

"WONDER BOYS"

Screenplay by

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Based on the novel by

Michael Chabon

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ALL IS A BLUR...

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

GRADY

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

INT. CLASSROOM - UNIVERSITY - AFTERNOON

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

GRADY

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

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

WELCOME TO WORDFEST

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

GRADY

(a wave of the pages)

So... Anyone?

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

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

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

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

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

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

GRADY

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

HOWARD

I hated it.

GRADY

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

HOWARD

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

kill myself.

Grady glances at James, but his face remains impassive.

Then – with a visible sense of relief – Grady notices the raised hand of the achingly beautiful HANNAH GREEN.

GRADY

Yes, Hannah?

HANNAH GREEN

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

Grady nods, smiles subtly. Appreciative.

GRADY

Well put, Hannah. And a good note to end on, I think.

(as the students rise)

Don't forget about WordFest this weekend. And remember: those of you driving V.I.P.s to tonight's cocktail party need to have them at the Chancellor's house no later than 5:30.

Hannah Green gathers her things, pauses by Grady.

GRADY

Thanks for that. He all right?

HANNAH GREEN

I think so... What about you?

GRADY

Me? Sure. Why?

HANNAH GREEN

Just checking.

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

JAMES LEER
Turn out the light, please.

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

INT. STAIRWELL/CORRIDOR - AFTERNOON (MOMENTS LATER)

Grady hurries down the steps, then spies SARA GASKSLL, 45, standing below. She is talking to a BOY with an armful of SLICK PROGRAMS.

SARA
(calm but firm)
No, Elliot, I said five hundred programs for today. This means we have no programs for the weekend. This means that tomorrow morning, at 9AM, several hundred people will walk into Thaw Hall and have absolutely no idea where they are going.
(shaking her head)
It's all right, Elliot. I'll take care of it.

Grady watches Sara take the programs, turn, and spot him.

There is the slightest of hesitations, then...

SARA
Professor Tripp.

GRADY
Chancellor.

SARA
I got the message you called.

GRADY
I got the message you called too.

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

INT. GRADY'S CAR - MOVING

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

WELCOME TO WORDFEST FEBRUARY 26-28

EXT. GALAXIE - MOVING - PITTSBURGH

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

INT. PITTSBURGH AIRPORT

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

INT. ARRIVAL GATE - PITTSBURGH AIRPORT

...TERRY CRABTREE – Grady's editor and friend – exits the tunnel with a STUNNING YOUNG WOMAN in a skin-tight black dress, bright red topcoat, and three-inch spike heels.

Grinning devilishly, Crabtree whispers something in the woman's ear, then spots Grady.

CRABTREE

Tripp!

GRADY

How are you, Crabtree?

CRABTREE

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

WOMAN

Sloviak.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

(a slight beat)

The more the merrier.

MISS SLOVIAK

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

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

MISS SLOVIAK

(indicating Crabtree)

That's exactly what he said.

CRABTREE

We know each other pretty well.

(to Grady)

So where's Emily?

GRADY

Emily?

CRABTREE

Your wife.

GRADY

Oh. We're picking her up. Downtown.

CRABTREE

Perfect. Well then, shall we?

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

INT. BAGGAGE CAROUSEL - AIRPORT - MOMENTS LATER

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

CRABTREE

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

Pittsburgh.

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

She's a transvestite.

CRABTREE

You're stoned.

GRADY

She's still a transvestite.

CRABTREE

Mm.

GRADY

Isn't she?

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

CRABTREE

So how's the book?

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

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

I don't know. I'm sort of at a critical... juncture.

CRABTREE

I thought you were tinkering.

GRADY

I just mean...

CRABTREE

Forget I asked. I don't want to pressure you, Tripp. But...

(pointedly)

...I get pressure. Know what I mean?

Grady ponders this, troubled by it. Suddenly, Crabtree's face brightens again.

CRABTREE

Ah... well now. What do you suppose that would be?

Grady turns, watches an immense PONY HIDE CASE drop onto the carousel.

GRADY

That would be a tuba.

INT. GRADY'S CAR - MOVING - LATE AFTERNOON

As the Galaxie emerges from a TUNNEL, GRADY watches the great city of Pittsburgh reveal itself in the distance, then glances in the rearview mirror.

GRADY

That perfume you're wearing, Antonia. It wouldn't happen to be Cristaile, would it?

MISS SLOVIAK

Why yes. How did you know?

GRADY

Lucky guess.

CRABTREE

You didn't actually purchase this car, did you. Trip??

GRADY

It was Jerry Nathan's. He owed me money.

CRABTREE

He owes God money. You know, he
queered himself for good with Esquire.

Grady takes a joint from the ashtray, snaps a Scripto butane.

GRADY

He said something about being between
things.

CRABTREE

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

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

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

GRADY

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

Crabtree and Miss Sloviak smile and nod. Tanya smiles and
nods back, her eyes passing uneasily over Grady's joint.

TANYA

Grady... Emily's not here.

Grady just smiles, nods.

TANYA

Is there anything I can do for you?

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

GRADY

You're leaking, Tanya.

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

CRABTREE

Trip??

GRADY

She left me. Crabs.

CRABTREE

Left you...? Who? Emily?

GRADY

This morning. I found a note in the kitchen.

CRABTREE

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

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

GRADY

I thought maybe I made it all up.

EXT. GASKELL HOUSE - EVENING

Through the windows, a rabble of writers, faculty and select students can be SEEN, mingling under a haze of cigarette smoke. Grady brings the Galaxie to a lurching halt across the street, parks in front of another fire hydrant. As the trio steps out. Miss Sloviak notices a GREENHOUSE, shimmering quietly in the chill night air.

MISS SLOVIAK

That's a nice greenhouse.

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

Piss off, Crabs. I lost a wife today.

CRABTREE

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

EXT. FRONT PORCH - GASKELL HOUSE

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

SARA

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

CRABTREE

Chancellor. Don't you look ravishing.

SARA

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

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

GRADY

Easy there.

SARA

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

MISS SLOVIAK

Practice.

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

SARA

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

MISS SLOVIAK

Antonia. Antonia Sloviak –

Just then, a THICKLY-MUSCLED DOG with very strange EYES skitters around the corner, BARKING SAVAGELY in the general direction of Grady.

SARA

Poe!

CRABTREE

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

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

MISS SLOVIAK
Who's he barking at now?

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

SARA
Poe! Hush! Now stop this. Honestly.

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

GRADY
I need to talk to you.

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

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

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

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

INT. UPSTAIRS ROOM

GRADY enters a room swimming in BASEBALL MEMORABILIA.

AUTOGRAPHED BASEBALLS abound, as well as PHOTOGRAPHS of famous

big-leaguers. In one somewhat-dated PHOTO a TRIM MAN IN HIS FORTIES (a younger Walter Gaskell) stands with PITTSBURGH PIRATE BILL MAZEROSKI at an old-timers game. As Sara eases the door shut, Grady nods to a 1951 YANKEE'S PENNANT hanging over the mantle.

GRADY

New?

SARA

(nodding)

Walter just got it back from the framer today.

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

SARA

You go first.

GRADY

All right. This morning –

SARA

I'm pregnant.

A flash of LAUGHTER flutters from the living room below.

Grady starts to speak.

SARA

I'm sure.

GRADY

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

SARA

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

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

GRADY

Emily left me this morning.

SARA

She's left before...

GRADY

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

Sara nods. Considers this.

SARA

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

GRADY

Simple.

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

SARA

Is that Cristaile?

GRADY

Hm.

SARA

(weary)

My God, I wear the same scent as a transvestite. She IS a transvestite, isn't: she?

GRADY

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

SARA

Has he asked to see the book yet?

GRADY

Yes.

SARA

And? Are you going to tell him?

GRADY

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

SARA

(distantly)
Neither do I.

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

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

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

INT. LIVING ROOM - GASKELL HOUSE

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

CRABTREE
Walter! I see you've met my friend.

WALTER GASKELL
Yes. She's charming.

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

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

MISS SLOVIAK
Oh, I couldn't agree more.

NEW ANGLE

GRADY works his way through the crowd, spies Walter, and

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

Q

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

GRADY

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

HANNAH GREEN

(brightening)

Grady.

Q eyes Grady over his wine glass.

Q

Hello... Professor.

GRADY

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

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

MAN IN TWEED

(to short man)

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

(as GRADY passes)

Grady!

GRADY
Hello, Nathan.

MAN IN TWEED
My God, I haven't seen you since,
what? The PEN/Faulkner Awards. That
was a big night for you, Grady.
(to his friend)
Grady was there for Arsonist's
Daughter.

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

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

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

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

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

EXT. REAR GASKELL HOUSE - NIGHT

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

MAN'S VOICE
There you are.

Grady starts, but when he looks through the window, he sees
that the VOICE belongs to WALTER GASKELL and the person to

whom he's talking is Sara. They are standing in the kitchen, near an elaborate WINE RACK.

WALTER

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

SARA

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

WALTER

You'd recognize it if you tasted it.

SARA

I doubt it, darling.

WALTER

(angling & bottle to the light)

Well, Q certainly will. And, given that he will be addressing 500 people in little over an hour...

SARA

You want to keep him happy.

WALTER

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

As Walter goes, Grady studies Sara as she stands alone in the quiet little room, looking small and tired. Finally, she takes a breath, steeling herself, and moves off, returning to the clamor inside her house.

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

GRADY

James?

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

JAMES LEER

It's fake.

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

It's very convincing.

JAMES LEER

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

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

...You carry firearms.

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

JAMES LEER

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

Grady nods, accustomed to James' weirdness.

JAMES LEER

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

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

JAMES LEER

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

Grady nods, ponders this over-elaborate explanation.

GRADY

Are you and Hannah seeing each other, James?

JAMES LEER

No! What gave you that idea?

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

She likes old movies like I do, that's all.

(glancing back at the window)

Besides, she doesn't really know me. She thinks she does, but she doesn't. Maybe it's because she's Mormon and I'm Catholic.

GRADY

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

James looks away from the window, at Grady.

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

She went crazy, Frances Farmer.

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

Sounds like a good one.

