

THE SWEET HEREAFTER

By

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Based on the novel by

Russell Banks

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FADE IN

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- DAY

A young family together in bed. It is a bright summer

morning. Father, mother, and a three year old girl are still asleep. They are naked. A light breeze drifts into the room. The scene is serene and softly suspended.

Head credits appear over this idyllic image. The little girl turns in her sleep. A dog barks outside.

CUT TO

INT./EXT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

From the peaceful tableau of the sleeping family, the scene shifts to a vehicle entering a car wash. The image is shot through the windshield, from the driver's point of view.

The car enters the lathered world of spinning felt wheels and gushing water.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

Inside the car MITCHELL STEPHENS, a man in his mid-fifties, listens to a stirring piece of music. The sound of the car wash is filtered out by the strains of music.

CUT TO

EXT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

The phone booth is located in a rundown area of a large city. A young woman, ZOE, enters the booth and lifts the receiver.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL STEPHENS is going through the wash. The automatic mops and buffers embrace his car with water and suds. The cellular phone in the car rings. MITCHELL picks it up.

MITCHELL

Yes? Yes, I'll accept the charges.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE is on the phone. There's a figure outside the booth waiting for her.

ZOE

Daddy, it's me...How are you doing?  
That's great...Where are you?  
What's that sound?

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL in his car, playing with the volume on his radio.

MITCHELL

I'm in a car wash.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE

A car wash! Wow, I've never talked  
to you when you've been in a car  
wash. Make sure you've got the  
windows closed.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

ZOE

(over the phone)

Remember that time we were having  
the car washed and I started playing  
with the automatic window? How old  
was I, Daddy? Five or six? I got  
absolutely soaked, remember?

MITCHELL

Why are you calling me, Zoe?

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE

Why am I calling you? You're my  
father. I'm not supposed to call  
you? What's the matter with wanting  
to talk to you, Daddy?

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL

Nothing's wrong with trying to talk to me, Zoe.

ZOE

(over the phone)

So what's the problem?

MITCHELL

The problem is I have no idea who I'm talking to right now.

ZOE

(over the phone)

'Cause you think I'm stoned, Daddy?  
'Cause you think I've got a needle stuck in my arm? Is that what you're thinking, Daddy?

Pause. MITCHELL doesn't respond.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE

Are you wondering if I scored, Daddy, and I'm calling you for money? That I'm begging? God, I don't fucking believe it!

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is emotionally stunned by ZOE'S voice. She is heard over the phone.

ZOE

(over the phone)

Daddy! Are you listening to me, Daddy?!

The music that MITCHELL has been listening to becomes louder as he stares at the spinning felt wheels of the car wash.

ZOE (CONT'D)  
DADDY!!!

MITCHELL  
Yes.

ZOE  
Why can't you talk to me?

MITCHELL  
I...I just need to know what state  
you're in so I know...how to talk to  
you...how to act...

MITCHELL is in pain. He closes his eyes.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

The phone booth is deserted. ZOE is nowhere to be seen.

Over this image, the sounds of a band playing a blues number.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

The blues number continues as the camera cranes down to the bandstand of a country fair. A local band is rehearsing.

Around the practising band, various carpenters and technicians are making final preparations for that evening's big event.

One of the people watching the band is SAM BURNELL, a man in his early forties. He watches his daughter, NICOLE, as she sings into the microphone. NICOLE is sixteen.

NICOLE stares at her father as she sings.

ANGLE ON

SAM looking back at his daughter. He is intensely proud of her. SAM is a carpenter, working on at the fair site. He gets back to his work, hammering a supporting beam into the grandstand.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPORT. WASHROOM -- AFTERNOON

CLOSE UP of a three year old girl, staring up into the lens. Her face is full of sweetness and trust.

ANGLE ON

MITCHELL STEPHENS in a crowded airport washroom, watching a young father, PETER, trying to change the diaper on his three year old daughter.

MITCHELL stares at the little girl, his face registering a wistful smile. PETER is having a hard time trying to find the towel from the toddler's bag and keeping an eye on her at the same time.

MITCHELL

Need a hand?

PETER

Sure, if you could find a towel in this bag. I know my wife packed one in there...

MITCHELL comes forward and searches through the toddler's bag.

MITCHELL

You always think you're prepared for these things.

PETER

Tell me about it.

MITCHELL

How old is she?

PETER

Almost three.

MITCHELL  
(finding a towel)  
Is this it?

PETER  
Perfect.

MITCHELL  
Here we go.

PETER  
Thanks.

PETER lays the towel across the counter, and dries the little girl. MITCHELL watches as PETER puts a new diaper on her. The toddler stares up at MITCHELL, her eyes are playful.

MITCHELL stares at the girl's face.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

TIME CUT back to MITCHELL honking the horn of his car, trying to get someone's attention. No response. MITCHELL picks up his cell phone, and dials the operator.

MITCHELL  
Yes, operator, I'm in a strange situation. I'm calling from my car, and I appear to be stuck in a car wash...A car wash, yes...Is there anyway you could...Hello?...Hello?...

The line has died.

MITCHELL searches for an umbrella, finds one, and tries to get out of the car without getting soaked.

ANGLE ON

MITCHELL as he leaves the car, trying to protect himself from the onslaught of water with his umbrella. He is

immediately soaked by a large mop. The camera watches MITCHELL as he makes his way towards light at the end of the wash.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL walks into the office of the car wash. No one is there. There is an ominous buzz coming from another room.

MITCHELL moves towards the garage of the car wash/auto repair establishment. He moves into a larger room, full of discarded auto parts. The buzzing noise is coming from an electric guitar, which has been left on, and is on the verge of screeching feedback.

Someone was just here. They are nowhere to be seen.

MITCHELL

Hello?

No response. MITCHELL picks up the guitar, which begins to produce a terrifying electronic feedback.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE wander through the fairground. Various rides and concession stands are being set up. SAM has his arm around NICOLE.

SAM

That was great.

NICOLE

Really?

SAM

You're going to blow everyone away.

NICOLE

You mean it?

SAM

Of course.

NICOLE

You don't sound like one hundred percent absolutely sure.

SAM

I am. Really. It was awesome.

NICOLE assesses SAM. Sensing his sincerity, she throws her arms around him in a gesture of unabashed excitement.

NICOLE

I'm so happy, Daddy.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

MITCHELL STEPHEN'S car pulls into the parking lot of this run-down roadside motel. In the fading light, a magnificent mountain range is seen in the background.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

MITCHELL enters the reception area, and rings a bell on the desk. After a few moments RISA WALKER appears. She is an exhausted looking woman in her mid-thirties, once attractive but very run-down. RISA stares at MITCHELL'S soaked clothes.

MITCHELL

Hello.

RISA

Is it raining outside?

MITCHELL

No, I...had an accident.

Pause. RISA stares at MITCHELL, her expression somewhere else.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Do you have a room?

RISA

Will you be spending more than a night?

MITCHELL

Hard to say. I might have...some business here.

A voice is heard from the darkness beyond the desk.

WENDELL

Are you a reporter?

MITCHELL

No.

WENDELL WALKER, RISA'S husband, appears from the darkness.

WENDELL

You here about the accident?

MITCHELL stares at WENDELL'S haunted eyes, then looks back at RISA. He immediately knows their story.

MITCHELL

Yes. I'm a lawyer. I realize this is an awful time, but it's important that we talk.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

A group of men are setting up the ferris wheel for the country fair. SAM and NICOLE walk into the shot, eating ice cream cones. SAM waves at someone he recognizes in the distance.

SAM

Let's sit down.

NICOLE nods, her mind elsewhere.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE are sitting at an outside table, finishing their cones.

A school bus pulls up into the fairground. NICOLE watches as young children spill out of the bus and gather outside.

NICOLE smiles at this scene. SAM notices, turns around to see the children, then turns back to NICOLE.

SAM

What's so funny?

NICOLE

Just the way Dolores gets so excited about bringing the kids to check out the animals. It's like the biggest thing in her life.

ANGLE ON

DOLORES DRISCOLL, a warm and cheery woman in her forties, leading the young children into the large exhibition barn on the fair site.

DOLORES

Alright, kids. I want you all to listen to me. Rule number one No one is allowed to stick their fingers into the cages. I don't care how cute some of these animals may be, the fact is they don't like being here, no matter how many ribbons some of them have won...

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

MITCHELL STEPHENS is having a meeting with WENDELL and RISA WALKER in their livingroom behind the reception area. MITCHELL has a pad of paper and is taking notes.

WENDELL

Kyle Lambston's a drunk. Nobody likes him. He's a nasty piece of work.

MITCHELL

In what way?

WENDELL

Been drinking since high school.  
Fucked himself up. Used to be smart  
enough.

MITCHELL

Any criminal record?

WENDELL

Probably half a dozen traffic  
convictions. Drunk driving. Lost  
his licence. That's why he don't  
work no more.

WENDELL

Can't get off that shitty dump they  
live on. What little money comes in  
goes to booze.

MITCHELL

How does the family survive?

WENDELL

Don't know. Food banks, welfare,  
church charity. They scrape by.

MITCHELL looks at RISA, who has remained silent.

MITCHELL

What about Doreen?

RISA

She...she was a friend of mine.

MITCHELL

When?

RISA

At school. She fell for Kyle just  
before we graduated. Got pregnant,  
and...went to live in a trailer up  
on a woodlot Kyle's dad used to own.  
Kyle started spending more and more  
time at the Spread Eagle...

MITCHELL

That's the local bar?

RISA

(nodding)

...coming home drunk and I guess feeling trapped by his life and blaming her for that...and...

RISA hesitates.

WENDELL

Taking it out on her.

MITCHELL stops taking notes, and looks at the WALKERS.

MITCHELL

He beat her?

RISA nods. MITCHELL crosses the LAMBSTONS off of his list. He looks up at RISA and WENDELL.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

You see, to do this right, to actually have a chance at winning - of getting some money to compensate you for the loss of your boy - we need folks like you. Sensitive, loving parents. People with no criminal background or history of trouble in town. Do you understand?

The WALKERS nod.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Now, of all these parents you've told me about whose kids were killed, who would you consider to be good upstanding neighbors?

RISA stares hard at MITCHELL.

RISA

What do you mean?

MITCHELL

People who will help our cause.

Pause.

RISA

Well, there's the Hamiltons. Joe  
and Shelly Hamilton.

WENDELL  
(caustically)  
Yeah, right.

Beat. MITCHELL looks at WENDELL, waiting for an  
explanation.

WENDELL (CONT'D)

I mean, everyone knows Joey steals  
antiques from summer cottages.  
Resells them to dealers in the city.  
He's been doing that for years.

MITCHELL regards WENDELL with a slight smile of admiration.

MITCHELL  
That's great, Wendell. That's the  
sort of thing I need to know. So it  
doesn't come back to haunt our case  
later on.

RISA  
There's the Prescots...

WENDELL  
That sonofabitch owes thousands to  
the bank and half the businesses in  
town. He's about to lose his house  
and car.

RISA  
But Charlene...

WENDELL  
Charlene's over at the Spread Eagle  
every other night. Sleeps with  
whatever she can get her hands on.  
She'll go down for a pat on the head  
and a fistful of peanuts.

MITCHELL is taking notes.

