

"Awkward Endeavors"

FADE IN:

INT. HOUSE/SPARE BEDROOM - DAY

43-year-old accountant PAUL SHAPIRO is riding an Exersystem 5000 stationary bike. He wears mesh shorts, a baggy T-shirt, and gold-framed glasses that make saucers of his lively, brown eyes.

Through headphones connected to a microcassette recorder held in his hand, Paul listens to a taped conversation between himself and one of his clients.

PAUL (V.O.)
How long were you in the hospital
after the accident?

CLIENT (V.O.)
They kept me overnight.

PAUL (V.O.)
Did you have to pay out of pocket?

CLIENT (V.O.)
Yeah, but I don't remember how
much.

Paul pedals faster, rocking back and forth at the waist. Due to the strain, the outmoded bike squeaks and totters.

PAUL (V.O.)
Did you go to physical therapy?

CLIENT (V.O.)
Why? Is that something I can write
off?

PAUL (V.O.)
The IRS allows you to deduct
qualified medical expenses that
exceed 10% of your Adjusted Gross
Income.

CLIENT (V.O.)
What do you mean by "qualified
medical expenses"?

Paul's breath quickens. He rises from the seat and pumps his legs as if ascending a hill.

PAUL (V.O.)
 Acupuncture, air conditioning
 necessary for relief from
 allergies, alcoholism treatment,
 artificial limbs -- and that's just
 the As!

CLIENT (V.O.)
 Every time I come in your office I
 learn something new. You're a heck
 of a guy, Paul. I'd be lost without
 you.

Slackening his pace, Paul rewinds the tape and listens again to the client's plaudit. This makes him smile.

He dismounts the bike and walks over to a neatly organized desk in the corner of the room. After a long draw on his water bottle, he ejects the tape from the player and returns it to its small plastic case.

INSERT - TAPE LABEL

reading "Sharkey, 10/23/14" in a tight, mannered script.

BACK TO SCENE

Paul opens a desk drawer and files "Sharkey" among a row of identical tapes, all of them meticulously labeled and chronologically arranged. He places the earphones and recorder next to the audio library and closes the drawer with a CLICK.

INT. CONNOR & CONNOR CPAS/PAUL'S OFFICE - DAY

An architectural holdover from the late 1970s, the room is dreary and non-descript, with wood paneling on the walls and a moldy drop ceiling.

Paul is wrapping up a meeting with a pair of young newlyweds. The HUSBAND and WIFE, who are in their early 30s, listen intently to Paul's last words of advice.

PAUL
 Everyone's situation is different,
 but, generally speaking, filing
 jointly is wiser than filing
 separately. When you file together,
 you get an automatic five-hundred-
 dollar tax credit.

(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

You also qualify for the highest standard deduction and can claim two personal exemptions, as opposed to only one allowed you individually, before you said "I do."

Husband and wife turn to each other and shrug in unison.

HUSBAND

It's a lot to think about.

WIFE

Yeah, I don't know if we're ready to make a decision just yet.

PAUL

There's no rush. Talk it over and we'll address it again in a week or two.

HUSBAND

Sounds good.

The newlyweds get up to leave. Paul rises with them.

PAUL

You know, we only live a half-mile from each other. To save you guys the trip, I could come to you next time.

Paul's overture takes the couple by surprise.

HUSBAND

(a polite smile)

You don't have to do that.

PAUL

It's no trouble. I actually prefer making house calls. They're much more intimate.

The husband glances at his wife, a look of mild terror in his eyes.

WIFE

(to Paul)

We appreciate the offer, but I think we'd rather just keep things in the office.

PAUL
 (stung)
 Okay.

HUSBAND
 (cheerfully)
 I'll fax over those receipts
 tomorrow.

PAUL
 Okay.

WIFE
 Have a good one.

PAUL
 You too.

The newlyweds depart, and Paul sits back down at his desk.

He reaches behind a stack of papers and glumly presses Stop on the microcassette recorder, his hangdog expression leaving little question: this session will not make the archives.

INT. CONNOR & CONNOR CPAS/HALLWAY - LATER THAT DAY

Recovered from the newlyweds' unintended slight, Paul lingers in the doorway of his co-worker KEVIN's office, relating an obscure anecdote about M. Night Shyamalan's "THE SIXTH SENSE."

PAUL
 Did you know that during the shooting of "THE SIXTH SENSE" they had to shut down production for a week because of actual paranormal activity?

Kevin, who is more than acquainted with Paul's odd Shyamalan fetish, doesn't seem the least bit interested in the story.

PAUL (CONT'D)
 Apparently, several of the locations were haunted. It got so bad that Donnie Wahlberg had a nervous breakdown. His brother Mark had to convince him to keep going. Coincidentally, that's how he landed his role in "THE HAPPENING."

The office SECRETARY pops her head in the door. Pointing at her wrist watch:

SECRETARY
(to Kevin)
Happy hour.

Kevin immediately gets up and brushes past Paul.

PAUL
So, if you ever want to know why
everyone's so scared in that movie,
it's because everyone's so scared
in that movie.

KEVIN (O.S.)
See you Monday, Paul.

PAUL
See you.

SERIES OF SHOTS - M.O.S.

A) The only one left in the office, Paul sits at his desk, punching numbers into a jumbo calculator.

B) He puts the tape recorder in his briefcase along with some files for the weekend.

C) He empties the bag from his wastebasket and turns off his desk lamp.

D) In the parking lot, he tries to launch the bag into the open dumpster, but it falls short and he has to go and retrieve it.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

INT. PAUL'S CAR - DAY

Stopped at a red light, Paul sees a panhandler walk up to the car at the front of the line. The homeless man has a long black beard and over his right foot he wears a plastic bag cinched at the ankle.

The driver at the front rolls down his window and gives the man some money. The second driver in line does the same.

Not wanting to be left out, Paul rolls down his window and prepares to give the man a handful of coins scooped from his cup holder. But when the man reaches Paul's car, he walks on by as if it wasn't even there.

Paul sticks his head out the window and looks back at the homeless man, who is soliciting the next driver.

PAUL

Excuse me.

The man gives no indication that he's heard Paul.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(louder)

Excuse me.

CUT TO:

INT. FARM FRESH DELI AND PRODUCE - DAY

Paul is standing in line with a six-pack of beer, eavesdropping on two of the deli's Spanish-speaking employees, who are talking informally as they build a pylon of oranges.

So attracted to their casual manner and easy-going rapport, Paul, through a fantasy of superimposition, imagines that he is one of the guanacos.

INSERT - PAUL AND LUIS

(NOTE: The following exchange will be in Spanish with English subtitles.)

PAUL

I like stacking oranges with you.

LUIS

I like stacking oranges with you.

PAUL

You wait until I've put my orange down before putting down yours.

LUIS

You do the same thing for me. I'm just returning the favor.

Paul reaches the bottom of his crate of oranges. In rhythm, he bends down and picks up another.

PAUL
 (resumes stacking)
 Do you remember the apples?

LUIS
 It was a disaster, but not from
 anything that we did.

PAUL
 Apples are slippery. Their surface
 is too smooth. They're not good for
 stacking.

LUIS
 Oranges are much better.

Luis holds up an orange and gently rubs it with his thumb.

LUIS (CONT'D)
 The rind is bumpy. It has a good
 grip.

PAUL
 (agreeing)
 I could stack oranges all day with
 you.

LUIS
 And they would never fall down.

CASHIER (O.S.)
 Sir?

BACK TO SCENE

The cashier's voice puts an end to Paul's *ensueno de naranjas*, returning him to a world seemingly without fruit.

PAUL
 (to the cashier)
 I'm sorry.

EXT. PAUL'S HOUSE - DAY

As Paul walks up the driveway, he sees his next-door neighbor, ALBERT LEWIS, smoking a cigarette on his back steps.

Early-50s, goateed and grouchy, Albert looks at Paul with spurs in his eyes, daring him to speak.

PAUL
Good evening, Albert.

ALBERT
What's good about it?

PAUL
It's Friday.

ALBERT
So what?

PAUL
It's the start of the weekend.

Paul almost drops his keys trying to open the back door, as Albert glares at him through a cloud of smoke.

ALBERT
What do you got -- a hot date?

PAUL
I happen to have a friend coming over.

ALBERT
(laughing)
My ass! You're gonna' sit in that house alone, like you do every Friday night.

PAUL
Just because you live next door to me, don't assume that you know everything there is to know about my life.

ALBERT
Trust me: it's not much.

Albert flicks his cigarette onto Paul's driveway and the cherry explodes in a brief display of asphalt fireworks.

INT. PAUL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Paul sits on the edge of the bed, having a one-sided phone conversation with his mother, JACKIE. He is fresh from a shower, his lower half wrapped in a chunky white towel.

JACKIE (V.O.)

Dr. Goldschmidt said I'm going to have to have the other hip done, probably in October. I told him, I said, "Look, I have my niece's wedding at the end of September, and I don't want to be all crippled for it." So he's giving me the cortisone injections, which I initially didn't want, but the pain is so bad this time, way worse than before. I guess because that was eight years ago when I had the first one done, and I'm older now, so everything hurts more than it did.

(pause)

Here, your father wants to talk to you.

There is a rustling in the receiver as Paul's father STEWART gets on the phone.

STEWART (V.O.)

Hey, son.

PAUL

Hey, dad.

STEWART (V.O.)

How's work?

PAUL

Good.

STEWART (V.O.)

How's the house?

PAUL

Good.

A deadness passes between the two men, in which one can hear a lifetime of such silence.

STEWART (V.O.)

Okay. I'm going to put your mother back on.

PAUL

Love you.

STEWART (V.O.)

Love you, too.

After a mumbly hand-off, Jackie jumps right back into it:

JACKIE (V.O.)

And I said to him, "Make sure you make the left leg a little bit shorter, so it matches up with the right one." Because they're not the same length since the first surgery. This way everything'll be even, and I won't have to walk like I'm two different people.

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

An hour later, Paul stands before the sink, peering through the bay window. He wears khaki pants and a button-down shirt, and has the air of a man awaiting the arrival of a long-expected guest.

PAUL'S POV - PAESANO'S PIZZA DELIVERY CAR

as it pulls up to the curb. A furry-faced man in his late 40s wearing a baseball cap and a green jacket exits the car and starts up the driveway. He carries a brown paper bag with a receipt stapled to its lip.

BACK TO SCENE

Paul opens the kitchen door before the man can even knock.

PAUL

Hello.

(extends hand)

I'm Paul Shapiro. How are you?

With some reluctance, GREG JANSEN, the delivery man, shakes Paul's hand.

GREG

Greg Jansen.

He glances at the check.

GREG (CONT'D)

\$10.41.

Instead of cash, Paul takes an unsealed envelope from his pants pocket and hands it to Greg.

PAUL
 (grinning)
 This is for you.

The delivery man looks askance at Paul, then, after a pause, gives him his bag of food and cautiously opens the envelope.

INSERT - GREETING CARD

inside of which is a twenty-dollar bill and a hand-written note that says, "Thank you, and keep the change! P.S. You are invited to eat the other meatball sandwich I ordered."

