

Nothing but Love

by

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FADE IN:

INT. RESTAURANT - 6 P.M.

(PRESENT)

RECEPTION AREA

STELLA BONK, seated, plays with the brass clasp of her beaded purse in the busy waiting area.

PURSE CLASP

Her unsteady hand, that of a woman in her early thirties, obsessively opens and closes the tightly held purse, creates a series of loud, sharp snaps.

BACK TO SCENE

The purse open, she extracts a piece of chewing gum, attempts to remove its foil with her short red fingernails. Other CUSTOMERS, well dressed, walk past, approach the hostess stand, are greeted and seated.

Unable to free the gum from its foil, Stella jams it back into the purse. Her attention is suddenly drawn to her feet.

STELLA'S FEET

She is wearing two shoes of similar style, but different colors.

BACK TO SCENE

STELLA

Oh, for Christ's sake! Shit!

RECEPTION AREA

Everyone stops talking, turns their attention to Stella. She buries the toes of her mismatched shoes beneath her elegant chair. People return to their conversations. A young HOSTESS approaches Stella. O.s. thunder booms.

HOSTESS

Still no word, Ms. Bonk? Would you like to be seated, have a cocktail while you wait?

Stella scowls, wipes her powdered, ample nose.

STELLA

You kidding? Think I'm going to run up a tab waiting for this jerk, who might not even show up?

The hostess, taken aback, steps back, looks up.

HOSTESS' POV

Standing behind Stella's chair, tall, drenched, embarrassed
ED PLINTH, thirty-five, searches for the right words.

BACK TO SCENE

The hostess retreats to her stand. Stella looks up and over
her shoulder, back down at her purse. Her shoulders slump.
Ed, dripping, steps in front of Stella, squats.

ED

Stella? My apologies -- ten years
in southern California and it has
to have its worst storm in twenty
the night we meet.

STELLA

I assume you're Ed Plinth?

Ed stands, puts his hand to his forehead, smooths back his
black, wet hair.

ED

Yes, yes I am. I'm afraid I'm off
to a terrible-

Stella stands, adjusts her circulation-stopping, low-cut
dress.

STELLA

Listen, I was hungry an hour ago.
Let's get seated, okay?

Ed nods; they approach the hostess stand.

ED

Plinth, party of two.

The hostess checks her monitor.

HOSTESS

Certainly, please follow me.

The threesome enters the cavernous, modern dining room. The
din of conversation and plates clattering is ear splitting.
Tables are ridiculously close, aisles narrow. The hostess
turns sideways to negotiate the aisle, as do Ed and Stella.

OCCUPIED TABLE

The hostess' rear end glides along the upper surface of a
white linen tablecloth, followed by Ed's and Stella's.

BACK TO SCENE

The hostess stops at a table for two, pulls back a chair for
Stella. Ed and Stella hesitate, as a second table only an
inch away, is occupied by an ELDERLY COUPLE, who scrutinize

the newcomers.

ED

(to hostess)

When I made this reservation, I requested a more private table.

OLD MAN

Don't be such a stick in the mud. And don't worry about us listening to your sweet talk -- the missus and me are practically stone deaf.

The old man raps his knuckles on the table.

OLD WOMAN

Even if we could hear you, we couldn't, on account of the racket in here.

OLD MAN

What racket?

The old couple laugh.

ED

(to hostess)

This will do.

They sit, are handed menus. Stella, uncomfortable, adjusts her chair, then adjusts it a second time.

HOSTESS

Connie, your server, will be over shortly.

The hostess departs. Ed slowly looks to his right.

ED'S POV

The elderly couple stare at him and Stella wide-eyed, unblinking.

BACK TO SCENE

Waitress CONNIE, lean and stern, comes to the table, removes ear plugs, sets them down next to the salt and pepper. Stella picks at the corner of her menu, puts it down, adjusts her chair yet again.

STELLA

How about some bread? Can we get some bread here?

OLD MAN (O.S.)

They're out of bread.

Connie huffs, shakes her head.

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)

They're out due to that yeast crisis. It's dreadful, positively dreadful. Not just Bay View, either. All of California is impacted. It's worse than last year's arugula crisis.

CONNIE

Can I start you off with a cocktail?

ED

The sooner the better.

Connie fidgets, adjusts her chair.

ED

Is there something wrong with your chair?

STELLA

Obviously. You got any wine coolers, honey?

CONNIE

I doubt it. What exactly is a wine cooler?

STELLA

Forget it. Gin on the rocks, with a twist -- make it a double.

CONNIE

And you, sir?

Ed sets his menu down, strokes his right temple, closes his eyes, as if in pain.

ED

I'll have a martini, as large as allowable.

CONNIE

How do you want it, shaken or stirred?

A long, low rumble silences the room.

DINING ROOM

Tables, silverware, windows rattle in unison. Light fixtures sway. Patrons are petrified. A woman yells o.s. The tremor ceases after thirty seconds. The cacophony immediately resumes.

BACK TO SCENE

ED

The gods have decided.

CONNIE

Shaken it is. If you're interested in an appetizer, our seafood tower is exceptional.

ED

(to Stella)

You game?

STELLA

Am I gay? Why would you ask-

OLD MAN (O.S.)

He asked, "Are you game?" for the seafood tower?

Stella turns to the old couple.

STELLA'S POV

The old couple await Stella's barb.

STELLA (O.S.)

I thought you said you're deaf?

OLD MAN

Sorry, I'm having a good day.

OLD WOMAN

Aren't you about due to adjust your chair again, sweetie?

BACK TO SCENE

ED

Bring it.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

Stella sips her gin as Ed, detached from the situation, sips his martini.

OLD MAN (O.S.)

One of you, say something.

ED

(to Stella)

So, how long have you and Katie been neighbors?

STELLA

About five years. She said you're in the toy business?

Ed stops stirring, brightens up.

ED

Yes, that's right. For nearly ten years, over in Bay View Mall.

STELLA

Bay View Mall? Wasn't that condemned?

ED

It's hanging in there.

STELLA

So, like you sell dildos, French ticklers and-

Ed nearly knocks over his drink.

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)

How disgusting!

Stella turns in the old couple's direction.

STELLA

Mind your own goddamned business.

She turns back to Ed, adjusts her chair.

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)

Your shoes don't match.

STELLA

(to Ed)

I just assumed you meant adult toys. So, it's like regular kids' toys? You're a grown man... selling children's toys?

Ed shrugs.

ED

Yeah, of course. I mean, who else but an adult would sell toys?

Stella finishes her gin.

STELLA

Just seems odd, an adult selling kids' -- whatever.

The conversation is interrupted by two struggling STAFF MEMBERS. They drop off a massive seafood tower that takes up most of the table. Ed and Stella's eyes bulge. Oysters, clams and crab claws fall off.

ED

This is an appetizer?

OLD MAN

OLD MAN

A hundred and fifty dollars worth,
sucker.

BACK TO SCENE

The staff members chortle, depart. Stella picks up her knife, pokes, inspects, frowns. Ed looks around the tower's side to see her.

ED'S POV

Stella keeps poking.

ED (O.S.)

Something wrong?

STELLA

I don't see any fish sticks.

ED (O.S.)

Fish sticks?

BACK TO SCENE

Disgusted, Stella drops her knife.

STELLA

Yeah, fish sticks, popcorn shrimp,
fried fish fillets -- you know,
seafood. There's none of my
favorites, just this low tide
debris you have to break out of a
shell.

She plucks out an oyster shell, bangs it on the table,
tosses it back onto the pile.

OLD WOMAN (O.S.)

There's a McDonald's next door,
dearie.

EXT. MALL PARKING LOT - 8 A.M.

(THE NEXT DAY)

Ed's five-year-old Prius sputters, comes to a stop in a pothole, in the nearly empty parking lot of Bay View Mall.

Assorted garbage blows about. The exterior walls of the enclosed, dated structure are dirty, cracked, peeling. A large, worn banner hung near the entrance announces vacancies and a Realtor's phone number with the last digit missing.

Ed exits his vehicle. Storm clouds from the previous night are breaking up. Ed, coffee cup and briefcase in hand,

trudges toward the mall's entrance.

INT. MALL ENTRANCE - MINUTES LATER

Ed sips coffee, as he walks along a major dimly-lit corridor. He looks up.

CEILING

Passing high overhead, a succession of light fixtures flicker, or are completely out. A pair of old sneakers, tied together, dangle from one. A sparrow, startled, flies out of one of them.

BACK TO SCENE

Ed continues walking, looks side to side.

ED'S POV

Most stores, large and small, are permanently closed, with signs in their windows indicating availability. Other stores, open for business, are peculiar in theme.

MONTAGE - QUIRKY STOREFRONTS

-- "Make Your Own Shoelaces!"

-- "Dented Canned Goods Depot"

-- "Rulers and Nuts"

-- "Expired Health & Beauty Aids"

END MONTAGE

VARGAS, the proprietor of Expired Health & Beauty Aids, waves to Ed, indicates he'd like to talk. Ed approaches Vargas, a short, bearded man in his fifties.

VARGAS

Morning, Ed. Ready for another day
in retail hell?

Ed sips, laughs, spurts coffee, splashes some onto the floor.

ED

Hey, Vargas. Actually, sales have
picked up a little lately. Well, I
guess they have. My inventory is
down, so I'm assuming we sold
something. What's new in the
expired health and beauty aids
business?

VARGAS

We accidentally got a shipment of cold capsules that were in-date. I have to put them in storage for six months until they expire, or the state will be on my ass about false advertising. Crazy business, man.

ED

Yeah, you got money tied up in inventory you can't turn over. One nice thing about toys -- no required expiration dates, at least not yet.

Vargas takes a step closer, looks side to side before speaking, lowers his voice.

VARGAS

Just wanted to warn you, I saw that bastard property manager, Maynard Poe, out in the parking lot early this morning. He fined me \$125.00 for not bundling my garbage to his liking.

ED

What a louse; I hate that guy. He once fined me for having a crooked sign in my window.

VARGAS

He'd look for a way to fine his own grandmother for making Thanksgiving dinner.

Vargas looks about one more time.

VARGAS

Like I said, be on the alert.

ED

Thanks, I'll be on my best behavior.

VARGAS

Oh, one more thing. Don't know if you heard, but Make Your Own Shoelaces is shutting down today.

ED

That's too bad; they couldn't make shoelace ends meet?

Vargas starts to laugh, catches himself.

VARGAS

No, it's no joke, Ed. That's five stores down in just two months. It's a bad sign. Something's wrong; management of this place couldn't care less.

Ed grimaces, continues on his way, turns a corner.

ED'S POV

A small, grim man (MAYNARD POE) wears a black suit and tie, stands in the middle of the hallway. Stone-faced, he holds up his smartphone, which displays a photo, taps its side.

BACK TO SCENE

ED

Morning, Poe. Family dinner photo you care to share?

Poe clears his throat, extends his phone into Ed's face.

PHONE

The photo shows discarded burger wrappers and french fries on the floor, in the hallway outside of Ed's store, Joy's Toys.

BACK TO SCENE

Poe lowers his phone, smooths his unruly comb-over.

ED

Worst family dinner photo ever -- I see the dinner but there's no family.

POE

You'll notice I'm not laughing, Ed. And neither will you, when you see the \$200.00 fine added to your monthly rent invoice.

Ed walks past Poe, continues down the corridor. Poe turns in his direction.

POE'S POV

Ed keeps walking.

POE (O.S.)

Leaving without hearing me out?

ED

I think I've heard enough.

POE (O.S.)

Oh, no you haven't.

Ed stops, turns, faces Poe.

POE (O.S.)

You're only one violation away from triggering an automatic non-renewal of your lease.

Ed finishes his coffee, drops the empty cup, turns and continues on his way.

INT. FRONT OF JOY'S TOYS - MOMENTS LATER

The hallway in front of the store is clean. A WOMAN in her early thirties tends twin boys, SAM and DAN, age four. One on each side of her, they hold her hand and repeatedly reach across, tag each other, laugh.