WENDELL (CONT'D)

Don't even think of the Bilodeaus or the Atwaters. They're all inbred.

RISA  
The Ottos.

Pause. MITCHELL waits. No response from WENDELL.

MITCHELL  
Tell me about the Ottos.

RISA  
Wanda and Hartley. They lost Bear. He was their adopted son. A beautiful boy. Indian.

MITCHELL  
Indian?

RISA  
Yes.

MITCHELL  
That's good. Judges like adopted Indian boys. Tell me more about the Ottos.

As RISA talks, MITCHELL takes notes.

RISA  
They're smart. Been to college. They moved here from the city about a dozen years ago.

MITCHELL  
What do they do?

RISA  
Crafts.

MITCHELL  
Crafts?

RISA  
Wanda does these photographic things. That's one of her pictures on the wall.

WENDELL

Yeah, well, they probably smoke weed.

RISA

You don't know that.

MITCHELL

Have they ever been busted?

RISA

No.

WENDELL

You don't know is what you mean.

MITCHELL regards the tension between RISA and WENDELL as he continues to make notes.

MITCHELL'S cell phone rings. He answers it.

MITCHELL

Yes, I'll accept the charges.

MITCHELL stands up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Do you mind if I step outside for a moment? It's a private call.

The WALKERS nod as MITCHELL moves outside.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

MITCHELL speaks into his cellular phone.

MITCHELL

Zoe...Zoe, where are you?

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

A newscaster is giving a report on the television screen of a first class airplane cabin. The image is silent.

This scene takes place two years after the accident.

MITCHELL STEPHENS is playing with his headset, which doesn't seem to be working. He summons a STEWARDESS over.

MITCHELL

I'm not getting any sound.

The STEWARDESS checks the headset and confirms the problem.

STEWARDESS

I'll find you another pair.

The STEWARDESS leaves.

A young woman seated beside MITCHELL hands him her headset.

ALISON

You can have mine.

MITCHELL takes ALISON'S headset. Their eyes lock for a moment.

ALISON (CONT'D)

Yes, we do know each other. I'm Alison Jones.

MITCHELL

Alison Jones.

ALISON

I was a friend of Zoe's. We went to school together. I used to come to your house.

MITCHELL

(pretending to remember)

Yes.

ALISON

Ally. That was my nickname.

MITCHELL

Ally. That's right.

ALISON

How are you?

MITCHELL

I'm just fine, Ally. What about you?

ALISON

I'm fine. Still working with my father.

MITCHELL

And what does he do again?

ALISON

He used to work with you. Until you found out he was having an affair with your wife.

Pause. MITCHELL finally remembers ALISON JONES.

MITCHELL

Ally Jones.

ALISON

How is Mrs. Stephens?

MITCHELL

We're...not together.

ALISON

I'd heard that. But she's well?

MITCHELL

Yes...fine.

ALISON

And Zoe? How's Zoe?

Pause. The STEWARDESS comes back with a new headset. She notices the set that ALISON has given him.

STEWARDESS

Oh, you've beaten me to it.

The STEWARDESS hands the headset to ALISON.

STEWARDESS (CONT'D)

Here.

The camera has remained fixed on MITCHELL'S face.

CUT TO

EXT. ROADSIDE -- MORNING

WANDA and HARTLEY OTTO are waiting for the school bus with their adopted son BEAR.

The bus arrives, and the door opens to reveal DOLORES DRISCOLL, who is driving.

DOLORES

Good morning, Wanda. Hi, Hartley.

WANDA

Hi, Dolores.

DOLORES watches as WANDA and HARTLEY OTTO affectionately say goodbye to their boy. WANDA gives BEAR a photograph, which has strong psychedelic influences. BEAR shows it proudly to DOLORES.

WANDA (CONT'D)

What do you think?

DOLORES

Well, it's certainly what you'd call interesting.

WANDA

(laughing)

You hate it.

DOLORES

I didn't say that.

WANDA

I could wrap it up. Protect the other kids.

DOLORES

I'll just strap it on the roof.

WANDA

It's for the school bazaar.

DOLORES

Oh, it's bizarre alright. C'mon Bear. Let's get you out of here.

WANDA

Away from your crazy Mom.

DOLORES

(voice over)

The Ottos always waited for the bus with Bear. They were the only parents who did that, together like that. I guess they're what you might call hippies.

MITCHELL

(voice over)

What do you mean by that, Mrs. Driscoll?

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES and MITCHELL are in the modest livingroom of DOLORES'S house. The conversation continues from the previous voice over.

In the corner of the room sits ABBOTT, DOLORES'S husband. ABBOTT has suffered a massive stroke, and seems to be completely paralyzed. His presence, however, is intense and powerful.

MITCHELL frequently looks over to ABBOTT during his conversations with DOLORES. ABBOTT is always watching him like a hawk, making MITCHELL uneasy.

DOLORES

Dolores. No one calls me 'Mrs. Driscoll'.

MITCHELL

What do you mean by that, Dolores?

DOLORES

About the Ottos?

MITCHELL

Yes. What do you mean by 'hippies'?

DOLORES

I mean, the way they look. Their hair and clothing...

MITCHELL

Do they have any reputation for drugs?

DOLORES

No, nothing like that. The Ottos are what I'd call model citizens. They're regular at town meetings. They give their opinions in a respectful way. They always help out at various fund-raising bazaars in town, though they aren't churchgoers.

MITCHELL

And they loved Bear.

DOLORES

Oh yes. Like I said, they always came out together to see him off to school. It's like he was their little treasure. He was such a beautiful boy. That's a picture of him on the wall there, behind Abbott.

MITCHELL turns around to find the picture of BEAR.

It is right behind ABBOTT'S head, so MITCHELL has to divide his attention between the cute PHOTOGRAPH of BEAR clutching a prize rabbit at last year's county fair, and ABBOTT'S glaring eyes.

ANGLE ON

The PHOTOGRAPHS of various children with their pets. Some have ribbons.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

(voice over)

Those are all from the fair last year. Abbott and me were judges at the pet show.

MITCHELL

For rabbits?

DOLORES

(nodding)

Abbott used to breed them 'til he had the stroke. Bear won first prize. Just look at the smile on his face.

DOLORES

He was one of those children that bring out the best in people. He would have been a wonderful man.

ANGLE ON

MITCHELL as he stares at the photo of BEAR.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

The camera is outside the bus, looking at BEAR as he finishes waving to his parents.

ANGLE ON

BEAR'S P.O.V. of WANDA and HARTLEY disappearing as the bus pulls away.

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

The camera moves inside the crowded bus, peering at the childrens' activity as they play with each other in the bus.

ANGLE ON

JESSICA and MASON ANSEL are seated at the back of the bus,

looking out the rear window, waving at someone.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

JESSICA and MASON are seen waving at...

BILLY ANSEL, driving behind them in his pick up truck. He waves back at his children.

DOLORES

(voice over)

Billy Ansel started honking at us up around Upper Hat Creek. He always started to do that when he caught up to the bus. He'd wave at his kids, Jessica and Mason, who always sat at

the back. Normally, he followed us the whole distance over the ridge towards the school.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

The conversation between MITCHELL and DOLORES continues from the previous scene.

MITCHELL

So Billy was driving behind the bus at the time of the accident?

DOLORES nods. Her expression is distant.

DOLORES

Billy loved to see his kids in the bus. They always sat in the back, so they could wave to each other. It comforted him.

MITCHELL

From what?

DOLORES

(confused)

From what?

MITCHELL

Did he have any particular problems that you knew of? Financial pressures...run-ins with the law...

DOLORES

No, nothing like that. Billy's wife, Lydia, died of cancer a few years ago. He took over raising the children by himself. It was obvious how much he missed Lydia.

MITCHELL

You talked about it?

DOLORES

No.

(beat)

I saw it on his face.

Pause. DOLORES stares at MITCHELL.

CUT TO

EXT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

Through the windshield, the camera fixes on BILLY'S face as he stares at his children.

ANGLE ON

Inside the cab of his pick up, BILLY dials a number on his cell phone. He continues to wave at his children as he speaks into the phone.

BILLY

(into the phone)

Hi...Can you talk? I'm on my way to work...I'm waving at them now...What's that noise?

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

RISA is on a cordless phone. She has just finished cleaning a room. WENDELL is hammering in the background.

RISA

Wendell's working on the roof. He thinks he's fixing a leak. As far as I'm concerned he's just punching in a few new holes.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

BILLY smiles as he continues the conversation.

BILLY

Nicole's coming over to look after the kids tonight. She'll be there around six.

RISA

Billy, that's too early.

BILLY

She said she's got to be home by nine.

RISA

Can't you make it later?

BILLY

Look, I'll be waiting in the room. You get over as soon as you can. Okay?

RISA

I guess.

CUT TO

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

HELICOPTER AERIAL SHOT

The bus and the pick-up are travelling through a beautiful mountain pass.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

MITCHELL continues his conversation with ALISON as they eat dinner.

ALISON

I'm glad to hear that Zoe's okay.

MITCHELL

Are you still in touch?

ALISON

Not really. The last time I saw her was at that clinic. That was a long time ago.

MITCHELL

Which one?

ALISON

Which one?

MITCHELL

Which clinic?

ALISON

I don't remember the name. It was near a beach.

MITCHELL

Sunnyridge. That was a long time ago.

Beat. ALISON proceeds cautiously.

ALISON

So there were others?

MITCHELL

(as he eats)

Other clinics? Oh sure. Clinics, half-way houses, treatment centers, detox units...

ALISON

Then...when did she get better?

MITCHELL

She didn't.

ALISON

But you said...

MITCHELL

That's where I'm going. To see her.

ALISON

She's in trouble?

MITCHELL

Yes.

(beat)

Do you find there's something  
strange about this meat?

ALISON stares at her plate. MITCHELL summons the  
STEWARDESS.

STEWARDESS

Some more wine?

MITCHELL

I'm afraid this meat is overdone.

STEWARDESS

I'm sorry about that, Mr. Stephens.  
Would you like to try the fish?

MITCHELL

What is it?

STEWARDESS

Poached salmon.

MITCHELL considers this. He is polite, but slightly edgy.

MITCHELL

Do you have a cold plate?

STEWARDESS

We do.

MITCHELL

Is there shrimp on it?

STEWARDESS

Yes.

MITCHELL

If you could pick the shrimp off, as well as anything that touches the shrimp...

STEWARDESS

(smiling)

I'm not sure if that will leave much on the plate.

MITCHELL

Well, let's see what we get.

The STEWARDESS leaves with MITCHELL'S food. MITCHELL gets up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

(to ALISON)

If you could excuse me for a moment.

ALISON nods. MITCHELL leaves. ALISON picks at her meat undecidedly.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

In the mirror of the tiny washroom of the plane, MITCHELL washes some water on his face. He stares at his reflection in the mirror.

CUT TO

EXT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL approaches the house of HARTLEY and WANDA OTTO. He gets out of his car and knocks on the door.

WANDA OTTO answers. She has been crying. The two stare at each other.

MITCHELL

Mrs. Otto, my name is Mitchell Stephens. The Walkers told me you might be willing to talk to me.

Pause.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry for coming over unannounced like this, Mrs. Otto, but the Walkers said you would understand. I know it's an awful time, but it's important that we talk.

WANDA

Who are you?