BACK TO SCENE

Greg looks up from the card; his brow is pleated. He tries to speak but cannot, perhaps because nothing like this has ever happened to him before.

With the enthusiasm of a game show host, Paul steps back and opens the double doors to the dining room. The table has been set for two.

PAUL
 I know you need a break. Friday nights are always a rush and hustle for you guys.

GREG
 Actually, tonight's been kind of slow.

PAUL
 Then surely you can sit with me for twenty minutes. I can't see it taking that much longer for us to eat our sandwiches.

GREG
 I would, but I'm working.

Not wanting to lose this one, Paul goes straight to the heart of the matter.

PAUL
 (open-faced)
 Look, I'm not weird or anything. I'm a certified public accountant. I haven't had a guest in my home in over six years.
 (MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

Eating alone every night is a painful punishment for something I may or may not have done. Would it be so much for you to sit and relax and spend some time with a new friend?

Paul's confession stirs pity in Greg, a flicker of emotional interest.

Seizing on this, Paul wheels into the dining room and returns spiriting a rather ugly pair of new sneakers.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I didn't know your size, so I just guessed. The least you can do is try them on for me.

Greg heaves a sigh of capitulation as we

CUT TO:

PAUL'S LIVING ROOM

The guest sits in a recliner by the fireplace, slipping off his old shoes and squeezing into the new ones.

Paul watches closely, petting the flesh of his bottom lip.

GREG

(standing)
They look good.

PAUL

I wouldn't say that.
(pause)
I'd say they look *great!* And why wouldn't they: I bought them at Marshall's. Give them a walk-around. See how they feel.

Greg describes a wide circle around his weathered bobos.

PAUL (CONT'D)

So are you still undecided about dinner?

GREG

I apologize, but I really have to go.

PAUL
(a desperate hush)
I have drugs. I have so many drugs.

Greg pulls a thin silver necklace from inside his collar, the medallion of which is a red sobriety coin.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Recovering?

GREG
It's why I'm delivering pizza.

Paul tosses up his hands.

PAUL
(wailing)
Foul ball! Foul ball!

GREG
Don't!

The sudden command stops Paul cold.

GREG (CONT'D)
(inevitably)
I'll eat.

PAUL'S DINING ROOM

The two men sit across from each other, quietly eating their meatball sandwiches.

PAUL
I don't really have drugs. I was just saying that.
(pause)
But I can get them if you want. One of my clients is a doctor.

GREG
No thanks. I'm good.

Paul looks at Greg's beer bottle and sees that he hasn't touched it.

PAUL
Are you allowed to drink?

GREG
I swore it all off.

PAUL

Then let me get you a water. I
can't have you over there dying of
thirst.

Paul ducks into the kitchen and comes back with a bottle of
spring water for Greg.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Did you know that M. Night
Shyamalan doesn't drink or take
drugs? He's what they call straight-
edge. Many people are surprised by
this because his movies are so out
there. I mean, look at "SIGNS." You
would think that he's on a constant
LSD trip, but he's not. He's stone
sober.

(pause)

So how long have you been in
recovery?

GREG

Two years.

PAUL

Is it hard?

GREG

It's not easy.

PAUL

What drugs were you addicted to?
Did you smoke crack?

The muscles in Greg's face tense up, and it sounds as if he's
stopped breathing.

GREG

I don't want to talk about it.

The host *immediately* hangs his head. Another foul ball.

PAUL

(into his lap)
I'm sorry.

GREG

It's okay.

The delivery man receives a text message. He quickly checks
his phone and puts it back in his pocket.

He takes a drink of water and wipes his mouth with a napkin, which Paul interprets as a preamble to departure.

Snapping out of his cursory funk, Paul leaps to his feet.

PAUL

I wrote a song for you. You don't
mind if I play it, do you? It'll
only take a minute.

Before Greg can answer, Paul jogs into the living room and comes back with an acoustic guitar.

He props his foot on the chair and starts singing "I'LL BE TIPPING YOU GOOD," an ode to Greg and all his pizza-toting brethren.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(earnest twang)

You deliver, I receive/ When you
show up it's like Christmas Eve/ No
matter how long it takes/ No matter
how much you make/ I'll be tipping
you good tonight.

Paul drops his pick during the turnaround, but after fumbling for it on the carpet, he resumes the song with the same joyful intensity.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I place my order, you turn the key/
In less than an hour you're lookin'
at me/ The grease stains on your
seat/ Look like the ones on the
receipt/ I'll be tipping you good
tonight/No matter how long it
takes/You let me know you're coming
with your squeaky brakes/I'll be
waiting for you tonight.

When the song's last chord is done reverberating, Greg applauds the performance, touched -- he *thinks* -- by the sentiment.

Suddenly, a knock comes on the back door. Paul excuses himself to answer it.

KITCHEN

Albert Lewis stands outside the screen door, scowling.

ALBERT
Car from Paesano's is blocking my
driveway.

GREG (O.S.)
I'm moving it right now.

Albert cranes his neck, glimpsing the spread on the dining
room table.

ALBERT
(making the connection)
That's your friend? The pizza guy?

He stalks off with a chortle as Greg dashes into the kitchen.

GREG
Thanks, Paul. It was good.

PAUL
But you only took like three bites
of your sandwich. You're not even
half-done.

GREG
I gotta' leave. That was work
texting me.

EXT. PAUL'S HOUSE/STREET - NIGHT

AD LIBBING pleas for him to stay, Paul follows Greg down the
driveway, but the delivery man's pity has officially run out.

Albert Lewis, his face obscured by a smoldering cigarette,
sits in his idling car with the window down.

Paul glowers at him.

PAUL
This is all your fault, Albert. You
ruined our dinner.

ALBERT
Fuck you, neighbor.

And he revs the engine loudly.

Stepping off the curb, Greg trips over his new sneakers and
lands hard in the street.

Paul, motored by a kind of jubilant panic, rushes to his aid, first lifting him to his feet and then escorting him to the car.

PAUL
(hurriedly)
I planned a day trip for us to my uncle's ranch in New Jersey. He has a real mechanical bull, and he said that we can ride it if we want. So I'll see you here bright and early on Saturday. What do you say?

Greg turns on the car and grimaces at Paul.

GREG
I have a herniated disk. I can't ride a mechanical bull.

A scent on the air distracts Paul for a moment.

PAUL
(leaning in)
Your car smells like...
(sniffing)
... calzones.

At tether's end, Greg drives off down the street.

Albert HONKS the horn and lurches from his spot, almost clipping Paul with his side-view mirror as he drives past.

Left to stare at the dwindling taillights:

PAUL (CONT'D)
(sotto voce)
Greg. Greg. Greg.

DISSOLVE TO:

PAUL'S LIVING ROOM

Glasses off, Paul sits on the edge of the coffee table, softly strumming his guitar and singing a slower, moodier version of "I'LL BE TIPPING YOU GOOD."

He brings the encore to a close and looks down at Greg's forgotten bobos, sitting side-by-side on the floor.

Paul smiles at this vestige of temporary fellowship, and starts the song again.

INT. LLANCERCH HILLS CHAPEL/BASEMENT - NIGHT

The pizza delivery man is attending a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. Of the dozen or so men and women sitting in the circle, two are asleep and one keeps involuntarily raising both arms above his head.

A grizzled ADDICT is winding up his harrowing testimony.

ADDICT

At the end of the run, I was in a real dark place. Not very much light at all. And it was there that I realized something: not only had I ruined my life, but the lives of everyone that I loved. It felt like hell in my guts. It felt like doom.

(pause)

But hey, what are you gonna' do?
Higher power, right?

ALL

Higher power!

TIM, a jittery young man whose face is splashed with freckles, volunteers to go next.

TIM

My name's Tim, and I'm an addict. Yesterday I relapsed. I crushed up three percocets and put them in a gin and tonic. It was awesome.

Some of the addicts appear as if they want to kill the red-haired Tim; others appear as if they want to trade places with him.

TIM (CONT'D)

You know that feeling when it first washes over you? You sink into the couch and the whole world just melts away.

Hell-in-my-guts fires Tim a stern look of disapproval.

TIM (CONT'D)

(downshifting)

That was pretty much it. After that I went over to my buddy's house. His girlfriend's a stripper. We did coke and she blew us.

EXT. LLANCERCH HILLS CHAPEL/SIDE DOOR - NIGHT

Greg and Tim stand around with the other junkie hopefuls, all of whom are either puffing cigarettes or slurping coffee.

TIM
(nodding)
I'm diggin' those kicks.

Greg considers the Marshall's monsters. Seen through Tim's eyes, they don't look so hideous.

GREG
Thanks. I'm still breaking them in.

TIM
So what do you got goin' on this weekend?

GREG
My boys are coming over.

TIM
Nice. How old?

GREG
Fourteen and sixteen.

TIM
What are you guys gonna' do? Get crazy?

GREG
Probably just hang out. I'd love to take them hunting up in Robesonia where my dad and I used to go, but I don't think they're interested.

Tim peers over Greg's shoulder at something approaching from the distance.

TIM
Where the hell's Robesonia?

GREG
Berks County.

TIM
My old meth dealer's up there. Never heard of Robesonia, though. What kind of huntin' they got?

GREG
Squirrel, grouse, pheasant, deer,
mink, muskrat...

A car stops in the middle of the street, windows down, radio blaring.

TIM
That's my ride. Have fun with your
kids.

Tim quickly jumps inside and greets the driver with a pound.

GREG
(calling after him)
You're not sticking around for the
rest of the meeting?

TIM
I thought it was over.

GREG
No. There's still another hour and
a half.

TIM
(a beat)
Fuck that!

Tim thrusts out his tongue a la Miley Cyrus as the car speeds off down the street.

Along with the rest of the healing herd, Greg returns to the

CHAPEL BASEMENT

to recite the Three Disturbing Realizations.

ALL
We are powerless over our addiction
and our lives are unmanageable.
Although we are not responsible for
our disease, we are responsible for
our recovery. We can no longer
blame people, places, and things
for our addiction. We must face our
problems and feelings.

INT. GREG'S APARTMENT - DAY

Greg is tidying up the ground-floor apartment in preparation for his sons' weekend visit.

There is a knock on the door and Greg answers it to find his co-worker OTIS standing on the

PATIO

with a large pepperoni pie and a two-liter of soda.

GREG

Hey.

OTIS

Hey, man. How you doin'?

Otis hands Greg the pizza and the soda.

GREG

You guys busy?

OTIS

Not yet. It's pickin' up, though.

Greg lifts the lid on the box and inspects the pizza.

GREG

(frowning)

Leo made this.

OTIS

Charlie don't come in until five.

GREG

He burnt the crust.

OTIS

Just on the one side.

Closing the box with a petulant sigh, Greg hands Otis a twenty-dollar bill.

GREG

I should get half-off.

OTIS

You're already gettin' the employee discount. You want your change?

GREG

Keep it.

OTIS

(strutting away)

You have a good one, Greg. Don't be so mad.

GREG

Tell Leo to stop making pizzas.

After Otis pulls out in the Paesano's delivery car, his spot is immediately taken by an SUV carrying Greg's ex-wife JENNIFER and his two teenaged sons.

