cypress that left' me breathless.

GRADY

(pushing past him)

Thanks, Q. I felt the same way about the bank teller's breasts in your last one.

INT. BACK ROW - AUDITORIUM - THAW HALL

GRADY enters, but Sara is ...gone. He picks his way behind the back row, scanning the aisles.

GIRL'S VOICES

Hey, Professor Tripp.

It's Carrie McWhirty, James' tormentor from workshop. GRADY takes another look around, then drops into the seatnext to her.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

If you're looking for Hannah, she's on the aisle.

GRADY

No...

But GRADY looks anyway. Hannah sits a dozen rows down the aisle, hair pulled back in a clip, glorious skin gloaming. The Goatee Kid sits close beside her.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

Who's that guy she's with? Didn't he used to be in workshop?

GRADY

Jeff. He comes from a long line of tango

dancers.

INT. MAIN STAGE

Walter turns over the last page of his prepared notes.

WALTER

And now, as those of you who've been with us in previous years know, we have a tradition of sorts here at WordFest. I'm speaking, of course, of The Plums.

An anticipatory BUZZ sweeps through the audience as Walter begins to read from a separate list.

WALTER

This weekend, Susan Lowery, of North Braddock, found a publisher for her children's book. The Loneliest Prawn, Susan, stand up.

INT. BACK ROW - THAW HALL^

As a CHUBBY WOMAN stands to acknowledge the applause, GRADY cranes his neck, searching the sea of seats. To his surprise, he finds CRABTREE sitting prominently in the front row, in his shirtsleeves, smiling his spookily complacent smile. James is next to him, now wearing CRABTREE'S METALLIC SPORTS COAT over Grady's flannel shirt.

WALTER

And Robert Wilkenson--who many of you know for his City Beat column in the Post-Gazette--has found a home with Putnam for his new Three Rivers thriller. Blood Patterns. Robert.

A SHORT, BALDING MAN stands briefly then Walter's VOICE takes a shift in tone.

WALTER

Now, this next one, I think, is especially exciting to announce, because it concerns a student here at the university. Our own James Leer, a sophomore in English literature, has found a publisher for his first novel, which I believe is called The Lovely Parade.

GRADY blinks, leans forward, and watches Walter smile warmly toward the front row. CRABTREE gives James a jab in the ribs and slowly, awkwardly, James rises. Stunned, Carrie McWhirty turns to the GIRL next to her.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

I have a class with him.

James hangs-like a scarecrow from a nail, waiting as the APPLAUSE slows, then sputters, then dies out altogether.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

The guy's kind of an alien probe, if you know what I mean.

Grady, in a last attempt to save James from himself, cups Hi his hands around his mouth.

GRADY
Take a bow, James!

James turns, spots GRADY in the back row, then-a sheepish grin on his face--spreads his arms, hangs his head, and takes his first sweet public bow.

GRADY (cont'd)
(softly)
Wonder Boy.

WALTER
And finally--and perhaps not least importantly--Terry Crabtree, of Bartizan, has also decided to publish my own book--a critical exploration of the union of Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio and its function in American mythopoeics--which, tentatively, I've entitled 'The Last American Marriage.'"

Wild, obsequious APPLAUSE. GRADY smiles cynically, watches Walter take a brief, dignified bow of his own.

WALTER
Until next year. Thank you, everyone.

The LIGHTS come up. As the auditorium empties, CRABTREE shakes Walter's hand and Jeff and his goatee escort Hannah Green down the aisle, where she drapes her lovely arms around James.

GRADY watches them ail, sitting alone in his row, when suddenly Sara appears over James' shoulder. She says something congratulatory, turns, and exits out a side door. GRADY blinks, scrambles up.

INT. CORRIDOR - THAW HALL - MOMENTS LATER

GRADY bursts into the corridor.'

GRADY
Sara!

Its empty. Quiet. GRADY pauses. Somewhere, a HEAVY METAL DOOR CLOSES. GRADY rushes on.

INT. NEW CORRIDOR

Grady, limping badly, turns a corner and sees a DOOR. He moves to it, pushes past...

INT. STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

...and finds himself standing in a stairwell. He leans out over the railing, peers down. It's a steep drop, very, steep, ending in a small rectangular space, a kind of basement office, with VENDING MACHINES, PLASTIC CHAIRS, and a COLLAPSIBLE CARD TABLE.

GRADY turns back to the door he came through, pushes against it. Locked. He sighs, looks back at the stairs, his ailing ankle, then sits. He fishes out the Ziploc of marijuana, considers the perfectly roiled JOINT floating atop the bag of buds, but, for once, isn't up to it. The SOUND of FOOTSTEPS echoes far below and, hopeful they're Sara's, GRADY pulls himself up, peers over the railing.

It's Traxler, with a broom, a big plastic bag.

GRADY
Yo, Traxler.

TRAXLER
(looking up)
Hey, Professor Tripp.

GRADY considers the Ziploc in his hand, looks down again.

GRADY
Do you get high, Sam?

TRAXLER
Only when I'm working.

GRADY hangs-over the railing and lets fly the Ziploc. It pinwheels through the vortex of stairs, lands at Sam's feet.

TRAXLER
Holy shit. Are you serious?

GRADY
As a heart attack.

TRAXLER
Thanks-Whoa, Professor Tripp, careful
^here...

GRADY is still hanging over the railing-but looking dizzy now. His eyelids flutter and he tips forward-a Steinway on a window ledge-and as he starts to drop...

...there is a SHARP JERK on his- COLLAR, a SHIRT BUTTON caroms off his cheek, and slowly, he is hauled back.

SARA
Grady, what are you doing, you idiot?