MITCHELL

I'm a lawyer.

WANDA

You can't come here.

MITCHELL

Please, let me explain. I'll only take a moment of your time.

WANDA

No.

MITCHELL

Please.

WANDA pauses, stares at MITCHELL, then lets him in.

CUT TO

INT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL walks into the OTTO residence. It is a large two-storey space divided into several smaller chambers with sheets of brightly colored cloth - tie-dyes and Indian madras - that hang from wires.

On a low brick platform in the centre of the main chamber is a large wood-burning stove. A few feet from the stove, sitting on an overstuffed cushion, is HARTLEY OTTO.

HARTLEY is listening to music on his headphones. He is very

stoned. WANDA moves over, and pulls the headphones off her husband's head.

WANDA

We have a guest. What did you say your name was?

MITCHELL

Mitchell Stephens.

MITCHELL hands them a card. HARTLEY reads it with deliberation.

WANDA

The Walkers sent him by.

HARTLEY rises up. He stares at MITCHELL. A tense pause.

HARTLEY

You want a cup of tea or something?

MITCHELL

A cup of tea would be nice.

(beat)

Would it be alright if I sit down for a few minutes, Mrs. Otto? I want to talk to you.

WANDA stares at MITCHELL. No response. MITCHELL waits a beat, then seats himself rather uncomfortably on a large pillow. He is unsure whether to cross his legs, or fold them under his chin.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

The Walkers spoke very highly of you.

WANDA

You've been retained?

MITCHELL

Yes.

WANDA

Their child died, and they got a lawyer.

Pause. MITCHELL assesses WANDA'S energy.

MITCHELL

It should be said that my task is to represent the Walkers only in their anger. Not their grief.

WANDA

Who did they get for that?

MITCHELL

You are angry, aren't you, Mrs. Otto? That's why I'm here. To give your anger a voice. To be your

weapon against whoever caused that bus to go off the road.

WANDA

Dolores?

MITCHELL

It's my belief that Dolores was doing exactly what she'd been doing for years. Besides, the school board's insurance on Dolores is minimal. A few million at the very most. The really deep pockets are to be found in the town, or in the company that made the bus.

WANDA

You think someone else caused the accident?

MITCHELL

Mrs. Otto, there is no such thing as an accident. The word doesn't mean anything to me. As far as I'm concerned, somebody somewhere made a decision to cut a corner. Some corrupt agency or corporation accounted the cost variance between a ten-cent bolt and a million dollar out-of-court settlement. They decided to sacrifice a few lives for

the difference. That's what's done, Mrs. Otto. I've seen it happen so many times before.

HARTLEY returns with the tea.

HARTLEY

But Dolores said she saw a dog and tried to...

MITCHELL

How long has Dolores been driving that bus, Mr. Otto? How many times has she steered clear of danger? What went wrong that morning?

MITCHELL takes the cup of tea.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

Someone calculated ahead of time what it would cost to sacrifice safety. It's the darkest, most cynical thing to imagine, but it's

absolutely true. And now, it's up to me to make them build that bus with an extra bolt, or add an extra yard of guard rail. It's the only way we can ensure moral responsibility in this society. By what I do.

Pause.

WANDA

So you're just the thing we need.

MITCHELL

Excuse me?

WANDA

Isn't that what you want us to believe? That we're completely defenseless? That you know what's best?

MITCHELL

Listen to me, Mrs Otto. Listen very carefully. I do know what's best.

As we're sitting here the town or the school board or the manufacturer of that bus are lining up a battery of their own lawyers to negotiate with people as grief-stricken as yourselves. And this makes me very, very mad. It's why I came all the way up here. If everyone had done their job with integrity your son would be alive this morning and safely in school. I promise you that I will pursue and reveal who it was that did not do their job.

MITCHELL

Who is responsible for this tragedy. Then, in your name and the Walkers' name and the name of whoever decides to join us, I shall sue. I shall sue for negligence until they bleed.

Pause.

WANDA

I want that person to go to jail. For the rest of his life. I want him to die there. I don't want his money.

MITCHELL nods sympathetically.

MITCHELL

It's unlikely that anyone will go to prison, Mrs. Otto. But he or his company will pay in other ways. And we must make them pay. Not for the

money or to compensate you for the loss of your son. That can't be done. But to protect other innocent children. You see, I'm not just here to speak for your anger, but for the future as well.

(beat)

What we're talking about is an ongoing relationship to time.

Pause. HARTLEY looks at MITCHELL'S teacup.

HARTLEY

I didn't ask if you wanted milk.

MITCHELL

No. A little sugar though.

HARTLEY

We've only got honey.

MITCHELL

I'll...take it straight.

MITCHELL maintains his eye contact with WANDA.

WANDA

Are you expensive?

MITCHELL

No.

MITCHELL

If you agree to have me represent you in this suit, I will require no payment until after the case is won, when I will require one third of the awarded amount. If there is no award made, then my services will cost you nothing. It's a standard agreement.

WANDA

Do you have this agreement with you?

MITCHELL

It's in my car.

MITCHELL gets up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I'll just be a minute. Anyhow, you should discuss this all without me

before you make any decision.

MITCHELL moves to the door.

CUT TO

EXT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL leaves the house and moves to his car. He gets inside and closes the door.

Once inside, MITCHELL opens his briefcase and takes out an agreement for the OTTOS. Something inside the briefcase catches his attention.

ANGLE ON

A photograph of ZOE.

MITCHELL stares at this photograph.

MITCHELL

(voice over)

I've done everything the loving father of a drug addict is supposed to do...

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- EVENING

MITCHELL and ALISON have finished dinner. MITCHELL is drinking a triple scotch.

MITCHELL

(continuing from voice over)

...I've sent her to the best hospitals, she's seen all the best doctors. It doesn't matter. Two weeks later she's on the street. New York, Vancouver, Pittsburgh, Toronto, L.A. The next time I hear from her, it's a phone call scamming for money. Money for school, or money for a new kind of therapist,

or money for a plane ticket home.  
'Oh Daddy, just let me come  
home...Please, Daddy, I have to see  
you...' But she never comes home.  
I'm always at the airport, but she's  
never there. Ten years of this, ten  
years of these lies, of imagining  
what happens if I don't send the  
money, of kicking down doors and  
dragging her out of rat-infested  
apartments, of explaining why that  
couldn't be my daughter in a porn  
flick someone saw...well, enough  
rage and helplessness, and your love  
turns to something else.

ALISON

(soft)

What...does it turn to?

MITCHELL

It turns to steaming piss.

Pause. ALISON is shocked by MITCHELL'S intensity. He  
collects himself.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I'm...so sorry.

ALISON

That's okay.

CUT TO

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- LATE DAY

BILLY is chasing his kids around the yard of their house.  
NICOLE appears, and watching BILLY play with JESSICA and  
MASON. BILLY notices her, and runs up breathlessly,

BILLY

Hi, Nicole.

NICOLE

Hi, Mr. Ansel. Hi, Jessica,  
Mason...

BILLY

They just finished supper.

NICOLE

(to the kids)

Was it good?

The children shake their heads. NICOLE and BILLY laugh.

BILLY  
I'll be back around nine.

NICOLE  
Okay.

CUT TO

INT. GAS STATION -- DUSK

BILLY is playing his electric guitar in the same garage that MITCHELL walked into at the beginning of the film.

This is the gas station/repair shop/car wash that BILLY runs.

BILLY checks his watch, and takes his guitar off. He leaves the garage.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

BILLY is walking along a path behind the hotel, making sure that he is not seen. He sneaks into Room 11.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

BILLY is sitting in a chair in Room 11, smoking a cigarette. The room is dark. After a while, RISA enters through the door and slips inside.

RISA  
Have you been waiting long?

BILLY  
A while.

RISA  
Billy, do you have to smoke?  
Wendell can smell if someone's been smoking.

BILLY gets up to put out his cigarette in the toilet. He notices some work tools in the washroom.

BILLY

What's all this?

RISA

Wendell put some fresh enamel on that break in the tub.

BILLY

Does this mean I can't take a shower?

RISA

No. It should be dry by now.

BILLY nods. He turns around, looks at RISA, and begins to unbutton her shirt. RISA stops him, smiles, and kisses BILLY. After a moment, she pulls away, unbuckles her belt, and slips off her jeans. She moves to the bed.

BILLY

What time's he coming home?

RISA

When the game's over, I guess.

BILLY moves to the radio and turns it on, tuning into a hockey game. RISA laughs. He lowers the volume. RISA takes off her shirt, and moves behind BILLY, kissing his neck. BILLY closes his eyes.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- EVENING

JESSICA and MASON, BILLY'S children, are being read to sleep by NICOLE. She reads from Robert Browning's THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN.

NICOLE

The Pied Piper of Hamelin.  
By famous Hanover city;  
The river Weser, deep and wide,

Washes its wall on the southern  
side;  
A pleasanter spot you never spied;  
But, when begins my ditty...

MASON  
What's a ditty again?

NICOLE  
It's like a song.

MASON  
Oh.

NICOLE

When begins my ditty,  
Almost five hundred years ago,  
To see the townfolk suffer so  
From vermin, was a pity...

MASON  
What's vermin again?

NICOLE  
Rats!  
They fought the dogs and killed the  
cats,  
And bit the babies in the cradles,  
And ate the cheeses out of vats.  
And licked the soup from the cook's  
own ladles,  
Split open the kegs of salted  
sprats,  
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,  
And even spoiled the women's chats,  
By drowning their speaking  
With shrieking and squeaking  
In fifty different sharps and  
flats...

MASON  
Nicole?

NICOLE  
Yes.

MASON

Can I sit beside you on the bus tomorrow?

NICOLE

Don't you usually like to sit at the back? To wave at your Dad?

MASON

I want to sit beside you tomorrow.

NICOLE

Okay.

NICOLE covers JESSICA, and gets up to leave.

MASON

Nicole?

NICOLE

What, Mason?

MASON

Did the Pied Piper take the children away because he was mad that the town didn't pay him?

NICOLE

That's right.

MASON

Well, if he knew magic - if he could get the kids into the mountain - why couldn't he use his pipe to make the people pay him for getting rid of the rats?

NICOLE

Because...he wanted to them to be punished.

MASON

The people in the town?

NICOLE

Yes.

MASON

So he was mean?

NICOLE

No. Not mean. Just...very angry.

MASON

Oh.

NICOLE

Should I keep reading?

MASON

Okay.

NICOLE smiles at MASON. JESSICA is already asleep.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

Room 11 at the Bide-A-Wile. RISA is naked, sitting cross-legged on the bed. BILLY has just gotten into the shower. RISA stares at BILLY through the semi-transparent curtain.

RISA stands up and walks to the window. She looks across the parking lot.

ANGLE ON

RISA'S P.O.V. of the rain-glistened concrete.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- NIGHT

NICOLE is in BILLY'S bedroom. She has some womens' clothing laid out on the bed, and is staring at the selection of blouses and summer dresses. The camera slowly glides to a picture that BILLY has beside his bed.

ANGLE ON

The photograph. It shows BILLY and his deceased wife, LYDIA.