JAMES LEER

(a crooked smile)

It's not bad.

Grady considers James' fragile face.

GRADY

Listen, James, about this afternoon. In workshop. I'm sorry. I think I let things get a bit out of control.

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

Well...

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

(truly impressed)

Really? That's remarkable.

JAMES LEER

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

As James gazes off at the gloaming greenhouse, Grady looks

down at the left front POCKET of James' overcoat.

Like a nervous tic, James' hand – hidden – twitches against the modest bulk of the cap gun.

GRADY

You cold, James?

JAMES LEER

(distant)

A little.

GRADY

So what are you doing out here?

JAMES LEER

It's colder in there.

GRADY

(laughing)

You're right.

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

Heaven?

JAMES LEER

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

Abruptly, James glances at his watch.

JAMES LEER

I should be going.

James turns away, then stops. He stands like this a moment,

then turns back. Holds out his right hand.

JAMES LEER
Goodbye, Professor Tripp.

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

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

JAMES LEER
I'll miss my bus.

GRADY
This is worth it.

James looks conflicted.

GRADY
Trust me.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

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

HANNAH GREEN
Hey, you two.

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

HANNAH GREEN
Are you riding with me, James?

JAMES LEER
No, I'm going ho –

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

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

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

Here we are!

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

CRABTREE

(spying James)

Nell, hello there.

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

GRADY

James. This is my editor, Terry
Crabtree.

HANNAH GREEN

James'll know about George Sanders.

JAMES LEER

George Sanders?

HANNAH GREEN

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

JAMES LEER

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

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

CRABTREE

How comprehensive of you.

HANNAH GREEN

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

JAMES LEER

There's so many...

HANNAH GREEN

Just a few then. The big ones.

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

JAMES LEER

Pier Angeli, 1971 or '72, also pills.

Charles Boyer, 1978, pills again.

Charles Butterworth, 1946, I think.

In a car. Supposedly it was an accident, but, you know...

(a trace of irony)

He was distraught. Dorothy Dandridge,

she took pills in, like, 1965. Albert

Dekker, 1968, he hung himself. He

wrote his suicide note in lipstick

on his stomach. Alan Ladd, '64, more

pills, Carole Landis, pills again, I

forget when. George Reeves, Superman

on TV, shot himself. Jean Seberg,

pills of course, 1979. Everett Sioane –

he was good – pills. Margaret

Sullavan, pills, Lupe Velez, a lot

of pills. Gig Young. He shot himself

and his wife in 1978. There are more

but I don't know if you would have

heard of them. Ross Alexander? Clara

Blandick? Maggie McNamara? Gia Scaia?

HANNAH GREEN

I haven't heard of half of those.

CRABTREE

You did them alphabetically.

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

JAMES LEER

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

CRABTREE

Fascinating. Listen, why don't you

come out with us after the lecture.
There's a place on the Hill I always
get Trip to take me.

JAMES LEER

Actually... I just want to go home.

CRABTREE

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

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

BLACK

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

INT. CLOSET - GASKELL HOUSE

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

JAMES LEER

Is that really it?

GRADY

That's really it.

JAMES LEER

The one she wore on her wedding day?

GRADY

So I'm told.

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

GRADY

Go ahead.

JAMES LEER

Really?

GRADY

Really.

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

JAMES LEER

They're glass. The buttons.

GRADY

Like the lady herself.

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

JAMES LEER

She was small. Most people don't know that. The shoulders are small.

(touching the satin)

It looks so perfect. I bet it's the only time she wore it. That day. She must've felt so... happy.

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

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

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

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

GRADY
Right.

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

GRADY
We, better skedaddle. Close that
closet – James? You all right?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INT. HALLWAY

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

GRADY

Okay. Easy now. Eee-zy...

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

GRADY

Jesus!

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

GRADY

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

Poe regains his feet, but doesn't let go, whipping his head back and forth, back and forth, over and over, growling low, dark, and hideously from the back of his throat, until there is a sharp...

CRACK! CRACK!

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

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

I had to. Didn't I?

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

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

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

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

James looks miserably at Poe.

JAMES LEER

What are we going to do?

Grady rises awkwardly, holds out his hand.

GRADY

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

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING

Grady and James stare gloomily out the windshield.

JAMES LEER

Professor Tripp? Can I ask you a question?

GRADY

Yea, James.

JAMES LEER

What are we going to do with...

James glances in the backseat, where Poe lies, strange blue

eyes gleaming.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

You?

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

I've got tenure.

EXT. PARKING LOT – THAW HALL (CAMPUS)

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

GRADY

Okay.

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

JAMES LEER

He's still a little warm.

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

JAMES LEER

Yuck.

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

(searching)

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

JAMES LEER

Whose tuba is that anyway?

GRADY

Miss Sloviak's.

JAMES LEER

Can I ask you something about her?

GRADY

She is. Ah. Here we go...

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

JAMES LEER

Oh. So. Is – is your friend Crabtree –
is he – gay?

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

Looks like... our old friend Mr.
Codeine. That should take the pinch
out of my ankle.

(handing the bottle
to James)

Have one.

JAMES LEER

No thanks. I'm fine without them.

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

How 'bout we try that again.

INT. AUDITORIUM - LATER

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

WALTER

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

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

Q

Good evening.

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

hush. Finally, he speaks again.

Q

I am a writer.

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

Q

As a writer, one thing you learn is that everyone you encounter has a story. Every bartender, every taxi driver, everybody has an idea or a story that would make a "great book" or a "great movie." Presumably, each of you has an idea.

(gestures to the audience)

But, how do you go from there to here? How do you go from having an idea to having a book? How do you get across? What is the bridge, the bridge that allows you to walk on air from the shoreline of inspiration to the terra firma of accomplishment? Faith. Faith that your story is worth the telling, faith that you have the wherewithal to tell it, faith that the carefully woven structure you create won't collapse beneath you...

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

Q

...and faith that when you get to the other side someone will be waiting who gives a damn about the tale you have to tell.

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

Abruptly, James LAUGHS OUT LOUD – some private amusement: bubbling up from the bottom of his brain and out into the

auditorium. As Q looks and four hundred other heads turn, James ducks down – mortified. Crabtree, sitting a few rows away, studies James with amusement, then winks at Grady.

Grady blinks, turns to James.

GRADY
I'll be right back.

INT. LOBBY

Grady bursts through the auditorium doors and into the lobby. A PAIR of local BOOKSELLERS, chatting quietly behind a table arrayed with the BOOKS of attending authors, glance up as Grady limps toward the restrooms.

INT. CORRIDOR

Grady stumbles down the sloping carper, but the corridor begins to turn sideways on him and he stops, resting his cheek against the cool... cool... wall... as... all.. goes...

BLACK FOR A MOMENT AND THEN....

SARA'S VOICE
Grady? Grady?

Grady opens his eyes, finds Sara's face swimming above him. He is lying on his back in the corridor, his corduroy blazer bundled under his head like a pillow.

SARA
You had another one, didn't you? You have to see a doctor, Grady. First thing Monday morning. All right?

GRADY
Is the thing – is it over?

SARA
Almost. Want to sit up?
(as he winces)
What's the matter?

GRADY
Nothing. I think I twisted my –

Grady looks at his ankle and feels a rush of guilt.

GRADY

I have to tell you something.
Something... hard.

Sara's face stiffens, becomes more Chancellloresque.

SARA

Then stand up. I'm too old for all
this rolling around on the floor.

Grady lets her pull him up, watches her light a cigarette.

GRADY

Well...

SARA

Don't. I know what you're going to
say.

GRADY

No, really, Sara, I don't think you –

SARA

You love Emily. I know that. And you
need to stay with her.

GRADY

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

SARA

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

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

GRADY

Not have it.

SARA

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

GRADY

Well, no, I don't see any way.
(taking her hand)

And I know how hard it is for you to –
to lose this chance.

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

Somewhere deep in the building, APPLAUSE swells.

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

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

SARA
Who's gun is that?

GRADY
It's – it's a souvenir. Of Baltimore.

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

SARA
Heavy. Smells like gunpowder.

GRADY
Caps.

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

SARA
Pow.

GRADY
You got me.

SARA
I love you, Grady.

Grady places his fingers gently over Sara's... and removes
the gun from her hand.

GRADY
I love you, too.

INT. LOBBY

The auditorium doors swing open and James Leer emerges, arms draped over Crabtree and a LARGE STUDENT.

JAMES LEER
Woah! The doors made so much noise!

As they make for the restrooms, Sara and Grady appear.

JAMES LEER
This is so embarrassing! You guys had to carry me out.

GRADY
Is he all right?

CRABTREE
(rolling his eyes)
He's fine. He's narrating.

JAMES LEER
We're going to the men's room. Only we might not make it in time.

SARA
Terry Crabtree and James Leer. Leave it to you to make that mistake, wait here.

As Sara heads off after James, Grady turns toward the lobby... directly into the hostile gaze of Miss Sloviak.

MISS SLOVIAK
I need a ride.

GRADY
I'm your man.

EXT. STREET

As the Galaxie's big trunk yawns open. Miss Sloviak stares at what's wedged up against her suitcase.

GRADY

There's an explanation.

Miss Sloviak raises an eyebrow and then, leaning in, unzips her suitcase.

INT. GRADY'S CAR - MOVING

As GRADY drives, Miss Sloviak finishes with the top button of a man's shirt, then reaches into the zippered COSMETICS BAG in her lap. Onto the open tray of the glovebox, she places a JAR of COLD CREAM, a BOTTLE of NAIL POLISH REMOVER, and a cloud of COTTON BALLS.

MISS SLOVIAK

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

GRADY

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

MISS SLOVIAK

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

GRADY

I'm not sure that's possible.

MISS SLOVIAK

Sure it is.

Grady watches Miss Sloviak peel the wig from her forehead.

GRADY

Listen, Antonia –

MISS SLOVIAK

Tony. Now that I'm home.

GRADY

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

MISS SLOVIAK

Forget it. I should've known better. Your friend is just, I don't know,

into collecting weird tricks. Mind?

Tony angles the rearview mirror toward himself.

GRADY

He's writing his name in water.

MISS SLOVIAK

What's that?

