THE TREE

by

Al Lougher

Copyright (c) 2012. This screenplay may not be used or reproduced without the express written permission of the author.

OVER BLACK

We hear the sounds of various animals chirping and shrieking, then a man groaning and coughing.

FADE IN:

EXT. TREE, SWAMP - DAY

DAVE (30's) is a clean cut business professional from the city and is now hunched over with his back to a large Florida cypress tree that is looming out of the muddy swamp water. His arms are stretched around the side of the tree and his wrists bound with rope.

He has dried blood splattered across the side of his forehead, down his white work shirt and pink and blue striped tie. From the ankles down his black work pants vanish into the pea soup like swamp water.

His head is slumped into his chest. He is waking, yet still groggy.

He raises his head. His senses slowly returning. He takes a breath then pauses before realizing his hands are numb. He jerks his shoulders forward but he's not going anywhere. He coughs then slowly turns his head side to side then upward, his eyes focusing on his new surroundings.

In the distance, and in various directions, we hear a smorgasbord of strange sounds, each of which DAVE tunes his ears to.

He tries to pull free again: no joy.

DAVE

What the-

He tries again, then again, grimacing with each tug of the arms.

DAVE (CONT'D)

H-Help?

He clears his throat and looks around in all directions.

DAVE (CONT'D)

(screaming)

HELLO! ANYONE?

His voice echoes throughout the swamp. He shakes and pulls at his wrists.

DAVE (CONT'D)

(even louder)

Somebody get...me...outta here!

CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMP - DAY

Elsewhere in the swamp we see various animals react to DAVE's screams: some birds flock from their nest, a turtle lifts its head, its eyes darting around, and an alligator perched on a log slowly slips into the murky water.

CUT TO:

EXT. TREE, SWAMP - DAY

DAVE starts to slow his breathing to try and calm down. He looks around then down at his legs sticking out of the nasty, smelly brown swamp water.

DAVE

(quiet)

What the hell is this?

He tugs his hands again. We can see that the rope around his wrists is starting to loosen slightly. DAVE begins to twist and turn his wrists in different directions and he starts to become very frustrated with his situation.

CUT TO:

INT. PARKING GARAGE - DAY

DAVE's car, a leased silver sports coupe is parked on the 10th floor facing out to the city. The windshield reflects the city's towering office buildings.

We hear a cellphone ring tone from inside the car.

RING...RING...RING...RING.

A gravely voice, the sort of voice that results from years of smoking, finally answers.

VOICE (V.O.)

Yup?

DAVE (V.O.)

Mr. Lombardo-

MR LOMBARDO (V.O.)

You have my money?

CUT TO:

INT. DAVE'S CAR, PARKING GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

DAVE is nervously running his fingers through his hair.

DAVE

(wincing)

Well, not quite. I-

MR LOMBARDO

You either have it or you don't.

DAVE

Yeah, I'll have it-

MR LOMBARDO

Listen you little prick, you've got, oh, 8 hours to get me my money. In fact, the price just went up. Call it interest. It's now one-fifty Gees.

DAVE

What? You said-

MR LOMBARDO

I said Tuesday and last time I checked it was Tuesday. On Tuesday they have a great early bird at the Boca Diner. On TUESDAY you hand me my money. You've got until 4PM today.

Beat.

MR LOMBARDO (CONT'D)

And if you're late I'll find you, and I'll do bad things to you Dave. And I'll kill your wife. I'll kill your dog. Your cat. Your pet guinea pig. Got it?

Click. The message "call ended" pops up on the cell phone.

DAVE stares at the phone in disbelief. He looks out at the city and the blue summer sky.

CUT TO:

EXT. TREE, SWAMP - DAY

The rays of the sun break through the tree tops and light DAVE up like he's in the spotlight on a stage. His chin rests on his chest.

SUDDENLY in the distance we hear a loud grunt from some kind of beast, a grunt that could be a cross between pig and bear, or even bear and lion. Certainly not an animal easily identifiable. A grunt, followed by a big splash.

DAVE snaps his head in the direction of the sound. He pauses for a moment before turning his attention back to getting his hands free. He slowly looks to his left then slowly turns his head 180, trying to look out beyond the creepy looking trees.

CUT TO:

EXT. BANK - DAY

A generic looking Florida bank with an ugly pale pink color scheme. In the foreground is DAVE's car.

CUT TO:

INT. DAVE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Through the rear window we see DAVE strolling toward his car, his pink striped tie blown by the wind and resting on his shoulder. He reaches the driver door, we hear the alarm chirp and he opens it then settles into his seat and slamming the door behind him.

He stares directly ahead for a long time.

DAVE breaks out into a frenzy of fists slapping and punching the steering wheel.

The tantrum passes, DAVE is panting, staring at nothing in particular.

He starts the engine and reverses the car out of its spot.

CUT TO:

EXT. BANK - CONTINUOUS

DAVE's car reverses quickly out of the spot and stops. The engine revs loudly as if the car was slipped into neutral.

The car jerks forward then speeds out of the lot.