WOMAN

Sam, Dan, for the tenth time, behave yourselves.

They ignore her, continue playing tag. She sniffs, coughs into the crook of her arm. A few feet away stands a chunky, jowly man in his early sixties. His name is WALTER SCHAEFER; his expression indicates his mind is a blank. His tight, yellow corduroy trousers are way too short.

Ed fumbles in his pocket for keys as he approaches those waiting.

ED

Morning, Katie; morning, Walter. Who's winning, Sam, you or Dan?

The boys giggle, retreat behind their mother, who will now be referred to as KATIE. She sneezes again.

KATIE

Morning, Ed. Sorry, but I had to bring the twins in again.

Ed produces the keys, steps to the front door.

ED

What's their preschool in violation of this week? Not another indoor fireworks demonstration I hope.

Katie shudders, sniffs.

KATIE

Thank god, no. This time it was for asbestos... covered with lead paint.

Ed unlocks and opens the front door. A growl stops him and the others in their tracks. The growl turns into barking, as a huge German shepherd bursts through the entranceway. Everyone jumps back; the twins cry, Walter burps.

ED

What the hell?! How did a dog get
in?

GERMAN SHEPHERD

A jump rope entangled with its tail, the dog runs in
circles, bolts away down the corridor, still barking.

BACK TO SCENE

ED

Everyone's blood pressure back to
normal?

Katie looks at her startled sons; they nod. Walter picks
his front teeth, inspects the find.

ED

Walter, you closed last night.
Didn't you see a dog in the store
the size of a Shetland pony?

Walter squints, tugs an earlobe, awaits enlightenment,
finally snaps out of his reverie.

WALTER

Back in Nebraska, when I was this
high (he lowers a hand to
mid-thigh), a neighbor, the Klauses
-- they had a Shetland pony and it
caused no trouble whatsoever.

Ed, baffled, takes a deep breath, exhales slowly.

ED

Okay, then. What do you all say we
get to work?

INT. JOY'S TOYS - CONTINUOUS

Four thousand square feet of disorder are a testament to
Ed's lack of management skills.

MONTAGE - THE STORE IN DISARRAY

-- Piles of unopened cases of merchandise clog an aisle.

-- A dozen twisted tricycles occupy a wire bin mixed with
beach balls, dolls and bent hula hoops.

-- A wall of pegged merchandise is coated with silly string.

-- On the floor, a battery-operated monster truck, topped
with an inflatable T-Rex, repeatedly bangs into an upside
down Lego castle.

END MONTAGE

INT. ED'S OFFICE

A claustrophobic room with a ridiculously low ceiling, Ed's office window has a view of the sales floor. The sound of footsteps is heard o.s.

Ed, bent at the waist, steps up and into his office, careful not to bump his head on the foam ceiling tiles. The intensely bright fluorescent fixture above is headache inducing.

Ed sits behind his desk, the top of which is cluttered with paperwork, a desk phone with all message lights flashing, and defective toys. He picks up an action figure whose head falls off, lands on the floor.

FLOOR

The rolling head stops at the center of the top step.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie ascends the stairs into the office and is just about to step on the toy's head.

ED

Watch your step, Katie. Another Onyx Man's head came off.

Katie brushes back her auburn hair, looks down.

KATIE'S RAISED FOOT

is just above Onyx Man's head.

BACK TO SCENE

KATIE

Thanks for the 'heads up.'

Short, she steps into the office without having to bend at the waist.

ED

I think that makes an even dozen we've had returned with that same problem. Mention it to the sales rep the next time he's in.

She picks up the head, deposits it in her smock pocket, sneezes.

KATIE

I'll add that to the list, if I can find it, and I'll have him issue a credit. On another matter, you really need to have a fire and brimstone talk with Walter. I

(MORE)

KATIE (cont'd)

don't mean to blame him for the entire mess around here, (Ed rolls his eyes when Katie points at him) but he's definitely contributing more than his share.

Ed stands, bumps his head on a foam ceiling panel, dislodges it, sets it back in place.

KATIE

I asked him a week ago to put together that display for the magic kits and it's still not done. It only has three parts! The twins could have assembled it in fifteen minutes.

ED

Great. Get them started on it. If they can do it, they can each have a magic kit -- say, where are they?

A drone, with a plastic dinosaur dangling from it, cruises into the office through its open window, hovers. Katie and Ed stare at it in disbelief.

KATIE

Drones -- the kids are in aisle six. I'll get them started on the display.

She heads for the stairs, turns back towards Ed.

KATIE

I nearly forgot -- how did the date with Stella go last night?

KATIE'S POV

Ed pauses, makes the muffled sound of an atomic bomb going off, moves his hands in a manner imitating an expanding mushroom cloud.

KATIE (O.S.)

C'mon, seriously. I set you guys up; I want to know.

BACK TO SCENE

ED

We both lived through it. Didn't she say anything to you?

KATIE'S FLASHBACK

INT. KATIE'S KITCHEN - PREVIOUS NIGHT (9 P.M.)

Katie, exhausted, stands at the kitchen counter in her modest suburban home, prepares next-day lunches for the twins.

Hard knocking at the backyard door, behind, startles her.

STELLA (O.S.)

Katie! Open up! It's me, Stella!

Katie goes to the door, lets Stella in. Stella, half gallon of ice cream in hand, barges in still dressed up from dinner. Whimpering, she charges to a kitchen drawer, flings it open, retrieves an ice cream scoop.

Stella pries off the lid, digs in with the scoop, devours a massive chunk of ice cream, alternately chews and cries.

END OF FLASHBACK

KATIE

Yeah, she stopped by for dessert.
Stella thought it went... well,
quite well -- I better tend to the
boys.

Katie exits the office; Ed lowers his head.

SALES FLOOR - MINUTES LATER

Walter, as if paralyzed, stands at the sales counter, stares off into space, waits for customers, though there are none in the store. Ed, arms full of merchandise, approaches.

ED

Contemplating the infinite?

Walter breaks from his trance, tucks in his ill-fitting flannel shirt, despite it having no further to go.

WALTER

No, but would you like me to? It's
pretty quiet this morning.

Ed sets the merchandise onto the counter, along with a pricing gun.

ED

That's because we don't actually
open for another twenty minutes.

WALTER

Then I'll start contemplating.

Walter's eyes widen; he returns to his trance.

ED

No, no, no and no!

Ed snaps his fingers. Walter blinks rapidly, comes around.

WALTER

Ed, please make up your mind.

ED

When I hired you for this job,
didn't you say you had previous
retail experience?

Walter runs his fingers through his abundant gray hair,
takes on a look of anguish.

WALTER

It was so, so long ago.
Remembering hurts.

ED

It was less than two months ago.
After you told me you flunked the
US Postal Service entrance exam for
the eleventh time, you said you
worked in retail.

Walter's face brightens. He points an index finger upwards,
grins.

WALTER

I remember now! I washed corpses
at a funeral parlor!

ED

You consider that retail?

WALTER

It's not wholesale; it's not
manufacturing, so that leaves
retail, right?

Ed picks up the pricing gun, places it to his temple,
squeezes the trigger. An orange price sticker is ejected,
sticks to his skin. He hands the pricing gun to Walter,
slides the merchandise his way.

ED

Price these, okay? When you're
done they go in aisle four, next to
the car models. Try to get it done
in the next six months.

Ed walks away, mumbles.

AISLE SIX

Sam and Dan sit on the floor among open drone boxes. Dan works the controls; Sam eagerly observes. A particularly large drone at his feet engages, rises three feet.

Sam stands under it, grabs on -- up it goes, slowly. Dan works the levers, watches with glee as his brother is lifted a few more feet off the ground. They giggle.

Katie enters the aisle, gasps.

KATIE

Stop that this instant! Get your brother back down right now!

She runs to Sam, reaches up, grabs his feet. The drone descends, shuts down. Katie takes the remote control away from Dan, wags her finger in his face.

KATIE

Don't you ever do that again -- ever! You hear me?!

Dan's lower lip extends. Crimson, he pouts, turns away.

SAM

I want up again! I want up again!

Katie composes herself, grabs each boy by the hand.

KATIE

Ed has something fun for the two of you to do, and when you get it done, you each get a very nice gift.

The boys are elated, intrigued.

DAN

A drone?

KATIE

No, no drones -- it's a magic kit.

The kids droop.

DAN

That's for kids.

A DIFFERENT AISLE

Standing in front of shelves of baby toys, DOMINIQUE CARTER, a young, brunette woman in smart business attire, attempts to make a selection. She inspects a stuffed animal, blows dust from it, returns it to the shelf, continues her search.

Ed enters the aisle clutching an assortment of stuffed toys, drops a few, is startled at the sight of the unexpected,

attractive customer. She turns in his direction.

DOMINIQUE

Balls?

Ed gulps.

ED

I beg your pardon?

DOMINIQUE

Your balls? Where are your balls?

Ed drops more stuffed toys.

DOMINIQUE

This is a toy store -- I assume you have balls.

Ed nods repeatedly. The orange price sticker flakes off.

ED

Yes! I, that is, we have plenty.
What, uh, exactly...

He wipes his brow. Dominique playfully smiles.

DOMINIQUE

It wasn't a personal question, I-

Katie enters the aisle, startles Ed.

KATIE

Need any help here?

ED

(to Katie)

No-no, everything's fine, Katie.
We're looking for my, for 'some'
balls. Please check to see if
Walter's conscious.

Katie shrugs, sneaks an extra look at Dominique, then Ed, exits the aisle.

DOMINIQUE

As I was saying, I'm looking for
something like a small, stuffed
soccer ball, or basketball, for a
very young girl. Everything I've
seen so far is kind of prissy.

Ed settles down, focuses.

ED

I think we have what you're looking
for. Let me take a look.

Ed steps past Dominique, goes to a nearby shelf, jams his hand to its back, up to his shoulder. After a few tugs, he pulls out a small, stuffed soccer ball. He proudly smiles, as if he just reeled in a forty-pound salmon, presents the toy to Dominique.

DOMINIQUE

That's perfect, exactly what I was looking for.

She takes it from him.

ED

Great. Nice to see our inventory system still works.

Dominique laughs, looks around, takes in the disarray.

DOMINIQUE

Are you the owner?

Flattered, Ed straightens his necktie.

ED

Yes, I am. I'm Ed Plinth, pleased to meet you.

DOMINIQUE

I don't mean to be rude, but does this place always look, ummm...

ED

Post-apocalyptic?

Dominique conceals amusement with her delicate hand.

DOMINIQUE

That's the word I was thinking of, but I was searching for something less blunt.

ED

Oh, that's okay, I've heard worse.

Embarrassed, Ed reflexively straightens out a few misplaced items on a shelf. Dominique takes notice.

DOMINIQUE

Oh, there, that does it. Now the store is in perfect order.

They both laugh.

DOMINIQUE

From the little I observed, your store seems to be lacking in technology.

ED

Not a huge fan. Don't trust it. You become too dependent on it and, when it fails, you're in serious trouble, plus it's tremendously expensive.

DOMINIQUE

I assume you have a cell phone.

Sheepishly, Ed produces an old flip phone from his shirt pocket, waves it for a second, clumsily puts it back.

DOMINIQUE

Oh, so there are exceptions. And you do own a car, or do you hitchhike here every morning?

Ed senses defeat, leans back against shelving, knocks off merchandise. One item breaks. He gently kicks it away.

ED

Okay, you got me...

DOMINIQUE

Dominique, Dominique Carter.

Ed extends his right hand; Dominique shakes it.

ED

I'm Ed Plinth. I already mentioned that, didn't I?

DOMINIQUE

Yes, you certainly did, Ed.

She opens her purse, retrieves a business card, hands it to Ed, who fails to read it.

ED

So, do you sell point of sale systems?

Dominique taps the card in Ed's hand.

DOMINIQUE

DeMarco Consulting. I'm a consultant to retailers and a variety of other business owners.

Ed studies the card.

ED

I see your company is close-by.

DOMINIQUE

Walking distance from the mall.

ED

How nice.