Back to NICOLE, selecting various items of LYDIA'S clothing, and placing them over her body, seeing how she looks in the mirror.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DAY

RISA'S DAYDREAM. A montage of various events, watched from the window in Room 11. RISA is seen talking to BILLY on her cordless phone (Scene 34), as well as going through various activities. Finally, RISA is seen putting her son, SEAN, into the schoolbus. As the bus pulls away, RISA waves goodbye. RISA turns around and walks to the camera. She stops in front of the lens and stares into it, her expression calm and serene.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

Present time. Night. RISA is sitting on the bed, naked, her legs crossed. She looks to the side, lost in thought.

BILLY is behind her, putting on his clothes.

BILLY

What are you thinking?

RISA

Tomorrow I'm going to put Sean on the bus. He won't want to go. He never does. He'll cry and want to hold on to me.

BILLY

That's because he misses you.

RISA

Yes.

BILLY

It's natural.

RISA

Your kids never cry.

BILLY

Well, maybe that's because they know  
I'm going to follow them. Behind  
the bus.

RISA

They can look forward to that.

BILLY

Sure.

RISA

Just like we look forward to this.

BILLY looks at RISA and smiles at her with affection. He  
moves to the door.

RISA (CONT'D)

You're leaving.

BILLY

I better get back.

RISA nods.

RISA

Good night, Billy.

BILLY

Good night.

BILLY leaves. RISA, still naked, moves to the washroom.  
She stares into the tub, noticing that the white enamel that  
WENDELL has applied has been washed away from BILLY'S  
shower.

RISA picks up a tube of the enamel, and begins to re-apply  
it.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- EVENING

NICOLE shows BILLY the clothes she has chosen. BILLY stares  
at the selection.

NICOLE

Are you sure?

BILLY

Yeah.

NICOLE

It just seems...kind of weird.

BILLY

Why?

NICOLE

I don't know.

BILLY

Nicole, I'm just going to pack all this stuff and give it to the church for charity. Don't feel bad. Unless you feel strange about wearing it.

NICOLE

No. I mean, I remember Mrs. Ansel wearing some of this stuff, but...I don't feel funny about that. I really liked her.

BILLY

And she really liked you. She would've given you all this if she'd outgrown it, or...

BILLY trails off, suddenly consumed with sadness.

NICOLE

What do you mean 'outgrown it'?

BILLY

I'm not sure.

NICOLE

Oh.

(beat)

Right.

NICOLE turns to leave, taking the clothes with her.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Goodnight, Mr. Ansel.

BILLY

Goodnight, Nicole.

NICOLE leaves the house and walks towards the car where her father is waiting.

CUT TO

INT. SAM'S CAR. -- DUSK

NICOLE gets into the car beside her father.

SAM

What took so long?

NICOLE

Nothing.

SAM stares at the bundle of clothes on NICOLE's lap.

SAM

What's that?

NICOLE

Mrs. Ansel's clothing.

SAM

Does it fit?

NICOLE nods, staring ahead, as SAM starts the car and drives away.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

SAM drives up the driveway to the Burnell home. He opens the door, and takes a blanket from the back. NICOLE gets out as well. The two walk towards the barn.

NICOLE

(voice over)

Once more he stept into the street,  
And to his lips again  
Laid his long pipe of smooth  
straight cane;  
And ere he blew three notes  
such sweet soft notes as yet

musician's cunning  
Never gave the enraptured air -  
There was a rustling, seemed like a  
bustling  
Of merry crowds justling at pitching  
and hustling,  
Small feet were pattering, wooden  
shoes clattering,

Little hands clapping and little  
tongues chattering,  
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when  
the barley is scattering,  
Out came the children running.  
All the little boys and girls,  
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,  
And sparkling eyes and teeth like  
pearls.  
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily  
after  
The wonderful music with shouting  
and laughter...

Inside the barn, SAM and NICOLE are engaged in a sexual  
embrace. The camera glides past them as NICOLE's voice  
continues to read from the poem.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

When, lo, as they reached the  
mountain-side,  
A wondrous portal opened wide,  
As if a cavern was suddenly  
hollowed;  
And the Piper advanced and the  
children followed,  
And when all were in to the very  
last,  
The door in the mountain-side shut  
fast...

CUT TO

INT. BUS -- DAY

CLOSE-UP of NICOLE in the bus as it makes it's way to school. She seems to be listening to her own voice as it reads from the poem.

NICOLE

(voice over)

Did I say, all? No! One was lame,  
And could not dance the whole of  
the way;  
And in after years, if you would  
blame  
His sadness, he was used to say,-  
'It's dull in the town since my

playmates left!  
I can't forget that I'm bereft  
Of all the pleasant sights they see,  
Which the Piper also promised me.  
For me led us, he said, to a joyous  
land,  
Joining the town and just at hand,  
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees  
grew,  
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,  
And everything was strange and  
new...

On this last line, NICOLE's lips begin to move, as she repeats the line out loud to herself.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Everything was strange and new.

CUT TO

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

A HELICOPTER shot of the schoolbus making its way through the winter terrain. DOLORES' voice is heard over this sweeping panoramic shot.

DOLORES

(voice over)

By the time I reached the bottom of

Bartlett Hill Road, I had half my load, over twenty kids, aboard.

CUT TO

EXT. WINTER ROAD -- MORNING

The bus comes to a stop where a couple of children in bright snow suits are waiting by the side of the road. DOLORES opens the door and the kids climb in.

OMITTED

DOLORES

(voice over)

They had walked to their places on the main road from the smaller lanes

DOLORES

and private roadways that run off it. Bright little clusters of three and four children - like berries waiting to be plucked.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES is continuing her conversation with MITCHELL.

DOLORES

(smiling to herself)

That's the way I thought of them sometimes.

MITCHELL

Berries.

DOLORES

Yes. Like I was putting them into my big basket. Clearing the hillside of its children.

Pause. MITCHELL stares at DOLORES, disturbed by this image. DOLORES looks back at him.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

Abbott and I used to do a lot of that in the spring.

MITCHELL  
Berry-picking.

DOLORES  
Yes. The old-fashioned way.

MITCHELL  
And what's that?

DOLORES  
With our hands.

MITCHELL nods, stealing a glance ABBOTT, who stares at him intensely.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

The bus pulls up across the road from the Bide-A-Wile Motel. DOLORES watches as RISA walks her little boy, SEAN, across the road to the bus.

DOLORES  
(voice over)  
Anyhow, my next stop was across from the Bide-A-Wile, which is owned and operated by Risa and Wendell Walker.

Risa walked her little boy, Sean, across the road, which was customary. Sean had some kind of learning disability.

DOLORES  
He was behind all the other kids his age in school and was too fragile and nervous to play sports.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES continues to talk to MITCHELL, who takes notes.

DOLORES

(smiling)

A strange little fellow, but you couldn't help liking him. He was close to ten but seemed more like a frightened five or six.

MITCHELL

Were his parents...attentive to him?

DOLORES

What do you mean?

MITCHELL

You mentioned that he had a learning disability.

DOLORES

That's right.

MITCHELL

Did his parents attend to that?

DOLORES

What do you mean?

MITCHELL

Did they give him special care?

DOLORES

The Walkers loved Sean. He was their only child...the object of all their attention. I mean, Wendell's a withdrawn sort of man. That's his nature. But Risa, she's still got dreams.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

DOLORES opens the door for SEAN. RISA is wearing a down parka over her nightgown and bathrobe and is wearing slippers.

RISA  
Morning, Dolores.

DOLORES  
Hi, Risa. Aren't your feet  
freezing?

RISA looks down at her slippers.

RISA  
I guess they are.

SEAN gets to the landing of the bus, then turns around and  
looks at his mother. He extends his hands like a baby  
wanting to be hugged.

SEAN  
I want to stay with you.

Pause. RISA stares at her son with great intensity and  
feeling.

RISA  
Go on now, Sean. Go on.

SEAN turns away and looks into the bus full of children.

NICOLE  
C'mon, Sean. Sit next to me.

MASON is sitting beside NICOLE. NICOLE whispers something  
to him, and he makes his way for SEAN.

MASON goes to the back of the bus and sits beside his  
sister, JESSICA. SEAN moves tentatively towards NICOLE.

ANGLE ON

Back on DOLORES and RISA.

DOLORES  
Is he okay?

RISA  
I don't know.

DOLORES

Temperature?

RISA

No. He's not sick or anything.  
It's just one of those mornings, I  
guess.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES continues her conversation with MITCHELL STEPHENS.

DOLORES

But I never had 'those mornings'  
myself. Not so long as I had the  
schoolbus to drive. Not so long as  
I had my kids.

DOLORES is lost in this memory, realizing she will never  
drive the children again. A tear runs down her cheek.

ABBOTT, sensing his wife's mood, activates his electric  
wheelchair and maneuvers himself towards DOLORES.

MITCHELL watches as DOLORES grasps ABBOTT'S hand.

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

NICOLE is seated in the bus next to SEAN. She is staring at  
the large speedometer on the front panel.

ANGLE ON

The speedometer reads 51 miles an hour.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

JESSICA and MASON, BILLY'S children, wave at their father  
from the back of the bus.

CUT TO

EXT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

BILLY waving back at his children. His expression suddenly  
changes as he sees...

CUT TO

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

From BILLY'S point of view, the schoolbus smashes through the guardrail and the snowbank. It plummets down the embankment to the frozen-over pond.

Still upright, the bus slides across the ice to the far side. The ice lets go and the rear half of the yellow bus is swallowed at once by the freezing water. The sound of the ice breaking is terrifying.

DOLORES

(voice over)

It emerged from the blowing snow on the right side of the road. It might have been a dog or a small deer or maybe even a lost child. It might have been an optical illusion or a mirage. Whatever it was, for the rest of my life I will remember that red-brown blur...

An eerie silence as the camera stares at the scene of the accident.

CUT TO

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- MORNING

The camera is high above the bed, looking down on a sleeping family.

This is the same image as from the beginning of the film.

A FATHER, a MOTHER, and a THREE YEAR OLD GIRL, naked in bed.

MITCHELL

(voice over)

Every time I get on one of these flights to rescue Zoe, I remember the summer we almost lost her. She was three years old. It happened in the morning, at this cottage we used to rent. We were all sleeping together in bed. It was a wonderful

time in our lives. We still thought we had a future together, the three of us. Did you ever visit the cottage?

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is telling the story to ALISON.

ALISON

I...don't think so.

MITCHELL

I woke to the sound of Zoe's breathing. It was laboured. I looked over and noticed she was sweating and all swollen. I grabbed her, rushed to the kitchen, and splashed water on her face.

ALISON

What happened?

MITCHELL

I didn't know. I was in a panic. I guessed she'd been bitten by an insect, but there was no doctor. The nearest hospital was forty miles away, and Zoe was continuing to swell. Klara took her in her arms and tried to breast-feed her, while I dialed the hospital. I finally got a doctor on the line. He sounded young, but cool. He was confident, but there was a nervousness. He have been an intern. This was the first time he ever had to deal with anything like this. He wanted to seem like he knew what he was doing, but he was just as scared as I was.

ALISON stares at MITCHELL, taken by his need to chronicle and detail this irrelevant stranger.

CUT TO

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- MORNING

FATHER (YOUNG MITCHELL) is on the phone. The camera is behind his head.

In front of him, MOTHER (KLARA) is breast-feeding the THREE YEAR OLD GIRL (ZOE).

