A Lot Like Christmas

by Chazz Christopher

> DRAFT 1 11/11

1st Draft 11/11 2nd Draft 11/11 in red

### EXT. OUTSIDE THE STEWARD'S HOME. EARLY MORNING

James and Erica Steward live in Franklin Township, New Jersey with their 3 kids. Their house is a beautiful colonial - as is every house on their street.

The house is just a house, no decorations, no lights, no Santa, no reindeer, no anything - nothing but a house.

We move out until we can see the other houses on the street. Apparently, the Steward's neighbors take decorating their houses very, very seriously at Christmas.

There are full manger scenes in front yards; there is Santa on his sleigh and a full stable of reindeer; there are thousands upon thousands of lights. They take their Christmas decorations very, very seriously.

## SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: December 18

In the distance we hear an alarm go off.

CUT TO:

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### INT. JAMES AND ERICA'S BEDROOM. CONTINUOUS

The alarm clock beside the bed reads 5:00am. James' hand slams down on the top of the alarm clock with such velocity that it is a surprise that the clock is still showing time once it stops alarming.

JAMES sits up in bed. He is tired. It is freaking 5am, after all. He groans and rubs his eyes as he turns on the bedside lamp.

His wife, ERICA turns over and groans, shielding her eyes from the light.

ERICA Do you really need to go in early *again* today? You haven't seen the kids in a week.

JAMES Erica, you know that I....

# ERICA

(interrupting) Can't you just wait till the kids are up, eat breakfast with them and then go in? CONTINUED:

### JAMES

Honey, I can't. I'm sorry. I have to be in early - it simply isn't possible - I wish I could. Give them my apologies.

James stands up and trudges into the bathroom.

Erica stares at the ceiling.

CUT TO:

# INT. THE TRAIN. EARLY MORNING

James stands on the train, reading a newspaper as the world flies by outside the window behind him.

CUT TO:

## EXT. HOMEFRONT INSURANCE BUILDING. MORNING

Light barely breaks through the clouds above Manhattan as James comes around the corner of the building and makes his way towards the front door to the building.

We finally get a look at James. He is 37 years old, goodlooking and carries himself with authority. His jawline curves around like a sculptor shaved it out of granite; and every hair is perfectly in place.

He walks through the door of the building and is met right inside by SEAN HELLMUTH, a somewhat younger, somewhat nervous, somewhat annoying accountant. Sean talks way, way \* too fast for anyone's good.

### JAMES

Good morning, Sean

# SEAN

James.

James continues walking towards the elevators. Sean tags along. As they wait for the elevator, Sean talks.

SEAN (CONT'D) You hear the news?

JAMES What news is that, Sean?

SEAN I can't believe you haven't heard the news. That's unbelievable. (MORE) \*

+

### SEAN (CONT'D)

You're like 3rd or 4th in command, depending on who you talk to. I mean, you should've heard the news. I can't believe you haven't heard the news.

Annoying.

### JAMES

Sean, what's the news?

SEAN

Homefront Insurance - we're being bought out.

The elevator pings and then opens. They get on the elevator. Sean pushes the button to their floor.

#### JAMES

Those rumors have been going around for years. I haven't heard anything about us being bought out, Sean. Just relax, man...

### SEAN

(ignores the "relax") They said that whoever's buying the company is going to let most of us go. Oh, man, oh, man, oh, man. I can't lose this job. The job market blows right now. I mean - and you? And you? I mean, you're about to become vice president of sales - I mean, all the time you've been here....

# JAMES

15 years.

SEAN

Yeah, all the time you've been here, all a waste!

The door pings open.

JAMES Sean, don't worry about all of this. It's rumors, just rumors.

James walks off the elevator and Sean walks beside him.

SEAN All right, James, all right - but I mean - I dunno - I dunno - I just can't lose my job right now. CONTINUED: (2)

They walk past a conference room. We stop at the conference room as they continue walking down the hallway.

JAMES

No one is losing their job, Sean - enjoy the holidays, man! How's the family, by the way?

We leave their conversation behind and turn to look into the conference room. HARRY STONE, CEO and president of Homefront Insurance sits at a table, looking exasperated and exhausted, surrounded by boxes of files and a group of well-dressed lawyers working for \$500 per hour.

CUT TO:

INT. HARRY STONE'S OFFICE. DAY

James walks into an opulent office area. He stops at EVELYN's desk. Evelyn is Harry's assistant. She is in her late 50's but dresses sharply and could be qualified as pretty.

# JAMES

Is Harry in?

### EVELYN

He's down in the conference room. Did you need something?

JAMES Nah, we were just gonna discuss this whole promotion thing - you know....

EVELYN

Might wanna wait till tomorrow - he's covered up today.

JAMES

Cool. You got any of those caramel candies?

Evelyn smiles and opens up a drawer, pulling out a small jar of candies.

EVELYN

You mean these?

#### JAMES

(smiles) Yes, I do.

He takes 2 of the caramel candies.

# JAMES (CONT'D)

Thanks. Is your mom doing any better?

# EVELYN

You know, she isn't. Parkinson's is a horrible disease - I don't even really recognize her anymore.

#### JAMES

I'm so sorry, Evelyn. Just know we're thinking about you, praying for you.

James smiles and turns and walks out of the office.

EVELYN Thanks, James - have a good one.

James waves over his shoulder.

INT. STEWARD HOME. NIGHT

James walks through the back door and into the kitchen. Erica is waiting at the table, reading a magazine. The microwave clock reads 9:07pm.

Erica puts down the magazine.

### ERICA

You eat dinner?

JAMES I did. Sorry I'm so late.

Erica stands up and walks towards the stairs, then turns around.

ERICA

When do we come first? If not at Christmas, when do we come first?

A short silence.

# JAMES

Erica...I....

# ERICA

Your kids haven't seen you in over a week, James. They miss you. They want to know their daddy loves them.

#### JAMES

Erica, it's just a little while longer, baby - I'm this close to Vice President of sales. Once that happens, no more travel, no more late nights - it's what we've been working for. It's just a little while longer.

# ERICA

(sighs) You've been saying that for 15 years, James.

Erica turns and walks up the stairs. James sighs, sets down his briefcase then sits down at the table. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a leftover caramel candy, pops it in and begins sucking on it.

He sighs again.

\*

INT. JAMES OFFICE. MORNING

SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: December 19

Harry pops his head into James' office. James looks up from his computer.

# HARRY

Hey, you up for a trip?

JAMES

When?

### HARRY

Tomorrow.

#### JAMES

Oh! Wow...um...

# HARRY

Got a client in Wisconsin who wants to spend a lot of money - just needs to get nudged over the edge. Your help on this one would go a long way.

James thinks for a moment.

HARRY (CONT'D) Just a coupla days...you'll be back in time for Christmas holidays. CONTINUED:

# JAMES

(nods) All right, Harry...all right.

HARRY That's why I love you.

JAMES What about that Vice P....

And Harry disappears.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Or...not....

James goes back to work on his computer. Suddenly Sean pokes his head in.

SEAN

Did he tell you?

JAMES

(sighs) Tell me what, Sean?

SEAN

About the sale of the company! Come on, man! Don't play dumb! This is my life!!!

JAMES Sean, he genuinely did not talk about that at all.

# SEAN

Then what?!

JAMES

He's sending me to Wisconsin to help a client spend some money on insurance.

### SEAN

Oh.

(a long pause)
Well, the company is selling. I've
heard the news. It's happening.
Definitely happening.

JAMES Sean - go back to work.

SEAN

Okay.

CONTINUED: (2)

And Sean leaves the office.

CUT TO:

\*

INT. STEWARD BEDROOM. NIGHT

It's late, again. James gets home. He comes into the bedroom. The lights are off. Erica is in bed.

James sits down on the edge of the bed.

ERICA

The kids missed you.

JAMES (gritting his teeth) Erica, I know.

James takes his shoes off and then unbuttons his shirt.

JAMES (CONT'D) Harry is sending me to Madison, Wisconsin tomorrow for a couple of days. I'll be back in time for Christmas eve.

Erica doesn't answer.

James takes off his shirt and heads into the bathroom. He shuts the door and we see a sliver of light shine out from under the door as he turns on the light.

Erica sighs.

CUT TO:

\*

INT. STEWARD KITCHEN. EARLY MORNING.

SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: December 20

The microwave clock reads 5:37am.

James comes down the steps carrying a small suitcase to find his 3 children waiting for him, all dressed in their pajamas.

McCartney is eleven, smart and rambunctious - he is wise beyond his years, and talks as much like a grown up as he can at eleven. Sara is nine, cute and sweet. Willie is four and is, like every four year old, a handful.

8.

#### JAMES

What? What are you guys doing up this early?

### MCCARTNEY

I heard your alarm go off, dad. I woke Sara and Willie up so that we could see you. It's been too long, dad - too long.

### WILLIE

I went pee-pee in the potty.

### JAMES

Good, Willie, good.

### MCCARTNEY

Dad, we are all 3 dissatisfied with the amount of facetime we've been able to have with you lately.

### JAMES

McCartney, you're eleven. No eleven year old talks like that. Why are you...?

### MCCARTNEY

### (interrupts)

Dad, it is well-known fact that children who grow up with a disengaged father end up either gay or malfunctioning in life.

### JAMES

Sara, are you malfunctioning?

### SARA

No. Miss Rotehouse says I come from dysfunction, though. I googled that and didn't like what it said.

#### JAMES

Okay...guys, look: daddy has to fly to Madison, Wisconsin today.

#### MCCARTNEY

That's the capital.

#### JAMES

Yes. Yes, it is. I have to go sell some people some insurance to make their lives better. I will be gone for a couple of days. When I get back, we will talk about how I can spend more time with you guys. Okay? CONTINUED: (2)

The 3 kids nod.

JAMES (CONT'D) All right, give daddy a hug, then.

He hugs the kids then stands up.

# JAMES (CONT'D) Okay, kisses; I'll be back soon.

James turns and walks out the front door, dragging his suitcase behind him. He shuts the door behind him, looks through the door's window and waves. The kids wave back.

CUT TO:

### INT. AIRPLANE. DAY

James sits in business class. He leans his chair back and tries to get a bit of sleep.

CUT TO: \*

\*

### EXT. FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH. DAY

A taxi pulls into the parking lot of the church and we see \* James get out, pay the driver and walk towards the front \* door of the church, dragging his bag behind him. \*

CUT TO: \*

INT. FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH. CONTINUOUS \*
James walks into the lobby of the church. The church \*
doesn't look old but doesn't look new. \*

He walks through the lobby and sees a sign on the wall with \* an arrow that reads "Office". \*

CUT TO: \*

INT. CHURCH OFFICE AREA. CONTINUOUS \*
James struggles through the door to the office area, \*
dragging his bag, and sees a secretary. \*
SECRETARY
A blessed day to you. How can I help? \*
JAMES
Hi, I'm looking for Steve Hammond? \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINU	JED:
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The secretary stands up.	*
SECRETARY And can I tell him who's asking for him?	* * *
JAMES James from Homefront Insurance.	*
CUT TO:	*
INT. CHURCH AUDITORIUM. CONTINUOUS	*
Steve and James walk through the auditorium, looking around. James shed his bags in the office earlier. Steve points at things around the building.	* * *
Steve is a tall, skinny African-American man who looks to be in his early 50's. He is kind and soft-spoken and has love behind his eyes. He genuinely cares for people and their problems. He is a pastor, not a caricature.	* * * *
STEVE Have you ever worked with a church before, James?	* * *
JAMES No, no I have not. Seems odd to me - do you need insurance if you have faith?	* * * *
Steve stops and turns to James.	*
STEVE Are you a man of faith, James?	* *
JAMES I have too many questions to have faith, to be honest, Steve.	* * *
STEVE That ishonest. We all have questions - that doesn't mean faith and doubt are mutually exclusive.	* * * *
JAMES I'm an insurance man. In insurance, we equate God with acts that mess up people's lives, kill, maim and cripple.	* * * * *

STEVE	*
I can understand how that would seem.	*
But let me encourage you to keep your	*
options open. This is the perfect	*
time of year to come to Him.	*
(points to the sky)	*
It is after all, HIS time of year!	*
JAMES	*
Funny - it feels like it's Wal-Mart's	*
time of year. Is Jesus part of that corporation?	*
Steve doesn't laugh. Or smile.	*
STEVE	*
We will set up in the conference room,	*
James.	*
JAMES	*
That was a	*
	*
STEVE (interrupting)	*
We take Christmastime seriously,	*
James.	*
o and o	
Steve turns and walks back towards the offices.	*
JAMES	*
(finishes)	*
jokejust a joke. Okay.	*
Terrer and The server of the server	
James walks up after Steve.	*
CUT TO:	*
INT. CHURCH CONFERENCE ROOM. DAY	*
James is set up at a conference table, a laptop in front of	*
him, papers spread out in front of him.	*
STEVE	*
So, you're saying we can actually save money with you by literally taking out	*
twice as much coverage?	*
That'samazing - a blessing from	*
God.	*
JAMES	*
(bites his tongue)	*
Yes - yes it is. And from	*
Homefront.	*

(CONTINUED)

# CONTINUED:

James looks down at papers and studies different forms for \* a long moment. \*

	STEVE	*
E	o your kids celebrate a religious	*
	experience at Christmas, James?	*
James loc		*
	L	
	JAMES	*
И	We go to church on Christmas Eve,	*
	usually, Steve - but why don't we	*
f	ocus more on the insurance than the	*
M	whole God thing. I need to get back	*
i	n time for Christmas Eve - so the	*
n	nore we get done today, the better it	*
i	s for me and my family!	*
	STEVE	*
	But, James - the whole Christmas	*
	experience is the whole "God thing",	*
a	as you say.	*
Tomo a do	and the second whether the second s	. ا
paperwor	esn't respond, but immerses himself in the	*
paperwork	2.	Ŷ
	FADE TO:	*
INT. HOT	TEL BAR. NIGHT	*
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James is	the only person in the hotel bar. He nurses a	*
James is glass of	the only person in the hotel bar. He nurses a Scotch on the rocks as the bartender works around	* *
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# JAMES

Doy	you	th	ink	my	wife	would	enjoy
hav	ing	а	silk	s	carf,	Steve	

# STEVE

That sounds like quite a feasible option. Women normally seem to like soft things and as it doubles to both keep her warm and is fashionable well, it's the perfect storm for the Proverbs 31 woman. It provides modesty, also, covering up the bosom. Is your wife a Proverbs 31 woman, James?