DOMINIQUE

I'd be happy to give you a free initial consultation sometime, perhaps over a drink after work. I think you'd be surprised at how organized and efficient your store could become.

Ed looks at the card again, then back at Dominique.

ED

Sure, I'd like to get together. I'd like that very much. How's tomorrow evening, say 7 p.m.? There's a Chili's about a block from here.

DOMINIQUE

Excellent. I'll see you then, Ed. (she holds up the ball) And thanks for finding your balls.

INT. ED'S OFFICE - MINUTES LATER

Seated at his desk, Ed leans back looks at Dominique's card, smiles. Katie, business papers in hand, enters, shows surprise over Ed's countenance.

KATIE

Make a new friend today?

Ed, caught off guard, clears his throat, sits upright, stashes the card in his desk drawer.

ED

No, well, yes, actually. Dominique is a business consultant.

KATIE

Uh-huh.

ED

She's got some ideas she'd like to talk to me about. She thinks she could make this place more efficient.

Katie makes a face, shows concern.

KATIE

That makes two of us.

She places her papers on Ed's desk, spreads them out.

KATIE

Take a look at the items I circled
and made notes about.

Ed complies, silently reads, looks up at Katie.

ED

Wow.

KATIE

Yeah, wow. The sampling I did
against merchandise on the shelf
showed nearly half our marked
prices don't reflect current
wholesale cost. We're priced too
low.

ED

By at least ten percent. That's a
real eye opener. Great work,
Katie. I'll have to make some time
to change them.

Katie gathers up the papers.

KATIE

You should have Walter work on it
in the mornings. He just stands at
the register with that bizarre
expression on his face -- like some
constipated zombie -- it creeps me
out. If not, hire a part-timer to
work on it.

Ed stands, dislodges a ceiling tile, resets it.

ED

We don't exactly have the spare
cash for a new hire.

KATIE

And what do you think a consultant
is going to charge? They don't
come cheap.

ED

I know, I know. I haven't
committed to anything. I'll hear
her out tomorrow night when we get
together for drinks. I can handle
it.

Katie sniffs, shows doubt.

KATIE

Oh, drinks?

ED

You sound a little...

KATIE

What? What do I sound like?

ED

Nothing. Concerned, I guess, with a cold coming on.

KATIE

To tell you the truth, I am concerned. When it comes to drinking, you don't exactly have a hollow leg. A couple of cocktails and you're liable to sign anything.

Ed, embarrassed, shows the palms of both hands, silently nods.

KATIE

You should be embarrassed. It's only two years ago that you went out for lunch with that salesman and not only bought forty dozen teddy bears that were-

ED

Missing an eye-

KATIE

And one foot. Besides that, you-

ED

Bought his rental car. I know, I know. I'll be careful, Katie, I promise. Thanks for looking out for me.

Katie, skeptical, smiles, changes the subject.

KATIE

I've got my Husky Helpers meeting in ten minutes. First time at the new location.

ED

What they need is a new name.

KATIE

I can't complain; I've lost eighteen pounds. I'm back to what I weighed when I was a senior in high school.

ED

That's fantastic; you look great.

Katie places her hands on her hips, pivots, gloats over her accomplishment.

ED

Wish I could say the same. So,
what's the new location?

KATIE

Over in the Davenport Building.

Ed's brow furrows. He retrieves Dominique's card, inspects it.

ED

Hmm. That's a coincidence. Send
up the boys; I'll keep them busy
while you're gone.

KATIE

Thanks. FYI, they built that
display in ten minutes.

ED

That's less time than it would take
Walter to open the box.

EXT. DAVENPORT BUILDING - DAY

(MINUTES LATER)

Katie walks up to the two-story stucco building, ascends steps, stops to look at the exterior directory board.

DIRECTORY BOARD

The board shows Husky Helpers on the second floor and DeMarco Consulting on the first.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie proceeds to the front door, enters.

INT. DAVENPORT BUILDING

Katie goes partially upstairs, stops, looks to her right.

KATIE'S POV

The view through the high, glass-walled entrance to DeMarco Consulting reveals a dozen cubicles, mostly occupied. Dominique emerges from a private office adjacent to the cubicles, walks out of view.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie takes one step, pauses. A rumbling sound o.s. and vibration of the stairwell quickly stop her. It ceases after a few seconds. Katie continues upstairs.

TOP OF THE STAIRWELL

Katie reaches the top step, is startled by a well dressed man in his thirties, BRIAN HOVLAND. The closed, straining middle button of his suit jacket explains his presence.

Brian is out of breath.

Katie reaches for the door knob, notices, stops.

KATIE

Was it the tremor, or the climb?

Brian, doubtful, rocks his head side to side.

BRIAN

You left out anxiety. A bit of all three, but truthfully, mostly the climb, I'm afraid. That's why I'm here.

KATIE

Oh, a Husky Helpers first-timer? I don't recall your face.

Brian straightens his sandy hair, bites his lower lip.

BRIAN

Yeah, believe it or not, I've been standing here for ten minutes wondering if I should go through with it.

Katie taps Brian's lapel.

KATIE

You're going to love it -- what's your name?

BRIAN

Brian Hovland, and you are?

KATIE

Katie Venturi. Pleased to meet you, Brian. Best way to do this is not to overthink it. Jump in with both feet.

She grabs Brian's hand, opens the door.

BRIAN

The same way I learned zorbing.

KATIE

I've seen that! The giant plastic ball rolling downhill with you inside! Always wanted to give that a try -- didn't have the nerve.

INT. HUSKY HELPERS

Katie and Brian enter the modest sized meeting room, continue their conversation MOS. They walk past wall posters depicting heavy people eating and enjoying fattening foods.

BRIAN

Well, maybe there's a deal we can work out here. If you can get me through Husky Helpers, perhaps I can help you overcome your fear of zorbing.

KATIE

We'll see. I've known you for all of two minutes.

Katie and Brian walk further into the room. Brian looks the interior over as they search for a place to sit, in the last row of concentrically arranged semi-circles of seats. The room is nearly full. Brian is drawn to a particular poster.

BRIAN'S POV

A poster of a large man holding and taking a bite from an entire roast turkey.

BACK TO SCENE

They sit next to each other.

BRIAN

What's with the posters?

KATIE

They making you hungry?

BRIAN

I'm about ready to eat my own hand.

KATIE

Good, that should help.

BRIAN

Help? I don't get it.

Dramatic music fills the room.

KATIE

Just try to be open minded.

Brian's nostrils flare.

BRIAN

What smells so good?

DOORWAY

The lights dim, except at a nearby double doorway that is suddenly spotlighted. The audience turns its attention to it. The doors fling open.

Long banquet tables are wheeled in by uniformed, corpulent ATTENDANTS. The tables, packed with exquisite desserts and the most tempting appetizers and snacks, are brought within

a few feet of the mesmerized, oohing attendees. The grinning attendants stand erect by the tables.

BACK TO SCENE

BRIAN

What the hell is-

Katie taps Brian's knee, silences him.

DOORWAY

TANYA, a tall, trim, fit woman in a sequined jumpsuit blasts into the room to raucous applause. She prances to the center of the concentric seating area. The random applause turns rhythmic, intensifies. Sporadic cheers erupt.

CROWD

Tanya! Tanya! Tanya!

BACK TO SCENE

Katie claps, motions to Brian to join in.

TANYA

raises her arms. Energized, she does a back flip, evokes cheers, then raises her arms again, silences the psyched crowd.

TANYA

Welcome! Welcome, existing and new members to Husky Helpers! Are you ready to test your will power?!

CROWD

No!

TANYA

Good! Go eat!

The crowd rises to its feet, stampedes the banquet tables, begins devouring everything in sight without plates or utensils.

KATIE AND BRIAN

Still seated, Brian, shocked, turns to Katie for guidance.

BRIAN

This is the most disgusting display of human gluttony I have ever witnessed! I'm about to throw up!

KATIE

Same here -- that's how I lost eighteen pounds. You ready to leave?

He concurs. They stand, dodge a few latecomers, head for the exit.

BANQUET TABLES

are inundated, besieged. Food is consumed in a manner great white sharks could only envy. Tanya buries her face into an Oreo-topped cheesecake.

EXT. PARKING LOT - MINUTES LATER

Brian, baffled, walks beside calm Katie.

KATIE

Not quite what you expected, was it?

BRIAN

When I found their business card on my windshield a few days ago, I assumed it was a weight loss program.

Katie snorts, covers her mouth.

KATIE

I did, too, at first -- but it's the exact opposite. Their whole thing is over-indulging. They love it, but it turns me off to food for days at a time.

BRIAN

Did you see that guy in the blue sweatshirt? He-

Katie laughs, pokes Brian in the shoulder.

KATIE

I know! I know! Quesadilla on top of German black forest cake! Ecch!

They continue walking, laughing, then stop next to an immaculate luxury sedan.

BRIAN

Well, here's my car.

Impressed, Katie looks the car over, runs her hand along its polished surface.

BRIAN

Can I give you a lift somewhere?

KATIE

No, thanks, I work right here in Bay View Mall.

BRIAN

Oh, the 'haunted' mall. Is that store that sells the dented canned goods still open?

KATIE

Dented Depot: (she sings their jingle) "No two cans alike!" Yeah, they're still there.

An awkward silence blooms.

BRIAN

Would you like to go out sometime, for coffee, or a drink?

KATIE

Sure, just no buffets.

Brian smirks.

BRIAN

Great, here's my card.

He hands her his card; she reads it.

KATIE

Metro Processing, Inc. General Manager, impressive. Kind of vague, though. What do you process?

BRIAN

Meat. We're a meat processing company -- everything, from the ordinary to the exotic.

KATIE

Hmmm. Uh, always good to know someone in the meat processing business. Never know when you're going to need some cartilage or tendons.

She takes a deep breath, pauses, suddenly fumbles for her card, pauses again.

KATIE

I just remembered -- I don't have a business card. I work at Joy's Toys.

BRIAN

Well, you've got mine. Call me or email me whenever you like. Nice meeting you, Katie.

Brian gets into his car, waves, drives off.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING PARKING LOT - THAT EVENING

Ed's Prius pulls into a spot, enters a pothole, jerks to a stop. He gets out, stretches, reaches in for his briefcase, heads for the building's entrance.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING HALLWAY

Ed walks halfway down the well-lit corridor. O.s. the sound of gunshots, a fading siren. Unfazed, he stops, digs for keys. The door to the apartment across from Ed's opens. Jazz music is heard, female giggles o.s.

SAL BENITEZ, a slim Latino in his twenties, enters the hallway. He wears only a red Speedo, spots Ed.

SAL

Toy dude, good timing.

Ed pauses, looks in Sal's direction, waves.

ED

How you doing, Sal? (raises eyebrows) As if I needed to ask.

Sal dances over to Ed, points to his own apartment, then outlines a woman's curves in the air. He bites one of his knuckles.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Sal? Sal-va-tore? The oven, she is set to broil, baby.

ED

I'll bet you're not cooking ribs.

Sal fans himself, gives a toothy grin.

SAL

(to o.s. woman)

Be patient, my sweet. Your Salvatore will be there to do some basting in un-momento.

Sal returns his attention to Ed.

SAL

Ed, I assume, being in the toy biz, you must get free samples from time to time, right?

ED

Sure.

SAL

You have anything interesting me and my sizzling lady friend might find, um, stimulating?

ED

It's not that kind of toy store,
Sal. I don't know why everyone I
meet automatically assumes-

SAL

Okay, okay, sorry.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Salvatore, this oven gets any
hotter, the racks, they gonna melt!

Sal takes a step back towards his place, looks to Ed.

SAL

(quietly)

Can you believe I just met her an
hour ago, while waiting on line for
a lottery ticket?

He jumps in the air, pumps his fist.

SAL

And she says she has two sisters
who insist on sharing everything.
Everything!

ED

You are the master.

Ed salutes, turns towards his door.

SAL

You gotta move fast with the
ladies, man. You hesitate, you
just masturbate.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Salvatore, it's a five-alarm fire!