The older one sits in the passenger seat; the younger sits in the back. Rather than look at their father, both stare down at their smartphones.

Jennifer gets out and walks up to the patio. The bearer of bad news, she offers Greg a sympathetic smile.

GREG (CONT'D)

(haltingly)

Are they all right?

JENNIFER

Yeah, they're fine.

GREG

Are they getting out?

JENNIFER

I don't think so.

GREG

What do you mean?

JENNIFER

They don't want to stay.

GREG

(puzzled)

They don't want to stay the night?

JENNIFER

No. They don't want to stay at all.

Greg peeks around Jennifer and briefly meets the eyes of his oldest son, who, embarrassed by the contact, quickly returns his gaze to the screen. Meanwhile, the younger boy is yet to acknowledge his father.

Greg sets down what would've been their lunch.

GREG
(to Jennifer)
Why didn't you call me?

JENNIFER
Because the whole way over here I
was trying to talk them out of it.

GREG
What's wrong? They don't like the
apartment?

JENNIFER
No, there's nothing wrong with the
apartment.

GREG
I just cleaned up in there. It
looks like a five-star hotel.

He steps aside so she can see the cavernous living room with
its matted carpet and shabby appointments.

JENNIFER
The apartment's fine. Much better
than the halfway house

GREG
Is it because of me?

JENNIFER
No, it has nothing to do with you.
They're teenagers now. They want to
be with their friends. You know how
it is.

GREG
(pressing)
Yeah, but it's my weekend.

Jennifer folds her arms across her chest, a defensive
gesture.

JENNIFER
Not technically. I'm allowing you
visitation. If they don't want to
see you, I can't force them.

GREG
But I thought we had a deal. I
thought they were on board.

JENNIFER

They were -- until this morning.

Greg casts one last futile glance at the car, his sons' faces in permanent profile.

GREG

What are they doing next weekend?

JENNIFER

Next weekend they're going to the Poconos with my brother, and the weekend after that baseball starts.

GREG

(a beat)

So when am I going to see them again?

INT. GREG'S BEDROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Greg is talking on the phone with his SPONSOR.

SPONSOR

You have to channel it into something else, something positive.

GREG

I can only think of one thing right now.

He paces the length of the room and keeps flapping the neck of his plaid button-down to cool himself off.

SPONSOR

How about a tattoo? You've been talking about getting one for a while, and you have all that money saved up. Instead of blowing it on pills, go get some ink.

GREG

That's just one more thing to get addicted to.

SPONSOR

NA doesn't say anything about getting tattoos.

GREG

You sure? I've got the Basic Text right here.

A hardcover edition of NA's Basic Text sits on Greg's dresser.

SPONSOR

If they did, half the guys in recovery would still be considered junkies. Hell, some guys get them to celebrate their recovery. How long have you been clean now?

GREG

Two years.

SPONSOR

There you go: get two!

INT. TATTOO PARLOR - NIGHT

Looking slightly out of place amid the floor-to-ceiling gallery of provocative body art, Greg stands at the front desk talking to the SHOP GIRL, a bubbly spiritualist in her mid-late 20s.

GREG

I hear it's painful.

SHOP GIRL

It can be, yeah.

GREG

And that it takes a while.

SHOP GIRL

It depends on how intricate the tattoo is. What are you thinking of getting?

Greg slides a pair of school photos across the desk.

SHOP GIRL (CONT'D)

Are these your sons?

Greg nods.

SHOP GIRL (CONT'D)

Awww, that's so cute.

GREG

(seriously)

If I can't see them in the flesh, they're going to *be* in my flesh.

SHOP GIRL

And then they'll always be a part
of you.

(pause)

Do you know where you want to get
them?

CUT TO:

GREG

sitting in a tattoo chair, shirtless from the waist up,
holding a photo against each of his woolly breasts.

The TATTOO ARTIST stands back a few feet, staggered by Greg's
profundity of body hair.

TATTOO ARTIST

(slowly shakes head)

There's no way, dude.

GREG

Can't you just shave it?

TATTOO ARTIST

I could, but when the hair grows
back they'll both look like Teen
Wolf.

(pause)

Is there any part of your body that
doesn't have hair?

INT. GREG'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Greg takes a bottle of gin and a bottle of tonic from a brown
paper bag and places them on the counter.

After fixing a drink, he reaches into his pants pocket and
removes a baggy of pills. He dumps the pills onto the counter
and repeatedly strikes them with a small hammer, reducing
them to a fine powder, which he then sweeps into the drink.

LIVING ROOM

He sits down on the couch next to the unopened box of pizza.
Raising his glass to no one in particular, he knocks back
half the gin and tonic in one gulp, and just as Tim said it
would, the world begins to melt away. Burnt crust be damned,
he peels off a slice of Leo's pizza and takes a big bite.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY - ESTABLISHING

Two helmeted children are riding their bikes on the sidewalk, an old lady is picking up after her dog, and

GREG

is parked in front of a well-kept house at the top of the street.

It is apparent from his dress that he is not delivering pizza. In lieu of the ball cap and jacket, he wears a wrinkled polo tucked into a pair of ill-fitting jeans.

He glances at the house and then checks his thinning hair in the rearview. From the passenger seat he takes a copy of "LEILA FLETCHER'S PIANO COURSE: BOOK I," underneath which is the most recent issue of "GUNS & AMMO" magazine.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Greg knocks on the door. Inside, we HEAR someone skillfully playing the piano. Greg knocks again and a tall, fair-haired man with penetrating blue eyes answers the door. This is JEROME FOWLER.

JEROME

(warmly)

Hey. Come on in. She's just finishing up with the last one.

INT. FOYER - ON GREG AND JEROME

JEROME

You thirsty? You want something to drink?

GREG

No thanks.

JEROME

There's water and soda in the fridge if you change your mind. Help yourself.

Jerome slaps Greg on the back and strides off toward the kitchen.

LIVING ROOM

MELINDA FOWLER -- mid-30s, unkempt but not unattractive -- sits at a black Steinway as one of her charges, an 8-year-old prodigy in the mold of Alasdair Howell, concludes the final movement of Mozart's "SONATA NO. 12."

FOYER

Greg is staring at a framed photograph on a table next to the front door. Pictured are Jerome and Melinda on the beach in Cape May at the height of summer.

INSERT - JEROME AND MELINDA - M.O.S.

on the very same beach, coming to life in the jaundiced eye of Greg's improvisation.

Moving in accordance with his dreamlike vision, Jerome crashes down in a beach chair while Melinda tip-toes into the water. At first she is stunned by the Atlantic, but then, as her body adjusts to the temperature, she cautiously wades out farther.

Melinda seems unsure of her footing in the shoulder-high swell, and soon she is caught in a riptide that washes her past the breakers. Unable to touch the ground, she begins to flail and flounder, her mouth filling with water as she screams to Jerome for help.

But her husband is asleep in his chair, a puddle of drool collecting on his shirt.

Luckily for Melinda, Greg and his two sons are walking along the shoreline. Greg hears Melinda's cries and without hesitation rips off his shirt (miraculously revealing a hairless upper body) and gallops into the surf.

With his sons' full attention, Greg performs an act of bald-chested heroism, dragging Melinda from the deep water and carrying her to shore.

He rests her body on the soft sand and brushes a lock of wet hair from her brow. She looks up at him and smiles -- and there is more than just gratitude in her bloodshot eyes.

BACK TO SCENE

The eight-year-old prodigy passes through the foyer and out the front door, too smug to say hello to his adult counterpart.

Greg, shaking off his flight of fancy, watches the boy mount his bike and pedal across the lawn.

MELINDA (O.S.)
(faux French accent)
Entrer, Monseieur Greg!

Studiously holding his "LEILA FLETCHER," trying very hard to cut the figure of a practiced pupil, Greg strolls into the

LIVING ROOM

MELINDA
There's my favorite pizza delivery
guy.

Greg sits next to her on the piano bench.

GREG
How are you?

MELINDA
Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful.

Melinda clears a spot on the music rack for Greg to place his coursebook.

GREG
That kid's a hard act to follow.

MELINDA
Don't compare yourself to him. He's
been playing since he was three-
years-old.

GREG
I was surprised to see your
husband.

MELINDA
Yeah. He didn't have any houses to
show, so he's doing some yard work.
He won't bother us.

(pause)
(MORE)

MELINDA (CONT'D)
Have you been practicing your
scales?

Greg nods. Melinda winds the key on a Franz metronome and sets the pendulum ticking.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
Then show me C Major.

Spreading out his hairy fingers, Greg finds the appropriate keys and begins playing. A few of the notes are true, but most of them are slurred and sour. He gives up before he's finished and drops his hands in his lap with a sigh.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
Don't get upset. Relax. Go back to
the beginning and start again. If
you hit a wrong note, just keep
going.

Greg gives it another try, but the result is the same.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
You're too worried about how fast
you're playing. That's what's
tripping you up.

She adjusts the sliding weight on the metronome, slowing the pendulum to a beginner's cadence.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
Ready? Go.

Just five notes into the scale, Greg makes another blunder.

GREG
I'm sorry.

MELINDA
(benevolent)
Watch. Like this.

Ever the instructor, Melinda straightens her back and performs the scale, first with one hand, and then with two.

As she nears the end of her second pass, Greg, unprompted, drapes his hands over hers, and she abruptly stops playing.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

GREG
I thought I could learn this way.
Following along.

Bemused, Melinda takes Greg's hands and deposits them at his sides. Her tone is one of mild rebuke.

MELINDA

Not *that* way. Just watch.

She resumes her demo, calling out the notes as she strikes them. Greg, like a wilful child, reaches over again and blankets her hands with his.

EXT. FOWLERS' HOUSE - ON JEROME

using hedge shears to trim a forsythia bush by the living room window. He pauses to shake the clippings from the crown and peeks inside just long enough to catch

GREG

leaning in to kiss Melinda. She draws back in shock.

MELINDA

What the heck is going on with you today?

A gulping beat, then:

GREG

I love you.

Flattered yet annoyed, Melinda blinks heavily as she turns off the metronome.

MELINDA

Aw, Jesus.

Greg shimmies closer to her on the bench.

GREG

I've loved you since the very first night I delivered pizza to your house. Those few moments I spent with you were the highlight of my week. But they weren't enough. I wanted more.

(pause)

I knew the only way to get close to you was to sign up for piano lessons. You've probably figured this out already, but I have no interest in the piano. I don't even like music.

It is with this romantic revelation that

JEROME FOWLER

enters the room, holding the hedge shears out before him, the blades open wide as if ready to prune.

JEROME
(to Melinda)
Did he just kiss you?

MELINDA
No! He tried to, but...

Greg stands and faces Jerome, heedless of the shears. He speaks with a kind of deluded diplomacy.

GREG
I didn't want you to find out this way, Mr. Fowler, but... Melinda and I are in love.

JEROME
(white-faced, to Melinda)
Is this true?

MELINDA
(emphatically)
No. Absolutely not.

GREG
Last night, when we were in bed at the motel, she told me that she wants a divorce from you, so that we can start a life together.

Jerome makes a sweeping gesture with the shears, as if to indict them both.