James is saved from answering by his phone ringing. He shrugs and answers the phone.

# JAMES

Hello?

CONTINUED:

CUT TO:

# INT. SEAN HELLMUTH'S OFFICE. SAME

Sean is pacing back and forth as he talks into the cellphone.

SEAN James, it's over! It's over! We're all done.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH CONFERENCE ROOM. SAME

JAMES

What?

Sean hangs up on the other end.

JAMES (CONT'D)

What?!! Sean?

He holds his phone out to look at it. The call is no longer going on.

JAMES (CONT'D) (to himself) What...the... \*

\*

\*

### STEVE

Don't curse in the Lord's house, James.

James hits redial on his phone and tries to call Sean back. He gets a busy signal. He hangs up, thinks for a moment, then dials the number again. Again, a busy signal.

Then his phone rings. He picks it up quickly, without looking at the number.

# JAMES

CUT TO:

INT. HARRY STONE'S OFFICE. SAME

Sean?

Harry looks confused, talking on his large office phone.

HARRY James? This is Harry.

JAMES (V.O.) (through phone) Harry? Hey. What's going on?

Switch between locales as needed.

HARRY James...I'm really, really sorry - I couldn't tell you what's been happening just because it was all so...secret.

JAMES (not a question) You sold the company.

HARRY I sold the company.

JAMES

What does that mean?

### HARRY

It means, for now - that everything about Homefront Insurance is dead. Bank accounts are frozen, credit cards are frozen - all funds are frozen until the buyout...or merger is finished.

A long pause

HARRY (CONT'D) As in, your company cards will no longer be working, James

JAMES

Ah...now I get it. Crap.

James gets up and walks out of the conference room to the hall.

HARRY

Sorry, James. I really am. It just...got to be too much. We had to let everything go.

JAMES

Am I out of a job?

# HARRY

But SternCom Global isn't known for keeping a ton of staff around after hostile takeovers - like this one. I would guess that...you should begin looking for a job.

JAMES

Aw, crap.

HARRY Yeah - and some other words, too.

(a long pause)
All right, James, get home to your
family - spend the holidays
celebrating. Let this stuff wait for
the New Year.

JAMES Okay, okay, Harry - thanks for calling.

They each hang up.

James wanders back into the conference room.

\*

\*

### STEVE

Is everything all right - that sounded serious.

### JAMES

It was. I'm afraid that Homefront Insurance, for the time being, is no longer an entity. We, uh...well, I can't finish this deal right now - I'm sorry.

### STEVE

# Can we work this out later?

James shrugs, shakes his head, packs up his stuff and walks \* out without another word. He walks through the church and to the front doors. He exits the church and walks across the snow-covered parking lot.

When he reaches the edge of the parking lot and looks around, then turns and heads towards a Starbuck's

CUT TO:

\*

+

# INT. STARBUCK'S. CONTINUOUS

James walks in the front door of the coffee shop. There is no line, so he walks up to the front of the line.

# BARISTA

Can I get you something?

### JAMES

I will take a soy chai latte'.

### BARISTA

Oooh, very nice choice, sir. You are, obviously, a connoisseur of all things good when it comes to coffee. How will you be paying?

James hands him his credit card. The barista swipes, then scrunches up his face.

BARISTA (CONT'D) Oooh...so sorry, sir - but your card has been declined.

JAMES Declined? What? That's my personal credit card - shouldn't be declined.

He pulls out another credit car and hands it to the barista. The barista swipes it and shakes his head again.

BARISTA

I'm sorry, sir. That was declined, also.

JAMES Are you freaking kidding me? Thank God I have cash!

James pulls out a \$5 and hands it to the barista. Another barista finished his drink and hands it to him.

BARISTA 2

Thanks, sir.

### JAMES

No, thank you!

James walks outside thinks for a moment, then dials a number on his phone.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Hello?

BANK TELLER (O.S.) (through phone) Merry Christmas, how can I help you today?

JAMES My bank cards are being declined - I have plenty of money in my accounts. Can you tell me what's going on?

BANK TELLER Your name, please?

JAMES

James Steward - my account number is 6790278.

We hear the teller banging on his keyboard in the background.

BANK TELLER (O.S.) Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Steward - I see here that your wife put a hold on the account at 9 am this morning.

# JAMES

A what?

BANK TELLER (O.S.) A hold - it means that no one but her can access the accounts or use the cards - either credit or debit.

We hear James' phone beep with an incoming call.

JAMES

This is outrageous - wait, I'm getting another call - I will call you back.

He clicks a button on his phone and switches over to the new call.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Hello?

LAWYER (O.S.) (through phone) James Steward?

JAMES

Yes?

LAWYER (O.S.) Hello - my name is Sterling Seaver - I am a divorce lawyer representing your wife, Erica Steward.

# JAMES

What?!?

LAWYER (O.S.) Your wife legally filed for separation today. She is not filing for divorce...yet - she is giving you the chance to change.

A long pause

LAWYER (O.S.) (CONT'D) Sir, she is giving you the chance to change - that doesn't happen much in this business. Get yourself together cuz I'm good at my job and when or if she files for divorce, I will take you to the cleaners.

(a beat) Am I understood? Mr. Steward? James?

James hangs up the phone. He thinks for a moment. The phone rings again. James clicks it on.

JAMES

Hello?

LAWYER (O.S.) James, we have cut off your credit and debit cards until we figure everything out. \*

CONTINUED: (3)

LAWYER (O.S.) (CONT'D) Erica insisted, however, that we wire you \$300 via Western Union. You can pick it up at any approved location.

James hangs up the phone again. He thinks for a long moment. Again.

James pulls out his phone and dials a number. We hear the phone picked up, almost immediately by voice mail.

ERICA (0.S.) (through phone) You've reached Erica, leave me a message!

JAMES

What is going on, Erica? Lawyers? Turning off the credit cards? Who does this crap? I'm stuck in freaking Wisconsin! Call me back, please! At least let me get home and we can deal with this stuff!!! Call me back!

He hangs up the phone, slowly sets his coffee on the ground, and then, suddenly, begins to go crazy, punching and kicking the air around him.

After a long moment, he stops, straightens himself out, picks up his coffee and looks across the street at a grocery store.

JAMES (CONT'D) Western Union, it is.

CUT TO:

\*

\*

EXT. GROCERY STORE. CONTINUOUS

James walks out of the grocery store, counting \$300 in \$20 bills. He opens up his wallet and looks at the cash already there.

JAMES Three hundred and ninety-four dollars to get from Wisconsin to New York. Perfect.

CUT TO:

# INT. HOTEL BAR. NIGHT

We catch up with James after he has obviously had one too many to drink. He is sloshed.

### CONTINUED:

He is sitting on a stool with his head firmly planted on the bar. As he talks his words are slightly slurred.

JAMES

Who the heck does she think that she is? She's just gonna separate from ME - I'm James Steward! Without any warning? Without any talking about it? Without any heads up? Who does she think she is?

The bartender is an older man, perhaps 55. He is slightly overweight and has been doing this a long time. He walks over to James and stands in front of him for a moment.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Give me another.

# BARTENDER

I think you've had enough, James.

JAMES

I don't think I have had enough, good sir - wait...how did you know my name?

### BARTENDER

You gave me your ID and credit card earlier.

# JAMES

Oh, yeah.

#### BARTENDER

And you've said "I'm James Steward" about 15 times when talking about your wife.

JAMES My wife separated from me today.

# BARTENDER

So I heard.

### JAMES

Yeah - no warning.

BARTENDER

No heads up - yep, I've heard that about 15 times, too.

# JAMES

(suddenly remorseful) Sorry, man. I'm just a little freaked out.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

# JAMES (CONT'D)

I'm in Madison, Wisconsin, I lost my job today, none of my credit cards work, my wife separated from me and I have no freaking clue how I'm gonna get back to New York City in time to be with my family for Christmas Eve.

#### BARTENDER

Why Christmas Eve? Anything special?

### JAMES

It's Christmas eve, man! We take the kids to church; I've gotta put together toys, be Santa - all that crap.

James bangs his head down on the bar.

BARTENDER Sounds like you're kinda throwing yourself a pity party.

James looks up.

### JAMES

Screw you, man.

# BARTENDER

Let me tell you a story.

JAMES

(rolls his eyes) Sure, man - go ahead - enlighten me.

James takes another drink.

# BARTENDER

(ignores the sarcasm) I was married for 15 years. 3 kids. Great family. But one day my wife decided she'd had enough of my bad moods and my drinking and puking. She left me and I sat there, drink in my hand, and watched her walk out and never said a word.

JAMES

(sarcastically) Sad story.

### BARTENDER

Yeah, it is. My kids still want to have nothing to do with me, even though I've been sober for 16 years now. I had the chance to get my family back and I didn't take it.

### JAMES

I'm not an alcoholic.

The bartender looks at the 12 glasses in front of James.

JAMES (CONT'D) Oh, come on - this, this is an aberration.

#### BARTENDER

I'm just saying: you have the chance to get your family back. Don't let them walk away.

### JAMES

I'm in freaking Madison, Wisconsin, man, with no money, no credit cards how am I gonna even be there to keep them from walking away?

The bartender turns around and grabs a large bottle of Jack Daniel's. He pulls out 2 glasses and proceeds to fill each of them to brim.

BARTENDER If you want to be there, you'll find a way.

He picks up one of the glasses. James looks strangely at the Bartender, but picks up the other glass.

BARTENDER (CONT'D) A toast - to you getting back to your family safe and sound.

The bartender shoots the entire glass in one gulp.

JAMES

I thought you were sober.

### BARTENDER

Son, I was an alcoholic - one tumbler of Jack barely takes the edge off. And I will stop there. Drink your Jack and get out of here, James. Go save your family.

### CONTINUED: (4)

The bartender then walks down to the other end of the bar and begins sweeping. James throws back the glass of Jack and then looks sick.

JAMES

Oh, my...I think I've had too much to drink.

James puts his head on the bar and groans.

CUT TO:

# INT. STEWARD LIVING ROOM. NIGHT

Erica has the kids in their pajamas, ready for bed. She looks nervous as she considers what is coming next.

MCCARTNEY Mom, when is dad coming home?

ERICA You know, McCartney, at this point, I'm not really sure.

SARA What does that mean, Mommy?

WILLIE I poo'd in the potty today.

ERICA Yes, you did, Willie - very good!

MCCARTNEY Mom, what did you mean by that?

ERICA Well, McCartney - mom and dad are having a hard time right now.

MCCARTNEY Are you getting divorced?

ERICA

What?! Where...no! We are not getting divorced - yet.

WILLIE No!!! No divorce! No divorce!

Sara begins crying and Willie joins in as he continues to repeat his mantra:

# WILLIE (CONT'D) No divorce! No divorce!

### ERICA

Kids, guys, come on! Mommy and daddy aren't getting divorced.

### MCCARTNEY

The average child of divorce makes lower grades than those in a more traditional family. Lower grades make it near impossible to be involved in extra-curricular activities through high school and those things combined make it near impossible to get into a choice university.

#### ERICA

(shakes her head) What have you been reading - how old are you?

# MCCARTNEY

I'm eleven.

# ERICA

I know how old you are, McCartney.

A long pause. Sara and Willie have tears in their eyes.

ERICA (CONT'D) All right, guys, it's time for bed.

She corrals the kids towards the stairs. As they walk up the stairs, they continue talking.

WILLIE Will daddy be home when we wake up?

#### ERICA

No, Willie. I'm sorry.

They reach the top of the stairs and the kids make their \* way to their rooms. \*

ERICA (CONT'D) Good night, guys - I love you.

#### SARA

Good night, mama.

Sara closes the door to her room.

MCCARTNEY

I love you, too, mom.

McCartney shuts his door.

Erica walks Willie into his room and helps him get into his bed. She tucks him in.

WILLIE

Mommy?

ERICA

Yes, Willie?

WILLIE I no poo in my pants anymore.

ERICA

(chuckles) Okay, Willie - I'm happy with that.

WILLIE I no poo in my pants anymore if you no divorce.

Tears spring into Erica's eyes. She kisses Willie on the forehead, then stands and walks out of his room, closing the door behind her. And she sighs, not sure what she is doing.

CUT TO:

\*

INT. WISCONSIN HOTEL. MORNING

Light shines through the curtains and into James' eyes as he lays on his stomach on his hotel room bed. He groans as the light shines in on him.

# SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: December 22

He has slept fully-clothed. As he slowly stirs, it is obvious he is not doing good - he looks like a train hit him.

He rolls over onto his back and finally opens his eyes. He groans again.

JAMES Oh, my God - my head.

He holds his forehead.

He lays there for another short moment. Then he sits up.

JAMES (CONT'D) I'm going to go get my family. A short pause. James groans.

JAMES (CONT'D) Oh, no - I'm not gonna make it!

He rushes into the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before puking. He collapses on the bathroom floor beside the toilet.

JAMES (CONT'D) Okay - gonna go save my family.

(a beat) No matter how freaking bad my head hurts.

James pulls himself up and stands over the bathtub, wobbly. He then starts up the shower and shuts the door to the bathroom.

CUT TO:

INT. OUTSIDE JAMES' HOTEL ROOM. MORNING

We focus on the outer door to his hotel room as it opens.

James walks out, carrying his bag. We follow him as he walks down and hits the elevator button. The elevator pings open and he gets on with an odd-looking family of 5 (mom, dad, 2 boys and an ugly little girl).

JAMES How you doing this morning?

ODD MOM Don't talk to him, children. He smells like a brothel's spittoon can.

JAMES

Wow...that was - not nice

ODD MOM Don't even look at him, kids. He is a sinner in need of grace. Don't look at him.

The kids look away. James looks ahead, then turns back around to the woman.

JAMES Okay. You realize that - that's, like the opposite of grace, right?

### CONTINUED:

The door pings open and James walks out of the elevator and away from the family and out of the front door to the hotel.

James hails down a taxi and gets in.

JAMES (CONT'D) Get me to the airport, please.

CABBIE A lot to drink last night?

James looks sternly at the Cabbie.

The Cabbie turns around and puts the car in drive.

CUT TO:

EXT. DEPARTURES - MADISON, WI AIRPORT. SAME

James is getting out of the taxi, pulling his bag behind him.

JAMES All right - \$18 plus \$4 tip.

#### CABBIE

Thank you, sir - and you don't smell like a brothel's spittoon - you smell much, much better.

James shuts the taxi's door and runs into the airport. He skips the line and walks straight up to the ticketing counter.