SAL

Coming, my sweet! The fireman must
check the hose for leaks. (to Ed)
Don't you have anything going on,
man?

Ed turns back to Sal.

ED

Well, I did meet someone today.
I'm thinking of asking her out.

SAL

Don't think -- act. Look, you know
I work for that online travel
agency.

Ed affirms.

ED

Yeah, you go around checking out cruise ships -- ones that offer last minute deals.

SAL

That's it. Well, I just came across an unbelievable smokin' deal. Huge discount. Nice ship, not too big, maybe a thousand passengers, tops. It's a twenty-four-hour cruise to nowhere.

ED

Nowhere? They have cruises that just stay tied up at the pier?

WOMAN (O.S.)

Sal! I'm going to spontaneously combust!

SAL

(to Ed)

No sample novelty clitoral stimulators lying around? You sure?

ED

It's not that type of toy store.

Sal snaps the waistband of his Speedo.

SAL

The ship goes out, comes back, all in twenty-four hours. You ask your new lady friend to go on it. You won't regret it, man. She will love you till-

Heavy moaning o.s.

ED

Till?

SAL

Till your dick falls off.

ED

How romantic.

SAL

I gotta go. I'll slide the coupons under your door.

Sal runs to his door, stops, looks in.

SAL
 (to woman)
 Baby, your first responder has
 arrived!

He dashes in, slams the door shut.

ED
 I wonder what the markup is on sex
 toys.

Ed enters his apartment, closes the door.

INT. ED'S OFFICE - 6:30 P.M. (THE NEXT EVENING)

Corded phone receiver wedged between his jaw and shoulder,
 Ed, seated, converses while shuffling through handfuls of
 invoices.

ED
 Delinquent? How can I possibly be
 delinquent on merchandise I have no
 invoice for? Merchandise I never
 received.

He waits, listens, continues shuffling, peers at paperwork.

ED
 Well, you may think you shipped
 twenty-four Little Carpenter play
 sets, but I can tell you, you
 dreamt it. Goodbye!

Ed hangs up, jams the load of invoices into a nearby file
 cabinet, huffs. He picks up a cup of coffee, prepares to
 take a sip, looks in the cup, stops. He fishes out a toy
 soldier, addresses it.

ED
 Where's the rest of your unit,
 soldier?... Not talking, aye?

Ed tosses it over his shoulder, takes a swig of coffee.

An old, framed black-and-white photo, hanging inches away,
 catches Ed's eye. He sets down his cup, takes the photo off
 the wall, studies it.

PHOTO

A husband and wife, with their young son, proudly stand in
 front of a brick-and-mortar store. It bears a sign: "Joy's
 Toys."

Katie enters the office, surprises Ed.

KATIE
 Taking a walk down memory lane?

Ed looks up from the photo, hangs it back up.

ED

Yep, not always a pleasant thing to do.

KATIE

Tell me about it. I came across some old pictures of Jack last night; I must have cried for an hour.

ED

How long has it been?

Katie reflects.

KATIE

Going on three years -- hard to believe.

ED

Sure is. You think a piano falling on someone from ten stories up is something that only happens in a cartoon or a-

Katie sniffs, wipes her eye.

KATIE

Those Little Carpenter play sets really blew out of here in no time. You really need to get on the phone and order another two dozen, maybe more. They're sure to be a hit for Christmas.

Ed's mouth flops open.

ED

Uh, yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that. Good idea.

KATIE

You probably haven't even paid the bill yet for the first batch.

ED

Oh, I'm sure of that. I almost forgot to ask you. How did your Husky Helpers meeting go last night?

Katie takes a step towards the stairs, turns to Ed.

KATIE

Great, thoroughly disgusting. I could hardly even think about

(MORE)

KATIE (cont'd)
eating after it. Oh, and I met
someone. Nice guy, drives a sweet
car, probably worth more than my
house. He wants to get together.

Ed takes a hard swallow, momentarily looks away.

ED
Oh, nice. That's... really good
news. Good luck with that.

KATIE
Speaking of getting together,
aren't you supposed to meet with
your curvy consultant friend for
cocktails and a quickie this
evening?

ED
It's not like that.

Katie laughs. Ed looks at his watch, bolts to his feet,
dislodges a foam ceiling panel.

ED
Damn this ceiling! Thanks for
reminding me. I'm leaving now --
can you lock up?

KATIE
Sure, and try to stay sober.

Katie steps out of Ed's way as he runs downstairs.

EXT. BAY VIEW MALL -- MINUTES LATER

Ed exits, takes two steps, is engulfed in thick, gray sooty
smoke. He coughs, gags, as do PASSERSBY moving quickly. Ed
grabs the sleeve of an old GRIZZLED ONE.

ED
Hey, guy, what's all this?

The Grizzled One cackles, coughs, pulls his arm away.

GRIZZLED ONE
Just another idyllic day in the
Golden State, bub. Now let me be
on my way.

Ed grabs his sleeve again.

ED
C'mon, what is it?

The Grizzled One wheezes, spits copiously.

GRIZZLED ONE

Freight train carrying organic produce went off the rails two miles from here. (spits again) It hit and blew up an ethanol storage tank adjacent to a wind farm. That spread the fire onto five hundred acres of tinder-dry biodynamic wheat -- just like two years ago. Kind of a nutty smell, ain't it?

The Grizzled One spits a third time, hurries off. Ed pulls up his jacket collar, continues on his way for his date.

INT. CHILI'S - TEN MINUTES LATER

Dominique sits at the almost empty bar, converses MOS with the BARTENDER. Ed, soot covered, approaches. The surprised bartender looks on.

ED

Hey, Dominique, nice to see you; thanks for waiting.

Ed takes off his jacket, shakes it, spreads a cloud of soot, coughs.

DOMINIQUE

You a chimney sweep in your spare time?

ED

No, there's this cloud of smoke out there. Some sort of fire caused by a train... an ethanol storage tank blew up, then something about a wind farm spreading it -- weird.

DOMINIQUE

Oh, just like two years ago.

Ed sits next to her.

ED

So I've heard.

The bartender clears her throat.

BARTENDER

So, Mr. Chimney Sweep, would you and the young lady care to have something to wash down the soot?

DOMINIQUE

Moscow mule for me.

ED

I'll have the same, but shoot the mule.

BARTENDER

Shoot the mule? Does that mean
just vodka on the rocks, lime
twist?

ED

Yeah.

The bartender squints, departs. From an oversized leather bag, Dominique produces a thick folder, places it on the bar.

ED

What's all that?

DOMINIQUE

Just a few reports I wrote up,
based on what I observed the other
day.

Ed picks it up, assesses the folder's weight. Dominique takes it back.

ED

You weren't in the store for ten
minutes. How did-

DOMINIQUE

I'm very observant and I've been
doing this a while. At this point
I probably know more about your
business than you do.

The bartender returns, sets down drinks, departs.

ED

(quietly)

So do Katie's twins.

Dominique and Ed sip their drinks.

DOMINIQUE

Before we get to the nuts and bolts
of Joy's Toys, tell me something
about yourself. I like to know the
person, before making over their
business.

Ed takes another sip, hesitates.

ED

It's hard to know exactly where to
start.

DOMINIQUE

Are you a married man?

ED

No, not currently -- never have been, actually. In fact, I hardly even date.

DOMINIQUE

You sound almost proud of it.

Ed looks at his glass, runs his finger along its rim, plays with the stirrer.

ED

In a way, I am. More to the point, I have mixed emotions about settling down, or even a serious relationship.

The bartender returns.

BARTENDER

Fifteen minutes left to happy hour. If you want a half-off appetizer, the deep fried, gouda, jalapeño bacon balls are a steal at \$7.99. Another round of mules, living and shot?

ED

Sure, but we'll hold off on the bacon balls.

BARTENDER

They're a steal. Got regulars, except for one who recently died of a coronary, that order 'em every single night. Comes with a side of Tums. Did I mention they're all natural?

ED

So's hemlock. No, thanks.

She shrugs, departs.

DOMINIQUE

Getting back to our conversation, do you like women?

ED

Absolutely. My reluctance is about splitting commitments. Running a business is a full-time thing, and so is a serious relationship. If you try to juggle two, one has to suffer. My dad tried and it didn't work. He couldn't handle it, so he took off. Running the store alone was too much for my mom, so she liquidated it for next to nothing.

DOMINIQUE

I'm so sorry to hear that. I had no idea.

She places her hand on Ed's arm.

ED

Thanks. My folks' store, a neighborhood toy store, was also called Joy's Toys. We lived in the apartment above it. Outside of one or two good memories, I can tell you there wasn't a lot of joy at Joy's Toys.

Ed lowers his head, takes a deep breath. Dominique takes a long sip of her drink. Ed regroups.

ED

(head still down)

Would you like to go on a cruise with me next weekend?

Dominique gags on her drink, spits into it. Ed raises his head, goes pale, sweats.

DOMINIQUE

I beg your pardon. What did you just say?

The bartender arrives with the second round, gingerly places the drinks, lingers.

ED

It's, it's like a day cruise. That's it, a day cruise, except for a little bit of night time -- just one night's worth, in fact. The cruise doesn't even go anywhere.

He slurps down the remnants of drink number one, starts on the second. Dominique puts her hand to her chest, steadies her breathing.

BARTENDER

Only five minutes left on those bacon balls, folks. Then they go back to their regular price of \$12.99. Did I mention they're all natural? Comes with a side of-

Ed slams his palm on the bar.

DOMINIQUE

Doesn't go anywhere? What kind of cruise doesn't go anywhere?

Ed gulps, slaps his hands to his cheeks.

ED

Cruise to nowhere. Goes out, comes back. You don't even know you went anyplace, which you didn't -- because it's a cruise to, uh, nowhere. You know what Sal says, "Don't hesitate, masturbate!"

BARTENDER

I'm outta here.

The bartender leaves.

DOMINIQUE

What?! Who's Sal?

ED

My, uh, travel agent.

DOMINIQUE

Your travel agent tells you when to masturbate? That's ridiculous.

ED

You don't know Sal.

Ed lowers his head to the bar, shudders. Dominique places her hand on his back.

DOMINIQUE

Listen, Ed, you're a good guy at heart. I'm sure of that, but let's tap the breaks here and keep this a business meeting, okay?

Ed raises his head, nods. Dominique opens her folder, hands Ed a report.

DOMINIQUE

This is a summarization of all the other detailed reports in this folder. You can see here all the headings for the other reports, plus brief synopses.

Ed wipes his forehead with a cocktail napkin, focuses on the reports. The bartender returns, listens.

ED

Okay, I see. Quite a few topics covered here: inventory, point of sale, in-store communications, ordering, web strategy. It covers everything, even security.

DOMINIQUE

Which you should pay particular attention to. Employee theft alone can kill a retail business.

ED

I completely trust Katie and Walter. We can skip increased security.

DOMINIQUE

All right. We can go over the remainder now, in a cursory way and, at your leisure, you can read all the details. Sound good?

ED

So you're saying I'm free to take these home?

Dominique pauses.

DOMINIQUE

You can take them home, but all this (she points to the reports) is not free.

ED

It's checkbook time?

DOMINIQUE

Ed, think of it as an investment, not as an expense.

BARTENDER

Unlike your tab.

The bartender presents the bill.

INT. ED'S OFFICE - THE FOLLOWING MORNING

Katie paces inside Ed's office, Dominique's reports in hand. Ed sheepishly enters, holds two cups of coffee, presents one to Katie.

KATIE

Thank you so much, but I don't need anything to warm me up this morning, Edward -- I'm boiling as it is. Boiling, as in boiling mad!

Ed sits at his desk, cowers. Katie continues pacing.

KATIE

In the six years I've worked here, I've made countless suggestions on how to make your business efficient, and not once have you implemented any of them.

ED

That's not entirely accurate. I did move the bubble water bottles
(MORE)

ED (cont'd)
to a higher shelf, so toddlers
would stop drinking from them.

Katie does a mocking bow towards Ed.