GRADY

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

MISS SLOVIAK

That sounds like a fancy excuse for being a shit.

GRADY

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

Tony peels off a pair of false eyelashes, blinks.

MISS SLOVIAK

You mean because his career's ruined and all?

GRADY

Jesus. Is that what he told you?

MISS SLOVIAK

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

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

MISS SLOVIAK

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

Hearing this, Grady looks troubled. Miss Sloviak points.

MISS SLOVIAK

Turn here.

EXT. SLOVIAK HOUSE

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

GRADY

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

MISS SLOVIAK

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

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

MISS SLOVIAK

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

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

MISS SLOVIAK

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

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

GRADY

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

Miss Sloviak returns the gun, steps out of the car, and peers in at Grady.

MISS SLOVIAK

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

EXT. PARKING LOT - HI-HAT CLUB

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

EXT. ENTRANCE - HI-HAT CLUB

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

BOUNCER
(kidding him)
Clean tonight, huh, Professor?

GRADY
As a whistle.

INT. HI-HAT CLUB

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

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

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

GRADY
Double Dickel on the rocks.

INT. BOOTH

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

GRADY
Is that just beer?

CRABTREE
Primarily. Although I gather you two

staged a little raid on the Crabtree pharmacopoeia. You missed a few bottles, by the way.

GRADY

I'm sure. Where is everyone?

CRABTREE

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

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

GRADY

Jesus. He's out.

Crabtree glances over, nods.

CRABTREE

He has a book.

GRADY

I know. He started it Fall semester.

CRABTREE

He finished it Winter Break.

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

CRABTREE

So. Is he any good?

GRADY

No. Not yet he isn't.

CRABTREE

Well, I'm going to read it anyway.

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

He is. Take my word for it.

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

On the contrary, it could be just the ticket.

WAITRESS

(ducking in)

Double Dickel.

GRADY

Thanks.

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

CRABTREE

No sexual confusion there, eh, Professor?

GRADY

Shut up and drink.

Crabtree grins, brings his bottle up, then stops.

CRABTREE

Oh my goodness. Do you see what I see?

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

GRADY

President of the James Brown Hair Club For Men.

Sitting alone in the dark booth is a SMALL BLACK MAN with

big hands, a face peppered with scar tissue, and – most noticeably – a tsunami of hair sprouting from his scalp.

GRADY

(initiating an old
game)

He's a boxer. A flyweight.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

Not Curtis.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

And now he's addicted to painkillers.

CRABTREE

He can't piss standing up anymore.

GRADY

He lives with his mother.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

(stumped)

Because... because...

JAMES LEER

(sleepily)

... he was killed, when a gangster
named Freddie Nostrils tried to shoot
his favorite horse. He took the bullet
himself.

Grady and Crabtree turn to look at James Leer, who opens one bloodshot eye to regard them.

JAMES LEER

Vernon, over there, was in on the hit.

James' eye closes. Crabtree looks over at Grady.

CRABTREE

That was good.

GRADY

He heard everything we were saying.

Just then, Hannah Green bounces up in her red boots.

HANNAH GREEN

Come on, Teach. I want you to dance with me.

INT. DANCE FLOOR - MOMENTS LATER

Grady and Hannah, reflected in bits and pieces in the jack 'o lantern wall of MIRRORED TILE, slow-dance to a sexy, measured blues.

HANNAH GREEN

I've been re-reading Arsonist's Daughter. It's so beautiful, Grady. So natural. It's like all your sentences always existed, just waiting around in Style Heaven, or wherever, for you to fetch them down.

GRADY

I thank you.

HANNAH GREEN

And I love the inscription you wrote to me. Only I'm not quite the downy innocent you think I am.

GRADY

I hope that isn't true. We need all the downy innocents we can get.

Grady spies the corner table, watches Crabtree say something to Q and then, casually, stroke a lock of hair from James Leer's forehead.

HANNAH GREEN

So what are you going to do?

GRADY

Do?

HANNAH GREEN

I just mean, I – I guess Emily isn't going to be there when you get home.

Grady looks down into Hannah's translucent face, then catches a glimpse of himself in the fractured, wall. The tile that would reflect his head is missing.

GRADY

Are you holding me up or am I dragging you down?

Hannah snuggles closer, lays her head on Grady's chest.

HANNAH GREEN

Shush.

EXT. PARKING LOT - HI-HAT CLUB (2 AM)

Grady, limping on his bad ankle, carries James to Hannah's rumpled RENAULT, props him against the fender.

GRADY

Look, Hannah. When you get him home... make sure he's all right. Before you leave. Okay?

HANNAH GREEN

I would if I knew where I was taking him.

GRADY

Hannah, are you telling me you don't know where James Leer lives?

HANNAH GREEN

Some apartment somewhere. But I've never seen it.

GRADY

That strikes me as odd.

HANNAH GREEN

James is odd. I know he has an aunt in Sewickley Heights. I dropped him there once, but...

(remembering)

Come to think of it, it wasn't even his Aunt's house. He said she worked there. Or something. I don't remember.

James MUMBLES, starts to slide onto the hood of the car.

JAMES LEER

Mmhmmm... knap... sap...

GRADY

What's he saying?

HANNAH GREEN

His bag. You know that ratty green thing he's always carrying around. He must've left it inside.

GRADY

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

Grady glances at the idling Galaxie across the street.

Crabtree and Q huddle inside.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

(delirious, but insistent)

Mmrrmmm... KNAP SAP!

Grady frowns in annoyance, opens the passenger door.

GRADY

All right. Take him to my place. He can crash on the sofa.

HANNAH GREEN

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

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

Ail right. In my office.

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

HANNAH GREEN

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

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

Vernon Hardapple.

VERNON HARDAPPLE

You driving this car?

GRADY

Excuse me?

VERNON HARDAPPLE

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

GRADY

It's mine.

VERNON HARDAPPLE

Bullshit. It's mine, motherfucker.

GRADY

You must be mistaken.

VERNON HARDAPPLE
Bullshit.

Grady shakes his head wearily, opens the door.

GRADY
Go home to your mother, Vernon.

INT. GALAXIE

Grady slides in next to Q, puts the car in gear, and starts to pull away. As he glances in the rearview, he sees Crabtree smiling darkly in the backseat.

GRADY
All right, what's the matter?

Crabtree just keeps smiling.

GRADY
Christ, Crabs, what do you expect me to do? The kid's practically in a coma.

CRABTREE
Tripp.

GRADY
Yes.

CRABTREE
Hit your brakes.

Grady flicks his eyes from the rearview mirror just as a SHADOW looms in his headlights. As he squashes the break pedal, Q's EYEGLASSES go flying into the windshield.

Q
(squinting)
Oh my God! What is that?

It's Vernon, waving his arms, his shadow enormous in the beams of light.

GRADY
What's this guy's problem?

CRABTREE

Just go around him.

Grady taps the accelerator, but each time, Vernon dances back in front of Grady's grille.

GRADY

Shit.

CRABTREE

Back up. Go out the other way.

Grady throws the car in reverse, backs straight up, then turns up a one-way street. He shoots down the alley behind the Hi-Hat, turns onto the adjoining street... and watches in amazement as Vernon materializes from behind the high wooden fence that runs parallel to the Galaxie.

As Grady punches the brakes, Vernon grins.

GRADY

Now what?

Q

(mischievously)

You could always go over him.

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

Q

What just happened?

Grady peers at the wrinkled asterisk on his hood.

GRADY

I just had my car jumped on.

EXT. THAW HALL - NIGHT (TWENTY MINUTES LATER)

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

GRADY

Wait here. I'll be right back.

CRABTREE

Where would we go?

INT. LOBBY

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

JANITOR

It's open.

Grady pushes on the door and it opens.

JANITOR

Hey, Professor Tripp.

(off Grady's look)

Traxler. Sam. I took your class freshman year. Then I dropped out of school.

GRADY

I hope it wasn't my fault.

TRAXLER

(taking him seriously)

No. I guess you're here for the backpack.

GRADY

Oh... yeah.

INT. AUDITORIUM

The knapsack is sitting on one of the metal folding chairs as Sam and Grady enter the silent hail.

TRAXLER

I saw the manuscript inside. So when you showed up, I figured...

Grady lifts the knapsack, peers inside. There is no title page to the MANUSCRIPT, just the words The Love Parade and then, halfway down, TEXT.

TRAXLER

Is it good?

GRADY

(reading)
I don't know. It might be...

CUT:

EXT. THAW HALL - NIGHT - A MOMENT LATER

Grady steps outside, closes the flap of the knapsack and, hunching his shoulders against the cold... stops.

Crabtree. Q. The car. Gone.

INT. TRAXLER'S HONDA - NIGHT

Traxler gives Grady a ride in his Honda, one of the original Hondas best suited for sidewalk driving. The backseat bulges with a huge AMPLIFIER and BASS GUITAR.

TRAXLER

Say, Professor Tripp, is all that stuff true about Errol Flynn? How he used to put coke on his dick. To make himself, you know, like, last longer?

GRADY

Christ, Traxler. How the hell should I know?

TRAXLER

Well, jeez, you're reading his biography, aren't you?

Sam points and GRADY glances at the knapsack riding on the seat between him and Sam. A BOOK – bearing ERROL FLYNN'S PICTURE – is tucked into the side pouch.

GRADY

Oh, right. Yeah, that's true. He used to rub all kinds of things on it. Paprika. Ground lamb.

TRAXLER

Sick.

EXT. SASKELL'S HOUSE - NIGHT (MOMENTS LATER)

Sam brings the car to a coughing idle across the street from

the Gaskell's house.

TRAXLER

Wow, check out that greenhouse. Is that your wife?

Grady gazes at Sara, a vaporous blur in the greenhouse.

GRADY

No, my wife's out of town.

Just then, the Honda FILLS WITH LIGHT. HEADLIGHTS loom, then a POLICE CAR sweeps into the Gaskell's driveway.

Walter appears on the front steps.

TRAXLER

Who's that guy?

GRADY

Her husband.

Traxler looks anxiously at the police car.

TRAXLER

What exactly are we doing here, Professor Tripp?