JEROME
You were at a motel last night?

MELINDA
No! I was with you.

Reaching out his hand to Jerome:

GREG
I'm sure you're not happy about this, but there's nothing you can do to stop it. The wheels of fate are in motion.
(MORE)

GREG (CONT'D)

My advice is to move out of the way
before you get run over.

Reeling from the confusion, Jerome doesn't know whether to crumble or attack. He appeals to his wife.

JEROME

I don't understand. You're leaving
me?

MELINDA

(exasperated)
No, I'm not leaving you.

She crosses over to Jerome and divests him of the shears. She spins around and points them at Greg, backing him into the

FOYER

MELINDA

Leave.

GREG

Are you sure? I can give you
children. I can give you the family
you always wanted.

To signal that she means business, Melinda lunges at him with the shears, collapsing the blades with a decisive SNIP.

MELINDA

Leave, and don't ever come back.

Greg stands in the doorway, clinging to hope.

GREG

Not even to deliver your pizza?

MELINDA

No. I don't like pizza anymore.

An expression comes into Greg's face that we have not seen before: a look of malice, gritty and hot.

GREG

You're lying. Everyone likes pizza.

Melinda, alarmed by this new side of Greg, slams the door in his face.

LIVING ROOM - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Jerome is sitting at the piano, staring at the keys.

Melinda goes to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and drawing him close.

JEROME

(reviving)

That's why I didn't want you giving him lessons. I knew that he'd fall in love with you, sooner or later.

MELINDA

He seemed like such a nice guy.

JEROME

They all do.

Melinda sits down next to Jerome, takes his hand in hers. She tries to get him to look at her, but he continues staring at the keys.

MELINDA

You need to stop being so paranoid. You have nothing to worry about. Nothing.

JEROME

(a child's voice)

Can you do me a favor?

MELINDA

Anything.

JEROME

Play our song.

Melinda melts at his pathetic request. Of course she will do this for him.

She elbows Jerome playfully in the ribs before starting "THEIR SONG," neither noticing Greg's bright orange coursebook sitting on the music rack.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Melinda and her friend KATHLEEN are taking their morning run through the neighborhood. They jog at the same pace, though at times it seems as if Melinda wants to pull away from the overly inquisitive Kathleen.

KATHLEEN
I thought you said he was married.

MELINDA
No, he's divorced.

KATHLEEN
And he never came onto you before?

MELINDA
Never. He was a perfect gentleman.
Nicer than some of the kids I
teach.

KATHLEEN
I wonder what happened.

MELINDA
I have no idea. Jerome thinks he
was high.

KATHLEEN
Did he seem like it to you?

MELINDA
I can never tell with people. You
could be high right now and I
wouldn't know the difference. It
just felt like he was off.

A car comes up behind them and they briefly separate to let
it pass.

KATHLEEN
My Jack would've killed him.

MELINDA
Jerome's not like that. He's a
sweetheart.

Having milked dry the incident with Greg, Kathleen turns her
focus to the true teat of scandal: Jerome.

KATHLEEN
Is he still gambling?

MELINDA
Not since before Christmas. At
least that's what he told me.

KATHLEEN
And you believe him?

MELINDA

I have to.

KATHLEEN

Your parents aren't still giving you a hard time about him, are they?

MELINDA

My father eased up a bit, but my mother can't seem to let it go.

KATHLEEN

(really prying now)
Any more late nights?

MELINDA

Here and there. He doesn't always have a choice. Some people are only free after work.

Kathleen almost bites her tongue off trying to hold it.

KATHLEEN

Has he been showing a lot recently?

MELINDA

Yeah. He's been busy.

KATHLEEN

(not without irony)
They'll have to put his face on a billboard soon.

EXT. HOUSING DEVELOPMENT/CUL-DE-SAC - DAY

Jerome Fowler steps out of his car and sets a cup of coffee on the roof. He opens the back door and takes out his briefcase and a FOR SALE sign. Gathering everything, he walks up to the front door of a

NEO-COLONIAL

and tries several times to open the lock box.

Defeated but not frustrated, he sips his coffee and looks at his phone, does an ocular appraisal of the adjacent houses.

Across the street, he sees a pregnant woman get out of her car with a manila envelope and wobble through the side door of her house.

INSERT - PREGNANT WOMAN'S KITCHEN

Calling on the same fantasy of superimposition employed by Paul and Greg, Jerome transforms the woman into Melinda and casts himself as the man waiting for her at the kitchen table.

Beside him sits a three-year-old boy coloring on construction paper, presumably the couple's child.

Melinda beams at Jerome as she takes an ultrasound picture from the envelope and sets it on the table for him to see. He studies it for a moment, his eyes growing wide, his lips parting in wonder.

MELINDA
(a tearful laugh)
It's triplets.

Jerome leaps to his feet and hugs Melinda, lacing her forehead with impassioned kisses. Her cheeks between his trembling hands:

JEROME
How!

MELINDA
(lustily)
Because you're so potent.

BACK TO SCENE

Boosted by this vote of imaginary confidence, Jerome stakes the FOR SALE sign in the yard and hastily drives away.

INT. NORTH PHILADELPHIA ROW HOME/BASEMENT - DAY

A middle-aged Latino named MIKE MADURA picks chicken feathers from a dirt-covered fighting pit.

He rakes the dirt and then sprinkles it judiciously with a watering can.

Scooping from a sack of cornmeal, he draws an octagonal boundary around the ring.

On a black cloth he lays out four stainless steel, sickle-shaped gaffs, next to which he places a coil of dental floss and a fat, guttering candle.

He lights a cigarette and waits.

Soon, Jerome descends the stairs to the basement and shakes hands with Mike in the fuzzy half-light.

JEROME
(inspecting the pit)
Where did you have it last night?

MIKE
That house on Tioga Street.

JEROME
Who won?

MIKE
Pito.

JEROME
How many did he kill?

MIKE
Just two. But there were bodies
piled up from the night before in a
tub in the corner.

Jerome picks up one of the gaffs and runs his forefinger along the blade.

JEROME
He's undefeated so far. I don't
think there's a single one who can
beat him.

MIKE
They kept talking about this one
from Camden. They say he has two
sets of nuts. It's some kind of
weird birth defect.

JEROME
I'd have to see it to believe it.
(a flick of the chin)
You got something for me?

Madura dips into the shadows and reappears with a cash-stuffed envelope that he hands to Jerome, who, after quickly thumbing over the bills, conceals the envelope in the inside pocket of his sport coat.

JEROME (CONT'D)
A lot of people show up?

MIKE

Yeah. I had to turn heads away.

Jerome kneels down to check the consistency of the dirt.

JEROME

We're gettin' too big for these row homes. We need to get out of the city.

MIKE

All the action's in the city. It's where our customer base is. It's where the money is.

JEROME

(stands)

It's where the cops are.

MIKE

If the cops haven't caught on by now, they're not going to. We just need to stay one step ahead of them.

JEROME

I want something permanent. All this moving around shit is for the birds.

MIKE

It's the way we have to play it now. We don't have a choice.

Jerome's eyes glow with a visionary light.

JEROME

Haven't you ever seen "FIELD OF DREAMS"? If you build it, they will come.

Mike chuckles at the allusion.

MIKE

Where are you going to build it, Rome? Who's going to give you a permit?

JEROME

(dreamily)

I don't know.

MIKE
(more pressing matters)
Have you figured out what you're
gonna' do with the money?

JEROME
(nodding)
I think so.

INT. FOWLERS' HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

Melinda sits at the piano, struggling with the notes of an original composition.

JEROME

who has just parked his car in the driveway and is slinking toward the shed, stops outside the living room window to briefly look upon his wife.

Stymied by yet another discordant pass at the song, Melinda crumples her own hand-written sheet music and throws it to the floor.

The voyeur can only grimace.

INT. FOWLERS' SHED

Using the light from his phone, Jerome stashes the envelope in a drawstring bag kept at the bottom of a cardboard box. There are many other envelopes in the bag, all of which teem with cash.

INT. FOWLERS' BEDROOM - THIRTY MINUTES LATER

Jerome stands before his chest of drawers, changing out of his clothes into his pajamas.

Melinda is already in bed with a novel open in her lap.

JEROME
They didn't show up until eight-thirty. The woman was on the phone with her mother the whole time, sending her pictures. She was all over the place.

MELINDA
How much is it going for?

JEROME

Half a mil.

MELINDA

Did they put an offer in?

JEROME

Not yet. There's a competing bid, so that might put some pressure on them. The husband's already sold; the wife's another story.

Jerome climbs into bed. Melinda puts her book down.

MELINDA

Do you think my ass is fat?

In the beat that follows this loaded question, Jerome stares directly into the CAMERA, beseeching the audience in a manner not unlike Billy Ray Valentine in "TRADING PLACES."

MELINDA (CONT'D)

Don't get upset, but I was standing in line at the Wawa today and the guy behind me said I was a P.A.W.G.

JEROME

(uncomfortable)

Do you know what that stands for?

MELINDA

I had to look it up. It means Phat Ass White Girl.

JEROME

But the "Phat" is spelled with a "Ph."

MELINDA

Yes. I know.

JEROME

"Phat" with a "Ph" is good, and "Fat" with an "F" is bad.

MELINDA

So my ass *is* Phat.

JEROME

It would appear so.

Jerome rolls over onto his side.

MELINDA
 (rhetorically seductive)
 What are you going to do about it?

Hearing this, Jerome closes his eyes and makes a sougning sound deep in his throat.

JEROME
 Well, we both know I'm not going to get you pregnant.

MELINDA
 I don't want to get pregnant. I just want to make love.

JEROME
 Maybe that guy's still at Wawa.

Following what has become an ingrained pattern of behavior, Jerome grabs his pillow and exits the room.

MELINDA
 Where are you going?

JEROME (O.S.)
 The couch.

MELINDA
 Again! I thought we were past this?

There is no reply from Jerome -- only the CREAK of the stairs beneath his labored footfalls.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
 Jerome! Jerome!

INT. PAUL SHAPIRO'S OFFICE - DAY

The bespectacled accountant sits behind a large metal desk, worrying the flesh of his bottom lip.

Jerome Fowler, slickly dressed in a suit and tie, sits across from him.

PAUL
 How much money are we talking about?

JEROME
 Eighty-thousand dollars, in cash.

PAUL
And what is it that you want me to do?

JEROME
(matter-of-factly)
Create a fake ledger.

The proposition hangs in the air between them, heavy and odd.

PAUL
I can't.

JEROME
Why?

PAUL
Because my job is to keep books, Mr. Fowler, not cook them.

JEROME
You've never done it before?

PAUL
No, never.

Jerome issues him a skeptical smirk.

PAUL (CONT'D)
I'm an honest man, and I thought that you were too.

JEROME
I am an honest man...
(shrugs his shoulders)
... but sometimes I'm not.

Paul draws a deep breath, unsure of how to proceed.

PAUL
Why did you bring this to me?

JEROME
Because I trust you. I know that when I walk out of here, you're not going to call the police.

PAUL
Does your wife know what you're planning to do?

JEROME

No. If she finds out, she'll divorce me.

PAUL

Then why are you setting her up for the fall?