KATIE
Well, thank you sooo much, your
royal retail magnificence. I'm
about to bust wide open with pride,
that you heeded my bubble water
suggestion. I'm sure a statue will
be erected somewhere in my honor
for that monumental contribution.
Maybe I'll even win the Nobel Prize
for bubble water placement.

Katie slams the reports onto Ed's desk. A small drone
enters the office through the window. Katie sees it, bares
her teeth, plucks it out of the air, throws it against the
wall behind ducking Ed. Katie sticks her head out the
office window.

KATIE
Sam! Dan! Put down that
controller and get your tiny tushes
up into the office this instant!

SAM & DAN (O.S.)
Ohhh!

Katie turns her attention back to Ed.

ED
I admit I have problems delegating.
I'm set in my ways. I haven't
implemented your suggestions, which
are good, because-

The desk phone rings. Ed picks up, raises his index finger,
pauses the fireworks.

ED/DOMINIQUE PHONE CONVERSATION - INTERCUTTING

DOMINIQUE
Hi, Ed. I just wanted to follow up
on our meeting last night.

Dominique relaxes, sits back in her leather office chair.

DOMINIQUE
I appreciate you being open to
making major changes to how your
business operates, and for
committing with a check for one
full year of consulting services.

Dominique pauses. Background yelling, by Katie, is audible
on her phone.

DOMINIQUE
Who's that yelling in the
background?

ED
That would be, uh, Katie.

KATIE
I heard that! A year's worth of
consulting! What did that cost,
Ed?! I told you not to drink.

Sam and Dan enter the office, cry over Katie's agitation.

DOMINIQUE
Now I hear crying. Are those
children crying in your office?

ED
Katie's four-year-old boys. They
work here part time... and cry a
lot.

KATIE
Where's the office checkbook? I
want to see what you paid.

DOMINIQUE
Perhaps this is a bad time to talk.

ED
It's okay; it's always like this.
Katie, I hid it in the trash.

Katie rummages through the trash basket, finds the
checkbook, opens it, locates the entry.

KATIE
My god! How are you going to cover
this check? Eighteen-thousand
dollars! Maybe I misread it.

She re-reads it MOS, slams the checkbook back into the
trash.

ED
Katie, I'm funding it with what's
left of my inheritance.

KATIE
Money... down... the... drain.

ED
Think of it as an expense, not an
investment... or the other way.

Katie snarls, gathers up the boys, heads downstairs.

DOMINIQUE

I hope I haven't caused a rift.

ED

No, not at all. It'll blow over in a generation or two, hopefully.

DOMINIQUE

Listen, Ed, I've given some thought to your offer last night and I'm interested in going on that cruise with you. You still feel like going?

Ed falls out of his chair.

END INTERCUTTING

SALES FLOOR - MINUTES LATER

Walter stares, stands like a statue at the checkout counter. Katie and the boys approach. She picks up Sam, then Dan, each holding Nerf guns, seats them on the counter. They gape at Walter, pepper him with Nerf bullets without prompting a response.

KATIE

Walter, are you among the living?

Walter snaps out of his trance.

WALTER

I am now. That was a deep, deep trance -- a real doozie. Apparently, in a past life, I was the king of Australia's dingoes.

KATIE

Sorry to take you away from the pack, your highness. Have you waited on any customers today?

WALTER

Yes, unless I imagined them, too.

Ed cautiously walks up to Katie, weakly smiles.

ED

Uh, Katie, I was wondering if we could speak, privately, over in aisle two.

Katie turns to Ed, takes a step closer.

KATIE

Oh, I'd love to. Boys, keep an eye on the dingo king.

Katie and Ed walk away.

AISLE TWO

An elaborate, eight-foot-high structure composed of puzzle boxes sits in the middle of the aisle. Ed, followed by Katie, enters the otherwise unoccupied aisle. They are instantly stunned by the creation. They come closer to it, inspect.

ED

Looks like Sam and Dan's work.

KATIE

It's no poltergeist. You should see what they do with my pots and pans. So, what's on your mind?

Ed takes a step back. Hands on hips, he looks askance.

KATIE

Get it off your chest -- you're firing me.

Alarmed, he reaches for Katie, places his hands on her shoulders.

ED

What?! No! No! That's the farthest thing from my mind.

KATIE

I'll bet Dominique put you up to it, too. Technology in, Katie out.

ED

Never. You're the glue holding this teetering house of cards together.

KATIE

That's news to me, coming from you. Why did it take six years for you to say it?

Ed starts to take down the puzzle box tower, returns boxes to shelves, then stops.

ED

Because I'm not the perfect manager.

Katie clasps her hands, looks heavenward.

KATIE

Well, hallelujah! I never thought I'd hear those words, but you still haven't told me what's on your mind.

ED

I'm coming around to it.

Still attentive to Ed, Katie helps deconstruct the puzzle tower.

ED

Next Saturday-

KATIE

The day I'm taking my boys to Disneyland for their birthday...

Ed forces a cough, Katie stops her task.

ED

Y-Yes, next Saturday I'm going on a twenty-four-hour cruise, so I need to ask you to work open to... close.

Katie wilts, springs back to life, grabs and throws a boxed puzzle at Ed. It hits him in the gut, opens, scatters a thousand pieces.

KATIE

Of all the Saturdays! And it's with Dominique, of course!

ED

Yes.

KATIE

Why don't you ask Walter to work open to close? He'd do a great job of it.

ED

As we both know, Earth might not survive.

Katie folds her arms, stews.

KATIE

Sure, Ed, sure. You go and have a good time with Dominique. You've certainly earned it. Now excuse me while I break the news to Sam and Dan. No need to go with me, you'll be able to hear them cry from here.

Katie storms out of the aisle. Ed pushes over the tower, sighs, resumes placing boxes back on shelves.

EXT. PIER - MORNING

(THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY)

In the early morning, a thousand-passenger cruise ship, tied to the pier, is in the midst of processing assembled PASSENGERS. They range in age from early twenties to

seniors in their seventies. No children are present.

Dominique exits an X-ray security booth, retrieves a carry-on, followed by Ed, who does the same. They join the line of those boarding. Another couple, KELLY and BRUCE, immediately falls in behind them.

ON LINE

DOMINIQUE

We certainly lucked out weather-wise. There was a threat of showers today, until late last evening.

ED

Yeah, the weather is perfect. I'm really happy you agreed to go. This should be a lot of fun.

The woman of a couple (BABS and LOU) in front of Ed and Dominique, turns in their direction.

BABS

First-timers on this cruise line?

ED

Yes, we're newbies.

DOMINIQUE

It's a beautiful ship, immaculate.

KELLY

It is, from bow to stern. You two are in for a real treat. This is our... eighth time, Bruce?

Bruce pushes back his Panama hat, grins.

BRUCE

Eight it is -- most relaxing way to spend a Saturday. I'd go every weekend if I could afford it.

KELLY

Oh, it goes way beyond relaxing. It's liberating.

BABS (O.S.)

You said it, Kelly; liberating sums it up perfectly.

DOMINIQUE

How nice -- liberating, that's not a word I would have expected to have heard describing a twenty-four-hour cruise.

ED

Me neither.

Dominique puts her arm around Ed's waist. He wraps his around her shoulder. They all continue to inch their way forward.

DOMINIQUE

Not thinking about the store, I hope.

ED

It's a million miles away.

INT. SHIP CORRIDOR - THIRTY MINUTES LATER

Among other laughing, enthused PASSENGERS engaged in the same pursuit, Ed and Dominique search for and find their stateroom.

UNIDENTIFIED PASSENGER (O.S.)

See you all up on deck, everyone.

ED

(to Dominique)

A lively group. Quite a few people seem to know each other.

DOMINIQUE

Yeah, but a little older than I would have expected.

Ed opens the door. They enter with their carry-ons.

INT. ROOM

ED & DOMINIQUE'S POV

A postage-stamp-sized stateroom with a lopsided single bed. The open bathroom door reveals a tiny sink and stall shower. The door to the bathroom repeatedly swings open and bangs shut with the rocking of the ship.

A small porthole provides the only view of the outside, which is partially obstructed by an exterior metal pipe.

BACK TO SCENE

Dominique gingerly sets her carry-on onto the bed, produces a loud screech. Stunned, they look the place over.

DOMINIQUE

Did you say a 'friend' of yours got you the tickets, for this?

ED

He's more of an acquaintance, actually. And based on this, it

(MORE)

ED (cont'd)
doesn't look like it's going to
develop beyond that.

Dominique tries to open a clothes drawer. It only opens an inch, then jams. Ed tries to open it farther, breaks off the handle. Dominique steps towards the bathroom entrance.

DOMINIQUE
Let's have a better look at the
shower. Maybe it'll look bigger
from a different angle.

She peers in.

DOMINIQUE'S POV

The rust-stained shower is two feet wide. The cheap narrow vanity, patched with duct tape, slants, can accommodate nothing.

BACK TO SCENE

DOMINIQUE
Nope. I think the best thing we
can say is that we won't be
spending much time in here.

O.s. the ship's foghorn blares, causes the entire room to vibrate. Ed and Dominique place their hands over their ears.

ED
Sounds like we're right under the
horn!

DOMINIQUE
They probably charged you extra for
that!

The foghorn stops after fifteen seconds. Ed looks around, senses something.

ED
Can you feel it? We're underway.

DOMINIQUE
You're right -- there's no turning
back, even on a cruise to nowhere.

Dominique and Ed start unpacking.

MINUTES LATER

They finish unpacking. Dominique picks up a plastic ice bucket, hands it to Ed.

DOMINIQUE

Would you fill this up, please? I saw an ice machine at the end of the hallway.

Ed takes it, displays doubt.

ED

You sure this place has room for ice?

DOMINIQUE

Pick small cubes. While you're gone I'm going to change my clothes, so take your time.

Ed heads for the door as Dominique looks for an outfit. He opens it, takes one step out, looks down the hallway, to his right.

ED'S POV

A few doors down, Kelly and Bruce exit their stateroom. Carrying canvas totes, they wear sandals, hats and nothing else. Bruce locks their door, they proceed towards the elevator.

BACK TO SCENE

Ed steps back into the room, takes a deep breath, catches Dominique's attention.

DOMINIQUE

C'mon, shoo -- no Peeping Toms. I told you I want to change.

Ed clears his throat, rubs the back of his neck. Dominique shows concern.

ED

There's, uhhh...

DOMINIQUE

There's a what? That expression of yours -- it's like that of a child who accidentally enters his parents' bedroom at a delicate moment.

Ed sets down the ice bucket.

ED

You're pretty close.

O.s. laughter, giggling, festive music are heard.

DOMINIQUE

Well, what did you see?

ED

Maybe I imagined it, or maybe that old couple is just... forgetful. I think...

DOMINIQUE

What do you think?

ED

I think we may have overpacked.

Dominique puts down her outfit, hurries to the porthole, peers out.

DOMINIQUE'S POV

Men and women of all ages, shapes and sizes mill about, converse, engage in activities in the nude.

Facing away from Dominique, a bald man in his seventies drops his sunglasses, bends over, picks them up.

BACK TO SCENE

Dominique, ashen, turns to Ed, mouth agape, but only briefly. She pounds her fists into her hips, scowls, fumes.

DOMINIQUE

A nudie cruise!? You conned me into going on a twenty-four-hour nudie cruise!? Ed Plinth! What is the matter with you?!

Ed searches for a reply, hopelessly, takes a step back, shakes his head.

DOMINIQUE

Oh, the shy ones! It's always the shy ones!

Ed picks up the ice bucket, steps towards the door.

ED

I'll get that ice now.

DOMINIQUE

You're going to need it -- for the lumps on your head!

Dominique grabs the small desk lamp, throws it, barely misses Ed. Rapid knocking on their door startles both of them, pauses the conflict. Ed goes to the door, opens it.

ED'S POV

Babs and Lou stand at Ed's door -- all smiles in the altogether.

BABS

Hi again! We got the room next to yours and we were just heading up for the free bon voyage cocktail. Didn't want you two to miss it. Since this is your first in-the-buff cruise, we thought we'd help you get acclimated.