GRADY

(staring at Sara)

Taking the long way home.

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - NIGHT - A LITTLE LATER

As Traxler drives away, Grady mounts the porch with James Leer's knapsack hanging from one shoulder. He reaches above the door, feeling for a key, but his fingers come away with only dust. He stands, dispirited, then an idea strikes. He takes the doorknob, turns it. It opens.

INT. HALLWAY - GRADY'S HOUSE

Grady enters, closes the door quietly behind him.

INT. LIVING ROOM

The room is dim but the TV is on, throwing crazy slashes of light onto the walls and ceiling. As Grady limps by, he finds

a sleeping Hannah Green, bundled in a blanket, T-shirt, and little else. On the floor, near her dangling hand, Woolf's A Common Reader lays open next to a Diet Coke.

Grady considers the smooth geography of her body, but his eyes are most powerfully drawn to... her feet. He steps forward, lifts the blanket gently, but finds – to his disappointment – only the red cowboy boots.

He picks up the remote, turns off the TV, and exits.

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE

James Leer slumbers on a green sofa, draped in an old sleeping bag. Grady drops behind his desk, lets James' knapsack slide to the floor. He lifts his cuff, inspects his ugly ankle, then glimpses something in the knapsack.

Something yellow. Something soft.

Grady reaches down and, slowly – like a magician producing a magical scarf-extracts MARILYN MONROE'S WEDDING JACKET from James Leer's ratty green knapsack.

Grady glances at the young man on his sofa, then, looking very tired, reaches for the desk lamp... and turns out the light on the both of them.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - SATURDAY MORNING (NEXT DAY)

Grady steps outside in a WOMAN'S CHENILLE BATHROBE and plucks the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette from the second porch step. He fishes out a charred ROACH, starts to light it, then notices the Galaxie sitting in the driveway.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - MINUTES LATER

As Crabtree SNORES thunderously, Grady eases open the door, spots the CAR KEYS on the dresser, grabs them.

INT. LANDING - CONTINUOUS

Grady eases the door shut, starts to turn, then stops, his eyes drawn to the door just across the landing from Crabtree's room.

INT. EMILY'S OFFICE

Grady pushes open the door with the tips of his fingers, lets it glide open. The room that is revealed is bright and well-ordered, in direct contrast to the lazy clutter of Grady's office. There is a DRAFTING TABLE and a COMPUTER, pads and pens neatly arranged alongside.

A BULLETIN BOARD hangs on one wall, bearing an intricate mosaic of multi-colored index cards. There are PRINTS, framed, from various art exhibits, and two of Grady's DUST JACKETS – including, most prominently, Arsonist's Daughter.

There are PHOTOGRAPHS of EMILY too. In a black turtleneck with friends. In a sundress with Grady. In a billowing Burberry, floating like a dark butterfly against a BLUR of YELLOW TAXIS on a street in Manhattan.

Smiling brilliantly. Beautiful.

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE

Grady enters with a THERMOS – pauses – redistributes the sleeping bag over James Leer's pale body.

JAMES LEER
(without waking)
Thank you.

GRADY
You're welcome.

Grady sits at his desk, pours himself a cup of coffee from the thermos, then sets the cup directly in the center of a galaxy of previous coffee rings. Next, he takes a clean piece of paper, balls it up, and – with ritual precision – strokes it into the MINIATURE BASKETBALL HOOP that crowns the rim of the WASTE BASKET across the room.

All net.

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

(beat) 2611

In other words: Page 2611.

CLOSE UP - THE TYPEWRITER PAPER – darkening with WORDS, the

KEYS SNAPPING faster and faster, a CRAZY CLAMOR that grows and grows until, finally, it just... Stops.

GRADY
James I...

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

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

JAMES LEER
I put you on the floor.

GRADY
Oh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

JAMES LEER
Want me to get that?

GRADY
Sure.

As James shuffles away in the sleeping bag, Grady rises delicately and turns toward the window, just in time to see a POLICE CAR roll slowly by on the screen below.

JAMES LEER

(returning)

He didn't give his name.

GRADY

Who?

JAMES LEER

The guy on the phone.

GRADY

What'd he say?

JAMES LEER

He wanted to know if a Grady Tripp lived here and drove a dark maroon 1966 Ford Galaxie 500 with black interior.

GRADY

What'd you tell him?

JAMES LEER

Yes.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

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

GRADY

Afraid so.

JAMES LEER

That's a big book you're writing.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

Wow, Hannah always swore you were
working, but –

GRADY

But... ?

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

Washed up?

JAMES LEER

Blocked.

GRADY

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

James takes another glance at the mammoth manuscript.

JAMES LEER

No kidding.

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

CRABTREE

Good morning, boys. James.

James waves feebly from beneath the sleeping bag.

GRADY

(re: James' "attire")

If you're planning on staying for
breakfast, I'd put on something a
little less comfortable if I were

you.

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

JAMES LEER
Professor Tripp?

GRADY
Hm.

JAMES LEER
How did I get here last night?

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

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

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

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

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

EXT. FRONT PORCH

A POLICEMAN not much older than James Leer waits. As the door opens, Grady appears.

OFFICER PUPCIK
Good morning...
(eyeing Grady's robe)
Professor Tripp? Sorry to bother you, sir, but I understand you

attended an event at Sara and Walter Gaskell's house last night and were one of the last to leave...

INT. LANDING - SAME TIME

James lurks at the top of the stairs, swaddled in the sleeping bag, straining to hear.

OFFICER PUPCIK (O.S.)

...was just wondering if maybe you saw anyone. Someone you didn't know. Who seemed out of place. Suspicious maybe...

EXT. FRONT PORCH

Grady is scratching his head in mock thought.

GRADY

Well, there's always people you don't know at these things, but I can't say there was anybody particularly suspicious... Wait. There was one guy. Tiny fella. Claimed to be a jockey.

OFFICER PUPCIK

A jockey? You mean, like –

GRADY

Horses, right. Vernon something...
(thinking...)
Hardapple.

Pupcik stops on his pad, looks up.

OFFICER PUPCIK

Hardapple?

GRADY

I could be wrong. What happened anyway?

OFFICER PUPCIK

Huh? Oh, someone pulled a B&E on Dr. Gaskell's closet. And the dog's missing.

GRADY

That's weird.

OFFICER PUPCIK

We figure the perpetrator let him out. He's blind and we figure he just wandered off and got run over.

GRADY

The perpetrator.

OFFICER PUPCIK

No, the dog.

GRADY

Just kidding.

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

OFFICER PUPCIK

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

GRADY

I might have his number on campus.

OFFICER PUPCIK

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

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

HANNAH GREEN (O.S.)

There you are...

Grady stiffens, then turns to find Hannah Green across the room in her t-shirt and cowboy boots, looking all dewy-eyed and delectable.

HANNAH GREEN

I thought we were going to talk.
Last night.

GRADY
Oh. Well. I...

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

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

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

JAMES LEER
What do we do now?

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

GRADY
Hello?

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

GRADY
Could you hold on a minute, honey?

With a look of wonderment, Grady watches his hand ever-so-gently... hang up the phone.

GRADY
How 'bout we get the hell out of here?

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

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

GRADY
You start her up.

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

JAMES LEER
(as the engine roars)
How's that?

GRADY
Well done, James.

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

GRADY
Shit!

James blinks, pokes his head out the window.

JAMES LEER
You're bleeding. Professor Tripp.

INT. AISLE - MARKET - MORNING (LATER)

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

GRADY
Where exactly do you live, James?

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

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

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

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

GRADY

I guess there's probably a story behind that.

JAMES LEER

There is, but it's not that interesting.

GRADY

So where have you been staying?

JAMES LEER

(a long pause)

The bus station.

Grady stares incredulously at James.

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

(trying to fathom this)

But James. I mean... How long?

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

Jesus, James, you should've told someone.

JAMES LEER

Who?

GRADY

I don't know...

(unconvincingly)

Me.

Grady drops the basket at the check-out counter and, abruptly, finds himself face to face with a BABY, lolling on the shoulder of the woman before him. The baby is staring, spellbound, at a display of... Q'S LATEST PAPERBACK.

Grady frowns, then detects the true source of enchantment: a spray of SHINY MYLAR GIFT BALLOONS.

A thought evolves.

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

James takes another chug from his jug, nods.

JAMES LEER
Nice.

EXT. GASKELL HOUSE - MORNING

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

INT. GALAXIE - CONTINUOUS

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

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

GRADY
Hm.

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

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

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

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

GRADY

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

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

INT. GREENHOUSE - MOMENT LATER

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

SARA (O.S.)

Feeling guilty?

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

SARA

I can't believe you hung up on me, you dick.

GRADY

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

Sara nods, moves the ficus to another table.

SARA

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

GRADY

I heard.

SARA

You heard? How?

GRADY

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

SARA

Did you confess?

Grady looks up, mildly alarmed.

SARA

Your fingerprints were all over the
bedroom.

GRADY

Really? That was fast.

SARA

(frowning)

I'm kidding. Hello?

GRADY

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

SARA

Are you limping? Why are you limping?

GRADY

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

SARA

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

GRADY

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

SARA

All right.

Sara settles back, folds her arms. Waiting.

GRADY

I...

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

GRADY

...want to be with you.

Sara looks at him.

SARA

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

GRADY

Really, Sara, I...

Sara holds up one gloved hand.

SARA

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

GRADY

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

SARA

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

GRADY

About the baby.

SARA

That... and you.

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

SARA

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

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

SARA

Who's that sitting in your car?

GRADY

James Leer.

SARA
What's he doing out there?

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

Sara raises an eyebrow, then pushes through the door.

SARA
Isn't he lucky.

Grady watches her ripple across the glass, head for the house,
and wave. James, slumped low in the Galaxie, offers a limp
hand in return, but it's too late.

She's already gone.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING - LATER

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

JAMES LEER
She seemed to take it pretty well.

GRADY
Yeah, well, actually...

James looks over.

GRADY
The moment didn't really present
itself.

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

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

Nothing.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER
(sharply)
No.

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

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

James peers out the window at passing landscape.

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

GRADY
Your aunt?

James turns, eyes flashing with surprise.