MITCHELL

(voice over)

He surmised that there was a nest of baby black widow spiders in the mattress. He told me they had to be babies, or else with Zoe's body

weight she'd be dead. He told me I had to rush her to the hospital. He was alone. There was no ambulance available. 'Now you listen', he said, 'There's a good chance you can get her to me before her throat closes, but the important thing is to keep her calm.' He asked if there was one of us she was more relaxed with than the other. I said, 'Yes, with me.'

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL continues telling the story to ALISON.

MITCHELL

Which was true enough, especially at that moment. Klara was wild-eyed with fear, and her fear was contagious. I was a better actor than she was, that's all. Zoe loved us equally then. Just like she hates us both equally now.

(beat)

The doctor told me that I should hold her in my lap, and let Klara drive to the hospital. He asked me

to bring a small, sharp knife. It had to be clean. There was no time to sterilize properly. He explained how to perform an emergency tracheotomy. How to cut into my daughter's throat and windpipe without causing her to bleed to death. He told me there'd be a lot of blood. I said I didn't think I could do it. 'If her throat closes up and stops her breathing, you'll have to, Mr. Stephens. You'll have a minute and a half, two minutes maybe, and she'll probably be unconscious when you do it. But if you can keep her calm and relaxed, if you don't let her little heart beat too fast and spread the poison around, then you might just make it over here first. You get going now', and he hung up.

CUT TO

INT. CAR -- MORNING

A little girl staring innocently into the lens as a male voice sings a lullaby to her.

It is now recognized as MITCHELL'S voice, singing to his daughter as she is driven to the hospital.

MITCHELL

(voice over)

It was an unforgettable drive. I was divided into two people. One part of me was Daddy, singing a lullaby to his little girl.

MITCHELL

The other part was a surgeon, ready to cut into her throat. I waited for the second that Zoe's breath stopped to make that incision.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

ALISON stares at MITCHELL as he finishes his story.

ALISON

What happened?

MITCHELL

Nothing. We made it to the hospital. I didn't have to go as far as I was prepared to. But I was prepared to go all the way.

CUT TO

EXT. ACCIDENT SITE -- DAY

An open sky. BILLY ANSEL'S face appears in the frame, looking down at the camera.

ANGLE ON

The camera is staring down at BILLY as he identifies the bodies of his two children.

The camera is at a great height.

As BILLY walks away, the camera floats down, slowly moving on his face.

CUT TO

EXT. WOODS -- DAY

BILLY'S P.O.V. of his wife, LYDIA, tugging a sled through the snow. JESSICA and MASON are on either side of her.

The three figures are seen from behind, trudging their way through the winter landscape.

This image has a ghostly quality to it. It is filmed in slow motion.

Suddenly, a snowball enters the frame and hits LYDIA on the back of the head. She turns around, laughing into the camera.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

EXTREME-CLOSE-UP

BILLY in his chair in Room 11 of the Bide-A-Wile. He is alone, smoking a cigarette. A slight faraway smile on his lips.

After a moment, the door opens. It is RISA.

They stare at each other. Silence.

RISA

I knew you'd be here.

RISA sits on the bed. Pause.

RISA (CONT'D)

Are you going to the funeral?

Pause.

BILLY

I stopped by the station a while ago. I stared at the bus. I could almost hear the kids inside. There was a lawyer there. He told me he'd gotten you signed up. Is that true?

RISA

Something made this happen, Billy. Mr. Stephens is going to find out what it was.

BILLY

What are you talking about? It was an accident.

RISA

Mr. Stephens says that someone didn't put a right bolt in the bus...

BILLY

Risa, I serviced that bus. At the garage. There's nothing wrong with it.

RISA

...or that the guardrail wasn't strong enough.

BILLY

You believe that?

RISA

I have to.

BILLY

Why?

RISA

Because I have to.

BILLY

Well I don't.

BILLY gets up to leave.

RISA

Is it true that you gave Nicole one of Lydia's dresses? That she was wearing it when the bus crashed?

BILLY

Yes.

RISA

Why did you do that, Billy?

BILLY

You think that caused the accident, Risa? That it brought bad luck? Christ, it sounds to me you're looking for a witch doctor, not a lawyer. Or maybe they're the same thing.

RISA is crying. BILLY opens the door.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You know what I'm going to miss?  
More than making love? It's the  
nights you couldn't get away from  
Wendell. It's the nights I'd sit in  
that chair for an hour. Smoking  
cigarettes and remembering my life  
before...

BILLY stares at RISA painfully, then leaves.

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is videotaping the bus with a portable camcorder.

The bus is badly damaged, though essentially intact. Most  
of the windows in the rear have gone. There is a ghostly  
quality to this image, as though the video light is  
searching through the remains of an ancient shipwreck.

MITCHELL turns off the camcorder and stands in the silent  
night, absorbing the disturbing energy of the bus. He hears  
a truck approaching the garage from the distance. It's  
BILLY ANSEL. MITCHELL retreats to his parked car as BILLY  
stops his truck in front of the bus and steps out of the  
truck.

BILLY leaves his headlights on, and they cast dark shadows  
over the inside passenger seats. BILLY stares at the bus a  
long time. MITCHELL approaches him.

MITCHELL

I'm here about your children, Mr.  
Ansel.

BILLY takes a moment, then turns around to face MITCHELL.  
The two men stare at each other.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

My name is...

BILLY

Mister, I don't want to know your  
name.

MITCHELL

I understand.

BILLY

No you don't.

MITCHELL

I can help you.

BILLY

Not unless you can raise the dead.

MITCHELL hands BILLY a card.

MITCHELL

Here. You may change your mind.

BILLY looks at the card.

BILLY

Mr. Mitchell Stephens, Esquire,  
would you be likely to sue me if I  
was to beat you right now? Beat you  
so bad that you pissed blood and  
couldn't walk for a month. Because  
that's what I'm about to do.

MITCHELL

No, Mr. Ansel. I wouldn't sue you.

BILLY

Leave us alone, Stephens. Leave the  
people of this town alone. You  
can't help.

MITCHELL

You can help each other. Several  
people have agreed to let me  
represent them in a negligence suit.  
Your case as an individual will be  
stronger if I'm allowed to represent  
you together as a group.

BILLY

Case?

MITCHELL

The Walkers have agreed. The Ottos.  
Nicole Burnell's parents. It's  
important to initiate proceedings  
right away. Things get covered up.  
People lie. That's why we have to

begin our investigation quickly.  
Before the evidence disappears.  
That's why I'm out here tonight.

BILLY

I know Risa and Wendell Walker.  
They wouldn't hire a goddamned  
lawyer. And the Ottos wouldn't deal

with you. We're not country  
bumpkins you can put a big city  
hustle on. You're trying to use us.

MITCHELL

You're angry, Mr. Ansel. You owe it  
to yourself to feel that way. All  
I'm saying is let me direct your  
rage.

BILLY stares at MITCHELL with a cold intensity. The cell  
phone in MITCHELL'S car begins to ring.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

That's my daughter. Or it may be  
the police to tell me that they've  
found her dead. She's a drug  
addict.

BILLY

Why are you telling me this?

MITCHELL

I'm telling you this because...  
we've all lost our children, Mr.  
Ansel.

MITCHELL

They're dead to us. They kill each  
other in the streets. They wander  
comatose in shopping malls. They're  
paralyzed in front of televisions.  
Something terrible has happened  
that's taken our children away.  
It's too late. They're gone.

The phone continues to ring, as BILLY stares at MITCHELL.

MITCHELL turns to look at the ringing phone.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

MITCHELL is getting ready to leave. DOLORES is still grasping onto ABBOTT'S hand.

DOLORES

I have a question for you, Mr. Stephens.

MITCHELL

What's that, Dolores?

DOLORES

I told you that I was doing fifty miles an hour when the accident happened. That's how I remembered it. But the truth is, I might have been doing sixty. Or sixty five. And if that's true, that I was over the limit when the bus went over, what would happen then?

MITCHELL

That would complicate things.

DOLORES

Because I'd be to blame, right?

MITCHELL

Billy Ansel will insist that you were driving fifty-one miles an hour. Just like you've done every morning for the past fifteen years.

DOLORES

He knows that? Billy?

MITCHELL

Yes. He does.

DOLORES

Billy said that?

MITCHELL nods.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

You've talked to Billy?

MITCHELL

I did.

DOLORES

And Billy told you that he'll tell that to...

MITCHELL

Mrs. Driscoll, if Billy Ansel does not volunteer to say so in court, I will subpoena him and oblige him to testify to that effect.

Pause. MITCHELL plans his next step.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

But in order to do that, you must let me bring a suit in your name

charging negligent infliction of emotional harm. That's what I'm now asking you to consider.

Pause. DOLORES is lost.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

It's clear to me and other people that you have suffered significantly from this event.

DOLORES

What other people?

MITCHELL

Excuse me?

DOLORES

Who's been talking to you about what I'm feeling? Who should care about what I'm feeling?

MITCHELL stares at DOLORES.

MITCHELL

Dolores, people have to know that you've suffered too.

MITCHELL

And they won't understand until you let me clear your name - your good name - once and for all. Will you let me do that? Will you let me do my duty?

Suddenly, ABBOTT says something. He twists his face around his mouth, purses his lips on the left side and emits a string of broken syllables and sounds. After this outburst, DOLORES looks at MITCHELL, a comforted smile on her face.

DOLORES

You heard what Abbott said?

MITCHELL

Yes.

DOLORES

Anything you didn't understand?

MITCHELL

There might have been a word or two that slipped by. Maybe you could clarify it for me, just to be absolutely sure.

DOLORES

Abbott said that the true jury of a person's peers is the people of her town. Only they, the people who have known her all her life, and not twelve strangers, can decide her guilt or innocence. And if I have committed a crime, then it's a crime against them, so they are the ones who must decide my punishment.

MITCHELL stares at ABBOTT, who stares back.

MITCHELL

That's what he said, is it?

DOLORES

Yes. Abbot understands these things.

CUT TO

EXT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

MITCHELL leaves the DRISCOLL house, watched by DOLORES.

INT. HOSPITAL -- MORNING

NICOLE BURNELL is in bed. A doctor, DR. ROBESON, is touching her forehead. NICOLE'S family (SAM, her mother MARY, and her little sister JENNY)

DR. ROBESON

The mind is kind.

The camera fixes on NICOLE'S expression as she stares ahead.

NICOLE

(voice over)

They say I'm lucky because I can't remember the accident.

SAM

Don't even try to remember.

MARY

You just think about getting well, Nicole, that's all.

The camera is always fixed on NICOLE'S face when her voice over is heard.

NICOLE

(voice over)

I know I'm as well as I ever can be again. So shut up, Mom. To stay like this, to live like a slug, I'm going to have to work like someone trying to get into the Olympics.

SAM

Just wait till you see what we've got waiting for you at home.

CUT TO

INT. HOSPITAL -- DAY

NICOLE, in a wheelchair, is being led down a hallway with her family.

NICOLE

(voice over)

It's an incredible relief to be leaving the hospital. I'm so sick of looking at my doctor, listening to Frankenstein ask me stupid questions about what I was feeling...

CUT TO

INT. HOSPITAL. LOBBY. -- DAY

NICOLE is being wheeled to the front door of the hospital.