The line behind him immediately becomes unruly, pissed that he's cut the line. James simply holds his hand up to the rest of the line.

The Ticket Agent is dressed as well as you can be dressed in airline garb. His hair is perfect. He wears a scarf. His voice is slightly affected to have a near-English accent.

He is the epitome of someone trying to pretend they are, indeed, not from where they are from. In this case, Madison, Wisconsin.

> JAMES When is the first flight to New York City?

### TICKET AGENT

I'm sorry, you'll have to go to the back of the line.

JAMES

Look - I just need to know when it leaves - I can NOT miss it!

TICKET AGENT

Sir, glance behind you.

JAMES I don't need to look behind me. I know that they're waiting - and as soon as I get an answer I'll wait, too.

TICKET AGENT

Behind you.

# JAMES

Are you being serious? You know you're wasting more time right now making a point than if you had just looked up my flight.

#### TICKET AGENT

Glance behind you.

James finally looks behind him, then back to the agent.

JAMES Yeah, they're pissed.

TICKET AGENT Yes, sir, they are, in fact, irascible.

James looks around, searching for answers.

#### JAMES

Can anyone freaking tell me when the next flight to New York City is? Please!

A guy towards the back of the line finally raises his hand.

BACK OF THE LINE It leaves in 57 minutes - and I'm on that flight.

James nods and turns back to the Ticket Agent.

JAMES I need to be on that flight. BACK OF THE LINE I was making the point that I need you to get out of the way so that I can get on my flight.

James holds his finger up as if to say, "Wait a minute" but talks to the Ticket Agent.

#### JAMES

I'm not gonna move until you tell me how much that flight is.

### TICKET AGENT

Oh, you'll move.

The ticket agent waves and 2 security guards come over and stand next to him.

TICKET AGENT (CONT'D) Place this salacious man to end of the queue, please.

They grab his arms. James tries to pull away, but they hold firm.

CUT TO:

# INT. DEPARTURES. MORNING

James is at the front of the line now. The 2 security guards still stand next to him.

The Ticket Agent waves in James' direction.

TICKET AGENT

Next, please!

James walks up and the security guards leave.

TICKET AGENT (CONT'D) And, what is your destination, sir?

Long pause.

JAMES

Are you kidding?

TICKET AGENT I don't normally make it a habit to *kid* during work hours, sir. Now, to where are you going?

#### JAMES

To where? New York. I just spent...

(looks at his watch)
...27 minutes in line, and you can't
remember what the whole fuss was about
to begin with?

TICKET AGENT I just helped over 20 customers, sir. You're important, but not *that* important. So, New York?

(disappointed face) Oooh...sorry - that flight is closed.

JAMES

Of course it is.

TICKET AGENT Now, I *can* get you to New York City via a non-direct flight.

JAMES Where does it go through?

### TICKET AGENT

It goes to Des Moines, Iowa, then to Nashville, Tennessee then to Orlando, Florida, then to Houston, Texas then to Baltimore, Maryland, then - finally - to La Guardia.

A moment while this sinks in.

JAMES

Five layovers? *FIVE* layovers? How long does the flight take to get to New York City?

The ticket agent clicks some buttons.

TICKET AGENT Well, it leaves here at 2:25 p.m. and gets into La Guardia at...

(a beat) ...5:45 p.m. - tomorrow.

#### JAMES

(sighs)
Fine...just give it to me. How much
is it?

CONTINUED: (2)

TICKET AGENT That will be \$403 including all the taxes and fees.

James pulls out his money. He counts through it.

JAMES

Ah, crap.

TICKET AGENT What's wrong, sir?

# JAMES

I have \$343.

TICKET AGENT We do take credit cards, Mr. Steward.

JAMES

Yeah - I just lost my job and my wife turned off the cards - so, yeah, that's not happening.

TICKET AGENT Well, with that attitude, I can't say I'm surprised.

### JAMES

What did you say?

A beat while James realizes that his question is, indeed, rhetorical.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Never mind - look, is there anything you can do? Any way you could cut me a break?

The Ticket Agent thinks for a moment, looking James up and down.

JAMES (CONT'D) I have got to get to New York to win my family back, man - I just need a little grace, a little help. Please.

The Ticket Agent thinks some more.

TICKET AGENT I'm sorry, no. Had you not made a butt out of yourself earlier, I might have considered it - we do, after all, have privileges, doing what we do. But you, sir, are a jerk and a malefactor. 32.

#### JAMES

I don't think you know what that means.

# TICKET AGENT

I will give you 3 seconds before I merely wave and get your friends, the security men back over here. Move along, ruffian.

### JAMES

Who are you?

The Ticket Agent waves to the Security men.

CUT TO:

# EXT. OUTSIDE THE DEPARTURE TERMINAL. CONTINUOUS

The security men push James out of the door. James brushes himself off.

SECURITY MAN 1 You have a great day, Mr. Steward.

JAMES

And a very merry Christmas to you, too, assholes!

A smirk crosses both of their faces before they turn around and walk back into the airport.

James turns around and thinks.

JAMES (CONT'D) Greyhound, it is.

CUT TO:

\*

INT. GREYHOUND STATION. MORNING

James runs into the greyhound station and finds a ticket agent with no line. He runs up to the guy's window.

JAMES I need to get to New York City as soon as possible!

GREYHOUND AGENT Your best bet is going to be to head to Chicago, spend the night and then buy a ticket to New York. JAMES Okay, fine...how much to Chicago?

James pulls out his wallet.

CUT TO:

INT. GREYHOUND BUS. CONTINUOUS

Lionel is an African-American bus driver. He has worked for Greyhound for 37 years. His grey hair sticks out beneath his Greyhound cap. He is quite overweight, but jovial and kind to his riders.

As people get on, he smiles and nods and says little comments to them.

A poorly dressed woman gets on the bus with a little child, whose face is dirty. They are obviously quite poor. Lionel smiles and tickles the little girl as they pause at the top of the stairs, getting ready to walk down the aisle.

> LIONEL Aren't you a cutie pie! Cutie pie!

The little girl giggles and curls up against her mom's leg, peeking out at Lionel.

The woman and her daughter move on and behind her, the last person on the bus, is James.

JAMES

Good morning.

LIONEL Last man on the bus! Congratulations!

### JAMES

What's that mean?

### LIONEL

It means you're the last man on the bus, so we can leave. We have a full bus this morning so whatever seat is left is YOUR seat.

### JAMES

Perfect.

Lionel shuts the door to the bus and begins going through his pre-drive check list as we follow James back through the bus. He finally comes to the last empty seat, about halfway to the back.

# JAMES (CONT'D)

This seat taken?

# SEATMATE

(screams) NO!!!! Just take it if you want it but leave me alone!!!!

James looks around the bus as his fellow customers turn to get a look at the commotion.

JAMES I'm sorry - I was just...nevermind.

His seatmate doesn't answer.

James sits down. He sighs. He'll be here for a while.

Lionel picks up the CB connected to the overhead speakers

LIONEL Well, folks, thank you for choosing Greyhound. We are on our way to Chicago! It's about a 4 hour drive with a few stops along the way - so hold on, now - we're gonna have a great morning!

Lionel puts the bus in drive and takes off. They pull out of the Greyhound parking lot.

CUT TO:

### MONTAGE SEQUENCE

As folkie music plays we see, first the City of Madison, WI pass by, then we see the busy highways, then we see the countryside, then we see snow-covered fields. The montage is broken by....

CUT TO:

INT. GREYHOUND BUS. CONTINUOUS

James stands up quickly

JAMES

What the ....?

He looks down at his seat. There is a small puddle coming in his seat and it's obviously coming from the seatmate next to him.
# JAMES (CONT'D) Oh, God what is that smell?

People around the bus look back at what is happening. James reaches over and nudges his seatmate.

> JAMES (CONT'D) Dude! Sir! Come on, man - you peed or shat or something all over yourself!

James reaches down and looks at the wet spot on his pants. The seatmate doesn't move.

James reaches over and shakes the seatmate.

JAMES (CONT'D) Hey! What is going on?

The seatmate, then just rolls over and falls into the aisle. All hell breaks loose as people begin to scream and yell.

Lionel picks up the CB and comes on the overhead speakers.

# LIONEL What is going on back there?

An indistinct murmur comes as everyone around the situation tries to explain what is happening.

LIONEL (CONT'D) (interrupts) I can't hear if everybody's talking. Just one person talk! Everyone shut up!

The bus becomes quiet.

JAMES Sir, we have a dead guy back here!

Lionel turns around in his seat and looks back at James.

## LIONEL

A what?!?

Lionel turns back and looks at the road, looking at James through the mirror. James slaps the dead guy on the back.

JAMES Yep, he's pretty dead. \*

CONTINUED: (2)

Lionel slams on the breaks, sending James flying to the floor of the aisle where he was standing.

CUT TO:

EXT. MIDDLE OF NOWHERE HIGHWAY. CONTINUOUS

We see the bus screech to a halt on the side of the road.

CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE BUS. CONTINUOUS

Lionel stands up. And freaks out.

LIONEL No one freak out! No one freak out! We just got a dead guy! No one freak out!

Lionel runs off the bus and pukes on the side of the road.

Back on the bus, James tries to pull himself up. As he begins to get up, an older black woman pushes him back down and steps over him.

OLD BLACK WOMAN

I gots to smoke.

She walks to the front of the bus and gets off.

James leans back to the floor and groans, looking above.

JAMES You having fun, God?

He lays there for a moment.

WALLFLOWER (O.S.) You need some help up, mister?

James looks up to see Wallflower Morris, a wispy hippy-type girl in her early thirties Her beautiful brown hair is in pig tails that come down nearly to her waist and her wideeyes give her a facade of innocence.

> JAMES That would be...awesome.

WALLFLOWER I'm Wallflower Morris.

Wallflower puts her hand down.

### JAMES

I'm James Steward.

James takes her hand and begins to get up, as we...

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE THE BUS. DAY

2 police cars and an ambulance sit on the side of the road, beside the Greyhound bus, in the middle of nowhere, Wisconsin.

The EMTs are slowly moving the dead body from the bus to a waiting gurney. The cops are just watching to make sure it all goes down well.

All of the bus passengers are off the bus, milling around, impatiently waiting for their trip to continue.

Wallflower and James stand off to the side.

WALLFLOWER The police seemed like they were really asking you some questions.

### JAMES

Yeah - I mean, I don't know anything, I just feel my leg is wet and the dude falls over dead.

WALLFLOWER Yeah, crazy. You're kind of a hero.

JAMES Um...not sure how that worked out in your head, but - okay.

## WALLFLOWER

You were with him when he died that's something. Everyone needs that. How did it feel to be next to a dead man? Did you feel his soul pass by your face as he went to heaven?

JAMES

He crapped and peed himself. I was his seatmate. How do YOU think it felt?

James points to the wet spot on his pants.

WALLFLOWER

Is that....?

### CONTINUED:

James nods. Wallflower shakes her head.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) Just feels like it should - you know be more romantic than, "Hey I got my dead seatmate's poo on me" - what kind of memorial is that?

#### JAMES

I really want to smoke. I haven't smoked in 15 years. Do you smoke?

WALLFLOWER Don't smoke, James. Every time someone smokes, an angel in heaven gets their wings snipped.

Wallflower looks at the Old Black Woman who stepped over James earlier and gives her a dirty look.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) (to the woman) You're de-winging an angel - hope it feels good, coating your lungs with dream-crushing, wing-clipping tar and carbon dioxide!

The old woman rolls her eyes and take another drag.

OLD BLACK WOMAN

Hippies.

## JAMES

Wallflower, that's not nice...you can't say those kinds of things to people you don't know.

#### WALLFLOWER

She's killing herself and the environment...and probably little furry animals across the world. Smoking is almost as bad as people who don't care enough for their pets.

James doesn't know how to respond. So he doesn't.

The ambulance drives off with the Seatmate's dead body. The cops get in their cars and drive off.

Lionel stands up on the first step of the bus.

### LIONEL

All right, everyone - let's get going. We're running way behind.

CUT TO:

## INT. INSIDE BUS. CONTINUOUS

Everyone makes their way back on the bus. James and Wallflower are together now and they stop next to the seat where the guy died.

JAMES Looks like they cleaned up the mess really well, actually.

## WALLFLOWER

(shakes her head) Sad. A guy dies and all that remains of him 45 minutes later is the clean spot where his poo used to be.

## JAMES

(rolls his eyes) You want his seat or am I taking it?

## WALLFLOWER (horrified) James, he died there.

JAMES All right, I'll take it, then.

# CUT TO:

## INT. INSIDE BUS. DAY

The bus is moving now. We can see the Wisconsin country side fly by beside them.

Wallflower is sitting Indian-style on her seat facing James. Because of her positioning, James is shoved as far against the window as he can be. He looks uncomfortable.

We're obviously catching them in the middle of a conversation.

JAMES At this point, all I want to do is fall asleep, wake up and realize it's all a dream.

## WALLFLOWER

Gosh, what a horrible thing to do. Who does that? Turn off your credit cards when you're in a different state - no way to get home? That isn't nice.

## JAMES

I know, right? It's unbelievable. Now I have to get all the way to New York with two hundred and something dollars left. It's ridiculous.

## WALLFLOWER

Just don't offer your body up to truck drivers for a ride...I've been down that road. They don't take kindly to you reneging on that offer.

Awkward silence

## JAMES

Okay - I'll make sure to not, uh, offer up my body to truck drivers.

## WALLFLOWER

It can be tempting - truck drivers, they drive everywhere, you know? But when you say to them, "I will let you ravage me with your bearded chin", they don't see that as a joking matter. They expect you to follow through. But I'm just not that kind of girl.

JAMES I would absolutely never say that, Wallflower.

WALLFLOWER Believe me, Jammy - is it okay if I call you Jammy?

She doesn't wait for an answer and ignores James' head shaking to say, "No, it's not okay" as she continues:

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) Believe me, Jammy, when you're stuck in the panhandle of North Dakota in the midst of the first fall snows and you need to get to Florida in 2 days, you will do things you once thought impossible.

#### JAMES

Is there a...panhandle to North Dakota?

WALLFLOWER Of course there is.

(changes subject) What are you gonna say to your wife when or if you get home?

James thinks for a moment.

## JAMES

Right now, I'm so pissed off at her that I don't know what I'd say. I'd wanna cuss at her at this point.

# WALLFLOWER

(shakes her head) Oooh, don't do that, James. Every situation can be handled without using curse words.

# JAMES

Well, they *can* - but sometimes a curse word just feels so much better coming out.