JEROME

(cockily)

There's not going to be a fall -- only summer.

Interlacing his fingers and propping his elbows on the desk:

PAUL

(softly)

Before we go any further, I think it's only right that you share with me the nature of your illicit activity.

JEROME

Who said anything about it being illicit?

PAUL

Well, if it wasn't, you wouldn't be trying to hide it.

After a conciliatory beat:

JEROME

Why do you want to know?

PAUL

Because I'm looking for a reason to make it harder to say "yes."

JEROME

(perking up)

So you're considering it?

To be heard, Paul's response has to fight its way past his lips.

PAUL

I'm coming around to the idea of *possibly* considering it.

As a highly skilled real estate agent, Jerome Fowler makes a living off people who are "possibly considering it."

He folds his arms and crosses his legs, sizing up the window that Paul has just cracked for him.

JEROME

What if I told you that I killed people for money?

PAUL

I think that I would have a very hard time with that.

JEROME

What if I told you that it was prostitution?

PAUL

I would have a hard time with that too, but not as hard.

Jerome computes these answers.

JEROME

So, you're not okay with death, but you're okay with sex?

PAUL

(shaking his head)
I'm not okay with either of them.

A beat for the prude, and then, a different tack.

JEROME

How do you feel about animals?

PAUL

I like them.

JEROME

How do you feel about animals fighting?

PAUL

In the wild?

JEROME

No. In an organized contest.

Paul's voice takes on a quality of grisly speculation.

PAUL

It's not dogs, is it?

JEROME
No, it's not dogs.

PAUL
Is it cats?

JEROME
No, it's not cats.

PAUL
Is it cats *and* dogs?

JEROME
(impatiently)
No!
(pause)
It's roosters.

The farthest thing from his mind:

PAUL
Cockfighting?

Jerome flashes a palm, as if to fend off any moral critique.

JEROME
It's not as bad as you think. Only
one dies per match.

PAUL
(incredulous)
You made eighty-thousand dollars
betting on cock fights?

JEROME
A bird with a championship
pedigree, like an Old English
Gamecock or a Black-Tongued Tuzo,
can make a thousand dollars a
night, easily.
(pause)
Besides, I don't bet on them
anymore; I run the operation.

Paul takes off his glasses and stares at the ink blotter on
his desk.

PAUL
I feel squeamish.

JEROME
Why? Are you a vegetarian?

PAUL
I used to be.

JEROME
What happened?

PAUL
Meatballs.

Jerome has to stifle a giggle.

JEROME
If you eat meatballs, then I can
assume you eat chicken. Correct?

PAUL
Correct.

JEROME
What's your favorite chicken dish?

Paul has to think about this for a moment.

PAUL
Chicken parmigiana.

JEROME
Did you know that every time you
eat chicken parmigiana, you are
complicit in the slaughter of
thousands of chickens?

From the look on his face, it is clear that Paul has not
given the matter much thought.

JEROME (CONT'D)
The ancient Romans raised their
chickens to be gladiators. It's
their true calling, their reason
for being.
(pause)
Those birds you eat for dinner die
a sad and lonely death. At least my
roosters go out with a fight.
Honorably.

PAUL
That's different. I'm eating for
sustenance. The people who come to
your cock fights are there for
entertainment, for pleasure.

JEROME

You don't experience pleasure when you bite into a chicken parm? That doesn't feel good to you?

PAUL

It feels amazing.

JEROME

(teeth clenched)

Then stop fuckin' around, and tell me something I want to hear.

The room falls silent. All that can be heard is the SOUND of cars passing by on the street outside.

Paul timidly puts his glasses back on. Turning to his flat-screen monitor, he begins scrolling through the Fowlers' electronic data.

PAUL

Last year, your wife's company, 88 Plus 2, averaged four to five deposits a month, each one no more than two-hundred dollars.

(pause)

How much does your wife charge per lesson?

JEROME

Twenty bucks.

PAUL

And how many pupils does she have?

JEROME

Ten. No, nine.

PAUL

Just give me a minute.

On his jumbo calculator, Paul starts tapping in figures, mumbling to himself as he goes.

There is a golf putter leaning by the door, a cluster of balls on the carpet, and a Butt Putt at the far end of the room. The Butt Putt is a bum-shaped putting target that makes a different fart sound each time a ball is sunk.

Jerome takes up the golf putter and during the ensuing dialogue we HEAR intermittent blasts of electronic flatus coming from the Butt Putt.

PAUL (CONT'D)

If we were to funnel this money through your wife's company, we would have to justify a fifteen-hundred-dollar increase in her weekly deposits.

(looks up from calculator)

Considering the scope of her service, and what she has traditionally charged her students, I don't think this is something we can just sneak through. There are too many red flags. Too many discrepancies.

JEROME

Can't you be creative? Isn't that your job: to be creative with numbers?

PAUL

I'm an accountant, Mr. Fowler, not a mathematician.

JEROME

Please, call me Jerome. And you are a mathematician. You just keep telling yourself you're not.

Paul blushes at this compliment. He leans back in his chair and rocks a little.

PAUL

What if we disguised the money as a series of real estate commissions? The IRS might be inclined to overlook the uptick if it was coming from your job rather than your wife's.

Jerome stops mid-swing and points the putter directly at Paul, advancing toward him as he speaks.

JEROME

Are you trying to say that my wife can't make that kind of money?

The redness returns to Paul's face -- but with a tint of shame.

PAUL

(stammers)

I'm not saying that at all.

(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

I'm just saying that from the IRS's point of view, it would appear less conspicuous if we...

JEROME

How long have you been my accountant?

PAUL

Three years.

Jerome lowers the putter.

JEROME

That's a long time. I feel like I've gotten to know you in those three years. I feel like we're pals.

To the ears of the lonely accountant, the word "pals" has the ring of a shibboleth.

JEROME (CONT'D)

As my pal, you should understand that I can't have this thing close to me. I need some separation.

(pause)

Besides, there's enough fraud in real estate already. That's why I got into cockfighting.

After a reckoning sigh:

PAUL

If I agree to do this for you, will you promise to do something for me?

JEROME

Anything.

PAUL

I want you to come to my uncle's ranch with me on Saturday.

JEROME

(undelayed)

Sure. Absolutely. Why not?

The smile that spreads across Paul's face is one of great surprise and relief.

Oblivious to the dream that he has just made come true, Jerome rests the putter against the wall and heads for the door.

JEROME (CONT'D)

Call me tomorrow and we'll set it up. You have my number.

Jerome exits the office, and as soon as it's safe to do so, Paul reaches behind the stack of papers on his desk and takes out the microcassette recorder, which has been rolling since the conversation started.

He rewinds the tape to the part when Jerome says, "I feel like we're pals," and is transfixed.

CUT TO:

THE SKY

where Paul euphorically envisions himself and Jerome soaring through the air like a pair of Super Friends.

They smile at each other as the rushing wind blows back their hair. A high-five consummates the aerial union.

Just as the daydream is getting good

KEVIN

Paul's co-worker, rudely snaps him out of it.

KEVIN

(looming)

Do you have a hard copy of the 2013 returns for Sheridan?

Paul quickly stops the tape and hides the recorder beneath his desk, trying, poorly, to compose himself.

PAUL

I thought I gave you all his files.

KEVIN

Not 2013.

(pause)

You still doing that?

PAUL

Doing what?

KEVIN

You're gonna' get us all in big trouble.

PAUL
 (defensive)
 I record them for accuracy, for my
 own professional use.

KEVIN
 Just get me the file, J. Edgar --
 for *my* own professional use.

Paul scoots his chair over to the file cabinet. As he opens the heavy metal drawer, a mystical BLAST of air buffets his face, and he is again infused with the joy of his vision.

INT. APARTMENT COMPLEX/HALLWAY - NIGHT

Balancing a box of pizza in his left hand, embattled delivery man Greg Jansen knocks on the door to apartment 2B.

Loud music and a commotion of voices can be heard on the other side of the door. A party is going on, and the revelers need fuel.

The door swings open and who is standing there with a forty in his hand but Tim, the renegade of relapse.

TIM
 (howling)
 Oh shit! Robeson! I didn't know
 you delivered for Paesano's! Come
 on in, bro.

THE APARTMENT

About a dozen people are scattered about this den of iniquity. All appear to be either drunk or high or some combination of the two.

Tim takes the box from Greg and drops it on the coffee table amid a sprawl of empty beer cans.

22-year-old SHANNON, clad in little more than sweat pants and a bra, throws open the box and tears off a gooey slice. Like famished dogs, the others crowd around and have at the pie.

Shannon slinks over to Greg.

SHANNON
 You got anymore food? This is
 gonna' go fast.

She takes a salacious bite of her pizza.

TIM
 (to Greg)
 Yeah, we only had enough for one
 large. You can stay and party if
 you want.

And that is all we need to kick-start the

MONTAGE OF DEBAUCHERY

A) Greg returns with a spontaneous buffet of other people's orders.

B) The denizens pig out on cheese fries, mozzarella sticks, and beer-battered onion rings.

C) Greg and Tim disappear into a back room together.

D) While Greg and Shannon are dancing, she pulls off his shirt and invites the rest of the party to run their fingers through his chest hair.

E) Half-naked atop the coffee table, Greg smashes an empty pizza box over his head as the revelers cheer him on: "Higher Power! Higher Power! Higher Power!"

END MONTAGE SEQUENCE

INT. PAESANO'S PIZZERIA/KITCHEN - THE FOLLOWING MORNING

Greg stands by the back door with his red delivery bag, the mark of the beast still on him from last night's Bacchanalia.

JOHNNY PAESANO, the owner of the pizzeria, stares at him reproachfully.

JOHNNY PAESANO
 Give me the bag.

Too ashamed to look his boss in the eye, Greg hands over his livelihood.

JOHNNY PAESANO (CONT'D)
 (a beat)
 Now get out of my sight.

INT. FOWLERS' KITCHEN - DAY

Melinda is loading the dishwasher late Saturday morning when Jerome sneaks up behind her and puts his hand over her eyes.

JEROME
Come with me.

MELINDA
Oh no. What did you do now?

JEROME
You'll see.

He guides her into the

LIVING ROOM

and slowly takes his hand away to reveal a classical guitar on a stand.

MELINDA
(gasping)
A Casa Nunez!

JEROME
(proudly)
The guy said it was an antique.

She gently lifts the guitar from the stand.

MELINDA
Oh my god. Where did you find this?

JEROME
A shop over in Pensauken.

MELINDA
Are these the original strings?

JEROME
I think so.

MELINDA
(half-scolding)
Honey, these guitars go for like
four-thousand dollars.

JEROME
(a flick of the chin)
Play it for me.

He listens eagerly as Melinda strums a few chords. Any trace of animosity left over from their previous fight is borne away on the mellifluous tones of the Casa Nunez.

JEROME (CONT'D)
 Maybe you'll find a little magic in there. Get out of your rut.

Melinda returns the guitar to its stand and gives her husband a kiss and a hug.

MELINDA
 I love it. Thank you.

MELINDA'S POV - CAR

parked in front of the house, behind the wheel of which sits Paul Shapiro. He gives her a boisterous wave.