NICOLE

(voice over,  
continuing)

He thought it was cute when I called him Frankenstein. It wasn't. I feel like his monster.

MARY

Isn't it a lovely day?

NICOLE

What happened to summer?

MARY

Summer's over. It's fall.

NICOLE

And winter?

MARY

Well, winter's far behind us now.

NICOLE

How was it?

MARY

We had a terrible winter last year,  
didn't we, Sam?

SAM nods.

NICOLE

Good thing I was in Florida.

MARY doesn't know quite what to make of NICOLE'S joke. SAM  
flashes NICOLE a smile. She doesn't return it.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

NICOLE arrives at home. The car pulls up in front of the  
modest house.

SAM opens the door and puts the wheelchair up next to it.  
He points out the ramp he has built for NICOLE.

The ramp is painted green.

SAM

How do you like it, Nicole?

NICOLE

The ramp?

SAM

Pretty slick, eh?

NICOLE

Very slick.

SAM

Do you like the colour?

NICOLE

It's okay.

SAM

And I had to widen a few doors.  
You'll see.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

Inside the house. The interior of the house is dark and somewhat tawdry. The BURNELL'S are almost poor.

But SAM then leads NICOLE into the special room he has built for her. It seems like another world. Every detail has been lovingly attended to. No expense has been spared to make this room as attractive and inviting as possible.

A room that a guilty, abusive father might dream up for his crippled daughter.

SAM

What do you think?

Pause. NICOLE wheels around, trying to control her emotions as she inspects the room. A phone rings in the background. MARY goes to answer it.

NICOLE fixes her gaze at the back of the door.

NICOLE

The door needs a lock.

SAM

(taken aback)

Sure. I'll fix it right away.

SAM goes to get his tools. JENNY stares at NICOLE.

JENNY

Can I come and visit you here?

NICOLE

You better. And you can sleep in my new bed with me too.

NICOLE grabs her sister's hand, and JENNY moves in close to her. SAM comes back with the tools. He starts to screw in the hook.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

That's too high. I'll never reach it.

SAM

(nervous)

Oh. I better get some spackle.

SAM leaves again.

JENNY

Mommy says you need to lock the boys out.

NICOLE

What boys?

JENNY

I don't know.

NICOLE stares at JENNY, as MARY comes back into the room.

MARY

So do you like your new room?

NICOLE

It's interesting.

MARY

Your Dad spent all his spare time in here. He wanted to make it absolutely perfect.

NICOLE

I feel like a princess.

SAM comes back and begins to work on the door. NICOLE watches him. She notices a new computer on a desk.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Is this mine?

MARY

Yes. It's a present.

NICOLE

From you?

MARY

No. From Mr. Stephens. That was him on the phone just now. He was calling to see how you were.

NICOLE

Who's Mr. Stephens?

SAM

He's a lawyer. He's our lawyer.

NICOLE

You and Mom have a lawyer?

SAM

Well, yes. He's your lawyer too.

NICOLE

My lawyer? Why do I need a lawyer?

MARY

Maybe we shouldn't be talking about this just now, with you barely home. Aren't you hungry, honey? Want me to fix you something?

NICOLE

No. What's this lawyer business?

MARY turns to JENNY.

MARY

Jenny, why don't you go and play outside?

JENNY looks at NICOLE.

JENNY

He's given me some stuff too. Toys, and some books...

MARY

Jenny.

JENNY turns to leave. When she's outside, MARY continues.

MARY (CONT'D)

He's a very kind man. And he knew that you'd need a computer for doing schoolwork.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME. PORCH -- DAY

NICOLE wheels her chair to the exterior porch, where she watches her sister climb a tree. SAM follows her outside.

SAM

It's because of the accident,  
Nicole. Most people in this town  
whose kids were on the bus have got  
lawyers. A lot of people...well,  
people in this town are very angry.  
Us included.

NICOLE

But you didn't lose me.

MARY

No, honey. And we will thank the  
Lord for that every day and night

for the rest of our lives. But you  
almost died, and you were badly  
injured, and you won't be...you  
can't...

NICOLE

I can't walk anymore.

ANGLE ON

NICOLE'S P.O.V. of JENNY playing on a tree branch.

SAM

You're going to need special care  
for a long time to come. It's not  
going to be easy. Not for you, not  
for any of us. Because we love you  
so much. And it's going to cost  
money. More than we can imagine.

NICOLE

What about insurance? Doesn't  
insurance pay for these things?

SAM

Partly. But there's a lot the insurance doesn't cover. That's one of the reasons we have a lawyer. To make sure the insurance gets paid and to help us look after the rest.

NICOLE

How will he do that?

SAM

Well, Mr. Stephens is representing several families. The Ottos, the Walkers, us, and I think a couple more. Mr. Stephens is suing the town for negligence. He's sure that the accident could have been avoided if they had done their jobs right. He's a very smart man.

NICOLE stares at her sister who's at the top of the tree.  
JENNY turns to look back at NICOLE.

There's a tension, as it seems as though JENNY is going to let herself fall.

NICOLE

(voice over)

That's the first thing I heard about you. That you were a smart man.

That you were so smart that you were going to sue the town, then make us all feel better...

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

FLASHBACK to the scene outside the gas station between MITCHELL and BILLY.

The cell phone in MITCHELL'S car has begun to ring. The two men stare at each other.

NICOLE

(voice over)

You're good at that. Good at getting people to believe you could do something for them. Something they could never do for themselves.

MITCHELL breaks the silence.

MITCHELL

That's my daughter. Or it may be the police to tell me that they've found her dead. She's a drug addict.

BILLY

Why are you telling me this?

MITCHELL

I'm telling you this because we've all lost our children, Mr. Ansel...

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL stares at the sleeping figure of ALISON.

MITCHELL

(voice over)

They're dead to us.

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

Back to the scene between BILLY and MITCHELL. The cellular phone is ringing. MITCHELL breaks the stare with BILLY and moves to his car.

The camera follows him, as BILLY moves back to his truck in the background. MITCHELL gets in his car and picks up the phone.

MITCHELL

Yes, I'll accept the charges.

ZOE

Daddy?

CUT TO

EXT. PHONE BOOTH -- AFTERNOON

MITCHELL

Yes.

ZOE

I'm calling because I've got some news for you, Daddy. Some big news.

MITCHELL

News?

ZOE

Don't you want to hear?

MITCHELL

Yes. Give me your news, Zoe.

ZOE

You always think you know what I'm going to say, don't you? You always think you're two steps ahead of me. The lawyer.

MITCHELL

Tell me your news, Zoe.

ZOE

Okay. I went to sell blood yesterday. That's how it is. I'm in this fucking city where my father is a hot shit lawyer, and I'm selling my blood.

MITCHELL

That's not news, Zoe.

ZOE

No. But this is. They wouldn't take my blood.

CUT TO

INT. CAR -- DAY

Image of ZOE as a little girl in MITCHELL'S lap. Her face is swollen. She is being driven to the hospital.

MITCHELL is singing her a lullaby.

MITCHELL'S conversation with ZOE continues over this image.

ZOE

Do you know what that means, Daddy?  
Does it register?

MITCHELL

Yes.

ZOE

I tested positive.

MITCHELL

Yes.

ZOE

Welcome to hard times, Daddy.

Pause.

MITCHELL

What do you want me to do, Zoe?  
I'll do whatever you want.

ZOE

I need money.

MITCHELL

What for?

ZOE

You can't ask me that! Not anymore!  
You asked me what I wanted. Not  
what I wanted it for. I want money.

MITCHELL

Do you have the blood test?

ZOE

You don't believe me? You don't  
fucking believe me?

MITCHELL

Of...course I do. I just  
thought...I could get you another

test. In case the one you got...was wrong.

ZOE

I like it when you don't believe me, Daddy. It's better you don't believe me but have to act like you do.

Pause.

ZOE (CONT'D)

I can hear you breathing, Daddy.

MITCHELL

Yes. I can hear you breathing too.

ZOE begins to cry over the phone.

ZOE

Oh God, I'm scared.

MITCHELL

I love you, Zoe. I'll be there soon, and I'll take care of you. No matter what happens. I'll take care of you.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is still staring at the sleeping figure of ALISON.

ALISON'S blanket has fallen to the side.

MITCHELL lifts the blanket, and covers the sleeping figure of the young woman.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

MITCHELL drives up to the BURNELL home. He gets out of his car and walks to the front door.

SAM has repainted the ramp.

It is now red.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN -- DAY

MITCHELL meets NICOLE. SAM and MARY are also seated at the table.

The meeting takes place in the kitchen/diningroom.

MITCHELL

Well, Nicole, I've been wanting to meet you for a long time now. Not just because I've heard so many good things about you, but because, as you know, I'm the guy representing you and your mom and dad and some other folks here in town. We're trying to generate some compensation, however meager, for what you have suffered, and at the same time see that an accident like this never happens again. You're central to the case I'm trying to build, Nicole. But you'd probably just as soon let the whole thing lie. Just get on with your life as quickly and smoothly as possible.

NICOLE nods. Pause, as MITCHELL waits for her to go on.

NICOLE

I don't like thinking about the accident. I don't even remember it happening. Besides, it just makes people feel sorry for me, and...

MITCHELL

You hate that.

NICOLE nods.

SAM

What she means, Mitch...

MITCHELL silences SAM with a gesture of his hand.

MITCHELL

People can't help it, you know.  
They really can't. When they see  
you in this wheelchair, knowing what  
your life was life eight months ago,  
people are going to feel sorry for  
you. There's no way around it,  
Nicole. You and I just met, and  
already I admire you. Who wouldn't?  
You're a brave tough smart kid.  
That's obvious. And I didn't know  
you, know how exciting and promising

your life was before the accident.  
But listen, even I feel sorry for  
you.

NICOLE

You can only feel lucky that you  
didn't die for so long. Then you  
start to feel...unlucky.

MITCHELL

That you didn't die? Like the other  
children?

NICOLE

Yes. Like Bear and the Ansel twins  
and Sean and...

MARY

Nicole!

NICOLE

It's the truth.

MITCHELL regards MARY with calm authority, as though he's  
telling her the time.

MITCHELL

It is the truth.

Pause. MITCHELL looks back at NICOLE.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

It would be strange if you didn't  
feel that way.

NICOLE

(after a slight  
pause)

What do you want me to do for you,  
Mr. Stephens?

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. LIVINGROOM. -- DAY

TIME CUT fifteen minutes forward. The scene shifts to the  
livingroom.

MITCHELL and NICOLE are alone in the room. SAM comes back  
from another room, as MARY appears from the kitchen with a  
plate of cookies.

NICOLE

(voice over)

That got you talking about  
depositions and lawyers. By the  
time Daddy came back from the  
washroom and Mom came in with her  
tea and cookies, you were going on  
about how tough it would be for me  
to answer some of the questions  
those other lawyers would ask .

MITCHELL

They work for the people we're  
trying to sue. Their job is to try  
to minimize damages. Our job,  
Nicole, is to try to maximize them.  
You have to think of it that way.  
As people doing their jobs. No good  
guys or bad guys. Just our side and  
their side.

NICOLE

I won't lie.

MITCHELL

I don't want you to lie.

NICOLE

The truth is that it was an accident, and no one's to blame.

MITCHELL

There's no such thing as an accident, Nicole. Not in a situation like this.