## WALLFLOWER

Oh, please. You're telling me that calling your wife the b-word is better than saying, "Why did you do this to me, you perfectly perfect woman who I love even when I hate!"?

## JAMES

(without thinking) I am absolutely saying that using the b-word is better than that.

#### WALLFLOWER

Maybe if the b-word is "baby" - kill people with kindness, Jammy! Come on! You're never gonna change the world using the language of longshoremen.

# JAMES

Longshoremen?

## WALLFLOWER

Longshoremen - they're the tall men who fight against the African witch doctors, Shormen. They cuss a lot.

#### JAMES

Do you mean Shaman? I - I don't know what you're talking about.

#### WALLFLOWER

(waves off his concern) Look, here's the thing: I live in Toledo, OH. That's like, I dunno four, four and a half hours from Chicago. I could use your help getting the dogs from the kennel - if you help me, I'll drive you from Chicago to Toledo. I know it's not, like crazy far, but that's 4 hours you can travel for free.

## JAMES

Wow - that sounds great! That's amazing! I mean from Toledo I can figure out something! I'm not a huge fan of dogs, though...

WALLFLOWER Oh, don't worry...they're great!

JAMES (thinks for a moment) Well, I have to get home.

## WALLFLOWER

Great. Now, you get some sleep, Jammy. You need your rest. You've had a hard coupla days.

She puts her hand over his eyes and holds it there for a long awkward moment. Finally...

JAMES Wallflower, what are you doing?

#### WALLFLOWER

My muh-mah used to do this to me to help me sleep. Go to sleep, Jammy, go to sleep.

Long pause.

#### JAMES

Wallflower, take your hand off my eyes.

She removes her hand. And looks deep into his eyes.

### WALLFLOWER

Are you gonna try to sleep like a big boy?

James just stares at her for a long moment, then he crosses his arms, closes his eyes and puts his head against the window.

#### JAMES

Okay - I'm gonna go to sleep now.

Wallflower reaches up and begins to pet his head like a dog.

## WALLFLOWER

Good boy, good boy.

JAMES Wallflower, don't pet me. Please.

WALLFLOWER Well, you don't have to retreat from all affection just because you feel unloved in one area of your life.

She uncrosses her legs, turns straight in her seat and looks straight ahead.

#### JAMES

I'll see you when I wake up, Wallflower - thank you for everything.

CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE BUS. EARLY EVENING

The bus has come to a stop. James is fast asleep. Wallflower taps him on the shoulder.

# WALLFLOWER

Jammy! Jammy!

James comes awake.

# JAMES

Oh, we're here?

### WALLFLOWER

We made it safe and sound - and only 2 more deaths. Don't worry - you slept through it.

James looks around, still disoriented from waking up, before realizing that she is joking.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) My car is parked around the corner. Let's go!

CUT TO:

## EXT. PARKING LOT. CONTINUOUS

Wallflower and James drag their luggage through a massive parking lot. Wallflower finally stops, looking fondly at her car. We can't quite see the car, but we James looking at it not quite as fondly as Wallflower is.

> WALLFLOWER This is my baby. My first car. It's Vintage now, you know - 1986 - 25 years old. Vintage. In good condition, too.

We see what James sees now: a 1986 Toyota Camry Hatchback Station Wagon. It is one screw falling out away from completely disintegrating.

> JAMES Um - Wallflower, this is your car?

Wallflower pops open the hatchback and moves piles of stuff (empty boxes, paperwork, etc.) around to make room for luggage.

WALLFLOWER Yeah, isn't it great? Go ahead and put your bag in there, Jammy - I'll put mine on top of yours.

James puts his bag in. It overlaps the edge of the door by about an inch.

#### JAMES

It's a little big.

## WALLFLOWER

No, no, it's okay!

She throws her bag on top of his and tries to shut the door. Of course, the door doesn't shut.

She opens the hatchback again, and - instead of maneuvering the bag around, she searches through the pile of crap and grabs 3 long bungee cords. She then secures the hatchback door, not completely shut, but with a couple of inches left open. There we go!

## JAMES Wallflower, this isn't safe.

#### WALLFLOWER

Poppycock!

She walks to the driver's door and gets in. James pauses for a moment.

Inside the car, behind James, we can see Wallflower picking up piles of stuff from the passenger seat and floorboard and just throwing it to the back seat.

Finally, James walks over, opens the passenger door and gets in.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) See? I said poppycock - a perfectly acceptable way to get a point across without cussing!

She starts the car and puts it in reverse. She backs the car out of the spot.

JAMES

I don't think it made the point you think it did.

WALLFLOWER

(very seriously) Oh, yes, it did!

She puts the car in drive. Gears grind and finally the "vintage" Toyota shudders and begins moving forward.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) Oh, don't worry about that - we'll be at 60 miles per hour in no time!

CUT TO:

\*

INT. WALLFLOWER'S CAR. EVENING

We focus on the speedometer: 47 mph. The engine sounds like it is being gunned as hard as it can be gunned. The car is loud - it doesn't help that the hatchback is popped a few inches to make room for the bags.

Wallflower looks determined as she drives, pedal to the medal. James looks worried for the car.

46.

As they speak they need to almost yell to each other to be heard.

#### JAMES

It's been nearly 2 hours, Wallflower - are you sure your car is supposed to sound like this?

## WALLFLOWER

It's only when we're going up hills.

James looks in front of the car - they are actually going DOWN a hill.

### JAMES

Okay.

# WALLFLOWER

Don't worry - we're almost to the place where the dogs are. From there, it's all easy driving. I'm just pushing it, pedal to the metal, to get to my dogs asap!

JAMES Oh, that's even better!

CUT TO:

EXT. ILLINOIS ROAD. CONTINUOUS

We see the 1986 Toyota sputter along.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE DOG KENNEL FARM. NIGHT

A large sign reads: "Happy Farms Kennel and Dog Boarding"

The kennel looks like a beautiful farm.

Wallflower's car turns up the long, beautiful gravel driveway and they make their way into a roundabout where she turns the car around, facing back towards the road.

Wallflower and James get out of the car.

JAMES Wow - this place is really nice.

WALLFLOWER What is wrong with you, James? Do you have no conscience? 47.

### JAMES

Um...what?

## WALLFLOWER

Look, get in the car, keep it running and when I get back, be ready to drive - we've got a ways to go!

James looks a little confused, but before he can press it, Wallflower goes running into the kennel.

JAMES (to himself) Oh, my God. What a fruit loop.

James waits for a while, trying to keep himself occupied. He plays air drums to a song he hums to himself. He runs in place for a bit. He picks gravel up off the ground and throws it into the grass, working on his pitching motion.

Suddenly, the front door to the kennel bursts open and Wallflower comes running out with roughly 15 dogs on leashes.

KENNEL OWNER (O.S.) Stop! What are you doing?!?

WALLFLOWER James! Get in the car! Get in the car! We've got to go!

### JAMES

What the...

The Kennel Owner runs out holding a shotgun.

KENNEL OWNER Stop! Stop or I'll shoot.

Wallflower opens the passenger side back door and manages to fit in 5-6 dogs. The rest she just lets run away. Wallflower shuts the door and then hops in the passenger side front door.

### JAMES

Oh, my God!

The kennel owner lifts the shotgun to his shoulder as James jumps in the drivers side door, puts the car in gear and guns the gas pedal as hard as he can. The car sputters off.

The kennel owner fires off a warning shot over the car.

## JAMES (CONT'D)

Shit!

## WALLFLOWER

No, Jammy! No! The puppies will hear you and repeat! Do you want it on your conscience?

The car speeds up and down the driveway.

Behind them, we see the Kennel Owner running down the driveway after them, shaking his fist.

The 1986 Toyota Camry gets to the bottom of the driveway and screams around the corner, screeching and groaning like it might fall apart.

James gets control of the vehicle, bringing the car straight in the correct lane.

JAMES What the crap is going on?

WALLFLOWER

James, dog kennels are the Gulag Archipelagos of the 21st century!

## JAMES

What?! You're comparing boarding homes for pets to Siberian prisons under Communism?!

### WALLFLOWER

I wouldn't expect YOU to understand, Jammy. Your eyes are blinded by the mainstream media, trying to conservatively present the facts for all you straight-laced Republicans in the world!

#### JAMES

No one thinks the media is conservative!!!

## WALLFLOWER

Heck, yes, it is! They cover up the horrors of the Doglag Archipelagos with conservative propaganda every single hour of every single day!

Silence as James thinks.

#### JAMES

Who are you?

## WALLFLOWER

We consider ourselves Freedom Fighters, on the same level as Rosa Parks and Steve-O.

JAMES

Rosa Parks? Steve-O? Ourselves?

### WALLFLOWER

There's thousands of us - we are a group called the No Dog Left Behind collective.

(thinks a moment) Unfortunately, usually when we jailbreak dogs, many, many dogs get left behind. Perhaps we should call it the Few-Dogs-As-Possible Left Behind Collective.

James shakes his head.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) Jammy, I wish I could save them all but we just don't have time!

There is a long silence as James drives.

### JAMES

I swear to God, Wallflower - if I get arrested, I will murder every one of these dogs and feel no remorse.

Wallflower looks back at the dogs, who look sad, then back - \* angrily - at James. \*

## WALLFLOWER

Look at them! They can hear you, James. They understand the words coming out of your mouth - and those words hurt!

## JAMES

They're dogs, Wallflower.

## WALLFLOWER

And THAT is exactly what the conservative mainstream media like CNN want you to believe.

She crosses her arms and looks out her window.

James drives.

\*

\*

EXT. OUTSIDE OF A GAS STATION. NIGHT

James fills up the car with gas while Wallflower is inside. James takes out his cellphone and dials a number, then puts the phone up to his ear.

We hear the phone ring then, almost immediately, the voice mail message picks up.

ERICA (V.O.) You've reached Erica, leave me a message!

JAMES Erica...I - I don't know what to say right now. I'm confused. I'm pissed. I'm hurt. I'm killing myself to get to you, but I have no freaking money; I'm in the middle of god knows where Ohio, hitching a ride with a crazy hippy girl...

(long pause)
I just want us to be back to what it
was. I don't understand what you're
doing.

(he sighs) Call me back.

He hangs up the phone as Wallflower comes out of the store.

WALLFLOWER The gas attendant said it's only like an hour to my house! Yay! Not much longer!

James replaces the gas pump.

#### JAMES

You're driving.

## WALLFLOWER

Yay!

James tosses her the keys and Wallflowers runs around the car to the driver's side.

CUT TO:

# EXT. STEWARD HOME. NIGHT

Erica is corralling the kids out the front door. The kids don't seem extremely happy to be leaving the house.

(CONTINUED)

## MCCARTNEY

Mom, we all 3 know that Santa isn't real. Why do we have to go and pretend that the fat guy dressed in a red suit is going to bring us presents. We all know that you and dad will stay up all night Christmas Eve, putting toys together.

## WILLIE

Santa isn't real?

SARA

Mom and dad make our toys? I thought elves made our toys.

#### ERICA

McCartney! Come on!

They get out to the car and everyone gets buckled in. Erica runs around the driver's side front door and gets in.

CUT TO:

## INT. INSIDE STEWARD FAMILY MINIVAN. CONTINUOUS

Erica starts the car and puts it in reverse.

SARA

When is daddy going to come home and build our toys, then?

Erica keeps her foot on the brake and doesn't move. She thinks for a moment.

ERICA

Sara, we aren't really sure right now exactly when daddy is coming home.

WILLIE Daddy is a poo-poo head.

ERICA Willie! Why would you say that?

## WILLIE

He's not coming home for Christmas. I never get to see daddy. I never get to punch him or wrestle him or jump on him!

#### ERICA

I know, baby. Daddy is just very busy.

(MORE)

ERICA (CONT'D) Just know this - all 3 of you, listen to me: no matter what happens in he next few months, know that we have all done our very best to try and love each other. And daddy will, hopefully spend some more time with you!

All 3 kids nod, and Erica punches the gas a little bit and the car lurches backwards towards the end of the driveway.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE RODEWAY INN - TOLEDO. NIGHT

Wallflower's car pulls over to the side of the road in front of the hotel and James gets out of the passenger's side.

Wallflower gets out and helps James unhook the bungee cords and get his bag out.

Once his bag is on the curb, James turns around to Wallflower.

JAMES Wallflower, this has definitely been an experience!

Wallflower runs over and hugs him.

WALLFLOWER Aw, I love you, too, Jammy!

She lets him go from the hug but holds his hands in hers, looking deep into his eyes.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D)

Jammy, I've been thinking about your situation: when I was seven, my dad was killed by a refrigerator that fell off the back of the truck.

JAMES

Oh, gosh, that's horrible. Was he moving it or something, helping friends move, or what?

## WALLFLOWER

Oh, no...we were driving along and it flew off a truck and hit our car. It was the craziest thing I've ever seen. (MORE) \*

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) Anyway, when he died and I didn't have a dad anymore, I promised myself and God - if there is a God - that I would have a cause in life and I would believe in something and make a difference.

An awkward pause.

WALLFLOWER (CONT'D) (suddenly serious) Look at me, James - I'm batshit crazy. I needed a daddy. Don't let your kids end up like me. Save your family. Do what you have to do to save your family.

She looks into his eyes a moment longer, then hugs him and turns and walks to the car, opening the driver's door. As she gets in...

JAMES Wallflower - you said a curse word.

WALLFLOWER (smiles) There's only one way to describe batshit crazy, Jammy.

(a beat)
Plus, the dogs couldn't hear me, so
it's all okay.

She waves at James and gets in the car. James waves back. Wallflower's piece of crap car pulls away. James watches it go.

JAMES

(to himself)
She is batshit crazy - god, I've got
to save my family.

CUT TO:

INT. RODEWAY INN. NIGHT

The bell above the front door rings as James walks in, dragging his bag behind him. He walks up to the unoccupied front desk. He looks around - no one is there.

JAMES

Hello? Hello?

### CONTINUED:

He sees a bell that says "ring for service" and he rings it just as an Indian-American man rounds the corner of the office. As the hotel manager talks he has a very thick Indian accent.

> HOTEL MANAGER I am riiight here! You do NOT need to ring dey bell!

The hotel manager grabs the bell to keep it from ringing.

HOTEL MANAGER (CONT'D) All day long, you Amereekans ring dis bell like it is nobody's bidness. I am not a bellboy. I am not your indentured servant. I own dees hotel! Own it! I am Amereekan as much as you!