BACK TO SCENE

MELINDA
 (waving back, puzzled)
 Is that our accountant?

Jerome spins around and looks out the window.

JEROME
 It sure is.

MELINDA
 What's he doing here?

JEROME
 His uncle's selling his ranch. I told him I'd help him out.

MELINDA
 What time will you be home?

JEROME
 (exiting)
 I shouldn't be too late. We'll do Chinese.

In the wake of his departure:

MELINDA
 (to herself)
 And you believe him?

PAUL'S POV - JEROME

taking a ring of keys from his pocket, opening the padlock to the shed, and slipping inside.

A few moments later Jerome emerges from the darkness, locks the shed, and gets into

PAUL'S CAR

He stashes an envelope full of money in the glove compartment and sits back in his seat.

JEROME

That's the first installment.

EXT. PEDRICKTOWN ROAD - DAY - ESTABLISHING

A rich green expanse of South Jersey farmland provides lush scenery for the day-trippers.

PAUL'S CAR - MOVING

Jerome scrolls through pictures of cockerels on his phone while Paul recites another one of his Shyamalan soliloquies.

PAUL

Did you know that M. Night Shyamalan tried to make a movie about the Jersey Devil, but the state of New Jersey wouldn't let him because they said it would be bad for tourism?

Jerome looks up from his phone and sees -- about fifty yards ahead -- three migrant workers mending a split-rail fence on the edge of a soybean patch.

PAUL (CONT'D)

He had Andy Serkis lined up to play the Devil, but when Chris Christie got a hold of the script he said it was nothing but liberal propaganda, and denied tax incentives to M. Night's production studio.

Jerome stares at the workers as the car whooshes past, and continues to watch them in the side-view mirror, more intrigued by them than by anything Paul has been saying.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Christie said that the legend of the Jersey Devil was made up by Democrats from New York, but M. Night knows the truth. He knows that the Jersey Devil is real.

EXT. EL DORITO RANCH - DAY - ESTABLISHING

Set back 100 yards from a seldom-traveled road, and enclosed by nearly 2000 feet of rotting split-rail, the five-acre ranch is home to Paul's

UNCLE LEE

a widower and ex-pro bull rider in his late 60s.

Wearing a bronze belt buckle, straw hat, and jeans, he stands outside the main house, watching his nephew's

MID-SIZED COMPACT

wobble through El Dorito's branded head gate.

Paul parks in front of the main house, next to which is a small in-ground pool, and he and Jerome disembark.

PAUL

(embracing his uncle)
How are you?

UNCLE LEE

I'm good. How about you?

PAUL

Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful.

UNCLE LEE

(indicating Jerome)
Is this your friend?

PAUL

Yes. This is Jerome Fowler.

Uncle Lee and Jerome shake hands.

UNCLE LEE

Welcome to El Dorito. I hear you're in real estate.

JEROME

I am.

UNCLE LEE

Well, you've never seen an estate quite as real as this one.

(pause)

You ready for the tour?

Jerome arcs his eyebrows, doing his best to play along.

JEROME

Can't wait.

UNCLE LEE

(to Paul)

Bring the limo around!

EXT. RANCH - GOLF CART - MOVING

Paul chauffeurs while Uncle Lee rides shotgun and Jerome sits in the back.

UNCLE LEE

Ranch life is true livin'. Nothin' but fresh air and open country.

To their left, a mare and her foal nuzzle by the fence of the horse coral. To their right, a band of muddy Holsteins grazes in the alfalfa pasture.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

My dream, Jerome, is to turn El Dorito into a luxury dude ranch. I've been trying to get it off the ground for years, but nobody wants to invest.

JEROME

How about a loan?

UNCLE LEE

Banks won't touch me.

JEROME

How come?

PAUL

Because he's horrible with money.

In ignoring his nephew's axiom, Uncle Lee simultaneously accepts it.

UNCLE LEE

If I could just get them to come
out here, then they would see what
I see.

He unconsciously slips into an ad-man's glib persona.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

You want to book an executive
retreat? Look no further. Family
reunion? Wedding? Rodeo theme
party? This could be the place.

Uncle Lee opens his arms wide, accidentally slapping Paul in
the cheek.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

There's plenty of room for
bonfires, zip lines, morning yoga.
Whatever you want.

Shunting along, the golf cart approaches an old barn.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

And don't forget the crown jewel.
No dude ranch would be complete
without one.

On the west side of the barn

A MECHANICAL BULL

with a blonde wig sits at the center of a ring of mattresses.

UNCLE LEE

(reverent)

That's Addy.

Paul brakes so that everyone can have a closer look at the
hulking facsimile.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

She'll take you to heaven and back
if you let her. I can attest to
that.

Jerome is unmoved, and as the golf cart jerks forward, the
old man takes note.

INT. FOWLERS' LIVING ROOM - DAY

Melinda watches 9-year-old pupil EMILY battling her way to the end of "LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN." Since Emily appears displeased with her performance, Melinda pats her back reassuringly.

MELINDA

Can I ask you something?

EMILY

Sure.

MELINDA

It's a personal question. It has nothing to do with the piano.

EMILY

That's okay.

Melinda adds some weight to her voice.

MELINDA

Do you ever feel like somebody's not telling you the truth?

It takes Emily a moment to produce what she believes is the right response to this very adult -- and very unexpected -- question.

EMILY

I bought a pencil topper at the school store and my friend Kayla stole it. But when I asked her about it she denied it.

MELINDA

How do you know it was her?

EMILY

Because some other girl said she saw it in her pencil bag.

Melinda nods, intrigued by Emily's predicament.

MELINDA

Are you guys still friends?

EMILY

We are, but it's... weird.

MELINDA

Maybe you should ask for the pencil
topper back.

EMILY

That would probably make it even
weirder.

MELINDA

So you're just going to leave
things the way they are?

EMILY

I guess, until she tells me that
she did it.

MELINDA

So you're waiting for her, then?

Emily shrugs and turns up her palms.

EMILY

It's just a pencil topper.

EXT. RANCH/POOL - DAY

Sloshing through the water in his glasses, Paul shoots
jumpers on a poolside basketball net.

Jerome stands at the patio's edge with a beer, doing a
panoramic survey of the ranch.

PAUL

What do you think?

JEROME

It's nice.

PAUL

My uncle can be a little pushy with
the luxury dude ranch stuff. I like
El Dorito fine the way it is.

JEROME

(reflective)

Everybody's got a dream.

He takes a healthy swig of his beer.

PAUL

Are you sure you don't want to come in? You can wear one of my uncle's bathing suits.

JEROME

No, thanks. The chlorine's bad for my skin.

PAUL

But it's a salt-water pool.

Still eyeing the landscape:

JEROME

How far away is your uncle's closest neighbor?

PAUL

About a quarter-mile. Why?

Paul bricks a shot off the backboard and the ball skitters over to Jerome.

JEROME

I've got a proposition for him.

He scoops up the ball and tosses it high in the air to Paul.

JEROME (CONT'D)

Alley-ooop!

Overexcited by Magic Johnson's sudden involvement in the game, Kurt Rambis bobbles the pass and crashes head-first into the net.

INT. UNCLE LEE'S HOUSE/KITCHEN

The kitchen and the adjoining living room act as a repository for all of Lee's rodeo memorabilia, a braggart's museum of spurs, saddles, chaps, and hats.

Surrounded by the past, the three men sit at the head of a large farmer's table, eating a lunch of brisket and potato salad.

UNCLE LEE

(holding court)

I did it all back then: bronc ridin', steer wrestlin' -- hell, if they'd given me a wig I probably would've run in the barrel races.

JEROME

When was the first time you rode a bull?

UNCLE LEE

Cowtown, April 23rd, 1972.

JEROME

How long did you last?

UNCLE LEE

Long enough for him to stomp on my shoulder and break the bone in my free arm.

(laughs to himself)

Yeah, I learned pretty early on that bull riding is the hardest way in the world to make a dollar.

JEROME

Then why'd you keep doing it?

A beat, long enough for the pride and nostalgia to brim.

UNCLE LEE

Because when you ride a rank bull, son, you've done something nobody else can do.

Jerome seems satisfied with this answer, though his eyes still betray a hint of skepticism.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

You see, bull riding is the only sport in which the animal can win. If you know the animal, if you've seen him before, you can pretty well program it in your mind how you're gonna' ride him. But sometimes you don't know the animal, so you gotta' be ready for anything.

(pause)

It's a lot of mental preparation, pretty much straight concentration. A tough ride -- a tough ride's the closest you'll ever come to being a Hindu. You're totally blanked out to everything.

JEROME

(smirking)

Is that what happens when people
ride Addy?

Paul, who has been watching the two men closely, bites his
bottom lip.

Emphatically jabbing the air with his fork:

UNCLE LEE

Let me tell you something about
Addy. Ain't nobody alive can ride
that bull for eight seconds if I
don't want 'em to. I designed her
and built her myself, from scratch.
You won't find another like her in
all of these United States.

The old man lowers his fork, and proceeds with clairvoyant
conviction.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

When the people come to El Dorito --
and they will come -- Addy's gonna'
give 'em a little taste of what it
feels like to be up on top of the
end of the world. Ain't that right,
Paul?

PAUL

(shrinking)

I'm not really qualified to
speculate...

UNCLE LEE

(to Jerome)

Do you think it's got legs?

JEROME

The bull?

UNCLE LEE

No, not the *bull*. The luxury *dude*
ranch!

Unnoticed by all but the CAMERA, Paul cuts eyes at his uncle.

PAUL

(to Jerome)

You don't have to answer that if
you don't want to.

UNCLE LEE

Of course he does. That's why you brought him here.

PAUL

(emboldened)

No, it's not. I brought him here so that we could have a good time.

UNCLE LEE

I'm not interfering with anybody's good time. I just want the man's honest opinion.

Before he says anything, Jerome smiles at Paul, reassuring him that their "friendship" is still intact. Then he turns to Lee.

JEROME

What you have here is amazing. You just don't know what to do with it.

His face angled away from Jerome, Uncle Lee chews on a mouthful of brisket, grinding it down to nothing.

JEROME (CONT'D)

Nobody in their right mind is going to back a luxury dude ranch in the middle of South Jersey. It's a terrible idea.

The host belches loudly.

JEROME (CONT'D)

I'm not sure whether Paul told you this about me, but when I'm not selling real estate, I run a cockfighting ring in North Philly.

(pause)

The rowhouses where I hold the fights are dirty and overcrowded. The cops are always poking around, so I can never stay in the same location for more than a week. I'm sick of doing it commando-style. I'm looking for a place where I can consolidate my operation, and this ranch is ideal.

Unaccustomed to the sound of other men's delusions, Lee pops a toothpick into his mouth and orders Paul to clear the table.

JEROME (CONT'D)

It's secluded, there's a big barn for staging the fights, and you've got migrant workers living out here. For them, cockfighting is a cultural thing. It's their NASCAR.

Uncle Lee deliberately moves the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. He addresses Jerome with his words but not with his eyes.

UNCLE LEE

I've never been much for roosters. They're ornery, and they make a helluva racket.

JEROME

We'll soundproof the coop.