CUT TO:

EXT. TREE, SWAMP - DAY

DAVE is still tied up against the tree. He struggles some more, twisting and turning his hands, trying to break free.

DAVE

HELP ME! Someone? Anyone?

The midday sun breaks through the canopy trees and lights up DAVE's dirty, sweaty face. He squints as he looks upwards up at the tree tops.

UT TO:

EXT. BRIDGE, ZOO - DAY

A wooden rope bridge stretches between two attractions at the zoo.

In the background we hear a mix of various animals. Monkeys in their cage leap around, occasionally screaming and bearing their teeth at the tourists.

DAVE is alone and leaning up against the bridge. JOHN (40) and paunchy with thinning hair, approaches DAVE. JOHN is swinging a brown paper bag by his side.

DAVE gives the other man the "bro shake", clearly they are either good friends or related.

DAVE

Put a few pound on I see. The wife must be treating you good!

JOHN pats his belly.

JOHN

I wish. That's just the beer.

(studies DAVE)
Look at you...looks like you

haven't slept in a week.

(looking around)

You know I've always wanted to come here.

DAVE

Yeah, well, if you knew what shit I'm in you wouldn't be sleeping either.

JOHN puts his hand up on DAVE's shoulder as they step toward the edge of the rope bridge, both of them leaning on it and looking out at the monkey cage a few yards away.

JOHN

How's Jess coping with all of this?

DAVE

She doesn't know.

JOHN looks surprised.

JOHN

You haven't told her?

DAVE

What am I going to tell her? That she's married to a deadbeat with a gambling problem?

JOHN

You have to tell her Dave.

DAVE

Maybe, I dunno. I'm going to take care of it. It'll be alright.

JOHN hands him the brown bag.

JOHN

Here.

DAVE unravels the bag and peeks inside.

DAVE

Wow didn't realize 150 Gees looks so little.

JOHN

That's twenty.

DAVE looks disheartened.

JOHN leans back to look directly at DAVE, eyebrows raised.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Dave, how much do you owe exactly?

DAVE

Hundred... hundred and fifty.

JOHN

Christ! You really think I could get you 150 grand?

DAVE

I dunno, I was hoping-

CONTINUED: (2)

JOHN

Listen I like you, I like you like you're my own brother but you and I both know me and your sister don't have that kind of money Dave. I mean, she'd kill me if she knew I was giving you this!

(pointing at the bag)
That's her skiing vacation at Lake
Tahoe right there in that bag.
Heck, that's her summer in Hawaii
too!

DAVE

I know I know, I'm sorry John. I just. I was hoping for a little more. I'm deep. Way deep.

JOHN steps back and runs his hands through his thick black hair.

JOHN

Jesus Dave. You know I don't have that kind of money laying around. Amy's got most of it tied up in funds, and the kids' college-

DAVE

No, I would never ask you to touch that. Listen don't worry about it, it's all good, I'll figure it out.

JOHN sighs and they both pause for a moment, both staring at the monkeys leaping around antagonizing a family of four.

JOHN turns back to DAVE.

JOHN

So what are you gonna do?

DAVE

(shrugs his shoulders) What I always do I guess!

CUT TO:

EXT. HORSE RACE TRACK - DAY

The starting gates burst open as the starting bell rings and horses bolt forward kicking up clouds of dust into the air.

P.A ANNOUNCER (V.O)

And they're off!

CUT TO:

INT. CAR, RACE TRACK - DAY.

DAVE sits patiently behind the wheel. He looks down at the passenger chair where his brief case lay. He flips the locks on the case and lifts the lid to see the brown paper bag given JOHN.

DAVE stares at the bag.

SUDDENLY DAVE's trance is broken by the sound of his cell phone.

RING...RING...RING...

He quickly removes the phone, an iPhone, from his shirt's chest pocket and looks at the screen.

On the screen a picture of a pretty blonde, tanned, blue eyes and a beautiful smile. The caption "Jess" at the top of the screen.

DAVE taps the ANSWER button.

DAVE

Hey.

WIFE

Hey you. Where are you?

DAVE

(looking around)

At the office.

WIFE

Are you coming home soon? You know we have Cody's pediatrician appointment at five.

DAVE checks his watch. It's 3:05PM.

DAVE

I'll be there honey. I'm swamped right now. Larry's got a stick up his ass about the Brubaker account.

WIFE

Come on Dave, we talked about this! You know it's important to be here for this. It's his 6 month check up. You know Doctor Shapiro, right? I bumped..

DAVE tunes out of the conversation and starts staring at the brown bag.

WIFE (CONT'D)

.. into her at the mall today. I was there having lunch with Kate, you know Kate? You met her husband at their kids birthday party a few weeks ago, nice guy, works for Jet Blue-

DAVE

Oh yeah, hey Larry's on the other line, gotta run.

WIFE

Well what time will you be home? We need to leave at five.

DAVE

I'll be there. Love you.

WIFE

OK bye.

DAVE

Hey!

WIFE

Ya?

DAVE

(slowly)

I love you.

WIFE

I love you too!

DAVE

Ok, see you later.