JAMES

I'm really sorry - there was just no one around. Just trying to get help - it's been a long day.

HOTEL MANAGER Try working 20 hours a day, helping spoiled Amereekans check into a 45 dollar a night hotel. I have hookers, here, suh. Hoooookers! I did not come from India to run a brothel. I came for the Amereekan dream!

JAMES I just need a room, man.

HOTEL MANAGER Fine - I require credit card and driver's license.

James pulls out his wallet and hands him the credit car and license.

HOTEL MANAGER (CONT'D) This information is correct?

JAMES Yes - but I'll pay for the room with cash.

HOTEL MANAGER

No.

## JAMES

No?

No.

JAMES My credit card isn't working. I need to pay with cash.

# HOTEL MANAGER

I must have something to hold for damages, if you decide to go rock star on dey room. All the time, these hooookers are trashing the room, leaving powdered sugar all over deh place. I have to clean this up! I must have credit card for deh room!

#### JAMES

Look, man - can't we figure something out?

The hotel manager throws the card and license on the counter.

HOTEL MANAGER You Amereekans think everyone will just make exceptions for you! Not today, Amereekan! Not today!

JAMES

What is your problem?

HOTEL MANAGER Get out! There is no room in the inn! No room in the inn!

James storms out of the hotel and looks around. He goes over and kicks a flower planter as hard as he can. The planter doesn't budge. James jumps up and down, in pain.

> JAMES Oh, gosh, that hurt! Dammit! Frick! Shit!

He sits down on the edge of the planter and looks around. Right across the street he sees a Super 8 hotel. He sighs and stands up and, with a limp, begins to walk, dragging his bag behind.

CUT TO:

# INT. SUPER 8 HOTEL. CONTINUOUS

The door pings as James makes his way into the hotel lobby, dragging his suitcase behind him.

56.

In this hotel, when he walks in, a gentle-looking older man with a full beard is waiting at the counter.

HOTEL CLERK Hello. How can we help you today?

JAMES

I need a room - it has been a horrible day. I have a credit card but it doesn't work, so I'd have to pay with cash. Is that okay?

HOTEL CLERK

(smiles)
You look like you're gonna be okay.
I'll just copy your credit card just
in case - but cash is just fine.

JAMES

Oh, gosh - you don't know how grateful I am right now.

The old clerk smiles. And James makes his way to the counter.

CUT TO:

INT. SUPER 8 HOTEL ROOM. CONTINUOUS

James is settled into his hotel room. He sits down on the edge of the bed. He picks up his phone again and dials a number. The phone rings and, again, immediately goes to voicemail.

ERICA (V.O.) You've reached Erica - leave me a message!

James immediately hangs up.

JAMES C'mon, Erica, just pick up the freaking phone!

James throws the phone against the wall. It shatters into pieces.

He puts his head in his hands and rubs his eyes. And then he begins sniffling. Slowly, surely it goes from sniffling to sobbing, his body racking the bed. After a short moment the sobs move back to sniffling.

He walks over to the bathroom, gets a kleenex and blows his nose and wipes his eyes.

## JAMES (CONT'D)

Whew!

He stands in the bathroom for a short moment. Then he rushes over to his suitcase and opens it, rifling through the contents of his suitcase until he pulls out a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

He unscrews the top, puts the bottle to his lips and takes a long, deep drink from the bottle.

He sits down on the edge of the bed again and then takes another long drink from the bottle. He nearly gags as he pulls the bottle away from his lips.

> JAMES (CONT'D) Ugh, that is one recipe that hasn't gotten any better-tasting since college.

He shakes his head, then puts the bottle up to his lips again.

CUT TO:

# INT. SUPER 8 HOTEL ROOM. MORNING

We focus on a now nearly-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. We see an arm and we follow it up the bed to find James laying on the edge of the bed, deep in sleep. He is still fullyclothed and is drooling pretty severely.

There's a knock on the door and James stirs, barely.

HOUSEKEEPING (O.S.) Housekeeping, excuse me?

James stirs a little more.

HOUSEKEEPING (O.S) (CONT'D) Are you still there? Hello?

James turns over and groans an answer:

JAMES Not yet! Not yet!

HOUSEKEEPING (O.S.)

Sorry!

James lays there for another minute and gets up and walks into the bathroom and shuts the door.

James walks into the lobby for breakfast. He wears sun glasses to shield his sensitive eyes from the bright light.

He walks over and grabs a bowl of cereal, fills it with milk and then sits down.

At the table next to him, 2 men sit, talking. JOSE RAMIREZ is an ugly Mexican man in his mid to late 40's. He is short and squatty, reminds you of a bulldog and just looks dirty, even though he most likely just stepped out of the shower.

WALLACE PERKINS is a white man in his early 30's. Wallace has his hair dyed light blonde and wears a white t-shirt and baggy, sagging black jeans.

James eavesdrops on their conversation from his table.

JOSE I'm telling you, bro, Pittsburgh to Philly is the safest and best way to the city.

WALLACE

Just seems like it's out of the way. But - hey, you've been doing this way longer than me, man.

JOSE Yeah - best I can guess is that, from here, we're looking at like 10 hours.

WALLACE I've never been into New York City -I'm pumped.

JOSE This milk looks sketchy, huh?

WALLACE (in the middle of taking a bite of cereal) Sketchy, how?

JOSE Just looks a little cottage cheesey, right?

Wallace leans in to look at his milk. Jose slaps the back of Wallace's head, causing his face to plunge into his cereal.

Wallace stands up, ready to fight.

## WALLACE

What was that for?

Jose holds up his hands in defense.

JOSE

Whoa, whoa, whoa, Wallace! I'm just messing with you. Calm down! Sit down! Just messing!

WALLACE Dang, Jose - you gotta watch that stuff.

Wallace thinks for a moment, then sits down. James uses this moment to interject himself into the conversation.

JAMES Excuse me - hi, I'm James...James Steward.

JOSE Hello, I'm Jose - this is Wallace. What's up?

### JAMES

I couldn't help but overhear that you guys are on your way to New York City. I am in desperate need of a ride. Do you think I could hitch along with you guys.

Jose is hesitant. He looks at Wallace, grimacing.

JOSE I dunno, man - it's a bit out of the...ordinary.

#### JAMES

Ordinary?

### WALLACE

Ah, it's okay, Jose - quit being so tight! The guy's in desperate need! It's 2 days before Christmas. We got to let him come with us!

JOSE Shit. You're right. You're right.

(to James) All right, bro. What's the story?

### JAMES

My company sold and left me stranded in Wisconsin and my wife separated from me and cut off my credit cards and such, leaving me stranded - in Wisconsin. I just want to - I have to get back and try to get my family back.

Wallace has tears in his eyes. Jose notices the tears.

JOSE

What's wrong, bro?

### WALLACE

That is the single greatest thing I've ever heard! This is like a modern Wonderful Life or something! This guy is going to get his family back! And we are going to help him!

JOSE Hell, yes, we are! James, we are going to help you!

JAMES

Oh, my gosh, thank you! Let me just go grab my stuff.

James gets up and jogs out of the lobby to run to his room to get his stuff. Wallace and Jose watch him run out.

WALLACE

Ah, man - this is gonna be awesome. Someday, when he tells this story to his kids, you and me and are probably gonna be the heroes of the story.

JOSE

I ain't never been the hero.

WALLACE Me, neither! Think about that: (he looks off in the distance) Wallace and Jose - the frickin heroes!

Jose joins him in looking off into the distance.

JOSE The frickin heroes.

> (snaps to it) (MORE)

CONTINUED: (3)

JOSE (CONT'D) All right, we gotta cover up the stuff, you know, before he gets in the car.

Jose stands up and runs out. Wallace stands up, takes one last drink of coffee and then follows Jose out.

CUT TO:

EXT. SUPER 8 HOTEL. CONTINUOUS

Jose and Wallace stand outside of a brand new black Cadillac Escalade as James comes out of his room. James' eyes widen: it's not a freaking 1986 Toyota Camry Hatchback.

JAMES

Wow.

## JOSE

Nice, right?

# WALLACE Let's get outta here, bro!

Wallace opens the back door.

WALLACE (CONT'D) The back space is all taken - I hope it's okay, but you'll hafta put your suitcase up here.

James looks through the open car door then back at Wallace.

JAMES Man I just rode on a Greyhound bus and a crappy vintage hatchback - this is heaven. You guys are way too nice.

Wallace takes James' bag and tosses it in on the back seat.

JOSE You can get in on my side, bro.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY. CONTINOUS

The Escalade flies down the highway, the beautiful black gleaming in the sunlight.

INT. INSIDE ESCALADE. CONTINUOUS

Jose drives and Wallace sits in the passenger seat. James' bag sits on the seat behind Wallace, while James sits behind Jose.

Behind James a couple of blankets cover up whatever they are transporting.

JOSE So, in one day your company gets bought out, you don't know if you have a job anymore - a job you've worked 15 years up the chain - and then your wife leaves you stranded in Wisconsin?

James nods.

JOSE (CONT'D) Has she ever been to Wisconsin?

WALLACE Bro, I don't even know what I'd do if my wife did that crap to me.

JOSE I know what I'd do.

A pause while everyone waits to hear what he'd do.

WALLACE What? What would you do?

JOSE

I'd go home and cry my face off and ask her forgiveness.

(shrugs) But I'm a pussy when it comes to my wife - she is a strong woman.

### WALLACE

Nah, bro...I'd, like, show her who was boss, say, "Cmon, girl - you know daddy done taken care of you. Why you playing me like dat?"

JOSE

Wallace, you are the either the blackest white dude or the whitest black dude I ever met.

## JAMES

(laughs) I think I'm getting closer to figuring out my approach to all of this.

JOSE

What you gonna do, bro?

## JAMES

I'm gonna ring the doorbell, and when she answers it I'm gonna say something like,

(as he speaks he becomes more and more agitated) "Erica - you want a divorce, I'll give you what you want. But you should know this - I'll be coming after everything: the house, the cars, the kids - I want it all. I've done nothing but provide for you and now you're gonna freaking treat me like this, leave me out in the middle of Wisconsin, make me have to bum rides the whole freaking way home? Who the hell does that ?!! Who are you ?! Where is my wife that I fell in love with? What made you so cold? We haven't had sex in months, you mag me about the kids all the time, you get to do whatever you want, you get to spend time with the kids whenever you want to and I'm out working my ass off trying to make a life for you and the kids, for us and all you can do is complain ?! Who are you? What is wrong with you? WHAT. THE. HELL. IS. WRONG. WITH. YOU?!!!

Long, awkward silence.

## JOSE

Bro, this isn't a criticism or anything - so, you know, don't take it bad or nothing - but I think that might be - just maybe a little, uh...

## WALLACE

(interrupts) Dude, you sounded like Eminem when he's talking about Kim, yo!

James thinks.

JAMES

I don't know what that means: just a little over the top?

JOSE Bro...like not even a little. My wife would go get a gun and shoot my face if I talked like that.

JAMES

I dunno what to do. I just feel so...so angry. I've worked so hard to make a life for her, for us. It's like she doesn't understand that I'm working my tail off *FOR* her.

(a sigh)
I mean - I miss the kids as much as
they miss me. I just have to...I have
to do what I have to do get by.

(a beat) It's...never enough.

JOSE It never is, bro - that's marriage.

James leans against the window as the world flies by.

CUT TO:

INT. STEWARD HOME - KITCHEN. MORNING

Erica is in the kitchen baking and cooking, working on a meal for Christmas eve. Flour covers the kitchen island and she has pots and pans all over the place - she is making a big something or another.

McCartney walks into the kitchen.

MCCARTNEY Mom, I need you in the other room, please.

ERICA All right, honey - in a minute.

MCCARTNEY No - I need you right now, please.

Erica looks at him, thinks for a moment, then nods.

ERICA

Okay.

### CONTINUED:

She takes off her apron and sets it down on the counter.

McCartney leads her into the living room and points to the lazy boy chair. Erica sits down.

# ERICA (CONT'D) What's going on, McCartney?

### MCCARTNEY

I have put together a...presentation.

He opens up a laptop computer and as the screen comes to life there is a picture of James and Erica on their wedding day. They look younger, more innocent...less tired.

ERICA

McCartney, baby - what is this?

MCCARTNEY

This is my presentation. You aren't allowed to talk anymore until I'm done - okay?

## ERICA

Baby, I -

MCCARTNEY You can't talk, mom - okay?

ERICA (thinks for a moment) Okay, baby. Go ahead.

### MCCARTNEY

(points the picture) You and dad got married - you were 22 and he was almost 23. You met in college.

He pushes a button and a picture of James in a flag football outfit pops up.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) He was athletic and good-looking and smart. After your first date, he tried to kiss you - but you said you weren't that kind of girl.

He pushes another button and Erica as a young sorority girl pops up. She looks like an All-American girl. She surrounded by 2 or 3 friends.

> MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) But he took you out again, even though you didn't put out.

CONTINUED: (2)

Erica looks shocked.

## ERICA

McCartney!

# MCCARTNEY No talking, mom! You promised.

Erica pretends to zip her lips.

McCartney pushes a button and a picture of them on their graduation day pops up.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) You graduated from college the same day.

He hits the button and their wedding picture pops up, then another, then another, then another.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) And you got married the next day. 4 years later....

He pushes the button and a pic of James holding a grimecovered newborn pops up.

> MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) ...I popped out of your birth canal. Though this picture doesn't show it, I was as cute a baby as anyone had ever seen.

He hits the button and a picture of a very, very cute baby pops up.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) There we go - proof!

Erica laughs.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) Then 2 years later, another baby...

A picture of James and Erica in a hospital bed holding a pink, brand new baby: Sara.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) Not as cute as your first, but adorable, nonetheless.

A pic of McCartney on his first day of school. He looks like an overdressed preppy kid, with a way-too-big backpack on. Standing next to him is a teary-eyed Erica.

MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) You sent me to school and a year later, another baby - not an accident, but a blessing...which basically means you and dad forgot to put on a condom. Erica looks like she might choke. A pic of Willie as a baby pops up. MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) He's the baby of the family, so he'll always be a little bratty - but he was cute anyway. A graph pops up. MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) This is a graph that shows the percentage of families whose kids live a normal life after divorce. The numbers aren't good, mom. Another graph pops up. MCCARTNEY (CONT'D) And chances are that if we live with only one of you guys - and it's you that either me or Willie will end up gay. ERICA Baby, I'm okay if you're gay. MCCARTNEY I like the ladies, mom! Shhh! Another graph pops up. ERICA What is that? MCCARTNEY This graph is 2 things: the first is your chances at true happiness after divorce. 33% chance. ERICA What's the other side of it? The other side of the graph is 1%

MCCARTNEY The chances I'll be happy.