GRADY
Hannah mentioned something about an aunt.

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

JAMES LEER
Humboldt County?

GRADY
(surprised)
Maybe...

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

GRADY
Glaucoma?

JAMES LEER
Colon cancer.

GRADY
Jesus, James. Wow.

James puts the joint back in the ashtray.

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

GRADY
Where's that?

JAMES LEER
Carvel.

GRADY
Carvel? Where's Carvel?

JAMES LEER
Outside Scranton.

GRADY
I never heard of it.

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

GRADY
Your father worked in a mannequin
factory?

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

GRADY
What kind of dancer?

JAMES LEER
Whatever kind they wanted her to be.

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

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

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

JAMES LEER
When we fall, we fall hard.

GRADY
Amazing.

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

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

JAMES LEER
Maybe I just needed the moment to
present itself.

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

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

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

GRADY
Kinship.

JAMES LEER
Kinship. And what's here?

GRADY

Unless I miss my bet... my wife.

James' heavy eyelids flutter with surprise.

JAMES LEER

The one that left you?

GRADY

That's right. That one.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - WINTERS FAMILY HOUSE

Grady RAPS on the front door, then cups his hands against the glass of the living room window, squints inside.

Nothing. As he turns away, Grady sees James sitting on the hood of the Galaxie with the box of powdered donuts. He's sitting in the indentation.

JAMES LEER

Someone jumped on your car with their butt...

GRADY

How can you tell?

JAMES LEER

You can see the outline of a butt.

As GRADY nods, James holds out the donut box.

JAMES LEER

Want one. They're incredible.
Incredible.

GRADY

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

EXT. BACK PORCH - BACK YARD (MOMENTS LATER)

As GRADY steps onto the back porch, James follows.

JAMES LEER

Maybe she didn't come here.

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

(a pang of guilt himself)

Oh. Right. Well, let's try not to think about that.

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

INT. LIVING ROOM - WINTERS HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

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

JAMES LEER

It feels really... good... here.

GRADY

I know. It's the house you want to wake up in on Christmas morning.
(moving off)
Make yourself at home. I'll be right back.

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

Grady, laboring badly on his ankle, enters and finds a DUFFEL BAG open on the floor, its contents a tangle of quickly-packed clothes. Everything else in the room feels of another time.

PHOTOGRAPHS are everywhere, documenting a PRETTY GIRL'S life, from first recital to cap and gown.

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

INT. DEN

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

GEORGE SANDERS

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

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - SAME TIME

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

GRADY

(into phone)

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

INT. DEN

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

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM - SAME TIME

A Nelson Riddle's THEME FROM ROUTE 66 BOOMS from below,

Grady cups a hand over his ear.

GRADY

Sara? Hi. It's Grady.

SARA'S VOICE

Where are you, Grady? An elevator?

GRADY

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

SARA'S VOICE

(evenly)

You're in Kinship?

GRADY

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

SARA'S VOICE

With Emily?

GRADY

What? No. There's no one here. I'm just... just...

SARA'S VOICE

Just what? Doing a little dusting?

As GRADY endeavors to respond, TWO YOUTHFUL VOICES, CHEERFULLY SINGING, rise from below.

CHEERFUL VOICES

Good Morning! Good Morning!

GRADY

(yelling)

James! For Christ sake, will you turn that thing down!

SARA'S VOICE

James? He's still with you?

INT. DEN

James, in the midst of pouring himself a tumbler of Bushmills, smiles as JUDY GARLAND and MICKEY ROONEY sing their hearts out in Babes In Arms.

JUDY/MICKEY

We talked the whole night through!

INT. UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

Grady shakes his head, carries the phone toward the bedroom WINDOW.

GRADY

Look, Sara... I'm not here... I'm
not here to...

As Grady watches, a late-model PONTIAC BONNEVILLE turns into
the driveway below him.

GRADY

...reconcile with Emily.

SARA'S VOICE

Are you there to not reconcile with
her?

The Bonneville's trunk pops open, revealing THREE BAGS OF
GROCERIES, and HANK and IRENE WINTERS, both in their 60's,
get out. An enormous NEWFOUNDLAND vaults from the backseat.

Sara, eating phone static this whole time, interprets Grady's
silence her own way.

SARA'S VOICE

Goodbye, Grady.

GRADY

No. Sara, you don't understand...

SARA'S VOICE

Trust me, I understand. I just want
to say something to you, Grady.

GRADY

(dreading it)

Yea?

SARA'S VOICE

How you choose to live your own life
is your business. But you be careful
with that boy, Grady. With James. He
belongs to somebody else.

As the line goes dead, Grady watches Hank and Irene Winters
disappear below him.

INT. DEN

James – Irish whiskey in one hand, the pride of Humboldt

County in the other – watches with deep absorption as Judy and Mickey have a heartfelt conversation. Then, sensing something... he turns.

Hank and Irene Winters, grocery bags in arm, stand frozen.

JAMES LEER

Hullo.

FOOTSTEPS are HEARD on the staircase and Grady hobbies into view. He tries a smile.

GRADY

Mom. Dad.

INT. DEN - WINTERS HOUSE - (A BIT LATER)

Hank Winters emerges from the bathroom with a roll of tape, a bottle of alcohol, and some cotton wool.

HANK

Well, it's infected, I can tell you that. I'm just going to clean it up a bit. It's up to you to find someone who knows what they're doing. Here. Put your foot up.

Grady puts his foot up on Hank's lazy-Boy, then notices a BOOK lying face down on the seat. The AUTHOR on the back cover looks as if he's trying very hard to look consequential. To his surprise, Grady realizes the author is himself.

HANK

So he's one of your students, this boy?

Grady glances into the living room, where James and Irene sit on a long couch together, sipping something hot. James is looking out the window, a curious expression on his face. Grady looks out his own window, sees the Newfoundland sniffing curiously at the Galaxie's trunk. When he glances back into the living room, he and James make brief eye contact, then blink, look away.

GRADY

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

HANK

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

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

GRADY

What made you pull out that old thing?

HANK

(shrugging)

I was thinking of you.

GRADY

And?

HANK

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

GRADY

Maybe I should read it.

HANK

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

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

GRADY

Where's Emily, Hank?

HANK

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

GRADY

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

Hank looks up, incredulous.

HANK

Where you stand?

GRADY
(embarrassed)
I – just want to say I'm sorry.

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

GRADY
Neurologist? Why? What's wrong?

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

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

HANK
Ah, right. The book.

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

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

HANK
Why did you come here, Grady?

Grady gestures vaguely.

GRADY
I – just wanted to see her, I guess –
Emily. And to see you too – you and
Irene. And to let everyone know that,
even though it may be difficult to
comprehend now, this – everything

that's happening – it's not forever.
It doesn't mean "Goodbye."

HANK
Give me a break, Grady.

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

HANK
You're done.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING - DUSK

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

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

Grady glances over, sees James burrowing into the Ziploc.

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

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

JAMES LEER
I just wanted a little sip.

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

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

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

GRADY
Jesus...

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

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

GRADY
What?

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

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

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

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

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

act.

GRADY

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

James looks out the window, pondering this.

JAMES LEER

So, why did you take me up there?

GRADY

(feeling for the heat again)

I don't know, James. I don't know why I do half the things I do. Who does?

(looking over)

Why do you wear that coat?

James looks down, a little defensive.

JAMES LEER

It's warm.

GRADY

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

James just blinks, no ready answer available.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

Because of my coat?

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

(smirking)

Jealous? Of me?

GRADY
Not you. Your talent.

James' face hardens. He looks away.

JAMES LEER
You're lying.

GRADY
The hell I am.

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

GRADY
I never said that.

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

GRADY
I didn't mean it that way.

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

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

James stares blankly at Grady, then turns his face to the

window. He ponders Grady's words, the praise inherent in them. A hint of pleasure glints in his eyes.

JAMES LEER

But, last night...

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

(quietly)

I'm sorry.

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

Arsonist's Daughter meant something.

Grady smiles contemptuously.

JAMES LEER

I mean it. It means something to me.
It's one of the reasons I came to
school here. To be in your class. To
be taught by you.

(quietly)

It's one of the reasons I wanted to
become a writer.

Grady stares ahead, watching the darkness tumble away before

the wide sweep of the Galaxie's headlights.

GRADY

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

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

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

JAMES LEER

You coming?

GRADY

In a minute. Get us a table.

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

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

INT/ EXT. PHONE BOOTH - PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

GRADY rests his forehead against the PAYPHONE as he speaks.

GRADY

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

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

GRADY

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

Grady stops, his own words ringing in his head.

GRADY
Never mind. My mistake.

EXT. GALAXIE - PARKING LOT

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

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

INT. BOOTH - COFFEE SHOP - NIGHT (LATER)

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

JAMES LEER
Want a bite?

GRADY
No thanks.

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

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

JAMES LEER
What would you call them then?

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

James shrugs, spears a fluffy chunk of pie.

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

GRADY
I eat.

JAMES LEER
When?

GRADY
When nobody's looking.

Grady watches a pair of headlights approach...

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

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

GRADY
You just worry about yourself, James.
Okay?

JAMES LEER
Okay.

Just then, a long, pale WAND of LIGHT splinters against the coffee shop windows and a CAR sweeps into the parking lot. Grady follows it with his eyes, rises.

JAMES LEER
Where you going?

GRADY
Nowhere. You just sit here and...
eat.

Grady moves off, then stops, looking back at James and his giant piece of pie, still troubled by his words.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP/MOTEL

As Grady limps out of the coffee shop, he finds an OLDER MAN in a TUXEDO standing in the open door of a gleaming BLACK MERCEDES. Beyond him, in the front passenger seat, a WOMAN in MINK examines her eye shadow in the tiny mirror of the

sun visor.

MAN
(eyeing GRADY dubiously)
Professor Tripp?

GRADY
Grady.

MAN
Fred Leer. This is my wife Amanda.

GRADY
(re: their clothes)
Looks like I've dashed a wonderful evening.

FRED LEER
Hardly.

AMANDA LEER
We were on our way to a benefit.
But, as luck would have it, the club
was on the way, so...
(snapping shut the
visor)
We were able to put in an appearance.