LOU

It's a great intro cocktail hour. They make a helluva Sex on the Beach.

BACK TO SCENE

Babs and Lou, grins chiseled into their faces, eagerly await the slow-in-coming reply. Shell-shocked Ed turns to Dominique.

ED

They make a helluva Sex on the Beach.

DOMINIQUE

I'm in -- I could use several drinks, maybe more.

BABS (O.S.)

Stiff ones?

DOMINIQUE

Did you have to say that?

Ed and Dominique capitulate, start to undress.

CORRIDOR - TWO MINUTES LATER

Ed, Dominique, Babs and Lou walk to the elevator door. Lou pushes the button, they all wait in uncomfortable silence.

Dominique wears a large sun hat, makes a point of looking away from Ed. Ed wears sunglasses and a baseball cap. He takes off the cap, removes and looks at his cell phone.

ED

Wish I could think of someplace else to put my phone.

DOMINIQUE

I've got one in mind and I'm willing to assist.

Babs and Lou chuckle.

BABS

You folks are gonna fit in just fine.

An Asian couple, in their forties, join the foursome. The elevator door opens, reveals a carful of NUDISTS.

LOU

Room for six more?

ELEVATOR PASSENGER

You bet, the more the merrier.
Everybody breathe in -- and watch
those hands.

DOMINIQUE

It's not the hands I'm worried
about.

The six squeeze in, accompanied by tittering.

EXT. MAIN DECK - SECONDS LATER

The elevator doors open. Happy nudists exit, except for the last two: Dominique and Ed.

DOMINIQUE

I'm not exactly feeling
'liberated,' Edward.

Cheerful clothed staff carry trays of cocktails, hand them to Dominique and Ed, then move on. Bright sunshine enhances the festive atmosphere. Ed and Dominique walk to a nearby shady area, anxiously sip their drinks.

DOMINIQUE

I don't think there's enough vodka
on this ship to fix the situation.
You really did not seem like the
type.

ED

I'm not, trust me.

DOMINIQUE

Trust you?

She mockingly laughs, takes a quick downward glance at Ed's front, then goes eye to eye.

DOMINIQUE

In my experience it's the men with
the smallest penises that are the
least trustworthy. And right now
I'd say Bernie Madoff is Abe
Lincoln compared to you.

ED

Dominique, I've trusted you with
the future of my business,
something I've committed my entire
adult life to. I wrote you a check

(MORE)

ED (cont'd)
 for the last of my inheritance
 because I trust you. I don't think
 it's too much to ask you for a
 modicum of trust in return.

Ed walks away, finds a seat away from the crowd, takes his
 phone out from under his hat.

EXT. ON DECK/INT. JOY'S TOYS - INTERCUTTING

Ed and Katie converse.

ED
 Katie? It's Ed. I just wanted to
 check in and see how everything is
 going. Everything okay? Sounds
 like the store is busy.

Katie walks through an aisle, phone in hand. Bedlam, a
 horde of raucous little KIDS in party hats run by, stop,
 open packages, play with toys. Balloons waft through the
 aisle, along with a kite and two drones.

Katie points to Walter, who nods, walks away. He holds a
 large box of toys.

BACK DOOR TO STORE

Walter, still carrying the box, opens the door. He exits,
 puts the box in the back of a waiting blue station wagon
 loaded with more full boxes. He closes the vehicle's hatch,
 re-enters the store, closes the back door.

BACK TO SCENE

KATIE
 Yeah, it's busy all right, Ed.
 Since I missed taking the twins to
 Disneyland I figured I'd throw a
 little party here.

ED
 Oh? Okay, what better place than a
 toy store? Who knows?, someone
 might actually buy something.

Katie enters a second aisle. MOMS with their TODDLERS wave
 to Katie, silently compliment the cupcakes they devour.
 Confetti and streamers fill the air, thrown from adjacent
 aisles.

KATIE
 I suppose that's possible. So, you
 enjoying the cruise? Working on
 your tan? Getting better
 acquainted with your 'consultant?'

Ed takes the phone away from his ear, thinks. An athletic, forty-ish black woman jogs by.

ED

It's been quite revealing.

Still walking, Katie turns a corner, comes fact to face with displeased Mr. Poe. She comes to an abrupt stop. Sam runs into the aisle, sprays Poe with silly string, keeps running. Poe, poker-faced, slowly removes the string, wipes it onto a nearby stuffed animal.

KATIE

Ed, I better go. See you when you get back.

END OF PHONE CONVERSATION

Ed puts his phone back under his hat, mulls over the conversation. Dominique approaches, takes the seat next to Ed.

DOMINIQUE

Katie have everything under control?

Ed shows indifference to her question.

DOMINIQUE

I imagine she's still ticked about the last minute change in plans.

Ed silently finishes his drink. Dominique slowly runs her long fingernail along the armrest of Ed's chair.

DOMINIQUE

Sorry about what I said back there. Things happened so quickly. I was just caught off guard; I over-reacted.

Ed looks at Dominique, smiles.

ED

That makes two of us. I'm sorry if I made it sound as though you had no reason to doubt me.

Two naked men walk by, hand-in-hand, lick ice cream cones.

DOMINIQUE

I misjudged you. How about we go back to our room and make up?

ED

Let's.

INT. ED'S OFFICE - MORNING

(TWO DAYS LATER)

Elbows on his desk, eyes closed, Ed's hands hold up his head. His expression is sullen. Katie, seated, shows regret.

ED

Of all the times for Poe to walk in.

KATIE

Could only have been worse if I was hosting a jousting tournament.

ED

As they say, no vacation goes unpunished.

Ed releases his head, picks up a piece of correspondence, looks it over, leans back.

ED

Poe cited fifteen violations, and he was here for what, five minutes?

Katie shakes her head.

KATIE

Not even that.

ED

He writes that he's going to go before the board of directors, present the matter to them. Meanwhile, Dominique intends to start implementing her changes tomorrow. She's got a signed contract and my check. Frankly, I don't know what the hell to do.

KATIE

I took the liberty of looking over the lease after Poe recited all the alleged violations.

ED

And?

KATIE

While the situation isn't good, it's not as though he can just bounce you out, as long as you keep paying your rent on time. You can, can't you?

Ed aimlessly shuffles papers on his desk, tosses them, one by one, in the air.

ED

A few months ago I would have said yes, but the missing inventory has really thrown off our cash flow. Ordinarily, I could have made up for that by lending money to the business from what was left of my inheritance, but-

Katie bolts to her feet, kicks the garbage pail.

KATIE

But you spent all of it -- all of it! -- on a consulting contract!

Ed's eyes bulge. He maniacally runs his fingers through his hair, over and over. He stands, dislodges the usual ceiling tile, yells, crushes it to dust.

KATIE

Ed? Ed? Get a grip. Remember two years ago? The flood through the ceiling on Christmas Eve? We got through that; we'll get through this, too. Possibly.

Fearful, Katie stealthily moves towards the stairs. Ed looks about, spies the old family photo on the wall, pulls it off, glares at it. O.s. the sound of Katie's footsteps headed down the stairs.

ED

(to the photo)

Mom, Dad? I think it's time for a clearance sale.

Ed gently dusts off the photo with his sleeve, lovingly sets it back on the nail on the wall, from which it falls, shatters. Calmly, he heads down the office steps.

SALES FLOOR

Ed saunters, wild-eyed, into a merchandise aisle, swipes toys off two shelves, stops when an indignant OLD WOMAN marches up to him, shakes a plush toy in his face. Ed, with a wry expression, listens, feigns interest.

OLD WOMAN

My granddaughter only wants Sassy the Rapping Llama in yellow! You have it in green! You have it in red! You have it in pink -- but no yellow! Why don't you have it in yellow?! You hear me? Yellow!

Ed first stares at the woman, then looks about, places hands on either side of his mouth, rotates his head, mimics searching.

ED

Oh, yellow Sassy, where are you?

He places a hand to his ear, listens for a reply.

ED

Yellow Sassy? Not talking today?
Hiding? That's okay; I'll come
find you.

He lowers his hands, fully extends his arms in the narrow aisle, momentarily focuses on the old woman. Katie enters the aisle, along with the twins and Walter.

ED

Pardon me, madam, while I look.

Ed sprints through the aisle, arms still extended, sweeps merchandise off shelves on either side, as he proceeds. The shocked onlookers cautiously follow.

NEXT AISLE

Ed repeats the crazed shelf clearing, moves on to another aisle, followed by all.

ED

Yellow Sassy, yellow Sassy, where
are you, sunshine?

WALTER

(to Katie)

This looks like fun.

Walter knocks remaining goods off the shelves. The twins laugh. Katie kicks Walter in the rear end, stops him.

OLD WOMAN

(to Katie)

I think I'll buy it on-line -- and
I don't even know what that means.

The old woman departs.

ANOTHER AISLE

Ed, alone, sweaty and exhausted, pauses, catches his breath among the wreckage.

ED'S POV

The aisle turns blurry, back into focus, then blurry again.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie, from behind, steps in front of Ed, turns to him.

KATIE

Ed, it doesn't come in yellow.

Ed's eyes roll, close. He passes out, falls to the floor.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

(THE NEXT DAY)

Asleep, Ed tries to toss and turn, fails, due to restraints. His eyes jerk open.

ED

Sassy the Rapping Llama doesn't
come in yellow!

He ceases struggling, laughs heartily, crazily, suddenly stops.

ED

Where the hell am I?

Two quick knocks o.s. on the room's door.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Mr. Plinth? May I enter?

ED

That depends. Are you Sassy the
Rapping Llama?

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

No, I'm Dr. Mabel Pembrose, head
of... I'm Dr. Pembrose.

ED

And you don't know what you're the
head of?

Dr. Pembrose enters, politely smiles, stops at the foot of the bed. A busty, diminutive woman, over sixty, she wears an unbuttoned white smock over a low-cut sweater, carries a clipboard.

DR. PEMBROSE

To answer your question, Edward, I
do know what I am the head of.
It's just that under circumstances
such as these, the word
'psychiatry' can be a little...

ED

Terrifying as shit?

DR. PEMBROSE

Terrifying is a bit strong. Let's
just say, disconcerting.

ED

You can say that, Dr. Pembrose, but
I'm sticking with terrifying as
shit. What's with the restraints?

Under his blanket, he tugs at the bands binding his wrists and ankles to the bed. Dr. Pembrose comes around to the side of the bed, pinches his cheek.

DR. PEMBROSE

In a case like yours it is the standard procedure. We don't want you accidentally hurting yourself, or anyone else. You may not recall, but you were rather vigorous until we got you sedated.

ED

With what, rhino tranquilizer? My head feels like The Rock is stepping on it.

She weakly laughs, taps the edge of her clipboard with a fingernail.

DR. PEMBROSE

It's all in the chart. The bigger questions are: how are you feeling, and what brought on your breakdown?

ED

There's a third question: when do I get out of here?

She rocks her head, from side to side, loses her smile, pinches Ed's cheek again, only harder.

DR. PEMBROSE

The answer to the last question depends on the answers to the previous two.

ED

It's not as though I'm a physical threat to anyone.

He tugs harder on the restraints, shakes the bed.

DR. PEMBROSE

I don't believe the mall security guard would agree with you about that.

ED

Teddy bear Carl? What? What'd I do?

DR. PEMBROSE

Ach! Amnesia, too. Must add that to your chart. Not so good.

She jots a note.

DR. PEMBROSE

You jammed a Lego up his nose,
right before you... hit your head
on his night stick.

ED

Oh, my god.

DR. PEMBROSE

Lucky for you he did not press
charges. Otherwise, you would be
in the psychiatric ward of the
county penitentiary -- a very
unfriendly place compared to
Pleasant Vistas.

She circles the bed, looks Ed over, scribbles additional
notes. Ed is suddenly aware of something very wrong, turns
crimson.

ED

Where is it Dr. Pembrose?

She stops writing, runs the top of her pen along the
blanket, from Ed's hip to his shin. She considers his
question, seductively smiles.

ED

I want to know! You can't keep it
from me. It's not right! It's not
yours!