NICOLE

You seem very sure about that.

MITCHELL

I'm absolutely positive.

NICOLE turns to face SAM. She stares at him.

NICOLE

No matter what I'm asked, I'll tell the truth.

SAM looks back, expressionless.

MITCHELL

That's fine. I want you to be absolutely truthful. And I'll be right there to advise and help you. And there'll be a court stenographer there to make a record of it, and

that's what'll go to the judge, before the trial is set. It'll be the same for everybody. They'll be deposing the Ottos and the Walkers, the bus driver...

NICOLE

Dolores.

MITCHELL

Yes. Dolores...and even your mom and dad. But I'll make sure you go last.

NICOLE

Why?

MITCHELL

So you can keep on getting well before you have to go and do this. It's not going to be easy, Nicole. Do you understand that?

NICOLE nods.

SAM

When do they award damages?

MITCHELL

Depends. This could drag on for quite a while. But we'll be there at the end, Sam. Don't you worry.

NICOLE

(voice over)

At that moment, I hated my parents - Daddy for what he knew and had done,

NICOLE

and even Mom for what she didn't know and hadn't done. You told me it wasn't going to be easy. But as I sat there, staring at Daddy, I knew it was going to be the easiest thing in my life.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

REPLAY of the scene of SEAN WALKER entering the bus. He turns around to face his mother.

SEAN

I want to stay with you.

RISA

Go on now. Go on.

SEAN hesitantly turns to face the inside of the bus. He sees NICOLE BURNELL, who pats the seat beside her.

MASON leaves his place beside NICOLE to make way for SEAN.

NICOLE

C'mon, Sean, sit next to me.

ANGLE ON

DOLORES as she watches SEAN move towards NICOLE.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

DOLORES gives her deposition. A stenographer takes notes. MITCHELL listens, along with SCHWARTZ, the opposing lawyer.

DOLORES

He never took his eyes off his mother, even as he moved to sit beside Nicole. He looked frightened.

MITCHELL

Why would he be frightened?

DOLORES

I don't know. But it was weird in terms of what happened next. Sean was still watching his mother.

DOLORES

I shut the door with one hand, and released the brake with the other, and waited for a second for Risa to cross in front of the bus. There was a sixteen wheeler behind me, and I heard his air brakes hiss as the driver chunked into gear. I looked into the side view mirror, and saw him move into line behind me. Then suddenly Sean shrieked...

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

SEAN leaps to the front of the bus.

SEAN  
Mommy!

MITCHELL  
(voice over, from  
the court chamber)  
What happened then?

DOLORES  
(voice over)  
Sean was all over me, scrambling  
across my lap to the window. I  
glimpsed Risa off to my left,  
leaping out of the way of a red Saab  
that seemed to have bolted out of  
nowhere.

The scene is horrifying, as SEAN watches his mother just  
missing a terrible accident with the speeding vehicle.

DOLORES (CONT'D)  
Sean! Sit down! Your Mom's okay!  
Now sit down!

SEAN sits back down beside NICOLE. DOLORES slides open her  
window, and speaks to RISA.

DOLORES (CONT'D)  
You get his number?

RISA is stunned.

DOLORES (CONT'D)  
(voice over)  
She was shaken, standing there with  
her arms wrapped around herself.

DOLORES  
She shook her head, turned away, and  
walked slowly back to the office. I  
drew a couple of breaths and checked  
Sean, who was seated now but still  
craning and looking after his  
mother.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition continues.

DOLORES

I smiled at him, but he only glared back at me, as if I was to blame.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

AERIAL VIEW of the bus as it makes its way through the mountains. NICOLE'S voice is heard reading The Pied Piper from the scene with the ANSEL children.

NICOLE

(voice over)

For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,  
Joining the town and just at hand,  
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,  
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,  
And everything was strange and new...

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- DAY

A montage showing the faces of the various children in the bus. These images are intercut with DOLORES'S deposition.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition. DOLORES is trying to control her emotions.

DOLORES

I remember wrenching the steering wheel to the right and slapping my foot against the brake pedal. I wasn't the driver anymore.

DOLORES

The bus was like this huge wave about to break over us. Bear Otto, the Lambston kids, the Hamiltons,

the Prescotts, the teenaged boys and girls from Bartlett Hill, Sean, Nicole Burnell, Billy Ansel's twins, Jessica and Mason...all the children of my town.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

SAM and JENNY are watching television. Lumberjack log-rolling.

NICOLE, in her wheelchair, is reading a book off to one corner. MARY comes into the room.

MARY

That was Billy Ansel on the phone.  
He wants to come over to talk to us.

SAM

Did he say what about?

MARY

No.

SAM

Was he drinking? Could you tell?

MARY

Jenny, it's time for you to go to bed.

JENNY

Mom...

SAM

Come on, Jen. I let you watch your nature show.

JENNY reluctantly kisses her father goodnight, then NICOLE. As she leaves the room, MARY starts clearing the table.

SAM (CONT'D)

Is he coming over now? Right away?

MARY

That's what he said.

SAM is anxious. He looks over to NICOLE.

SAM

What are you up to, Nicole?

NICOLE

Nothing.

SAM

Nothing good on your T.V.?

NICOLE

As opposed to this T.V.?

NICOLE stares at SAM.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Besides, I'd like to see Billy.

NICOLE stares at the television.

ANGLE ON

On the television screen, an image of a studio audience applauding. The image is silent. The T.V. is on MUTE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

That wasn't true. I didn't want to be seen by anyone whose kids had been killed by the accident. Especially not Billy Ansel.

NICOLE turns her attention back to her parents.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

Actually, now that I think about it, I'd just as soon stay in my room.

NICOLE shoves her wheelchair towards her room, as the camera remains on her face.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

I remembered all the times I had tucked Jessica and Mason into bed. How they loved to have me read to them before they slept. There was nothing for me to say to Billy, except I'm sorry. I'm sorry that your children died when my parent's children didn't.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

BILLY pulls up to the BURNELL home. He gets out of his pick up and approaches the house.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

From her room, NICOLE watches as BILLY approaches the house.

He leaves her view as a knock is heard at the door. NICOLE wheels over to the door and presses her ear to the door so that she can hear the conversation.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN. -- NIGHT

SAM

Hey, Billy! What brings you out on a night like this? C'mon in. Take a load off.

MARY

Would you like a cup of tea, Billy? There's a piece of cake left.

BILLY

No. No, thanks, Mary.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN/LIVINGROOM -- NIGHT

SAM leads BILLY into the livingroom.

SAM

So what brings you out tonight?

BILLY

Well, Sam, I might as well tell you the truth. It's this lawsuit you've gotten yourself all involved with. I want you to drop the damned thing.

Pause.

SAM

I don't see how that concerns you, Billy.

BILLY

It does concern me.

SAM

Well, I don't know why it should. There's a whole lot of people in town involved with lawsuits. We're hardly unique here, Billy. I mean, I can understand how you feel.

BILLY

How?

SAM

Well, it being so depressing and all. But it's reality. You can't just turn this off because you happen to think it's a bad idea.

BILLY

Why not?

SAM

Because it's what we have to do.

BILLY

Well I don't want a damned thing to do with it.

SAM

Okay, fine. So...stay out of it.

Pause. BILLY stares at SAM. Tension.

BILLY

I've tried to stay out of it. But it turns out that's not so easy, Sam. You've gone and got yourself this lawyer. Mitchell Stephens. You and Risa and Wendell and the Ottos.

SAM

So? I mean, lot's of folks have got lawyers.

BILLY

But yours is the one who's going to subpoena me, Sam. Force me to testify in court. He came by the garage this afternoon. Gave me this piece of paper.

BILLY reaches into his pocket and shows the paper to SAM.

MARY

Why would he do that? You didn't have anything to do with the accident.

BILLY

Because I was driving behind the bus, Mary. Because I saw it. I saw it happen...

BILLY is harrowed by this image. SAM and MARY stare at him, frightened by his intensity.

BILLY (CONT'D)

If that bastard does subpoena me, if he forces me to go over this again, then all those other lawyers will line up behind him and try and do the same thing.

SAM

That won't happen, Billy. Mitch

Stephens' case is small, compared to some of those other guys. The way he told me, all he needs is for you to say what you saw that day, driving behind the bus. I know it's a painful thing to do, but it'll only take a few minutes of your time. That'll be the end of it.

BILLY

That's wrong, Sam. You know that. We'll be tangled up in this thing for the next five years. This is never going to go away...

SAM

C'mon, you know that won't...

BILLY

We've got lawyers suing lawyers because some people were stupid enough to sign on with more than one of the bastards. We've got people pointing fingers, making side deals, and dickering over percentages. Yesterday, I heard somebody wants to sue the rescue squad. The rescue squad. Because they didn't act fast enough.

ANGLE ON

NICOLE listening from her door.

BILLY (CONT'D)

If you two dropped the case, then the others would come to their senses

BILLY

and follow. You're good sensible parents, you and Mary. People respect you.

Pause.

SAM

No, Billy. We can't drop the lawsuit. You know how much we need the money.

BILLY

Why? You got money from Dolores' insurance with the school board. We all did.

SAM

It's not enough. For hospital bills. For Nicole.

BILLY

I'll help pay for Nicole, if that's what you're really talking about. I'll even give you the money I got for my kids.

(beat)

That's what we used to do, remember? Help each other. This was a community.

SAM

I'm sorry.

BILLY stares at SAM.

BILLY

I used to like it here. I used to care about what happened. Now I think I'll sell my house and move the fuck away.

MARY

Billy, please. The children.

BILLY

The children.

BILLY looks at SAM and MARY, s strange smile on his face. He moves to leave. He pauses at the door of the kitchen.

BILLY (CONT'D)

How is Nicole? Is she around?

MARY

She's resting. In her room.

BILLY

Say hello for me.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

BILLY walks to his car. SAM and MARY watch him from the porch/ramp.

SAM

(calling out)

We're getting on with our lives,  
Billy. Maybe it's time you got on  
with yours.

BILLY turns around, looks at SAM one final time, then moves to his pick up.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

NICOLE is watching BILLY from her window. She is crying.

ANGLE ON

NICOLE'S P.O.V. of BILLY driving away.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. NICOLE'S BEDROOM. -- NIGHT

NICOLE is lying in her bed. A knock at the door. SAM enters the dark bedroom and sits on the bed beside her.

SAM

Are you sleeping?

NICOLE

No.

SAM

Nicole, tomorrow Mr. Stephens wants you to make your deposition at the courthouse. I thought I'd take you over.

NICOLE

Great.

SAM

You seem...I don't know...well,  
distant, I guess. Hard to talk to.

NICOLE

We used to talk a lot, didn't we,  
Daddy. About all the things you  
were going to do for me.

SAM

What do you mean?

NICOLE

I mean I'm a wheelchair girl now.  
It's hard to pretend I'm a beautiful  
rock star. Not like you used to  
tell me. Remember, Daddy? All the  
people that were going to discover  
me? Where are they now?

SAM turns away from NICOLE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

He couldn't look at me. But I  
looked at him. Right at him. His  
secret was mine now. We used to  
share it. But not anymore. Now, I  
owned it completely.

SAM

Well, okay. I'll take you about  
nine-thirty in the morning. That's  
okay with you?

NICOLE

Great.