FRED LEER
Otherwise we would've been here
earlier.

GRADY
Ah. Well, that's all right. James
and I had a little dinner.

FRED LEER
Well, certainly we'll reimburse you.

GRADY
That's not necessary. I just felt...
it might be good for James to be
with his family this weekend.

FRED LEER
Well, of course, we can understand
that.

Grady considers the two glittering ghosts before him.

They seem to be waiting. Just waiting.

GRADY

Well. Let me go get him.

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

GRADY

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

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

AMANDA LEER

Excuse me?

INT. BOOTH - COFFEE SHOP

James is glowering at the parking lot as Grady returns.

JAMES LEER

I'm not going with them.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

I'm not going, with them.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

are dead.

Grady stares at James wearily.

JAMES LEER

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

Grady doesn't flinch, unpersuaded.

JAMES LEER

I swear. My father was a senior vice president at Dravo. My mother was a socialite. Her maiden name was Guggenheim.

Grady starts to protest, then pauses.

GRADY

I remember that. Five or six years ago.

JAMES LEER

Six. Their plane went down right outside Scranton.

GRADY

(sardonically)

Near Carvel?

JAMES LEER

I'm sorry about all that. I just – I don't like to talk about my family. They treat me like a freak.

(nodding towards Amanda)

She makes me sleep in the basement of my own house. It's mine. My parents left it to me.

Grady glances toward the parking lot, studies the contours of Fred Leer's face. Frowns.

GRADY

James, come on. That man is obviously

your father. You look just like him.

James looks down at the table, takes a deep breath, and speaks in a voice heavy with implication.

JAMES LEER

There's a reason for that.

Grady's addled brain grapples with this dark little riddle, finally deciphers what James is suggesting.

GRADY

Get out of here.

JAMES LEER

That's why she hates me. That's why she makes me sleep in the basement.

GRADY

In the crawl space, with the rats and the casks of Amontillado. Come on. Up.

As GRADY lifts him from the booth, James attempts a plaintive tone, but his heart's not in it.

JAMES LEER

I swear.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - MOMENTS LATER

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

FRED LEER

Thank you. Professor Tripp.

GRADY

Take care of him.

AMANDA LEER

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

Fred Leer hits the gas and swings the Mercedes around in a tight little arc, feathering Grady's pants – from the knee down – with a pudding of ICE and MUD. Grady glances down at his spattered self, then notices, sitting on the front

passenger seat, James' knapsack. Grady grabs it, turns.

GRADY

Hey!

GRADY'S POV - REAR WINDOW

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

GRADY

(softly)

Hey.

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

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

The Love Parade

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

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - NIGHT (LATER)

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

GRADY

(knowingly)

Crabtree.

INT. GRADY'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

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

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE

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

GRADY

(entering)
Hey.

HANNAH GREEN
Grady!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GRADY

Jesus.

HANNAH GREEN

Crabtree said it sounded like something James would be messed up in.

GRADY

Crabtree? He doesn't even know James.

HANNAH GREEN

Who does?

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

CRABTREE (O.S.)

Trip?! Where are you?

GRADY looks anxiously toward the door.

GRADY

The aunt, Hannah. Where did you take James that day?

HANNAH GREEN

I told you, Sewickly Heights.

GRADY

But where? I need the street.

HANNAH GREEN

I don't know, Grady. I just dropped him on a corner.

CRABTREE (O.S.)

Tripp?!

GRADY

Shit.

As Grady starts to turn away, Hannah hooks her finger inside his belt buckle.

HANNAH GREEN

No! Don't go. I've been waiting all night for you.

Grady looks at Hannah's hand, where it rests. He looks terrified.

GRADY

Listen, Hannah, I'm flattered, really,
but right now I –

CRABTREE

(bursting in)
Tripp, where the hell...

Crabtree stops, takes in the tableau before him.

CRABTREE

Oh, I'm sorry. Am I interrupting a
student-teacher conference?

Grady delicately removes Hannah's hand from his buckle, points
at Crabtree.

GRADY

You stay there.

CRABTREE

What? Ohhhh. Is that... it?

Crabtree cocks his head toward the reams of paper stacked on
Grady's desk.

CRABTREE

Honestly, Tripp. Do you actually
think I would sneak in here and read
your book without asking you?

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

Sometimes we have to improvise.

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

James? My James? What's happened?

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

Kidnapped? By who?

GRADY

His parents.

CRABTREE

Good God. Let's go rescue him.

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

It's a little late to call Admissions.

CRABTREE

Is it a little late to call the Chancellor?

GRADY

Maybe... I don't know.

HANNAH GREEN

Two-sixty-two Baxter Drive.

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

HANNAH GREEN

They're in the book.

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING - TEN MINUTES LATER

CRABTREE snaps James' manuscript closed.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

Only in your bones?

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

CRABTREE

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

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

GRADY

How bad is it for you?

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

Which is?

CRABTREE

Competence.

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

CRABTREE

So tell me about you and the

Chancellor.

GRADY
What's to tell?

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

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

CRABTREE
...I like her.

Grady peers at the stars, his voice barely audible.

GRADY
Me too.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - SEWICKLEY HEIGHTS

The battered Galaxie floats up a narrow road, gliding through a canyon of mansion walls and the occasional winding drive. Up ahead a stone post marker with the numerals "262." Grady kills the headlights.

GRADY
This is it.

EXT. LEER HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Grady – limping like an aging prizefighter – leads CRABTREE up a steep incline toward an enormous three-story house.

The Leer's Mercedes gleams in the shadows.

CRABTREE
Jesus. There must be two dozen windows on that thing. How are we supposed to find his?

GRADY
I told you. They keep him chained in the basement. Come on.

EXT. REAR - LEER HOUSE

LIGHT GLOWS from a low BASEMENT WINDOW. From one side, a WOMAN is HEARD SINGING. Grady and Crabtree pause, listen.

WOMAN SINGING

Why should I care though he gave me
the air? Why should I cry, heave a
sigh, and wonder why? And wonder
why?

CRABTREE

Doris Day.

Crabtree and Grady look at each other.

GRADY/CRABTREE

James Leer.

Grady moves to the window and RAPS on the glass. A moment later, James peeks out. Seeing Grady, his face brightens briefly, unguarded, then quickly resumes its usual Leerian aspect. He motions with his hand, as if to say, "That way."

EXT. BASEMENT DOOR

The DOOR swings open to reveal James Leer, decked out in a pair of RED, INK-STAINED PAJAMAS sagging badly in the seat. He looks like one of Santa's elves.

JAMES LEER

Hey. What are you guys doing here?

CRABTREE

We're springing you, Leer. Get some
pants on.

As they step inside, GRADY gives James' PJs the once-over.

GRADY

I can't believe you made fun of my
robe.

INT. JAMES' ROOM - BASEMENT

Electric CANDELABRAS light a large converted cellar whose walls are crowded with MOVIE POSTERS and LOBBY CARDS. There are STACKS of what look suspiciously like LIBRARY BOOKS and an enormous BAROQUE BED, complete with CANOPY.

CRABTREE

I like what you've done with it.
When's Captain Nemo moving in?

JAMES LEER

The candelabras were my Gran's.

GRADY

Oh, Christ, don't start on ol' Gran
or we'll leave you here.

CRABTREE

Hey, I heard all about it – the
parents, the grandparents, the China
town thing – and I believe you,
okay? That's why we're here. Now go
get dressed.

James scoops up the shirt GRADY lent him. this morning.

JAMES LEER

Can I – I mean – do you mind – if
I wear this again. Professor Tripp?

GRADY

Ah, wear whatever you want.

James flinches, stung, then disappears into a bathroom.

CRABTREE

So modest.

GRADY

So sensitive.

CRABTREE

(nosing around the
room)

Oh, come on, Tripp. Cut the kid some
slack.

GRADY

It's just ail that crap he spins
out. Just once I'd like to know if
the little bastard is telling the
truth.

CRABTREE

The truth. I know that's always been real important to you. Okay, check this out...

Crabtree leans over an old ROYAL TYPEWRITER, reads from the freshly-typed PAGE curling from the carriage.

CRABTREE

'Finally, the door opened. It was a shock to see him, shuffling into the room like an aging prizefighter. Limping. Beaten.'

(with an amused smile)

Sound like anyone we know?

(resuming)

'But it was later, when the great man squinted into the bitter glow or twilight...

(frowning)

Bitter glow of twilight? This kid definitely needs an editor.

(resuming)

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

Crabtree stops abruptly.

GRADY

Yes? 'His heart...'

Crabtree hesitates, then... reads on:

CRABTREE

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

Grady nods, his face unreadable, then James returns.

JAMES LEER

I'm ready...

James stops, sees the two men looking at him.

JAMES LEER

You all right, Professor Tripp?

CRABTREE

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

JAMES LEER

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

CRABTREE

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

JAMES LEER

(brightening)

Yeah. Like in Against All Flags. Only they use a couple big hams.

GRADY

No.

Crabtree and James turn.

GRADY

I've got something better than a teddy bear.

CUT TO:

POE – as he's lowered delicately onto James bed.

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

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

GRADY

Sweet dreams, Jimmy.

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - LATER

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

INT. LIVING ROOM

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

CRABTREE

Things must've picked up after we left.

Crabtree pats Grady's cheek, heads upstairs.

INT. HALLWAY

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

GRADY

Crabtree.

CRABTREE

(sticking his head out)
Ye-es?

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

GRADY

Nothing.

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

INT. HANNAH'S ROOM

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

Delicately, he lifts the sheet. Hannah Green's feet – finally revealed in all their naked glory – prove to be thick, wide,

and ordinary. Grady sighs.

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE

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

VOICE

Hey.

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

GRADY

How are you – is it Joe?

GOATEE KID

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

GRADY

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

GOATEE KID

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

GRADY

No...

GOATEE KID

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

GRADY

It's cool, Jeff. Really.

GOATEE KID

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

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

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

Grady blinks, looks away, and DIALS, just as... the CLATTERING COUGH of an ENGINE is HEARD and a VAN appears.