#### CONTINUED: (4)

Tears spring into Erica's eyes. She grabs McCartney and pulls him close.

## ERICA

Oh, baby, oh, baby...

#### MCCARTNEY

(now cries) Mom, don't get a divorce - we can work it out, whatever is wrong, we can work it out: me, you and dad.

ERICA Oh, honey, you're eleven - let us figure out the hard stuff, okay?

Erica holds him tight as we ...

FADE TO:

EXT. SIDE OF THE ROAD IN BROADMAN, OH. DAY

STANLEY LOWELL is a large bear of a man. He was made to be a police officer. He looks natural in his perfectly ironed uniform.

RAYNE DOWNS is smaller, pudgier and uglier. But he and Stanley have been friends forever, so when one went in the force, they both did.

Their squad car is sitting on the side of the highway, shielded from the oncoming cars' view by a stand of trees. Stanley leans over the squad car, elbow on the roof of the car, pointing a large radar gun towards to road.

Rayne holds a massive shotgun in his hands.

STANLEY

This is the perfect freaking place to catch idiots speeding. Gosh, it's so perfect. We are going to rack up the tickets today.

#### RAYNE

Dude, this gun is so freaking bad ace. I'm gonna shoot it into the woods. Can I, Stanley? Can I?

#### STANLEY

Rayne - you know we're not supposed to shoot guns for real out here.

### RAYNE

C'mon, man! It's so awesome and it's just sitting here, doing nothing except look awesome in my hands!

Stanley looks around and thinks.

## STANLEY

All right, just once: I kinda wanna see what kind of damage it does to a tree. But point it away from any kind of traffic - okay?

Rayne points the gun into a stand of trees and takes careful aim. Stanley puts down the radar gun and puts his fingers in his ears.

Rayne pulls the trigger and the gun not only bucks him back a few feet, but blows a hole three feet around in the branches of the trees.

## RAYNE

Holy shit!

## STANLEY

# Holy shit is right!

Rayne looks back at Stanley and gives him a thumbs up, with the gun pointed at the ground. Suddenly the shotgun fires into the ground, but with firing, it flies out of Rayne's hand and lands on the ground.

Both police officers dive to the ground, trying to avoid being shot. Once they realize there's no more gunfire coming. They both stand up and look at each other.

Then they laugh. Hard. They talk through laughter:

STANLEY (CONT'D) God dang you're a freaking moron!

#### RAYNE

It just shot! Just about kicked my butt!

## STANLEY

What do you mean "about kicked your butt"?

#### RAYNE

I should get this for myself for Christmas.

#### STANLEY

You're a moron.

(CONTINUED)

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- 7
- \*

\*

\*

CONTINUED: (2)

They laugh.

CUT TO:

## INT. INSIDE ESCALADE. DAY

James is asleep as Wallace and Jose whisper up front.

WALLACE We got to be really careful through here, man - I've heard about these hicks in Ohio, man - they're just looking to pull people over and we CAN'T get pulled over.

#### JOSE

We ain't gonna get pulled over, bro. We'll just book it. This thing has an engine that can outrun any cop car.

#### WALLACE

What? Are you freaking crazy? You gonna try to outrun a cop car? Just don't speed in the first place! We get pulled over with this package and we're dead, yo!

### JAMES (O.S.)

What package?

Wallace and Jose turn around. James is awake and he heard some of the conversation.

JOSE Oh, don't worry about it, bro. It's nothing.

# WALLACE

(shakes his head) Yeah, nothing, nothing at all.

#### JAMES

Sounds like something if you're wanting to outrun the police.

Wallace and Jose look at each other, nervous now.

### WALLACE

So - you know - we're happy to help you out.

JOSE Yeah - you needed help and we stepped up, right, bro? Right?
# JAMES

Guys, what is the package?

WALLACE Look - we are transporters.

JAMES

What is the package?!

Wallace and Jose look at each other, trying to decide if they should tell James the truth. Jose finally nods.

WALLACE

We transport...drugs, James - that's our job.

JAMES

Ah, crap! Ah, crap - it just gets better and better!

WALLACE We have 1800 pounds of pot in the back.

# JAMES

Holy crap!

He reaches back and pulls up one of the blankets: yep - it's pot.

JOSE You know how you keep asking if somebody farted or if there was a dead skunk?

(gestures back at the pot) Now, you know.

Wallace shrugs.

JAMES

(quietly to himself) My life is a bad dream. No - it's a horror movie. Real life can't be this bad.

(he pinches himself) Nope - still here.

We see the Escalade zoom past the stand of trees Stanley and Rayne are hiding behind.

72.

CONTINUED: (2)

JOSE Bro, it's all good - nothing is going to happen!

CUT TO:

EXT. SIDE OF THE ROAD IN BROADMAN, OH. CONTINUOUS

Stanley looks at the radar gun. Rayne looks, excitedly, expectantly at Stanley, hoping against hope that someone was speeding.

Stanley looks over at Rayne.

STANLEY

11 miles over!

RAYNE

Yes!

They both hurriedly get in the car and take off after the Escalade.

CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE ESCALADE. CONTINUOUS

JAMES Guys, I think maybe you should just let me out, just pull over. I'll walk to New York City.

WALLACE Man, it's all gonna be all right!

Jose looks in his rear view mirror and his face goes as white as it can.

JOSE

Oh, shit.

JAMES Oh, shit? Oh, shit, what?

JOSE

We got company.

JAMES

Company? What does that mean?

James rolls down his window and sticks his head out the window, seeing the cop car - lights flashing - behind them. James comes back inside the car.

JAMES (CONT'D) THIS IS AWESOME, JOSE!! WELL DONE!!! SO MUCH FOR HAVING IT UNDER CONTROL!!!!

JOSE

I'll lose them, bro.

James looks to the heavens.

# JAMES

Did I do something to piss you off, God? Did I not go to church enough? Did I screw someone over without knowing it? Just tell me what I did cuz this is really starting to suck!!! I really want off the merry-go-round!

Jose looks at Wallace, then back at the road, then back at Wallace, who nods. And Jose guns it!

CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE SQUAD CAR. CONTINUOUS

Stanley and Rayne watch as the Escalade does not slow down but instead takes off in front of them.

### STANLEY

Awwww, shit! We got ourselves a chase!

RAYNE

Whoooooo-hoooooo

Stanley guns it!

CUT TO:

#### MAP MONTAGE SEQUENCE

We see a map of Southeastern Ohio and Northwestern Pennsylvania from Broadman, OH to Pittsburgh, PA.

The map shows the topography and 2 model cars being pushed in stop-motion graphics. An arrow follows each car - the red arrow being the Escalade, the blue arrow being the squad car.

The cars go down into Pennsylvania, then they get off on an exit and go back into Ohio, then a u-turn and they're back into Pennsylvania.

# CONTINUED:

Music plays behind this.

CUT TO:

## EXT. HIGHWAY OUTSIDE PITTSBURGH. NIGHT

The Escalade drives at crazy speeds down the highway with the squad car tight on its tail.

Up ahead we see a roadblock set up by the Pittsburgh police.

CUT TO:

INT. SQUAD CAR. CONTINUOUS

STANLEY Hell yes! We're the heroes in this one, buddy!

RAYNE

Boom-chick-a-wow-wow - we're gonna get some ladies tonight!

CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE ESCALADE. CONTINUOUS

JAMES

Just pull over, Jose! There's a road block - they're going to get us no matter what! There's nothing we can do.

Jose looks over at Wallace, who nods.

And Jose guns it!

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY OUTSIDE PITTSBURGH. NIGHT

We can see the Escalade about a half mile down the road barreling towards the roadblock.

The cops run a massive spike strip across the road.

The Escalade barrels towards the strip and runs over it, immediately screeching and swerving as the metal rims connect with pavement.

75.

### CONTINUED:

And, suddenly the Escalade flips over on it's side and rolls down the highway, eventually coming to a stop upright a few yards in front of all the squad cars set up for the roadblock.

Cops run from the cars and get to the Escalade, guns drawn.

Jose and Wallace sit in the front seat, hands raised, smiling. They don't look too worse for wear, considering the wreck.

James sits in the back looking up at Jose and Wallace. He has a gash above his eye and he has most likely broken his nose as blood gushes over his mouth.

JAMES I'm gonna kill you stupid freaking morons.

Cops turn their guns to point at James. Jose waves at the cops, then points to Wallace and himself.

JOSE He's talking to us, bros.

CUT TO:

### INT. PITTSBURGH POLICE STATION. NIGHT

James is sitting at a table, his hands constrained behind his back. He has a bandage above his right eye and toilet paper in his nose to stop the bleeding.

Detective Roger Rose is dressed in a white button down shirt with a large floral print tie. He is in his early 30's and is relatively good-looking.

> JAMES Man, I'm just an insurance salesman who got mixed up with the wrong people, man. You've got to believe me.

Rose sits down.

#### ROSE

So - you're telling me that you're just this guy who needed a ride and you JUST happened to get picked up by 2 drug mules who JUST happened to lead police on a one hundred mile long chase through not one, but TWO states, and JUST happened to have the largest amount of pot ever seized in the history of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania on board their very expensive SUV.

James nods.

### JAMES

That...sounds about right.

Rose slams his fist down on the table.

# ROSE

That's bullshit, James! I'm calling bullshit! That's too many dang coincidences for me to believe, man! It's too much.

James chuckles.

#### JAMES

If you only knew the crap I've been through the last 3 days - this is just one layer on top of a shit cake that is growing taller and taller by the hour, layer upon layer upon layer. And you, Lieutenant? You're the icing.

# ROSE

This is funny to you. This is funny to you? You're gonna go to jail for a long time, James. A long freaking time!

James chuckles again.

# JAMES

Funny? Funny? I'll tell you what's funny! I just want to get home to my kids and be Santa and build some freaking toys on Christmas Eve.

Rose walks over to the door.

\*

ROSE

You can make your phone call in a minute, James - you're probably gonna need to let your kids know you won't be home for Christmas.

Rose opens the door and walks out.

James leans back in his chair and just starts laughing. His laughing builds until he is just laughing hysterically.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATION ROOM. CONTINUOUS

Rose walks into the room where another detective is standing, drinking coffee.

ROSE

This is it, right? This is the one!

DETECTIVE

You're sick.

CUT TO:

\*

\*

INT. SECOND INTERVIEW ROOM. CONTINUOUS

Stanley and Rayne have somehow finagled their way into grilling Jose and Wallace. They stand behind the table where Jose and Wallace sit with their hands and feet shackled.

STANLEY

Hey, Rayne - how dumb does someone hafta be to actually think they can outrun the PO-lice?

RAYNE

I dunno - like pretty dang dumb, I
guess. Don't they know we got sonar,
radar...phasers?

STANLEY

Hey, Rayne - how dumb do you think someone would hafta be to think they could travel through OUR jurisdiction carrying 1800 pounds of mary-jewwanna?

Rayne leans down between Jose and Wallace.

### RAYNE

I'd say as dumb as these guys - I guess. Or, in other words - pretty dang dumb.

### STANLEY

Hey, Rayne - how dumb do you think someone....

### JOSE

(interrupts) Okay, okay, we get it - you think we're dumb.

Stanley walks around to stand in front of the 2 drug mules.

### STANLEY

Nah - I don't think you're dumb - I know beyond a shadow of a doubt you guys are stupid asses. I'm gonna have my friend Rayne here tell you wassup.

Rayne, still behind the 2, leans down, again, between the 2.

### RAYNE

We are the cops who brought you down, guys! We are heroes; you are zeroes. Tonight we will have our pick of the ladies; tonight you will be the ladies picked out by some large men who want some attention.

STANLEY

Ka-boom. Don't pretend like it don't hurt - it hurts.

WALLACE What's your point, man? What do you want?

RAYNE We got what we want - we got you!

STANLEY And we are gonna GET LAID tonight!

RAYNE

We are gonna have sex with women together in the same room.

Jose, Wallace and Stanley all look confused.

#### CONTINUED: (2)

Rayne, as he talks, seems to go into his own little world.

## RAYNE

Heck, yeah - we will rent a room together, we'll both bring chicks back and we'll each have a bed and we'll both be having sex with our women and every now and then I might glance over at what's happening next door, you know - he'll be doing his thing and I'll be like learning stuff from his love-making techniques and it'll be awesome!

Rayne looks up, snapping out of his dream sequence.

#### WALLACE

Whoa, bro! You wanna look over at your best friend while you're doing it?

JOSE

Like - you're saying you got yourself a girl, she's naked, you're doing it and you're gonna take the time to look over at the naked dude having sex next to you?

Rayne suddenly looks nervous. He blows them off.

#### RAYNE

Well - when you say it like that it's just what friends do, man. It's not weird at all.

He looks over at Stanley.

#### STANLEY

That's weird, man.

### RAYNE

Pssht...it's just a joke - we'll each get girls and do 'em in our different rooms, maybe leave our phone off the hook so we can listen to each other while we're doing it. I...

### STANLEY

That's not better, man. Get the hell out of here - I need to questions these idiots and you're just getting in the way.

Rayne looks crushed. He meanders over to the door.

CONTINUED: (3)

STANLEY (CONT'D)

Out! Get out!

Rayne leaves the room.

STANLEY (CONT'D) (to Jose and Wallace) He's my best friend. He just...goes overboard sometimes.

JOSE (shakes his head) It's all good, man - ain't nobody judging here.

CUT TO:

# INT. PITTSBURGH'S JAIL PHONE. CONTINUOUS

James picks up the phone and dials a number. We hear the phone ring and then it connects.

ERICA (O.S.) (through phone) Hello?

JAMES Oh, god, Erica - you finally picked up.

A pause

ERICA (O.S.) Where are you calling from?

JAMES

It's a long story...I'll tell you the whole thing later - but here's the thing: I'm in jail.

ERICA (O.S.) What?! In jail?

#### JAMES

Yes. I, uh, got arrested for transporting 1800 pounds of pot through Ohio and crossing over into Pennsylvania. I mean - I didn't know! (MORE) 81.

### JAMES (CONT'D)

I mean, I knew right before we got caught but the guys I was riding with were drug mules and they were giving me a ride and it smelled like skunk and I thought it was just outside and it's all your fault and I'm so angry and frustrated and hurt and - I just, just don't know what to do.

Long silence.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Hello? Erica?