He hits disconnect on the phone. Looks at the bag, pauses then swipes it out of the briefcase, quickly unravels it pulls from it two big piles of crisp, twenty dollar bills.

He stares at the money for a moment.

CONTINUED: (2)

CU of President Jackson on the bill.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. TREE, SWAMP - DAY

CU of President Jackson on a twenty dollar bill floating on top of the murky swamp water.

DAVE spots the bill and watches is slowly drift across the pond.

In the background we hear a ear piercing shriek. DAVE snaps his head in that direction.

DAVE

(to self, quiet)

What the hell was that?

DAVE begins to shake violently now, scared and just desperate to escape his bonds.

CU of DAVE screaming..

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. HORSE RACE PARK - DAY

DAVE is screaming at the top of his lungs as fifteen horses surge onto the track.

DAVE watches on excited, gripping his ticket in his hand.

Number 6 is in the lead now and DAVE starts screaming.

DAVE

YES! NUMBER 6! C-MON! YES! YES!

Number 6 slips into third place. Half way around the track

DAVE (CONT'D)

C-MON! BRING IT!

Half way around the track Number 6 now fighting for 2nd place.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Number 6 C-MON! C-MON!

As they sail into the far turn Number 6 drops down to 4th. DAVE's excitement begins to fade.

DAVE (CONT'D)

What!? GO GO! FASTER!

But Number 6 lags far behind the leaders.

The leader, Number 2 sprints ahead of the pack down the stretch. Clearly the winner.

P-A ANNOUNCER (V.O)

It's Shoot For the Moon!

DAVE lowers his head and scrunches the losing ticket into a ball and throws it to the ground.

CUT TO:

INT. DAVE'S CAR, PARKING GARAGE - DAY

DAVE is parked on the empty 10th floor of a city parking lot. He lowers his phone into view and we see that he has compiled a text message to his wife. It reads:

"JESS - I HAVE DONE SOMETHING BAD. LIKE, REALLY BAD. SO BAD THAT I'M ASHAMED TO HAVE YOU BE WITH ME AND FOR WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I STAY AROUND. I LOVE YOU, ALWAYS WILL. DAVE. :("

His thumb hovers over the SEND button for a few moments before he presses down and we hear a WHOOSH sound of the text message being sent.

He places the phone back into his shirt chest pocket. He looks at his watch. It is 4:30PM.

CUT TO:

INT. PARKING GARAGE - DAY

DAVE shuts the door and slowly walks to the garage ledge. He takes a quick peek over the edge and focuses on the ground some 10 stories below.

He dry swallows.

He then puts one foot on the ledge and is about to stand when SUDDENLY a voice from behind.

VOTCE

I wouldn't do that if I were you.

DAVE turns but before he can make out the source of the voice a bag is placed over his head.

CUT TO:

BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. TREE, SWAMP - DAY

CU DAVE's closed eyes. They snap open. He is breathing rapidly.

He pulls at the ropes one more time. They are still taught around his wrists but loosening up. He twists, turns and contorts his hands into all shapes. He breaks one hand free and he brings both hands up to his face.

He stares at his pale white hands that looks like gloves on an otherwise tanned arm.

A look of joy appears on his face.

He now stumbles from the tree and falls to his knees, looks at his hands again then stands and looks quickly around him.

Regaining some kind of thought process, he reaches for the phone in his breast pocket and whips it out. NO SIGNAL!

He looks up at the tree tops, hoping to get some bearings. He then sets off through the thicket, slowly at first, stumbling as he goes but eventually picking up speed.

FADE TO:

EXT. DENSE SWAMP - DAY

DAVE tromps through the thicket and trees, his work shoes and pants now coated with mud, his white shirt now brown and torn and slashed in parts revealing painful looking scratches on his skin below.

He dodges and weaves through the tree like a man on a mission.

He stops, checks his phone: NO SIGNAL.

Off he goes again.

FADE TO:

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

DAVE happens upon the dark, almost black river that runs south through the forest of canopy trees. An old canoe is washed up on shore.

Spotting an opportunity he lunges for the canoe, pushing it out into the water and leaping on board.

He find an old wooden oar and begins to paddle downstream.

FADE TO:

EXT. RIVER - DUSK

Exhausted, DAVE is slumped forward in the canoe, the oar tossed aside. The sun now low in the sky.

He checks his phone one more time. He has one bar on the signal meter.

QUICKLY he pulls up the contact list and dials his wife.

RING...RING...RING...

CUT TO:

EXT. DENSE SWAMP - DAY

A dark and dense part of the swamp.

In the distance we hear a cell phone ringing.

RING...RING...RING...

FADE TO:

EXT. MORE DENSE SWAMP - DAY

The cell phone ringing is now very close.

RING...RING... Silence.

CAMERA POV - We pull slowly back past one tree to REVEAL DAVE's wife tied to a large canopy tree. She is wearing muddy jeans and a dirty, torn t-shirt. Her beautiful blonde hair damp and hanging forward.

Her head is resting on her chest but she quickly lifts it up, her eyes snapping open.

She gasps for air-

CUT TO: (CONT'D)

BLACK.

END CREDITS.