Dr. Pembrose walks to the door, shrugs.

DR. PEMBROSE

In due time. We'll see, Eddie.

Dr. Pembrose moistens her lips, makes a purring sound,
exits.

HOSPITAL CORRIDOR

Dr. Pembrose stops MARJORIE, a uniformed attendant.

DR. PEMBROSE

Marjorie, please double Mr.
Plinth's sedative.

INT. JOY'S TOYS - DAY

(THREE DAYS LATER)

Returned to order, the store is busy with activity, but not
from customers. A crew of WORKERS add hi-tech sensors to
shelves, install communications hardware. Katie,
displeased, walks about, observes, kids in tow.

SAM

What are they doing, Mom?

KATIE

They're preparing Mommy for a nightmare.

Dan reaches down into a box of sensors.

DAN

Can we play with these?

He picks one out, holds it up. A YOUNG MALE WORKER plucks it from Dan's hand, puts it back in the box, holds it up out of reach.

YOUNG MALE WORKER

These aren't toys, little guy. They're shelf sensors, very expensive and easy to break.

Katie pulls Dan away.

KATIE

Then what sense does it make installing them? What exactly do they do? How is their cost justified?

YOUNG MALE WORKER

I'm not a cost accountant, lady, so I can't explain that, but the sensor provides data on what the customer picks up, how long they hold it, and if they put it back. It also picks up changes in the customer's body temperature as they interact with the product. And, if that isn't enough-

A TALL SECOND WORKER approaches, chimes in.

TALL SECOND WORKER

The sensor can actually detect what credit cards the customer carries and what their blood type and eye color are. Awesome, huh? Combined, they'll collect terabytes of data for you to analyze every single day.

KATIE

I can hardly wait. How are we supposed to analyze all that, with a super computer? I don't believe we have one. Even if we did, what's the good of spending half the day crunching numbers?

TALL SECOND WORKER
 (to coworker)
 Some people just don't appreciate
 technology.

WALTER

stands at his check-out counter, passively watches as the old register is removed and a new, computerized point of sale system is installed. A thick, bound manual is set in front of him, opened by RAYMOND, a bearded technician.

RAYMOND
 Hi there, I'm Raymond. You are?...

WALTER
 I am.

Raymond extends his right fist, expects a bump. Walter looks at it, then at Raymond.

WALTER
 Can we start over?

Raymond closes the manual, notices Walter's name tag.

NAME TAG

Walter's tag bears the handwritten name, M. Ployee.

BACK TO SCENE

Sam and Dan approach, listen to the conversation.

RAYMOND
 A bit intimidated by the new point of sale system, Em? No need to be. You own a computer, I'm sure. And you have a router, a modem and a server at home, right? Undoubtedly, you know what an Ethernet connection is, and you have experience working and collaborating in the cloud -- I mean, who doesn't these days?

SAM AND DAN (O.S.)
 We do it!

Placid Walter reaches into his pants pocket, pulls out half a coconut, takes a noisy bite, chews cow-like. Raymond senses an uphill battle, closes the manual.

RAYMOND
 Can we start over?

Walter's response is another bite from his coconut. A youthful FEMALE CUSTOMER approaches the sales counter with a half dozen items, sets them down, expects service.

Impatient, annoyed, she looks at Walter, then Raymond.

FEMALE CUSTOMER

Well?

WALTER

Do you know what an Ethernet connection is?

SAM AND DAN (O.S.)

We do! We do!

FEMALE CUSTOMER

Of course, who doesn't?

Walter instantly shines with enlightenment.

WALTER

I know the answer to that: me!

INT. MALL CORRIDOR - THAT EVENING

Outside the entrance to Joy's Toys, Walter eats a snow cone, stands by Katie and the twins, as she locks up the darkened store.

WALTER

If only Ed was here.

Katie, somber, feels the weight of the keys in her hand, pockets them.

KATIE

If he was here, this would probably kill him, so maybe he's better off where he is, at least for a few more days. I just hope there's a store for him to come back to.

WALTER

He should try to be more like me.

Katie flinches, sniffs. Walter loudly slurps his snow cone.

KATIE

Either the store or this cold are going to be the death of me. (she notices the snow cone) Walter, where'd you get a snow cone?

Unsure, he looks upward, finally recalls.

WALTER

I found it in the garbage.

SAM

I want a garbage can snow cone!

DAN

I want two!

KATIE

No snow cones. You're going home, having dinner and then Stella's coming over to babysit so I can get to Husky Helpers.

The twins whine. Dan tries to take Walter's snow cone, but is too slow.

EXT. PARKING LOT - LATER THAT NIGHT

An old sedan enters the parking lot of the Davenport Building, pulls into a spot.

INT. SEDAN

Katie turns off the engine, looks at the far end of the half-empty lot.

KATIE'S POV

Brian Hovland's car is parked, empty.

BACK TO SCENE

KATIE

Hmm, Brian's back. Wish I'd had the time to call him.

Katie exits her car, sneezes, coughs.

INT. ENTRANCEWAY OF THE DAVENPORT BUILDING

As Katie ascends the unlit stairwell, she looks in the direction of DeMarco Consulting.

KATIE'S POV

The offices are dark -- then a light flashes on as a door opens to one of the larger offices. Brian, Dominique and Mr. Poe are recognizable. They speak MOS.

KATIE (O.S.)

There's an unlikely trio. What could they be up to?

The office light goes out. The three shadowy figures walk, progress towards the door adjacent to the stairwell.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie ascends a few more stairs, watches, listens. The trio exits DeMarco Consulting, pauses, listens, before anyone speaks in the weak glow of the red exit sign.

KATIE/TRIO - INTERCUTTING

DOMINIQUE

We're getting close. Are you positive there's no other clause in Ed's lease that can get him immediately evicted?

POE

I've been through it five times. Unfortunately, Plinth signed the lease with the previous management, who was far too lenient. I try to intimidate him, but it doesn't seem to get results.

The door to the Davenport Building swings open. A CHUBBY MAN enters wearing a food-stained Husky Helpers T-shirt. He is startled by the threesome.

Katie quietly gasps, inches up one additional step.

CHUBBY MAN

Pardon me, folks. Hope I didn't interrupt anything diabolical. Husky Helpers meeting tonight -- and man, did I bring an appetite!

He pats his stomach.

DOMINIQUE

No, nothing sinister I'm afraid -- have an éclair for us.

CHUBBY MAN

More like six, with guacamole!

The chubby man beams, bounds up the stairwell, pauses when he spots Katie. She puts her index finger to her lips. He silently acknowledges her, farts, continues on his way.

BRIAN

Between the two of you, you should have him out in short order. Using the lease to maximum advantage, plus wrecking his finances with your consulting work should be more than sufficient to kill that pissant toy store.

Katie swoons; her eyes bulge at the revelation. She feels a sneeze coming on, stifles it.

POE

Well, he's had a nervous breakdown, so I'd say we must be doing something right. He can't take much more. I'll keep leaning on
(MORE)

POE (cont'd)
the board of directors for an
eviction.

BRIAN
The important thing is to not let
up. Once the toy store fails, the
few remaining tenants will walk
away from their leases. Then we
can proceed to the next phase.

A low rumble grows in intensity; the building shakes,
silences the conversation.

POE
Not another.

Katie grabs the bannister. The shaking stops.

DOMINIQUE
Just a little California Cha-Cha.
Unfazed, she does a quick improvised Cha-Cha.

POE
You know, Katie, that employee of
his -- she's an impediment. If it
wasn't for her, Joy's Toys would
have gone belly-up years ago.

Katie pats herself on the back.

POE
What's more, I think Ed has the
hots for her.

Katie smiles.

END INTERCUTTING

DOMINIQUE
At this point I doubt even she can
save the store. Still, it might be
a good idea, Brian, to cross her
path again and pay her a visit.
Lay on the charm to make Ed
jealous.

BRIAN
Anything for the cause.

DOMINIQUE
Which reminds me, have you lined
up the financing for your offer for
the mall?

BRIAN

It's set. I actually had two banks
at each other's throats for the
loan.

POE

Once the transaction is complete
and you bulldoze the place, how
long will it take to build the new
processing plant?

DOMINIQUE

(to Poe)

I thought I was bad; you're even
more antsy for your cut than me.

Brian thinks, places his hands on his hips, tilts his head
back, suddenly looks up towards the stairwell, wrinkles his
brow.

BRIAN'S POV

A vague shadowy figure on the stairwell.

BACK TO SCENE

Brian dashes half way up the stairs, stops. The door to
Husky Helpers, at the top of the stairs, opens, briefly
illuminates the stairwell. Two MEMBERS rapidly descend,
food in hand, mouths chewing. They pass Brian, who stands
alone.

EXT. PARKING LOT - ONE HOUR LATER

Katie slowly exits the Davenport Building, looks about.

KATIE'S POV

The lot is deserted.

BACK TO SCENE

She runs to her car, enters, slams the door shut.

INT. CAR

KATIE

I've got to talk to Ed. Why hasn't
he called?

INT. JOY'S TOYS - AFTERNOON

(THE NEXT DAY)

As the technology installation continues, Katie stands in an
aisle, fusses with an in-store communications headset.
Frustrated, she fiddles with the size adjustment feature.

BRIAN (O.S.)

They do tend to stick, don't they?
Try a little silicone spray.

Alarmed, Katie turns, faces Brian.

KATIE

Brian, what a surprise. Thanks for the tip.

Nervous, she fusses with the device, then gives up, sets it on a shelf. A YOUNG WOMAN with a CHILD walks by. The child picks up the headset, instantly adjusts it, places it on her own head. They exit the aisle.

BRIAN

Don't you want your headset back?

KATIE

Not really; it looked cute on her. So, what brings you in?

BRIAN

When I gave you my card, I hoped you'd get in touch, maybe agree to get together with me for a drink, or maybe go zorbing.

KATIE

It's not that I wasn't interested, but between work and the twins it's not exactly easy to plan even one day ahead. And now with Ed in the hospital it's even harder.

BRIAN

Who's Ed?

KATIE

The owner. He's going through a bit of a rough patch, so I'm running things until he gets back. I'm absolutely exhausted.

BRIAN

I'm sorry to hear that, but even so, you deserve a little distraction of some sort.

Brian touches Katie's hair; she winces.

BRIAN

Doing something fun, just for a few hours, would do you a world of good.

Katie forces a smile, stops, ruminates for a few seconds, pokes Brian's lapel.

KATIE

Maybe you're right, Brian.
Tomorrow is Sunday; the store
(MORE)

KATIE (cont'd)
doesn't open till ten-thirty. If
you'd like to get an early start,
I'll go zorbing with you for a few
hours. Sound good?

She produces a pen, scribbles on a scrap of paper, hands it
to Brian.

KATIE
Here's my cell number. Text me and
let me know where and when to meet.

BRIAN
Great, you won't regret it.

KATIE
Oh, I'm sure of that.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - SUNDAY MORNING

Ed awakes in his bed, stretches, realizes he is no longer
bound. Elated, he sits up, rubs his wrists, promptly
relapses from the effects of the sedative. The door opens.
Dr. Pembrose enters, carries a plastic bag behind her.

She locks the door, sashays to bedside.

DR. PEMBROSE
You're looking better this morning,
Eddie. Enjoying being unbound? It
was at my direction, handsome.

She puckers her lips. Ed leans away.

ED
Thanks, Dr. Pembrose. Always good
to start the day with blood
circulating, I always say. You've
got something in back of you. Is
it what I think it is?

Dr. Pembrose keeps the bag behind her back with one hand.
With the other, she pushes back her poorly dyed hair, throws
open half of the front of her smock, reveals her curves.
Her breathing quickens, turns to panting. She lunges
closer, stumbles, regains her balance.

DR PEMBROSE
Does this do anything for you,
Eddie baby?

ED
Yeah, I'm about ready to piss my
pants.

DR. PEMBROSE

That's an understandable initial reaction, but I'm thinking of something beyond that... something visceral.

ED

Is this some sort of psychological test, Dr. Pembrose?