ERICA (0.S.) You got in a car with drug mules and got...arrested?

JAMES That's, basically, uh...

ERICA (0.S.) You got yourself in this situation, get yourself out, James.

The phone goes dead.

# JAMES

Erica? Erica! Dammit!

He hangs the phone up several times in a row, banging it hard until a cop comes and pulls him away from the phone. He lets the phone go.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Dammit!

CUT TO:

# INT. SECOND INTERVIEW ROOM. CONTINUOUS

Stanley sits at the table talking to Jose and Wallace.

STANLEY

3 kids, huh? Gosh, how do you do such horrible things and go home and look at your kids?

JOSE You just kinda segment stuff in your head.

### CONTINUED:

Rose suddenly walks into the room followed by Rayne. Stanley stands up. Rose walks over and leans over Wallace and Jose.

> ROSE Who's the guy - Steward?

JOSE James? We were giving him a ride.

ROSE Is this the story you worked up?

WALLACE If that was our story we're even dumber than these guys think we are.

Rose stands up straight.

ROSE

Dammit! Everything this guy tells me checks out! I thought we had this in the bag!

STANLEY

What do you mean?

### RAYNE

This cop thinks this is, like, a career-maker.

ROSE

No - it IS a career maker, but to capture 3 and just let 1 go - man, that sucks.

STANLEY

Man, I'm all for taking bad guys down - but if the guy's innocent, let him go.

Rose thinks for a moment.

# ROSE

Yeah - I mean we're still making the biggest bust in the history of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania - this is my case...doesn't matter if I let him go! He's innocent!

(a beat) Let him go - right? Let him go! \*

\*

EXT. PITTSBURGH POLICE STATION. NIGHT

The front door to the police station opens and James walks out. He takes a deep breath of fresh air and finally actually smiles.

A few yards down the sidewalk a guy stands against the building smoking. James walks down the stairs out front of the police station and walks over to the guy.

JAMES

Excuse me - I haven't smoked in 15 years, and I'm about to head home to my family and I've had the 3-day stretch from hell. Can I bum a smoke?

The guy smoking looks him up and down.

GUY

Don't you know every time someone smokes, an angel gets his wings clipped?

### JAMES

That is the 2nd time I have heard that phrase today - where the heck does it come from?

GUY

Who cares?

The guy pulls out a knife and holds it up to James' side. The guy looks around nervously.

> GUY (CONT'D) Give me all your money - now!

James raises his hands and shakes his head.

#### JAMES

Man - I only have \$211 and a bunch of credit cards that don't work. I need the cash to get home to my family in New York!

GUY Do you want me to stab you? Give me your freaking wallet! Now!

James pulls out his wallet and hands it to the guy, who immediately turns around and runs.

James lets arms fall to his side.

And then he screams. He looks to heavens and he screams.

James looks to his left and sees a bridge over a river. The river's water sparkles in the moonlight.

> JAMES (CONT'D) (still yelling) 3 days! 3 days of crap and I've had it, God! You've had every chance I could possibly give you to make this right, to work this crap out! And yet here I am in Pittsburgh freaking Pennsylvania, no money, no way home, no nothing!

He walks briskly to the bridge, still talking to God or the heavens or whoever he is talking to.

JAMES (CONT'D) I get it! You're trying to make the point that I need to put my family first! I FREAKING GET IT!!! Okay? I got it in Wisconsin, so, yeah the last 2 days have just been gravy on top of my shit salad! So, thanks for that, God! You're doing great getting your point across!

James climbs up onto the bridge and looks down at the water. He then looks back up to the heavens and continues yelling.

JAMES (CONT'D) You know, I was okay with getting stranded in Wisconsin! I was okay with the crazy hippy dog girl! I was okay with the racist hotel clerk! What the hell? I'm even okay with the freaking drug transporting morons who got me arrested! But now - now, God, you have crossed the line! All I want is to get home to save my family! I thought that is what you wanted for me to do! But NOOOOOO! Nooooo! You have to throw everything you can think of at me to screw me! I just wanted to get home to New York City...but I can only assume you want me to kill myself! So, here I go, God - this is on you! This is ALL on you!

CONTINUED: (2)

James starts to step off the bridge. Suddenly a voice calls out of darkness.

CLARENCE (O.S.) NO! Don't jump! Don't do it! I'm here!

James brings his foot back and looks around, confused.

JAMES

God?

CLARENCE (O.S.) No - I'm Clarence.

JAMES

Clarence?

(a beat) Um - are you an angel?

Clarence, a poorly dressed, nasty-looking bearded hobo steps into the light.

CLARENCE

No - I'm a hobo.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNDER THE BRIDGE. NIGHT

James is wrapped in a blanket as he and Clarence sit in front of a small fire.

Clarence hands James a cup.

CLARENCE Coffee - it'll help you come outta your funk.

James takes the cup and takes a drink and immediately spits it out.

JAMES Oh, God - that's coffee?

CLARENCE I didn't say it was good.

James hands him back the cup.

CLARENCE (CONT'D) So - you need to get to New York City? JAMES

I do. Trying to save my family, get them back.

CLARENCE I'm on my way to Philly - I can get you that far.

James looks around.

JAMES You got a car somewhere I don't know about?

### CLARENCE

Even better.

CUT TO:

# INT. TRAIN CAR. EARLY MORNING

We can hear the train moving slowly, but picking up speed. It is dark, but the view is of the train car's door. Light breaks through the cracks around the door.

Suddenly the door opens and a bag gets thrown up into the train car.

# JAMES (O.S.)

We're jumping the train?!

Clarence comes into view, pulling himself up into the moving train car.

CLARENCE

I haven't driven since 1974.

Clarence gets up into the car and helps James get into the car. James actually looks a bit refreshed, and excited.

JAMES

What am I doing?!

### CLARENCE

You got no money - you gotta get 350 miles - you got no choice - you gotta do what you got to do!

Clarence begins shutting the train car door and James helps him. The door shuts and it is completely dark.

JAMES

You got a light?

We hear something crack and we suddenly see a flare light up.

### CLARENCE

Flares!

CUT TO:

INT. TRAIN CAR. NIGHT

Clarence and James have settled in a bit. Clarence hands James another blanket.

CLARENCE Use that as a pillow. It'll help you sleep.

James takes the blanket and bunches it up then uses it as a pillow.

JAMES The clack-clack-clack is kind of relaxing, huh?

CLARENCE Ain't nothing like the railway, baby!

Clarence pulls out a bottle of corn liquor and takes a swig. He offers it to James.

JAMES No, I'm good, man - thanks, though.

CLARENCE (taking another swig) It'll help you sleep.

JAMES I don't think I'm gonna have any trouble sleeping.

James closes his eyes.

Clarence takes a long pull from the liquor, coughs and then begins humming an old Irish drinking song.

FADE TO:

BLACK SCREEN

CLARENCE (V.O.) (whispering) James, James - it's time.

(CONTINUED)

James opens his eyes to:

INT. TRAIN CAR. NIGHT

### JAMES

(groaning) Oh...how long did I sleep?

James doesn't notice, but Clarence looks even rougher than he did before. The bottle of corn liquor is now empty.

CLARENCE

The whole way. We're like 5 minutes away from where we need to jump off so we don't get caught.

James sits up.

#### JAMES

Man, I must've been really, really tired.

CLARENCE I wanna talk to you about your situation, James.

## JAMES

Okay...

CLARENCE

You just tried to commit suicide - that's...bad. I'm worried about you.

James looks embarrassed.

### JAMES

I'm sorry you had to hear...and see that, Clarence - I - I was overwhelmed by everything and just didn't know how to respond.

#### CLARENCE

No, no, I get it. I really do. Here's the thing: you grow up and your parents protect you and shield you and they do everything in their power to keep you from making mistakes; the same mistakes they made when they were young. They make you wear a helmet so you don't bump your head; they make you wear a seatbelt so, if you are in a wreck - God-forbid - that you don't get hurt;

(MORE)

CLARENCE (CONT'D) they try to keep you from dating till you're old enough to understand that love lost isn't the end of the world; they help you save money so you can have retirement unlike they do; they make sure you go to college so you can make more money than they did. It's all a reaction. They just want for you to be like them without making the same mistakes as them.

James nods.

CLARENCE (CONT'D) But what they don't realize is that they've created a culture of paddedroom babies that don't know how to react when everything goes to shit and make no mistake about it, everything will at some point go to shit. No one has it good. Everyone has it bad. But everyone has it good enough to be happy. Just no one realizes it.

# JAMES

Wow...that's really, really good, Clarence.

# CLARENCE

I'm not done. James, you don't need a multi-six-figure job to be happy. You don't need a house in the burbs. You don't need things. You need your family. If I could go back in time to 1974, I'd work it out with my wife, I'd make sure my kids had a dad, I'd suffer through whatever shitty job I had to. I got it right when I decided to do this...

(he gestures around)
- I don't need things. Where I missed
it was this: I do need people. We all
do. We need each other.

James has tears in his eyes.

### CLARENCE (CONT'D)

So, you go home and you tell your wife that you love her and you ask her forgiveness and you do whatever it is she needs or wants you to do - because you don't need the job, but you need your family. CONTINUED: (2)

James looks at Clarence, tears now streaming down his face.

JAMES You're right, Clarence - you are....

And Clarence promptly throws up all over James.

James looks down at the puke that is now nearly covering him.

# CLARENCE

Shit - I'm sorry!

Clarence points at one of the blankets.

CLARENCE (CONT'D) Just use that to clean yourself up as best you can - I never really liked that blanket anyway.

James reaches for the blanket.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE THE TRAIN CAR. EARLY MORNING

Light is breaking through the cold, cloudy skies above Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The train car door opens and we see James and Clarence looking at the ground flying by beneath them as they are pulling into the massive Philly Train Yard.

JAMES

You sure this is safe, Clarence?

CLARENCE For you padded room babies, probably not! But, yeah, it's safe!

All of a sudden we see 3-4 men running down the tracks after the train, yelling for them to stop.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

Crap!

JAMES

Who's that?

CLARENCE That is the Railyard police - they don't take as kindly to us jumping railcars as they used to.

## JAMES

What? What does that mean?

# CLARENCE

James, if they catch you, you will not make it home to your family. So - no matter what happens in the next few minutes, you run. You run like the wind.

JAMES What are you talking about, Clarence?

CLARENCE

I'm an old man. I've lived my life. I'm also very, very drunk. There is no way I'm outrunning these guys. So leave me behind, no matter what, and you run - run away and save your family. Okay?

### JAMES

Uh, okay.

Clarence then takes a running jump out of the car and hits the ground and tumbles. Clarence rolls to a stop and looks up at James and gives him a thumbs up.

#### CLARENCE

(groaning) Run, James, run!

James looks down at the ground and he lowers himself from the rail car to where his feet or inches off the ground and then he lets go, running to try and keep up with how fast the car was moving.

He nearly loses his balance, but he stays on his feet and he runs.

He looks over his shoulder to see the Railway Police now on top of Clarence.

And James runs.

CUT TO:

(CONTINUED)

# EXT. PHILLY STREET. EARLY MORNING

James emerges from an alleyway and looks both ways, nervously. He doesn't see anyone suspicious, so he comes out of the alleyway.

SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: December 24

### CONTINUED:

James walks up a street and sees a coffee shop open and bustling. He walks through the front door, reaches for his wallet and realizes it is gone.

His face drops and he begins to walk out.

BETTY (O.S.) You forget your wallet, young man?

James turns around and sees a gentle-looking old woman holding a large to-go cup of coffee in one hand.

JAMES I, uh - I was robbed. It just occurred to me.

#### BETTY

Oooh, you smell like you've had more happen to you than just get robbed. Let me buy you a cup of coffee. You go wash up a bit and I will get your drink.

James looks down at the puke stains on his jacket.

JAMES Yeah, a hobo threw up on me.

#### BETTY

I'm sure he did, son...go wash up -I'll get you a drink. I think coffee, strong and black should do the trick!

CUT TO:

INT. COFFEE SHOP BATHROOM. CONTINUOUS

James looks at himself in the mirror. He hasn't shaved in 3 days. He's been drunk twice. He has been in an accident. He's been arrested. He's been puked on. He looks like crap.

# JAMES

(to himself) You're lucky she would offer to buy you a drink looking like this.

He takes off his jacket and puts under the sink and turns it on.

CUT TO:

INT. COFFEE SHOP. CONTINUOUS

James wanders back into the coffee shop and doesn't see Betty. His shoulders slump. Another letdown.

Then, suddenly, a hand waves from a table in the corner. James sees Betty and his face lights up. He walks over to the table and sits down. Betty hands him his coffee.

JAMES

You don't know how much this means to me.

BETTY

Son, my husband of 57 years - God rest his soul - was a man of the clergy. He taught me through all our years together that we should always find the person who looks like he's had the roughest time and pick them to show God's love to.

JAMES

Wow - that is... I have not seen God's love that way, at all lately.

BETTY

God's people are just that: people. They're idiots and screwups and because they claim God's name, everyone on the outside thinks they should be perfect. They can't live up to it. So, my husband's theory was that instead of just talking about God in theory, how about we actually love people like God loved us, and let everything else move on from there.

JAMES

That is the nicest thing I've ever heard anyone say. What - what was your name? I didn't get it.

BETTY Well - I didn't give it yet. I'm Betty. And you are?

He holds out his hand to her and she shakes it.

JAMES

James. James Steward.

#### BETTY

So, James - what's your story? Where are you headed?

#### JAMES

I - I couldn't even begin to tell you what has happened the last 3 days. 3 days ago I was a successful insurance salesman about to get promoted with a beautiful wife and 3 kids. Then I got stranded in Wisconsin, lost my job, my wife separated from me - and I just am trying to get home in time for Christmas Eve to save my family.

#### BETTY

Well, I can give you a ride, James -I'm on my way to Franklin Township, New Jersey to see my son and daughterin-law - I could get you that far.

### JAMES

Did you say Franklin Township? That's where I live!

BETTY Well - isn't the Lord good?

Mysterious ways and all of that.

### JAMES

Oh, gosh, you are an answer to prayers!

Betty stands up.

#### BETTY

Well, this answer to prayer is gonna ask that you put that jacket in the trunk. I may have the love of Jesus in me, but that coat has the smell of Satan on it.

CUT TO:

### INT. BETTY'S 1978 COUPE DEVILLE. CONTINUOUS

Betty drives along through Philadelphia. James is sitting in the passenger seat minus his jacket.

> BETTY How long have you been married, James?