UNCLE LEE

Don't have a coop.

JEROME

Then we'll arrange to have one built. Those birds don't want to be stuck in some filthy basement in Kensington. They want to be on the ranch -- where they belong!

Paul shuts off the sink and dries his hands on a towel hanging from the oven door.

PAUL

(seeking a baseline)

The Animal Fighting Spectator Prohibition Act made cockfighting a felony in Pennsylvania. Maybe Uncle Lee is hesitant because he doesn't want to get in trouble with the law.

UNCLE LEE

(shaking his head)

I don't have any qualms about that. Reason why I don't like his idea is because he don't like mine. And the reason why he don't like my idea is because he's never ridden a mechanical bull before.

He gets up and takes a black Stetson from a peg on the wall.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)
I think you need to come outside
and get acquainted with Addy.

He finally looks at Jerome.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)
The second you feel her between
your legs, you're gonna' forget all
about those roosters of yours.

He plunks the hat on Jerome's head and starts toward the door.

EXT. RANCH/BARN

The mid-day sun pings off the bull's androgynous yellow wig. Uncle Lee fiddles with her buck-and-spin joystick while Paul helps Jerome into the saddle.

PAUL
Hold the rope with your palm facing
up.

JEROME
Why?

PAUL
If you get thrown off, it'll be
easier to let go.

JEROME
(switching his grip)
You think I'm gonna' get thrown
off?

PAUL
Just keep your upper body out in
front of her shoulders and you'll
be fine.
(pause)
And give me your keys.

Jerome hesitates at first, but then digs in his pocket and hands Paul his keys.

PAUL (CONT'D)
If you land on them funny, they'll
go right through your leg.

Paul springs off the mattresses and stands beside his uncle, who is barking into a microphone hooked up to a small preamp.

UNCLE LEE

I used to bring Addy out on the road. She was a big hit at the county fair. Then some yahoo had to go and break his damn pelvis. Now the lawyers are tryin' to tell me she's an "inherently dangerous instrumentality." I just don't see it.

Jerome looks at Paul through anxious eyes, urging him to discredit what the old man has just said. But the accountant, misreading the cue, grins as though in confirmation of it.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

(to Jerome)

You ready, Chicken George?

Staring straight ahead, Jerome nods.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

Three...Two...One. BOOM!

He throws the switch and Addy jumps to life.

Rambling over the PA as he works her red-knobbed joystick, Lee manipulates the bull into a series of violent revolutions...

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

There goes Addy and there goes Chicken George! There goes Chicken George and there goes Addy!

...careening jolts...

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

We go down, down Leroy Brown! Up, up Little White Scup.

...and sharp, sudden reversals.

UNCLE LEE (CONT'D)

Is he gonna' make it? Oh my God! He just might! *He just might.*

Despite losing his hat within the first three seconds, Jerome endures the wild ride, and as the spinning bull slows to a stop, he howls in triumph, his voice echoing off the nearby tree line.

JEROME
(breathless)
Why'd you stop?!

From the same tree line, as if in answer, come two RIFLE SHOTS.

The first hits Addy in the head, knocking off her wig; the second hits Jerome in the heart. He slumps forward, pawing at his chest, but somehow manages to stay astride the bull.

Ignoring Chicken George, Uncle Lee drops the microphone to inspect Addy's wound. He kneels and touches a bullet hole above her right horn, then, sensing something, he peers into

THE WOODS

along the edge of the property and descries a lone figure beating a retreat.

UNCLE LEE
(growling, to Paul)
Get that son of a bitch.

Torn between honoring his uncle's command and tending to his injured friend, Paul takes off across the

FIELD

that separates the ranch from the coppice.

For a number-cruncher, Paul is fleet of foot. He reaches the trees in less than ten seconds.

Slicing through brush and branch, he spots the shooter up ahead, a slow-moving man in a camouflaged ski mask with a Dragunov slung over his shoulder.

Paul gains on him quickly. When he is close enough, he leaps onto the man's back and wraps his arms around his neck.

They travel like this -- the pursuer "riding" the pursued -- until the gunman trips on an exposed root and sends them both crashing to the ground.

Before the sniper can gather his wits, Paul yanks off his ski mask, revealing the man's true identity: none other than Greg Jansen.

In the grand stillness of the woods, the two men regard each other: Greg with fangless ire, Paul with crushing bafflement.

He glances down at Greg's feet and beholds the Marshall's monsters. To the accountant's teary eyes, the sneakers still look great.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. FUNERAL HOME/LOBBY - DAY

It is the morning of Jerome Fowler's viewing. Paul wends through a crowd of mourners and stops at a table to sign the guest log.

In a shadowy alcove to his left, a man whose face we cannot see is looking at Paul's LinkedIn profile picture on his phone.

Oblivious to the man, Paul proceeds into the

MAIN ROOM

Mourners are lined up to pay their respects to the deceased, the body of which lies in a casket at the front of the room. Melinda, poised despite her sorrow, receives the guests at a station next to the casket, a giant wreath of white flowers in the b.g.

Paul does not join the line; he stands against the wall at the back of the room. He has come to see Jerome, but something is keeping him from showing his face to Melinda.

He returns to the

LOBBY

and is heading toward the exit when he hears a voice call his name from the alcove. He turns and sees Mike Madura standing in the shadows.

MADURA

Are you Paul?

PAUL

(guarded)

Yes.

Madura signals for him to come closer.

MADURA

I'm Mike.

He offers his hand and the two men shake.

MADURA (CONT'D)
I worked for Jerome... at his other
job.

He takes a knot of cash from his pocket and quickly hands it
to Paul.

MADURA (CONT'D)
That's the drop-off from the night
before he died. I already took my
cut.

PAUL
(moved by his honesty)
Thank you.

MADURA
Rome was a good dude. He always
took care of me.

PAUL
(a beat)
What are you gonna' do now?

MADURA
Keep fighting.

INT. FARM FRESH DELI AND PRODUCE - DAY

Paul stands in the produce section, weighing a bag of red
bliss potatoes and eavesdropping on the two guanacos, who
converse freely as they build another pylon of oranges.

He listens and watches with an expression of deep longing,
and becomes so mesmerized by the workers that he forgets
where he is or what he is doing.

The voice of an OLD WOMAN brings him back to earth.

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)
The best way to cook them is to
boil them still in their jackets,
and then saute them with a little
butter and salt.

Paul turns around and looks into the open, smiling face of
the old woman, a blonde-haired Greek.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Of course, if you want to do it right, you need to chop up an onion and mix it in with the potatoes.

She bags up a Vidalia onion and gives it to Paul.

PAUL

Thank you. I was just going to roast them.

OLD WOMAN

No! It's too hot for the oven. Do it this way. Even if you don't, I'll say that you did.

PAUL

Okay.

OLD WOMAN

Remember: just a pinch of salt. And let the potatoes cool before you cut them. That way the jackets stay on.

She moves down the aisle to a bevy of summer squash, missing Paul's feeble attempt at a joke.

PAUL

But it's too hot for jackets.

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - EARLY EVENING

Following the old woman's instructions, Paul boils the potatoes in a medium-sized pot.

When they are done boiling and he has allowed them to cool, he cuts the potatoes into quarters and sautes them in a pan with the melted butter and a sprinkle of salt.

As the potatoes are browning, he slices the sweet yellow onion and adds it to the pan.

He crosses over to the sink and looks out the bay window. The last time we saw him like this was just before he invited Greg Jansen to dinner.

PAUL'S POV - CAR

out of which steps Otis with a large pizza and bag of fries.

The film's *other* delivery man walks up to the house across the street and raps on the door.

BACK TO SCENE

Paul does not linger too long at the window. Even if he wanted to stay and watch (and a small part of him clearly does), there are Greek potatoes that need tending, made by his own hand.

EXT. PAUL'S HOUSE/DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Paul is taking out the trash. He lifts the lid from the metal can and deposits the lumpy bag.

On the other side of the driveway, Albert Lewis sits on his back steps smoking a cigarette.

ALBERT

Raccoons got in your trash again last night.

PAUL

I know.

ALBERT

And when I came out for work this morning, there was a big pile of turds in my back yard.

PAUL

I'm sorry.

ALBERT

That's where my daughter plays. If I hadn't seen it, she coulda' easily got the roundworm. You know what roundworm can do to a human being?

He gives Paul but a second to answer.

ALBERT (CONT'D)

Brain damage! Blindness! Coma!

PAUL

From their feces?

ALBERT

(indignant)

Yes, from their feces.

(MORE)

ALBERT (CONT'D)
 What the hell do you think I'm
 talking about?

PAUL
 (gravely)
 I don't want that to happen,
 Albert.

ALBERT
 Then fasten the lids with bungee
 cords.

PAUL
 I don't have any bungee cords.

ALBERT
 Why am I not surprised.
 (pause)
 Let me check my shed. I think I
 might have a couple extra ones.

He stabs out his cigarette and makes for the shed.

PAUL
 Thank you.

ALBERT (O.S.)
 I'm not doing it for you.

PAUL
 Right... for your daughter.

INT. PAUL'S UPSTAIRS BATHROOM - NIGHT

Dressed for bed, Paul sits on the toilet during another phone
 conversation with his mother. His pasted toothbrush awaits
 him on the rim of the sink.

JACKIE (V.O.)
 It was a trauma. You had a
 traumatic experience. And when you
 have a trauma you need to talk to
 somebody.

PAUL
 I'm talking to you, mom.

JACKIE (V.O.)
 Let me make an appointment for you
 with Dr. Stake. He helped me so
 much after my father died, I can't
 even tell you.

PAUL
I don't want to see Dr. Stake.

JACKIE (V.O.)
He doesn't judge, and he doesn't
make you feel like there's
something wrong with you. He's
sensitive, not snotty like some of
them are. He listens and he makes
sense of the whole thing. Your
father can tell you.

Stewart gets on the phone.

STEWART (V.O.)
(gruff)
Now do you see why my sister
divorced that crazy cowboy?

In the b.g., Jackie scolds Stewart for changing the subject.

PAUL
Uncle Lee didn't do anything. We
were just over there visiting.

STEWART (V.O.)
Don't defend him.

PAUL
I *will* defend him. He had nothing
to do with it.

STEWART (V.O.)
So you say.

A few stubborn beats. Then, the father cedes.

STEWART (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I'm just glad you're all right.

PAUL
Thanks.

STEWART (V.O.)
Love you.

PAUL
Love you too.

STEWART (V.O.)
Here's your mother.

INT. PAUL'S BEDROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

Paul is awakened by the SOUND of toppling metal trash cans.

He turns on the bedside lamp and puts on his glasses and a pair of flip-flops.

EXT. PAUL'S HOUSE/DRIVEWAY

The white cone of a spotlight shows that the lids to both cans have been pried loose and the contents of the bags strewn about the driveway.

Paul kneels to pick up one of Albert's bungee cords: the raccoons have gnawed straight through it.

O.S. Paul hears LOUD VOICES, which his ears track to Albert's open cellar doors.

Crossing the driveway to inspect, Paul steps in a SQUISHY mound of freshly laid raccoon scat. He tries to wipe it off on the ground, but the excrement is stuck like tar to the bottom of his flip-flop.