Stenciled on its side panel is:

 Kravnik's Sporting Goods

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

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

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

 GRADY
Walter?

 WALTER'S VOICE
Yes?

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

 WALTER'S VOICE
Who's this ?

 GRADY
It's Grady, Walter.

 WALTER'S VOICE
Grady?

 GRADY
GRADY Tripp. English Department.

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

it is?

GRADY

(looking at his watch)

I have... eight-fifteen. That's not right, is it?

WALTER'S VOICE

It's three-thirty, Grady.

GRADY

This is important.

WALTER'S VOICE

Oh?

GRADY

I... I...

WALTER'S VOICE

What is it, Grady?

GRADY

I'm in love with your wife.

WALTER'S VOICE

Excuse me?

GRADY

Sara. I'm in love with her.

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

WALTER'S VOICE

Are you drinking. Professor Tripp?
Right now.

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

GRADY

No.

WALTER'S VOICE

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

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

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

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

INT. GRADY'S OFFICE - SAME TIME

A heavy THHNK hits the driveway outside and GRADY blinks.

Sitting in his pink robe, bleary-eyed, he reconsiders the piece of paper curling from his typewriter.

GRADY'S POV - OF THE PAGE

It's obvious he's been sitting like this for some time.

Just then, the DISTINCTIVE PURR of an ENGINE is HEARD.

Grady peers through the window, watches a CAB glide to the curb below. A Citroen DS23. Sara.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - GRADY'S HOUSE

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

GRADY

Sara.

SARA

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

Sara leans down, replaces the uncradled phone.

SARA

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

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

GRADY

Oh?

SARA

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

GRADY

(slumping to the porch)

I'm sorry, Sara. I've been trying to
tell you. It's all my –

Sara raises her hand, silencing him.

SARA

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

GRADY

Inside.

SARA

And the jacket?

GRADY

Over there. In the backseat of the...

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

GRADY

Someone stole my car.

SARA

Grady.

GRADY

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

SARA

Are you sure you parked it there?

GRADY

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

Sara turns, sees Officer Pupcik cruising to the curb.

SARA

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

INT. CRABTREE'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

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

GRADY

(swinging in)

Is he awake?

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

(from under the covers)

That same guy?

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

JAMES LEER

You snore.

CRABTREE

So I hear.

JAMES LEER

(studying Grady)

No offense, Professor Tripp, but you
look sorta crappy.

CRABTREE

He's right, you look horrible.

GRADY

Thank you, Frankie and Annette.

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

JAMES LEER

It's the Chancellor.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

Grady squints at James as he pulls on his pants.

GRADY

Shut up, James.

CRABTREE

So what's the problem?

GRADY

(a tad tense)

There is no problem. Did I say there was a problem?

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

SARA (O.S.)

How's it coming back there, Professor Tripp?

CRABTREE

Who's that?

GRADY

Who do you think it is?

CRABTREE
The Chancellor's here? Now?

GRADY
Evidently.
(calling)
Coming!

JAMES LEER
Does she mean – does she know
about... her dog?

GRADY
It's Walter's dog and yes, she does
know. But let's spare her the details.
Come on, your shoes are in the hail.

CRABTREE
James. This book of yours. It's not
bad. Not bad at all.

James stops, considers this piece of news with a look of
deep seriousness, then nods.

JAMES LEER
Thank you.

CRABTREE
You're welcome.

As James shuffles off into the hail, Crabtree looks at Grady,
his eyes dancing with excitement.

CRABTREE
I want to publish this. I've got to.
I think they'll let me. With a little
editorial guidance it could be
brilliant.

GRADY
Great. Between you and Officer Pupcik
out there he can be the next Jean
Genet. It's been awhile since somebody
wrote a good book in jail.

EXT. GRADY'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Sara and Grady stand by as Pete Pupcik deposits James in the

back of the squad car, SLAMS the door.

PUPCIK

As I told the Chancellor, Professor,
I'm just going to run James here
over to the university. It'll be up
to Dr. Gaskell where we go from there.

Grady nods, leans in the window to James.

GRADY

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

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

I'm a little worried, James.

JAMES LEER

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

GRADY

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

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

JAMES LEER

Professor Tripp...?

GRADY

Yes, James.

JAMES LEER

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

James smiles his crooked grin.

JAMES LEER

You're still the best teacher I ever
had.

On this, Pete Pupcik pulls away, leaving GRADY standing on
the curb, watching the back of James' head, framed in the

rear window of the police car, growing smaller.

SARA

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

GRADY

Would Walter really press charges?

SARA

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

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

SARA

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

GRADY

I think I might have.

SARA

And what do you think you might have said?

GRADY

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

Sara's face remains unchanged.

GRADY

He told you.

SARA

He told me.

GRADY

And what did you say?

SARA

I said it didn't sound like you.

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

CRABTREE

So – what do we do now?

GRADY

Find the jacket.

CRABTREE

Oh! Huh. Exactly how do we do that?

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

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

INT. HANNAH'S ROOM - LATER

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

GOATEE KID

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

HANNAH GREEN

(laughing)

Stop it.

Hannah looks up, sees GRADY in the doorway and blushes.

She pulls the sheet up, gives an oddly formal wave.

HANNAH GREEN

Grady. Hi. What's up?

Jeff eases off the bed, past GRADY uneasily.

GOATEE KID

I'll be... somewhere else.

GRADY

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

Jeff nods – puzzled – then goes. Grady smirks.

GRADY

He cribbed that from Borges.

HANNAH GREEN

It beats 'What's your major?'

Grady nods, detecting a new aloofness in her voice.

GRADY

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

HANNAH GREEN

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

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

HANNAH GREEN

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

GRADY

That good, huh?

HANNAH GREEN

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

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

HANNAH GREEN

It's just that, you know, I was thinking about how, in class, you're always telling us 'that writers make choices – at least the good ones. And, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the book isn't really great –

I mean, really great – but at times it's, well, very detailed, you know, with the genealogies of everyone's horses and all the dental records and so on – and I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but it sort of reads, in places, like, well, actually, like...

(with trepidation)

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

GRADY

(stung)

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

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

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

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

CRABTREE

Want some help with that?

GRADY

(passing by)

Don't touch it.

INT. HANNAH'S RENAULT - MOVING

Crabtree sucks on a Kool, driving Hannah's rattling Renault too fast, shifting gears apparently at random.

Grady rides shotgun, still wearing the robe over his clothes, the Wonder Boys manuscript sitting like a watermelon on his lap-looking, all in all, fairly pathetic.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

So whose car is it?

GRADY

My guess – Vernon Hardapple.

CRABTREE

The hood jumper?

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

Such as.

GRADY

'That's my car, motherfucker.'

CRABTREE

Uh huh. So. We find Vernon, we find the car. We find the car...

GRADY

...we find the jacket.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

No wonder he screwed us over.

CUT TO:

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

INT. HANNAH'S CAR

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

CRABTREE

Christ, Tripp. How did you know?

GRADY

Call it a hunch.

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

CRABTREE

I'd call it genius.

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

GRADY

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

EXT./INT. GALAXIE

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

James Leer's little PEARL-HANDLED PISTOL.

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

INT. HANNAH'S RENAULT

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

CRABTREE

What the hell...

INT. GALAXIE

As Grady lolls behind the steering wheel, a CLOUD appears, hovering, then slowly mutates, and Grady realizes it's not a cloud at all, it's MARILYN MONROE standing by the side mirror, wearing a bright pink dress under her wedding jacket.

MARILYN

I know you...

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

MARILYN

Double Dickel on the rocks.

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

GRADY

Oola.

OOLA

I never forget a drink.

GRADY

I never forget an Oola.

Suddenly, there is a HEAVY CLICK.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Forget me?

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

GRADY

Vernon.

VERNON

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

GRADY
Who's got a gun?

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

GRADY
Relax, Vernon...

OOOLA
Why's he calling you Vernon?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GRADY
No, really...

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

INT. HANNAH'S RENAULT

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

CRABTREE
Holy shit.

EXT. KRAVNIKS

Vernon stands half-hunched, stunned.

VERNON
Are you crazy!

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

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

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

VERNON
You all right, cupcake?

OOLA
Who's Vernon?

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

VERNON
What the...?

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

CRABTREE
Tripp! Run!

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

VERNON
Who the hell is that?

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

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

VERNON
Woah.

Vernon steps into the street, levels the German Nine.

VERNON
Pull off, you crazy motherfucker!

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

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

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

Only, these ain't birds.

GRADY
Oh... my... God!

These are PAGES. Seven years of pages.

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

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

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

INT. GALAXIE - MOVING

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

CRABTREE
Naturally you have copies.

GRADY
I have an alternate version of the first chapter.

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

GRADY
That was MacCaulay.

CRABTREE
Or Hemingway, when Hadley lost all those stories.

GRADY
He was never able to reproduce them.

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

Grady's eyes shift, study Crabtree.

GRADY

Kind of a sign, you're saying.

CRABTREE

In a sense.

GRADY

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

VERNON

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

GRADY

'Fraid so.

VERNON

(glowering at Crabtree)

And you're saying it's some kind of sign? What the fuck's the matter with you?

CRABTREE

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

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

VERNON

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

CRABTREE

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

VERNON

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

CRABTREE

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

VERNON

He was trying to steal my car!

GRADY

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

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

OOLA

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

Grady stares into Oola's sweet, brown eyes.

GRADY

I don't know...

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

CRABTREE

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

VERNON

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

GRADY

I couldn't stop.

EXT. CAMPUS ENTRANCE

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

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

VERNON
Shoot.

Grady glances at little round Oola.

GRADY
Boy or girl?

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

Grady watches Vernon give Oola a kiss on the forehead.

GRADY
Right. Well, thanks. For the lift.

VERNON
No sweat. Only do me a favor?

GRADY
Sure.

VERNON
Stop calling me Vernon.

Crabtree leans into Grady, WHISPERS.

CRABTREE
The jacket, Tripp. We need the jacket.

GRADY
Oh, right. Oola. About that jacket...

OOLA
Yea?

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

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

As Oola smiles, pleased, Vernon shakes his head.

VERNON

Man, that book of yours must've been one nutty motherfucking ride.