Silence. SAM gets up to leave the room.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

Before, everything had been so  
confusing. I never knew who was to  
blame. But now I know. He's just a

thief, a sneaky thief who had robbed his daughter. Robbed me of...whatever it was that my sister still had and I didn't. And then the accident robbed me of my body.

CUT TO

INT. CAR -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE are driving to town. They don't exchange a word.

CUT TO

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

SAM is carrying NICOLE up the stairs of the community centre.

There is no ramp, so the wheelchair is left at the bottom.

He is having difficulty, because NICOLE is keeping her body stiff and won't hold on to him.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

NICOLE is wheeled across the floor of the community centre to a table where the depositions are being made. MITCHELL, SCHWARTZ, and the STENOGRAPHER are waiting for her.

NICOLE

(voice over)

The last time I was in the community hall was for the big Christmas party almost a year ago. It hadn't changed.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition. SAM watches his daughter as she speaks confidently into the microphone. The STENOGRAPHER takes

notes.

NICOLE is answering questions from the opposing lawyer.  
MITCHELL is also taking notes.

SCHWARTZ

Now on that morning, did there come a time, Nicole, when you left your parents' house?

NICOLE

Yes.

SCHWARTZ

What time in the morning was this?

NICOLE

About eight-thirty in the morning.

SCHWARTZ

Was anyone waiting for the bus with you?

NICOLE

No. I was alone. My sister Jenny was sick and stayed home that day.

SCHWARTZ

Was there anything unusual about the driver, Dolores Driscoll, or the bus that particular morning?

NICOLE

Like what? I mean, I don't remember a lot.

ANGLE ON MITCHELL

MITCHELL

I object to the form of that question. Note that.

SCHWARTZ

Was the bus on time?

NICOLE

Yes.

SCHWARTZ

And where did you sit that morning?

NICOLE

My usual place. On the right side.  
The first seat.

SCHWARTZ

And according to your recollection,  
there was nothing unusual about the  
drive that morning?

NICOLE

Until the accident? No.

(beat)

Yes, there was.

ANGLE ON MITCHELL

Worried about this new information.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

It was when Sean Walker got on. He  
was crying and didn't want to leave  
his mother. Mason Ansel was sitting  
beside me. I asked him to move, so  
I could quiet Sean down. When the  
bus started up, a car came around

the corner and almost hit Sean's  
mother. She was okay, but it really  
scared Sean, because he watched it  
out the window.

SCHWARTZ

And was this incident caused in any  
way by anything the driver of the  
bus did?

Pause. MITCHELL is nervous.

NICOLE

No, she hadn't even started to move  
the bus. It was the car's fault.

MITCHELL is relieved.

SCHWARTZ

There was nothing reckless in Mrs. Driscoll's behavior?

MITCHELL

I object to that form of question. Note that.

NICOLE

(answering the question)

No.

SCHWARTZ

Did there come a time when all the children had been picked up?

NICOLE

Yes.

SCHWARTZ

You remember that much?

NICOLE

As I'm talking, I'm remembering more about it.

MITCHELL is worried.

MITCHELL

Note my objection. She said, 'As I'm talking.'

SCHWARTZ

Did there come a time when the bus turned off Staples Mill Road onto

the Marlowe Road at what's called Wilmot Springs?

NICOLE

Yes.

NICOLE

There was a brown dog that ran

across the road up there, right by the dump, and Dolores slowed down not to hit him, and he ran into the woods. And then Dolores drove on and turned onto the Marlowe road, as usual. I remember that. I'm remembering it pretty clearly.

SCHWARTZ

(eyebrows raised)

You are?

NICOLE

Yes.

MITCHELL

(worried)

Note that she said 'pretty clearly'. Not 'clearly'.

SCHWARTZ

And what was the weather like at this time?

NICOLE

It was snowing.

MITCHELL

Unless the report from the National Weather Bureau for the district on January 23 goes into the record, I will object to that question.

SCHWARTZ

I will offer that report. Well, then, now that your memory seems to be clearing, can you tell us what else you observed at that time?

NICOLE

Before the actual accident?

SCHWARTZ

Yes.

NICOLE stares at her father as she responds.

NICOLE

I was scared.

SCHWARTZ

Why were you scared?

SCHWARTZ

This is before the accident, Nicole.  
Do you understand what I'm asking?

NICOLE

Yes, I understand.

SCHWARTZ

Why were you scared?

NICOLE

Dolores was driving too fast.

Silence. MITCHELL is watching his entire case crumble.

SCHWARTZ

Mrs. Driscoll was driving too fast?  
What made you think that, Nicole?

NICOLE

The speedometer. And it was  
downhill there.

SCHWARTZ

You could see the speedometer?

NICOLE

Yes. I looked. I remember clearly  
now. It seemed we were going too  
fast down the hill. I was scared.

NICOLE looks at MITCHELL, who stares back.

SCHWARTZ

How fast would you say Mrs. Driscoll  
was going? To the best of your  
recollection?

NICOLE

Seventy-two miles an hour.

SCHWARTZ

Seventy-two miles an hour? You're  
sure of this?

NICOLE

Positive.

SCHWARTZ

You believe that the bus driven by Mrs. Driscoll was going at seventy-two miles an hour at this time?

NICOLE

I told you I was positive. The speedometer was large and easy to see from where I was.

ANGLE ON

The speedometer from NICOLE'S P.O.V. It reads fifty-one miles an hour.

SCHWARTZ

(voice over)

You saw the speedometer?

NICOLE

Yes.

SCHWARTZ

Did you say anything to Mrs. Driscoll?

NICOLE

No.

SCHWARTZ

Why not?

NICOLE

I was scared. And there wasn't time.

SCHWARTZ

There wasn't time?

NICOLE

No. Because the bus went off the road. And crashed.

SCHWARTZ

You remember this?

NICOLE

Yes. I do now. Now that I'm telling it.

MITCHELL

(defeated)

She said, 'Now that I'm telling it'.  
Note that.

SCHWARTZ

What do you remember about the accident?

NICOLE

I remember the bus swerved, it just suddenly swerved to the right, and it hit the guardrail and the snowbank on the side of the road, and then it went over the embankment there, and everyone was screaming and everything. And that's all. I guess I was unconscious after that. That's all. Then I was in the hospital.

SCHWARTZ smiles and makes some notes in his pad. He talks to MITCHELL without looking up.

SCHWARTZ

Do you have any questions, Mr. Stephens?

MITCHELL stares silently at NICOLE for a long time.

NICOLE

(voice over)

Daddy was leaning forward in his chair, his mouth half open, as if he wanted to say something. Like what, Daddy? Like 'What about my money?'

NICOLE and SAM stare at each other.

MITCHELL

I have no questions.

SCHWARTZ

Thank you, Nicole.

NICOLE wheels herself away. She passes MITCHELL.

MITCHELL

(in a low voice)

You'd make a great poker player,  
kid.

NICOLE wheels herself over to her father.

NICOLE

Let's go, Daddy.

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTRE -- DAY

NICOLE is in the car in front of the community centre. She stares at SAM as he argues with MITCHELL on the steps.

NICOLE

(voice over)

Daddy took a long time. I guess he wanted to have a few words with you. He must have tried to tell you that I was lying. Then you would tell Daddy that it didn't matter if I was lying or not, the lawsuit is dead.

As NICOLE'S words are heard, her point of view of SAM and MITCHELL arguing is seen.

The movement of their lips is in sync with NICOLE'S voice over.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

Everyone's lawsuit is dead. Forget it. Tell the others to forget it. It's over. Right now, Sam, the thing you've got to worry about is why she lied. A kid who'd do that to her own father is not normal, Sam.

SAM comes down the stairs and enters the car, sitting down at the driver's seat. NICOLE stares at him as he starts the car.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)

But Daddy knows who lied. He knows who the liar is. He knows who's normal.

SAM stares ahead, not knowing what to do next.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(speaking to SAM)

I hope he lets us keep the computer.

SAM turns to look at NICOLE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

I'd like an ice cream.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPORT. -- MORNING

MITCHELL is at the baggage section of the arrival area, waiting for his luggage.

He watches PETER, the man he met in the washroom changing his daughter, playing with the little girl.

PETER is full of love as he swings the little girl into the air as she laughs.

MITCHELL is caught in a daydream, smiling at the happy image of father and daughter. ALISON approaches him.

ALISON

Well, it was nice meeting you again, Mr. Stephens.

MITCHELL

Mitchell. It was nice to see you again, Ally.

ALISON

Alison.

MITCHELL

Alison.

ALISON

Say hi to Zoe.

MITCHELL

I will.

ALISON

I hope she gets better.

MITCHELL

I'll tell her that.

ALISON shakes MITCHELL'S hand, and leaves.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM wheels NICOLE along a path away from the same concession stand that was seen at the beginning of the film. NICOLE is licking an ice-cream cone. Around them, people are setting up the bandstand.

NICOLE

Daddy, can we come to the fair?

SAM

Yes.

NICOLE

How about Sunday night? That's always the best time.

SAM

Okay.

NICOLE looks at a team of men constructing a ride. A school bus pulls up, and a group of children spill out. NICOLE watches as the driver tries to form them into a group.

NICOLE

What's going to happen to Dolores?

SAM

I don't know.

NICOLE

Will the police do anything to her?

SAM

It's too late for that. She can't drive the bus anymore. The school board saw to that right off.

NICOLE

She'll move away.

SAM

There's talk of that.

NICOLE

Someplace where no one knows her.

(beat)

Someplace strange and new.

SAM is frozen. NICOLE smiles to herself.

CUT TO

EXT. AIRPORT. -- MORNING

At the airport, in the arrivals bay, MITCHELL waits for his limousine.

Across the road, a hotel minibus is parked. The driver is DOLORES. The camera settles on her face as she stares at MITCHELL.

MITCHELL catches her gaze, and the two stare at each other.

NICOLE

(voice over)

As you see each other, almost two years later, I wonder if you realize something.

MITCHELL'S limo arrives. He gets inside.

CUT TO

INT. LIMOUSINE -- MORNING

CLOSE-UP of MITCHELL as he stares ahead, lost in thought.

NICOLE

(voice over)

I wonder if you realize that all of us - Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't - that we're all citizens of a different town now.

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- DAY

BILLY watches as a crane lifts the demolished schoolbus onto a flatbed truck.

NICOLE

(voice over)

A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

CUT TO

EXT. CAR -- AFTERNOON

NICOLE and SAM driving home from the fairground.

NICOLE

(voice over)

Whether others defend us, protect us, love us or hate us - they do it to meet their own needs, not ours.

The camera leaves the car to look up at the sky.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DUSK

Sunday night at the fairground. NICOLE is staring at the ferris wheel. In her imagination, the swinging cars of the

slowly turning wheel are full of children. The laughter and

noise is haunting.

NICOLE smiles as she stares at this private apparition.

NICOLE

(voice over)

This is what I learned. This is  
what I found out.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. JESSICA AND MASON'S BEDROOM. -- NIGHT

NICOLE has just finished reading a story to JESSICA and  
MASON. The children are asleep. NICOLE puts the book down,  
and kisses the two sleeping children on the cheek.

NICOLE gets up to leave the bedroom, leaving the door  
slightly open.

Light spills in from the hallway.

The End      October, 1996