#### JAMES

15 years.

#### BETTY

I like to say we were married for 57 years, happily for 32.

(CONTINUED)

## CONTINUED:

James laughs.

JAMES

Yeah - that sounds about right.

#### BETTY

Tell me about her - tell me what you love about her. If she doesn't take you back, what would you miss about her?

James chuckles.

### JAMES

You know, the last 3 days all I've been able to think about was how mad I was at her and how much I wanted to make her pay for what she was doing to me. I honestly haven't thought about what I'd do if I lost her.

BETTY So, what hits you, right off the top of the head?

JAMES Right now - honestly, I don't know.

Betty shakes her head.

### BETTY

That isn't good, James. You've got to think of what you want - women can sniff right through the bull poop and know if you want her back because you want to make things right; or if you want her back because you don't want that divorce lawyer of hers to take you to the cleaners.

James looks out the window for a moment.

### JAMES

She didn't kiss me on our first date. She said she wasn't that kind of girl. When we went on our honeymoon, she wouldn't wear a bikini to the beach because, she said, "On our honeymoon, only you get to see the good stuff."

BETTY Sounds like a good woman.

### JAMES

When we had our first baby - McCartney - she held him in her arms, tears in her eyes, obviously so much in love; and she looked up at me and said, "If I ever let this little one come before you, I'm not the wife I should be." And when Sara and Willie came, she repeated that to me again, both times.

#### BETTY

Did you put her first?

James looks down, glassy-eyed now.

#### JAMES

I did it all for them, Betty - the extra hours, the late nights, the trips. I never strayed - I had opportunities to have other things, other women - I never strayed -NEVER...strayed.

BETTY

But did you put her first?

#### JAMES

I thought giving them everything she dreamed of was putting them first.

#### BETTY

Oh, honey - giving people what you think they want or - even worse - what they need is never a replacement for giving them you.

A long pause

#### JAMES

I don't have time to give them me. They get little pieces, the slivers that don't get consumed in the fire of work, making money.

There is silence as Betty and James both consider what has been said.

#### BETTY

I'm just a woman who was married to a pastor for 57 years, James. I don't have all the answers. But, you think it's hard putting family first when you're working for the man? Try putting your family first when you're working for THE MAN! (MORE)

(CONTINUED)

# BETTY (CONT'D)

(she points up to heaven) My husband lead small churches, big churches, every size in between churches, and sometimes he got the balance right; sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he worked so hard and we were left behind trying to keep the family together; sometimes he worked so hard, but he left it all at church when he got home and we knew that we came first. But you know what I always knew: that even in the times he didn't get it right, I always knew that he was trying to make it right. I always knew that, even if the pendulum swung the congregation's way for a bit, he'd always swing it back, sooner rather than later. And that is what your modest, pretty little wife needs to know - that you're always trying to make it right.

James digests this.

## JAMES

You're right.

#### BETTY

And she wants you to make her scream in the bedroom. Anyone who won't wear a bikini on their honeymoon is obviously a super freak.

James laughs out loud, uninhibited.

JAMES

Wow - I did not expect that to come out of your nice old womanly mouth.

#### BETTY

Hey - my husband may have been a pastor, but he knew how to lay it down in the bedroom.

CUT TO:

# EXT. PHILADELPHIA HIGHWAY. CONTINUOUS

We see the 1978 Coupe DeVille driving along, the Philadelphia skyline in the background, as music plays.

FADE TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE THE STEWARD'S HOME. DAY

The 1978 Coupe DeVille pulls to the curb in front of the Steward's still undecorated home.

James gets out of the car and then leans back in to look at Betty.

#### JAMES

Betty - you turned a 2 hour trip into 4 hours by driving 20 miles under the speed limit, but - you know what? I'm thankful that you did.

#### BETTY

What are you gonna say to her, James?

#### JAMES

You know - I'm not sure. I'm gonna wing it - but I think I'm about as close to knowing what to say as I have been on this whole trip.

BETTY

Make sure you ravage her with that bearded chin later - she needs that.

James chuckles.

#### JAMES

Can you pop your trunk so I can get my jacket, please?

BETTY

James, no - I am doing this for your own good: there is no way she is gonna take you back while you're wearing that jacket.

James laughs.

#### JAMES

Okay.

#### BETTY

Go get her, Tiger!

James shuts the car door and turns to look at the house as Betty pulls away, comparing it to the other houses in the neighborhood.

> JAMES Gosh, we have GOT to do some decorating.

### CONTINUED:

James walks up the front sidewalk and stops at the front door. He thinks for a long moment, then, finally, he reaches up and rings the doorbell.

After a short moment we hear stirring in the house and we hear Erica talking to the kids.

ERICA (O.S.) (from inside the house) McCartney - seriously, clean your room! Sara, you, too.

The door opens and Erica looks like she might have a heart attack upon seeing James.

ERICA (CONT'D) James! What are you doing here?

JAMES Erica - I have had the worst 3 days of my life.

ERICA James - I don't think you should be here.

Erica starts to shut the door, but James catches it.

JAMES

Erica - I'm not mad. Just listen to me, let me have my say. If, at the end, you still want to go through with this, I'll understand, I'll give you what you want.

Erica thinks for a moment, then lets the door open back up.

ERICA

Okay, James.

### JAMES

I...I have thought about what I would say for the last 3 days. A lot of curse words coursed through my mind. A lot of derogatory statements about you and your character coursed through my mind. But none of those things come to mind right now.

(a short pause as he thinks) A few minutes before you lawyer called me, I found out that SternCom Global bought out Homefront. (MORE) JAMES (CONT'D) I am, most likely, without a job and that promotion I've been working for? Well - 99% sure that isn't happening.

Erica leans against the doorway, now realizing she had added to great pain.

JAMES (CONT'D) I couldn't afford the plane ticket back to New York, so I took a Greyhound bus. During that ride, my seatmate died of a heart attack or something and left his remains all over my leg. From Chicago, I helped jailbreak 15 dogs from a kennel because the crazy hippy girl I rode with equated dog boarding houses with prison camps in the Siberia. You know me: I don't even like dogs; if I could I'd send dogs to a Siberian prison camp.

Erica puts her hand over her mouth to cover a smile.

JAMES (CONT'D) When we finally got to Toledo, a racist Indian man wouldn't let me pay with cash because the hoooookers liked to leave powdered sugar all over his rooms.

(it hits him) I am pretty sure as I say that, that he thought cocaine was powdered sugar. I really hope he didn't put that on the donuts trying to save some money.

Erica laughs. Suddenly Sara wanders in behind Erica.

SARA

Daddy?

#### JAMES

Sara, baby - I need to finish talking to mommy really quick. Just stay there for a minute, okay?

Sara leans against Erica's hip.

JAMES (CONT'D) The next morning I caught a ride with 2 nice guys on their way to New York City, who happened to be transporting 1800 pounds of Marijuana. (MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D) That mixed with the driver's need for speed made for an interesting chase through Ohio and Pennsylvania. I got arrested for the first time on this trip - that was awesome.

MCCARTNEY (O.S.) Dad? You got arrested?

McCartney wanders into the doorway.

#### JAMES

Hey, buddy - I need to finish talking to your mom - why don't you go get Willie so I can hug all 3 of you kids once I get done.

McCartney runs off to get Willie.

ERICA

James, you can hug the kids.

# JAMES

You said to me that you would never put the kids before me. Well, I'm returning the favor. Once I fight for you, then I can love on them, okay? I'm gonna continue the story now.

Erica nods.

JAMES (CONT'D) After the police finally decided to let me go, I went out and tried to bum a smoke off of a guy.

# ERICA

James...

#### JAMES

I know, I know - don't worry, just like everything else: I paid for it. He then proceeded to rob me of the little bit of money I had left.

McCartney runs in, dragging Willie. Willie tries to run to James, but McCartney holds Willie back.

#### MCCARTNEY

Hold on, Willie - let them finish; I can tell this is gonna be good. They're probably gonna kiss really long.

# WILLIE

Ew!

James smiles at the boys, but continues, looking back up at Erica.

JAMES After I got robbed, I decided it was the most logical thing to kill myself, so I walked over to a bridge.

Erica looks down at the kids, then back at James.

JAMES (CONT'D) It all made sense at the time, all right? So, I try to jump off this bridge, but this angel named Clarence saves me and stops me.

#### ERICA

James, an angel named Clarence? Are...are you okay?

JAMES Okay, so he wasn't a real angel. He was actually a hobo.

Was actually a nobo. MCCARTNEY

You met a hobo? Cool!

JAMES So - Clarence helped me jump a train.

MCCARTNEY You jumped a train?

# ERICA

With a hobo?

# JAMES

Yes. I rode on the train from Pittsburgh to Philly. Clarence puked all over me - which is why I'm not wearing my jacket - and then he sacrificed himself for me when the Railway police came after us for railhopping.

#### ERICA

James, are you making this up?

JAMES

Absolutely not. I could not make this stuff up.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D) Anyway, I'm almost done - in Philadelphia I met this nice lady named Betty who was married for 57 years to a preacher and she was nice and loving and gave me a ride here her son and daughter-in-law live here in Franklin! So - here I am!

#### ERICA

And?

## JAMES

# And? And... (searches for the right answer)

...well, um, I've been trying to figure out what to say to you this whole time, this whole trip. I've been really angry at you, Erica. But I've come to realize something: you've put me first, but I've never put you first. We have these awesome kids and you always made sure I felt like I was first place, even though every mother in their right mind woulda just put everything into these kids - and you did put everything, but somehow I felt wanted and never felt like I had to compete with the kids. But I've made you compete with...well, everything.

Tears begin to sneak down Erica's cheek. She tries to brush them away.

### ERICA

And?

#### JAMES

And...I can't promise that I'll never let things get out of balance again, but I will promise you this: you'll never ask me again when you come first; and I promise that even if or when things get out of balance, you'll know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am fighting to make it right - that I am fighting with everything in my being to make you first place again. (a long pause)

In other words, I'll say it like this: Why did you do this to me, you perfectly-perfect woman who I love even when I hate? And your response should be: I did this to you because I love you! \*

\*

CONTINUED: (6)

Erica rushes to James and hugs him, tears rolling freely down his cheek. The kids jump onto their parents, hugging them and cheering.

> WILLIE No divorce! No divorce!

SARA Daddy can put our toys together tonight! He's Santa!

James looks down at Willie and Sara and back at Erica.

ERICA A lot has happened around here in the last 3 days, too.

Suddenly there is a phone ringing somewhere.

JAMES

Oh, gosh, that's mine...where is it?

He searches his pockets, finally finding it. He pulls out the phone that has been taped back together from when he broke it earlier.

> JAMES (CONT'D) (into phone) Hello?

INT. STERNCOM GLOBAL OFFICE. SAME

Josh Grouse sits in an opulent office, his feet up on a desk. He is dressed in a \$2000 suit and wears \$400 shoes.

JOSH

James Steward?

JAMES (O.S.) (through phone) Yes, that's me.

JOSH Hi, James - I'm Josh Grouse. I am your new boss here at Sterncom Global.

Switch between locations as needed.

JAMES Oh - so I have a job? JOSH

Yes, James - I'm calling to officially offer you the position of Vice President of Sales here at Homefront/SternCom insurance. We feel like you could help transition our team in perfectly.

### JAMES

Um - that sounds great, Josh.

JOSH

We'll have you sign all the paperwork after the New Year - but just wanted you to rest assured that we want you on our team, James.

JAMES

Hey, Josh - I want to keep on Sean Hellmuth as the accountant for sales.

JOSH Okay - I can let you do that. But most of your other co-workers are being let go, James.

JAMES I understand that - I just want Sean.

JOSH Done - see you after the holidays!

Josh hangs up and James looks at Erica.

JAMES I have a job! I have a job!

Erica and the kids cheer. James holds up his hand to say \*
"wait a second!" \*

JAMES (CONT'D)

I just need to make one phone call.

He dials a number on his phone.

SEAN (O.S.)

Hello? James?

JAMES Sean, it's over, it over!

# SEAN

What?

\*

\*

#### JAMES

You're rehired.

James hangs up the phone and laughs.

# ERICA

What was that?

## JAMES

Inside joke. Can we go inside now?

Erica nods and the family walks inside and shuts the door. With the door shutting, we....

CUT TO:

INT. STEWARD KITCHEN. DAY

James walks down the steps carrying 2 boxes. McCartney is behind him carrying a box. Willie is behind him carrying a small box.

Erica and Sara turn around in the kitchen.

ERICA

What is this?

JAMES New family tradition for Christmas Eve! Everyone outside!

They all walk out front and James drops the boxes on the ground. McCartney and Willie drop their boxes.

James opens up the boxes to reveal Christmas decorations. The kids cheer.

#### ERICA

James, we need to do this before Christmas eve!

#### JAMES

Hey, it's a start!

The kids pull out Christmas decorations and begin dancing around, ready to decorate the house.

We drift further and further away from the house, as the family gleefully begins to dress up their house.

FADE TO:

INT. STEWARD HOME. NIGHT

James walks down the hallway upstairs and peeks in McCartney's door. McCartney is tucked neatly into his bed and is out like a light.

He closes McCartney's door and checks on Sara. She's asleep, too. He then looks in at Willie who is sprawled out all over his bed, uncovered.

James chuckles and goes in and covers him up then leaves the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

He walks down the steps into the living room, where Erica has already begun to unpack the boxes of toys they will have to build and wrap tonight.

Soft, jazzy Christmas music plays in the background.

James walks to Erica and pulls her up from the floor and begins to slow dance to the music.

JAMES

A wise old woman told me today that you might like to be ravaged by my bearded chin.

#### ERICA

(smiles) Did she now?

### JAMES

That's what she said - and she was married to a man of God for 57 years, so she probably knows God's will for us.

James picks her up over his shoulder and takes her up the stairs into their bedroom. Erica laughs and squeels and tries to fight him, but he gets her to the bedroom and drops her on the bed.

He lays down on the bed next to her and holds her close

ERICA James - I'm sorry for how this went down. I didn't know everything that was happening.

### JAMES

How could you know? I'm not sorry at all - it was the only way...no other way you could get my attention.

# CONTINUED:

He kisses her. She kisses him back, passionately.

FADE TO:

# EXT. STEWARD HOME. NIGHT

The home is decorated to the nines and fits in perfectly with all the houses on the block.

SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: Midnight December 25 MERRY CHRISTMAS \*

CUT TO:

\*

BLACK SCREEN

SUPERIMPOSED TITLE: THE END