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

CRABTREE

You mind explaining what you just did?

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

GRADY

Came to my senses.

CRABTREE

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

GRADY

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

CRABTREE

Do you know he won't expel him?

GRADY

No. But I don't think that matters.

CRABTREE

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

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

GRADY

Nobody teaches a writer anything. You tell them what you know. You tell them to find their voice and

stick with it, because that's all you have in the end. You tell the ones who have it to keep at it and you tell the ones who don't to keep at it, too. Because that's the only way to get where you're going.

(ruefully)

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

(thoughtfully)

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

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

GRADY

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

Without warning, Grady tosses Crabtree the knapsack.

GRADY

He's got you.

Crabtree stares at the saggy green canvas in his hands, watches Grady walk away.

CRABTREE

Me? What can I do?

GRADY

Gee, I don't know, Crabs...

(over his shoulder)

Improvise. You're good at that.

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

CRABTREE

I'm sorry, Tripp.

Grady stops, turns.

GRADY

You peeked, didn't you?

CRABTREE

I peeked.

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

CRABTREE

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

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

GRADY

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

Crabtree looks directly at Grady, his old friend.

CRABTREE

Scout's honor.

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

GRADY

Well, thanks for that, Crabs.

INT. HALLWAY - ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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

INT. GRADY'S CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Grady surveys the room. Empty chairs. Empty desks.

He walks to a WINDOW, the same window he stood at two
afternoons ago when reading James Leer's story. A chill breeze
pitches the fabric of his shirt as he studies the barren
benches and icy walkways of the quad. Finally, he turns away,
settles behind his desk and, reaching into his pocket, removes
the seven remaining pages of his manuscript. He considers
them, then folds them in half length-wise. He continues,
folding the top right corner down into a triangle along the
first crease...

EXT. QUAD

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

INT. LOBBY - THAW HALL - LATER

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

GRADY

Sara!

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

Q

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

GRADY

(pushing past him)

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

INT. BACK ROW - AUDITORIUM - THAW HALL

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

GIRL'S VOICES

Hey, Professor Tripp.

It's Carrie McWhirly, James' tormentor from workshop.

Grady takes another look around, then drops into the seat next to her.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

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

GRADY

No...

But Grady looks anyway. Hannah sits a dozen rows down the aisle, hair pulled back in a clip, glorious skin gloaming.

The Goatee Kid sits close beside her.

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

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

GRADY

Jeff. He comes from a long line of tango dancers.

INT. MAIN STAGE

Walter turns over the last page of his prepared notes.

WALTER

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

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

WALTER

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

INT. BACK ROW - THAW HALL

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

WALTER

And Robert Wilkenson – who many of you know for his City Beat column in

the Post-Gazette – has found a home with Putnam for his new Three Rivers thriller. Blood Patterns. Robert.

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

WALTER

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

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

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

I have a class with him.

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

CARRIE MCWHIRTY

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

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

GRADY

Take a bow, James!

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

GRADY

(softly)
Wonder Boy.

WALTER

And finally – and perhaps not least

importantly – Terry Crabtree, of Bartizan, has also decided to publish my own book – a critical exploration of the union of Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio and its function in American mythopoetics – which, tentatively, I've entitled The Last American Marriage.

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

WALTER

Until next year. Thank you, everyone.

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

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

Grady blinks, scrambles up.

INT. CORRIDOR - THAW HALL - MOMENTS LATER

GRADY bursts into the corridor.

GRADY

Sara!

It's empty. Quiet. Grady pauses. Somewhere, a HEAVY METAL DOOR CLOSES. Grady rushes on.

INT. NEW CORRIDOR

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

INT. STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

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

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

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

GRADY
Yo, Traxler.

TRAXLER
(looking up)
Hey, Professor Tripp.

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

GRADY
Do you get high, Sam?

TRAXLER
Only when I'm working.

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

TRAXLER
Holy shit. Are you serious?

GRADY
As a heart attack.

TRAXLER
Thanks – Whoa, Professor Tripp,
careful here...

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

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

SARA
Grady, what are you doing, you idiot?

Grady looks up into Sara's freckled face.

GRADY
Looking for you.

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

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

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

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

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

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

His NAMETAG says GREENHUT.

GRADY
I passed out.

GREENHUT
You did.

GRADY
I've been doing that a lot lately.

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

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

GREENHUT
How long have you been having them?

GRADY

The last month maybe.

GREENHUT

How long have you been smoking marijuana?

GRADY

Spiro T. Agnew was vice president, I believe.

GREENHUT

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

GRADY

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

GREENHUT

And your wife left you.

GRADY

Is that in my chart?

GREENHUT

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

Grady considers the larger ramifications of this statement

GRADY

I know.

GREENHUT

(tapping the glucose bottle)

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

GRADY

She told you about...

GREENHUT

Her dog, yes.

GRADY

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

Greenhut glances up, looking GRADY in the eyes for the first time, and GRADY stops.

GREENHUT

Look, Mr. Tripp. You have a drug problem, all right? On top of that, you have a bite on your ankle that is severely infected. We pumped you with antibiotics so you'll be fine, but another day or two and you might have lost the foot. As for your spells. I'm guessing they're a result of the anxiety you've been experiencing lately.

GRADY

They're anxiety attacks? That's a little disappointing.

GREENHUT

Better luck next time.

GRADY

So is my friend... is Sara still here?

GREENHUT

No. There's no one here.

GRADY

I have to see her. As soon as possible.

Greenhut studies Grady, calibrating the desperation in his eyes, then takes a quick glance at his watch.

GREENHUT

Look, Mr. Tripp. If you really want to leave, I can't stop you. But I'm going to write you a prescription for a course of ampicillin and I want you to follow it to the end no matter how stupid you decide to be

with everything else. All right?

INT. HOSPITAL/BRIDGE WALKWAY - AFTERNOON

Grady sits in a WHEELCHAIR, watching the snow fall around him as a NURSE escorts him through the tunnel of glass that connects one building to another.

GRADY

I wonder if you could show me something.

EXT. NURSERY - HOSPITAL - MOMENTS LATER

Grady stares through the glass. There are only TWO BABIES on display, heads dented from natural delivery, skin purple and crazy with veins.

GRADY

Are these the only ones you have?

The nurse's eyes crinkle.

GRADY

Kidding...

EXT. GASKELL HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

GRADY pays a TAXI CAB DRIVER, then turns, looks at the Gaskell house.

EXT. FRONT DOOR - MOMENT LATER

Grady KNOCKS. Nothing. Peers into the living room window.

Dark. He stands helplessly, then spies the greenhouse, standing ghostly across the yard, feathers of snow drifting onto its roof, melting.

EXT. GREENHOUSE - MOMENT LATER

Grady hobbles to the greenhouse, puts both hands to the glass as he looks inside. Quiet. Empty. Dispirited, he pulls away, but not before leaving...

...the IMPRINTS of his hands, perfectly etched in the frost of the glass.

EXT. STREET

The snow continues to fall as Grady lumbers down the street. Finally, wearily, he stops, sits his crippled self on the curb. He plunges his fist into his jacket and.

...straight through the lining, James Leer's silly little pistol at the end of his hand. He considers the pistol, then looks up into the sky.

GRADY'S POV - of the SKY...

...dark and menacing. Suddenly, a THUNDERCLAP shatters the silence.

NEW ANGLE - GRADY

...still sitting with the gun in his hand.

GRADY
(as if addressing God)
Is that a suggestion?

Grady sits, blinking the snow out of his eyes, then TWO SHAFTS of LIGHT dance across his shoes. A white Citroen DS23 appears. It passes. Slows. Stops.

Grady stares at the car, burbling at the curb, then lifts himself up and makes his way to the driver's window. Sara makes a face, bugging her eyes a little mad at him, but not without humor. Then she rolls down the window.

GRADY
I'm so glad to see you, Sara.

SARA
I believe you. Did that nice doctor let you out? Or is this you improvising again, Grady?

GRADY
I'm through improvising.

SARA
Terry told me about Wonder Boys. Is it true? Did you lose it all?

GRADY

I lost it all.

SARA
Oh, Grady. You're such a putz.

GRADY
I know.

SARA
And you're old.

Sara strokes his scalp, takes a gray hair between her fingers.
Yanks.

GRADY
Ouch. How many?

SARA
Dozens. It's very sad.

Sara smiles at Grady, but the mischief leaves her eyes when she looks into his, and she glances away.

GRADY
I went and looked at some babies
just now.

SARA
Oh?

GRADY
(trying to make her
laugh)
I guess you have to go on faith.

SARA
(she doesn't)
Some times...

Grady studies her as she traces her finger around the HOSPITAL
BRACELET still encircling his wrist.

GRADY
Did you tell Walter?

SARA
I told Walter.

GRADY
Does he still love you?

SARA
It didn't come up.

Grady studies Sara's freckled cheeks, her anxious profile, then turns her chin gently toward him.

GRADY
Well I do. I've always loved you, Sara. I didn't know it at the time, but I'd always been waiting for you. My whole life. Because you're who I need. Because nothing makes sense without you. Because the best moment of every day is the moment I first see your face. And because when you leave a room, there's no reason to be in it any more. It's just a room again.

Sara cocks her head.

SARA
Did you just make that up?

GRADY
(shaking his head)
In the hospital. I was kind of excited about it at the time, but then I was on pretty heavy painkillers.

She frowns good-naturedly.

GRADY
Even so... it's still true. Every word.

Sara just nods, looks away, her face unreadable.

GRADY
Sara, I promise, even though commonsense might tell you...

Sara turns, puts a finger on GRADY's lips...

SARA

Don't write a page when a paragraph will do.

Grady nods, takes her hand. Looks at it as he speaks.

GRADY

You don't deserve me, you know.

SARA

I know, but sometimes...

Sara turns, looks at Grady. Her eyes are glistening.

SARA

You just go on faith.

Grady looks into her eyes, then rises, and we do too, drifting above the streetlights as Grady limps to the other side of the car and gets in. As Grady snaps shut his door, the car drifts off, gradually losing itself in the soft veil of falling snow. After a moment, Grady and Sara are lost too, nothing more than a blur.

THE END