Paul proceeds, the VOICES growing still louder as he enters

THE LEWIS BASEMENT

where cash-waving spectators cheer on two combatants squared off in the middle of a dirt-covered fighting pit.

Parting the crowd to get a better view of the fighters, Paul sees two grown men in chicken costumes high-stepping around the pit and flapping their polyester wings.

To his horror, the faces poking through the headpieces belong to Jerome Fowler and Greg Jansen.

Yes, Paul is having a nightmare.

Through with their swaggering, Tyson and Perdue start violently clawing at each other, much to the crowd's delight.

PAUL
(desperately)
Stop it! Stop it!

But no one can hear him.

Suddenly, Uncle Lee appears next to Paul. He wears Addy's shiny yellow wig and a pair of bull horns flush to his sweaty forehead.

UNCLE LEE

(demonic)

I'm an "inherently dangerous instrumentality." I'm the *end of the world!*

Paul backs away from Uncle Lee and bumps into Albert Lewis. He stands with his arm around his young daughter, who wears dark sunglasses and carries a folding cane with a wrist strap.

ALBERT

(livid)

Do you see what you did bringin' that shit into my house? You blinded her! She can't see!

Paul scrambles up the steps leading to the cellar doors, but when he reaches the top the doors close with a BANG, and

HIS FRIGHTENED EYES

spring open and skitter about the room.

INT. PAUL'S CAR - DAY

Paul is parked at the bottom of Melinda's street, closely watching the front door of her house. Shortly, Melinda comes out, gets in her car, and drives away. This is Paul's cue.

INT. JEROME'S SHED

Outside, we hear the padlock being opened, and then Paul appears in the doorway in a flood of sunlight.

He rummages through bins, roots in flower pots, yanks open drawers -- until at last he discovers the drawstring bag at the bottom of the cardboard box: Rome's Safe.

EXT. FOWLERS' HOUSE/FRONT DOOR

Paul drops Jerome's keys in the mailbox and runs back to his car.

INT. CONNOR & CONNOR CPAS/PAUL'S OFFICE - DAY

The mathematician sits behind his desk with the Fowlers' file spread out before him. Kevin leans into the room; Paul doesn't even notice him.

KEVIN
Paul?

PAUL
(startled)
Yes.

KEVIN
You all right?

PAUL
I'm okay.

KEVIN
(grabs the putter)
We're going to McSorley's for lunch. You interested?

PAUL
(shuffling papers)
I am, but I have work to do.

KEVIN
Fowler?

PAUL
(solemnly)
Yes.

KEVIN
I can give you a hand if it's too much.

PAUL
(emphatically)
No!

He quickly realizes that he has scared Kevin, or worse, implicated himself.

PAUL (CONT'D)
There's a lot of ins-and-outs, stuff you wouldn't understand. I mean, you would understand it, but I would have to explain it to you.
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

And I don't want to waste your time.

KEVIN

You sure you don't wanna' come with us? I'm buying.

PAUL

(a beat)

Next time.

Kevin strokes a ball into the expectant anus of the Butt Putt, only the gizmo fails to fire.

Paul fills the void by conjuring an actual air biscuit, the authenticity of which seems to satisfy the boy in both men.

INT. PAUL'S HOUSE/SPARE BEDROOM - NIGHT

Paul flips on the light and stands just inside the threshold of the room, debating whether he should enter.

The Exersystem 5000 beckons to him with its promise of 80s-era health, but he is in no mood to work out.

Instead, he walks over to the desk and opens the drawer with the tapes, headphones, and microcassette recorder.

He runs his finger along the tidy row of archived cassettes until it comes to rest on one in particular.

INSERT - TAPE LABEL

reading "Fowler, 7/7/18."

BACK TO SCENE

Paul closes the drawer and exits the room.

INT. FOWLERS' HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Paul is watching Melinda page through her tax return. Her puffy eyes widen as she scrutinizes a row of numbers.

MELINDA

I knew he was doing good. But I didn't know he was doing *this* good.

PAUL

Your husband sold a lot of property
last year.

The widow looks at him doubtfully. Paul's face flattens and his tone becomes more business-like.

PAUL (CONT'D)

He picked up on some action with a
car dealership. His commission was
ten grand.

MELINDA

Jerome didn't sell commercial real
estate. Only residential.

PAUL

He was in the midst of expanding
his portfolio. I'm surprised he
didn't tell you about it.

Melinda smells manure, but is too weak to raise a stink herself. She signs the required forms and gives them to Paul to file away in his briefcase.

There are two landscape paintings hanging on the wall above the piano. Paul drifts over to get a better look at them.

In the first, a vast yellow desert, stark and unpeopled, stretches to the horizon. In the second, snow-laden pine trees ring a frozen pond.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Did you paint these?

MELINDA

(glancing over)

Yeah. About a year ago.

PAUL

They're beautiful.

(pause)

I mean it. They're really good.

MELINDA

(forcing a smile)

Thanks.

Paul continues to study the paintings.

PAUL

How come you and Jerome never had
children?

Melinda stares at a spot on the carpet as though it were the Void.

MELINDA

We couldn't. God knows we tried. It just wasn't part of the plan.

PAUL

I'm sorry.

It's hard to tell whether he's apologizing for his line of questioning or for the Fowlers' inability to conceive.

MELINDA

(blinks off the Void)

How about you? Any kids?

PAUL

None.

MELINDA

Wife?

PAUL

Negative.

MELINDA

Girlfriend?

PAUL

Nope.

(faces her)

I'm asexual.

Melinda is thrown by this confession, but only briefly.

MELINDA

Maybe you're better off. You don't mind losing them if you never had them in the first place.

PAUL

(a beat)

Did you know that Paul Giamatti gained twenty pounds for his role in "THE LADY IN THE WATER," but his character didn't call for it?

MELINDA

No. I didn't know that.

PAUL

M. Night Shyamalan got all over him about it and made him go on a crash diet the first day of filming. That's why in the movie he's kind of fat for the first half and kind of skinny for the second. But you can't tell unless you really look at him.

(pause)

On a side note, when I push out my stomach...

He lifts the front of his shirt and bloats his gut.

PAUL (CONT'D)

... it looks like Paul Giamatti's character from "THE PLANET OF THE APES." The Tim Burton remake.

Melinda cocks her head and squints her eyes.

MELINDA

I see the resemblance.

Paul sits down on the piano bench.

PAUL

I wanted to talk to you at the funeral, but I didn't have the nerve.

Tears threaten his eyes, which appear rotund behind the lenses of his oversized glasses.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I think that Greg shot Jerome because he was jealous of our friendship. I think he was mad because I brought your husband to the ranch and not him.

There is struggle in Melinda's face: she wants to disabuse Paul of this theory, but doesn't have the heart to squelch his delusion.

MELINDA

Your uncle was looking to sell the place and Jerome was going to help him. Right?

PAUL
(upholding the lie)
That's what I told the police.

MELINDA
If anyone's to blame, it's me. I
never should've taken Greg on as a
student.

PAUL
And I never should've invited him
to eat the other meatball sandwich
I ordered.

Seeing how fervent he is, Melinda chooses to leave this
comment alone. Let him have his truth.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Are you going to re-marry?

MELINDA
I don't know.

PAUL
Are you going to keep living here?

MELINDA
I don't know.

PAUL
Are you still going to give
lessons?

Melinda can't answer this question, not yet.

PAUL (CONT'D)
It would be a shame if you stopped.
It's such a great piano.

He taps out a few notes on the Steinway, then something in
the corner of the room draws his eye: the Casa Nunez.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Sweet axe.

MELINDA
It was a gift from Jerome.

PAUL
(picking up the guitar)
Do you mind?

Melinda's consent is a reluctant one, but Paul takes great care with the instrument, cradling its neck just so and resting its body gently in his lap.

Seated in a recliner adjacent to the piano, he strums a few chords to get a feel for the action. Then, after some noodling and picking, he segues into a mid-tempo lilt, not very different from "I'LL BE TIPPING YOU GOOD."

The scratchy improvisation brings a smile to his face. He has found his groove, and intends to stay in it.

Coming back around to the initial chord progression, he is suddenly joined by Melinda on the piano, and his eyes almost explode with joy at the swell of her accompaniment.

They play together for the next few minutes, and in the spontaneous union of their instruments -- the piano bold and reverberant, the guitar dry and deep -- Melinda is not bereft and Paul is not gauche. Their infirmities no longer hound them; they are free to run through the high grass.

Meeting them there are the duo of Greg Jansen and Jerome Fowler, the former dressed in orange penitentiary scrubs, the latter in a Century 21 blazer.

Invisible to Paul and Melinda, their spectres emerge from the ether to sing "I WOULD TELL YOU ANY OTHER DAY."

GREG

I would tell you any other day/It's
time to pack it in.

JEROME

I would tell you any other day/The
line is growing thin.

GREG

I would tell you any other day/The
flag is at half-mast.

JEROME

But today I'm gonna' tell you/The
future is not the past.

They stand should-to-shoulder for the chorus, and address the CAMERA directly.

GREG/JEROME

Hope is an abstract thing/You can't
see the well from which it
springs/Love can be cruel to
you/But think of all the days it
got you through/It takes nothing to
hang your head/'Cause that's what
you'll be doing when you're dead.

The crooners break into a short, loosely choreographed dance routine, which carries them to the second and final verse.

JEROME

I would tell you any other day/To
just throw in the towel.

GREG

I would tell you any other
day/Sister don't look now.

JEROME

I would tell you any other
day/About the half-empty glass.

GREG

But today I'm gonna' tell you/That
your first is not your last.

Like a pair of full-throated drinking buddies, they combine once more for the chorus, dancing until the hallucination fades and retires them both to shadow.

FOYER

Paul and Melinda stand in the doorway, each one holding the other up.

MELINDA

We should go out for a cup of
coffee sometime.

PAUL

I don't drink coffee, but that
sounds like a great idea.

Melinda hugs him, and he hugs her back.

The feeling of closeness, of an intimacy won by neither bargaining nor deception, floods Paul so rapidly that he must close his eyes to keep from crying.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Another month has passed and Paul is seen riding a 12-speed along a bike trail. Sunlight sporadically plays across his face as he passes under a low canopy of trees. He turns onto a very tall

FOOTBRIDGE

and stops the bike. From the pouch beneath the seat he takes out the microcassette recorder.

Gazing down at the creek below, he listens to a portion of his last recorded conversation.

PAUL (V.O.)
Why did you bring this to me?

JEROME (V.O.)
Because I trust you. I know that when I walk out of here, you're not going to call the police.

PAUL (V.O.)
Does your wife know what you're planning to do?

JEROME (V.O.)
No. If she finds out, she'll divorce me.

PAUL (V.O.)
Then why are you setting her up for the fall?

JEROME (V.O.)
There's not going to be a fall -- only summer.

Paul stops the tape. The ritual has failed to yield its former fruit. It is pathetic and shallow and sneaky, and he knows this now.

He dangles his arm over the handrail and lets the recorder slip from his grasp, watching as it plunges into the water and settles like a stone at the bottom of the creek.

THE END