GRADY looks up into Sara's freckled face.

GRADY
Looking for you.

He wants to say more, he opens his mouth, but then... ALL GOES BLACK AS SARA'S VOICE CALLS...

faintly at first, then more forcefully, calling Grady's name, calling so insistently that the earth seems to RUSH upward until we see that she is...

KISSING him or something, and all goes softly... Blue.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

GRADY lies in a powder blue paper gown surrounded by blue plastic curtains in a blue room. Through a gap in the curtains, he can see the bottle of-GLUCOSE that drips slowly into his arm, and beyond, a window. Flakes of SNOW fall outside.

The DOOR SQUEALS, a SHADOW ripples across the blue, then the curtains part and a RESIDENT with a clipboard appears. His NAMETAG says GREENHUT.

GRADY
I passed out.

GREENHUT
You did.

GRADY
I've been doing that a lot lately.

GREENHUT
So I hear. You've also been smoking a lot of marijuana, I understand.

GRADY
Do you think that's why I've been having these...
(grabbing James' term)
... spells?

GREENHUT
How long have you been having them?

GRADY
The last month maybe.

GREENHUT
How long have you been smoking marijuana?

GRADY
Spiro T. Agnew was vice president, I believe.

GREENHUT
That's probably not the problem, then. What about your lifestyle. Any major changes recently?

GRADY
I've been trying to finish a book...

GREENHUT
And your wife left you.

GRADY
Is that in my chart?

GREENHUT
I spoke with the woman who saved your life. You're lucky she came along when she did.

GRADY considers the larger ramifications of this statement

GRADY

I know.

GREENHUT

(tapping the glucose bottle)

You need to see a doctor, Mr. Tripp. An internist. And I think you really ought to consider seeing a therapist, as well.

GRADY

She told you about. . .

GREENHUT

Her dog, yes.

GRADY

Actually, it was her husband's dog...

Greenhut glances up, looking GRADY in the eyes for the first time, and GRADY stops.

GREENHUT

Look, Mr. Tripp. You have a drug problem, all right? On top of that, you have a bite on your ankle that is severely infected. We pumped you with antibiotics so you'll be fine, but another day or two and you might have lost the foot. As for your spells. I'm guessing they're a result of the anxiety you've been experiencing lately.

GRADY

They're anxiety attacks? That's a little disappointing.

GREENHUT

Better luck next time.

GRADY

So is my friend...is Sara still here?

GREENHUT

No. There's no one here.

GRADY

I have to see her. As soon as possible.

Greenhut studies Grady, calibrating the desperation in his eyes, then takes a quick glance at his watch.

GREENHUT

Look, Mr. Tripp. If you really want to leave, I can't stop you. But I'm going to write you a prescription for a course of ampicillin and I want you to follow it to the end-no matter how stupid you decide to be with everything else. All right?

INT. HOSPITAL/BRIDGE WALKWAY - AFTERNOON

GRADY sits in a WHEELCHAIR, watching the snow fall around him as a NURSE escorts him through the tunnel of glass that connects one building to another.

himself up and makes his way to the driver's window. Sara makes a face, bugging her eyes a little-mad at him, but not without humor. Then she rolls down the window.

GRADY

I'm so glad to see you, Sara.

SARA

I believe you. Did that nice doctor let you out? Or-is this you improvising again, Grady?

GRADY

I'm through improvising.

SARA

Terry told me about Wonder Boys. Is it true? Did you lose it all?

GRADY

I lost it all.

SARA

Oh, Grady. You're such a putz.

GRADY

I know.

SARA

And you're old.

Sara strokes his scalp, takes a gray hair between her fingers. Yanks.

GRADY

Ouch. How many?

SARA

Dozens. It's very sad.

Sara smiles at Grady, but the mischief leaves her eyes when she looks into his, and-she glances away.

GRADY

I went and looked at-some babies just now.

SARA

Oh?

GRADY

(trying to make her laugh)
I guess you have to go on faith.

SARA

(she doesn't)
Some times...

GRADY studies her as she traces her finger around the HOSPITAL BRACELET still encircling his wrist.

GRADY

Did you tell Walter?

SARA
I told Walter.

GRADY
Does he still love you?

SARA
It didn't come up.

GRADY studies Sara's freckled cheeks, her anxious profile, then turns her chin gently toward him.

GRADY
Well I do. I've always loved you, Sara. I didn't know it at the time, but I'd always been waiting for you. My whole life. Because you're who I need. Because nothing makes sense without you. Because the best moment of every day is the moment I first see your face. And because when you leave a room, there's no reason to be in it any more. It's just a room again.

Sara cocks her head.

SARA
Did you just make that up?

GRADY
(shaking his head)
In the hospital. I "was kind of excited about it at-the time, but then I was on pretty heavy painkillers.

She frowns good-naturedly.

GRADY (cont'd)
Even so...it's still true. Every word.

Sara just nods, looks away, her face unreadable.

GRADY (cont'd)
Sara, I promise, even though commonsense might tell you...

Sara turns, puts a finger on GRADY's lips...

SARA
Don't write a page when a paragraph will do.

GRADY nods, takes her hand. Looks at it as he speaks.

GRADY
You don't deserve me, you know.

SARA
I know, but sometimes...

Sara turns, looks at Grady. Her eyes are glistening.

SARA (cont'd)
You just go on faith.

GRADY looks into her eyes, then rises, and we do too, drifting above the streetlights as GRADY limps to the other side of the car and gets in. As GRADY snaps shut his door, the car drifts off, gradually losing itself in- the soft veil of falling snow. After a moment, GRADY and Sara are lost too, nothing more than a blur.

THE END