She runs her free hand over Ed's blanket, stops short of his crotch, bats her fake eyelashes, one of which detaches. Dr. Pembrose lowers her voice, attempts to make it sexy, but it comes out phlegmy, guttural.

DR. PEMBROSE

You can fantasize that, if you care to, Eddie. I'd like that. And please, call me Mabel... available... Mabel.

She coughs, sputters, sits on the bed's edge, purrs, dangles the bag in front of Ed.

DR. PEMBROSE

You want it, don't you?

Ed nods like a bobble-head in a hurricane.

DR. PEMBROSE

Then say it; say you want it, want it badly, from available Mabel.

She puckers again, leans in for a kiss.

ED

All right, I'll say it! Give me back my goddamned foot!

Ed snatches the bag from Dr. Pembrose, extracts a prosthetic left foot. The second he rejoices having it back, Dr. Pembrose grabs it, jumps off the bed. She lovingly holds the foot to the side of her face, caresses it.

Lustfully, she licks the big toe. Ed throws off the blanket, hobbles out of bed, gives chase.

ED

I want my foot! I need my foot to get out of here!

DR. PEMBROSE

Earn it, baby!

ED

Dr. Pembrose!

Ed lunges, misses her, falters, reaches. Dr. Pembrose ducks and weaves, opens the door exits. The sound of the door

locking stops Ed. He limps back to the bed, sits, buries his head in the pillow, pounds the mattress.

EXT. PARK ENTRANCE - EARLY SUNDAY MORNING

In the soft, early light of a clear morning, Katie's sedan enters a park entrance. To the car's right is an expansive sign: "Zorbing Thrills Park."

INT. KATIE'S CAR

Katie drives, makes side glances at the facility.

KATIE'S POV

The gravel road rises, winds. It is bordered on both sides by grass, tall trees. On the right is a high, long green embankment. O.s. muffled cheering is heard.

BACK TO SCENE

Her car reaches the crest of the hill, enters a nearly full parking lot, cruises about. She comes to a stop a few feet shy of Brian's car, which is parked. He waves to Katie, points to the open spot next to his vehicle. She takes it, exits her car.

KATIE AND BRIAN

Brian grins, motions as if he's about to give Katie a hug, then hesitates when she takes a step back, sneezes.

BRIAN

Any trouble finding the place?

KATIE

Are you kidding? How could I miss it? That sign could qualify as the fifty-first state.

Brian produces two tickets from his shirt pocket. They start walking towards the facility's entrance.

BRIAN

I've been zorbing for over a year now. I love it so much I'm pricing getting my own ball and using it at my summer place.

KATIE

How big is your summer place?

BRIAN

Just shy of twenty-five acres. It has plenty of suitable hills. I figure I can get a zorbing run built for about a hundred thousand dollars -- one-fifty tops.

Surprised, Katie stops, as does Brian.

KATIE

Wait a second -- you told me you're the manager of a meat-processing plant.

BRIAN

That's what my card says. Actually, I own the business.

KATIE

That makes more sense, but not complete sense. You'd drop a hundred grand, or more, just to be able to roll down a hill, like an oversized hamster, inside a plastic ball? Why not give that money to a worthy charity?

They resume walking, reach the entrance turnstile.

BRIAN

It wouldn't give me the same sort of rush. You'll see.

TEN MINUTES LATER

Waiting on a short line, Brian and Katie observe the park's operation.

KATIE AND BRIAN'S POV

A zorbing ball, ten feet wide, rises to the top of the hill on a conveyor, where a PARK ATTENDANT positions it at the starting point for its descent. She waves for the next COUPLE on line to advance.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie gets Brian's attention, pats her chest, exhales sharply in eager anticipation.

COUPLE AHEAD OF BRIAN AND KATIE

The couple squirms their way through a portal in the exterior ball, then enters a smaller ball inside the first. Hundreds of small fasteners connect the inside sphere to the outside one. A heavy strap inside the smaller ball allows passengers to steady themselves.

PARK ATTENDANT

You folks ready to roll?

The couple give the okay sign. The attendant, with aid from a HELPER, lean their shoulders into the ball, send it cascading downhill. It quickly gains speed. Yelling from inside the ball and o.s. onlookers is heard.

Partway down, the ball rolls slightly up one bordering embankment, then diagonally across the course's trough and partway up the opposite embankment. Water cannons atop both embankments engage, douse the zorbing ball, cause it to accelerate.

KATIE AND BRIAN

cheer, get caught up in the excitement with the rest of the crowd.

BACK TO SCENE

The ball comes to a rest at the bottom of the hill, where other ATTENDANTS assist in the exiting. The empty ball, guided to the base of the conveyor, ascends for reloading.

TOP OF HILL

The ball, back at the top, is placed into position for Katie and Brian. The attendant motions to them. Katie hesitates.

KATIE

I don't know, Brian. I may be getting cold feet.

ATTENDANT

C'mon, folks, don't overthink it -- just have fun.

BRIAN

Too late now, Katie; you heard the attendant. 'Roll' with it.

O.s., others on line offer encouragement.

KATIE

Okay, okay. Almost funny, Brian -- 'roll' with it.

Katie, with assistance, squeezes in, followed by Brian. Onlooker o.s. rev up their cheering.

INT. ZORBING BALL

Katie and Brian try to get comfortable in the cramped space. They are practically on top of one another.

KATIE

I wasn't this entangled with my late husband until our fifth date.

Brian laughs.

BRIAN

I'm honored. What a great way to get to know each other.

KATIE

Hey, wait a sec-

EXT. ZORBING RUN/INT. BALL - INTERCUTTING

Pushed, the ball inverts, rolls, gains momentum.

Katie and Brian tumble about, over and under each other, side to side and upside down, intertwine.

KATIE

Oh, my god! Oh, my god!

Brian whoops and hollers.

KATIE

Watch those hands! How many do you have?! That's not the strap you're grabbing!

The ball spills over and over, up one embankment then down, across the grassy trough and up the opposite one. Water cannons fire, pelt the moving sphere.

Inside, the sound of water striking plastic like machine gun fire. Katie and Brian's bodies are jumbled, knotted.

The ball finally comes to a stop. The attendants turn it so the portal is in a position to allow the occupants to exit.

BRIAN

Was that awesome, or what?

KATIE

If I knew I was going to be getting a gynecological exam I would have prepared for it.

END INTERCUTTING

With help, they flip, flop, fall, eventually exit the ball, step to the path leading back to the hilltop. Katie gives Brian a light shove. He takes it good naturedly, smirks.

BRIAN

Whatever happened was purely accidental, and enjoyable. Want to go again?

Katie delivers a weak punch to his shoulder, forces a grin, keeps walking.

KATIE

Try to stop me.

TOP OF THE HILL - TEN MINUTES LATER

As before, the attendant motions for Katie and Brian to approach the newly delivered zorbing ball. They step to the

portal. Katie pauses.

KATIE

You get in first this time, and please, go in all the way so I'll have some breathing room. All right?

Brian's shoulders slump. He comically pouts.

BRIAN

Ohh, if you insist.

KATIE

I do.

Brian enters, goes in as far as possible. Katie turns down assistance from the attendant, motions for her to step back. She complies.

KATIE

(to attendant)

I can handle this.

Katie turns back to the ball.

KATIE'S SHORTS POCKET

She secretly produces a box cutter from the small pocket on her cargo shorts, exposes its blade.

BACK TO SCENE

BRIAN (O.S.)

Ready for round two of 'frisk and shout?'

Katie makes two quick, deep cuts in the exterior of the ball, stashes the razor, then leans hard into the sphere. The sound of escaping compressed air is audible.

The ball descends, moves erratically. Brian's muffled yells can be heard. Katie feigns surprise, looks on, watches approvingly.

KATIE

Frisk yourself, fathead.

KATIE'S POV

The ball gains speed, wobbles, moves eccentrically, accelerates downhill. It swiftly rises up an embankment, launches completely up and over it. O.s. the crowd roars.

PARK ROAD ADJACENT TO EMBANKMENT

A passenger car on its way up the same road Katie took earlier screeches to a halt when Brian's ball lands five feet in front of it, bounces, rises, bounces on the car

roof, lands in back of it. The ball continues down the road.

BOTTOM OF PARK ROAD

The bouncing ball advances down the road, approaches the park's entrance.

LARGE SIGN AT PARK ENTRANCE

The ball bursts through the center of the sign, lands on the busy street, where it is struck by a moving bus traveling at high speed. The zorbing sphere goes airborne.

SOME DISTANCE AWAY

A huge wooden vat of grapes is surrounded by eager TOURISTS awaiting the stomping demonstration advertised on the sign next to it. The perturbed EVENT HOST, next to the vat, is on the phone.

EVENT HOST

What do you mean, you can't make it? I've got a vat of pinot noir grapes sitting here and forty fully paid out-of-towners waiting for them to be crushed. Who's gonna crush these goddamned grapes?!

The host hears something, pauses. O.s. the sound of Brian screaming grows in intensity. Tourists, also attracted to the sound, look up, point.

AIRBORNE ZORBING BALL

What's left of the ball, with Brian inside, plummets, crashes into the vat of grapes.

VAT

Brian emerges from the wrecked ball, flails around in the grapes. Tourists watch. Satisfactorily entertained, they applaud. The host resumes his phone conversation.

EVENT HOST

Never mind.

He ends the call, watches Brian struggle.

EVENT HOST

(to tourists)

I told you you'd be impressed!

INT. ED'S HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER THAT DAY

Ed wakes from face-down slumber at the sound of o.s. tapping. He stirs, looks about. The tapping repeats on the room's lone window. He gets out of bed, cautiously draws back the vertical blind, reveals Walter chewing on an ear of

corn.

Aghast, Ed yells, stifles himself to avoid drawing staff attention. Walter taps the window again, with the ear of corn.

ED

Walter, you can stop tapping now;
I'm right here.

WALTER

Yeah, you're probably right.

ED

What are you doing here? And where
did you get a ladder that can reach
the third floor?

WALTER

Aren't you going to ask about the
corn?

ED

No.

WALTER

It's really good for found corn.

ED

I'm sticking to my original two
questions.

Walter deeply thinks, throws away the corn, after one last bite.

WALTER

What was the first question? Oh,
wait, I remember. I'm about six
feet tall, give or take. I can't
imagine why you'd ask that at this
time.

Ed opens the window.

ED

I didn't. I asked you what you're
doing here.

WALTER

I'm here to get you out. I
overheard Katie. She's concerned
about you. In fact, I think she
may even like you.

Ed is pleased to hear that.

ED

Really?

WALTER

Absolutely, I can tell those things. As a result, I felt compelled to act. You know me, Ed -- I'm a ball of energy.

Doubtful Ed scratches his head.

ED

Sure, you're regular runaway nuclear reactor. And the ladder? Maybe it's better I don't know.

WALTER

From the painters next door. They'll find a way to get down. I won't tell you that, if you don't want to know.

ED

Thanks. Are you parked far from here?

Walter picks his teeth.

WALTER

Do you have any floss? Mint, waxed, that's all I use.

ED

No! Where are you parked?

WALTER

In a great spot closeby. It's the chief administrator's according to the sign.

Ed grimaces.

ED

Hopefully, it won't get towed in the next fifteen minutes. Listen, they've got my street clothes locked up somewhere, so I'm going to have to wear this hospital gown, which is, unfortunately, open in the back.

Ed fumbles with the gown and its strings.

WALTER

Don't be ashamed, Ed; the human body is a beautiful thing. Well, some of them. Besides, it looks great on you and very comfortable. They're all I wear at home.

ED

Remind me never to visit. I'll need you to take me to my apartment first, so I can get a change of clothes. Then we'll go to the store. I want to see Katie -- I need to.

WALTER

You sure? You look fine as is. Sporty!

ED

Let's go.

Walter starts his descent. Ed remembers something.

ED

Hold up, Walter.

WALTER (O.S.)

Sheesh, Ed. Make up your mind. Be more decisive, like me.

ED

Sorry, it's just that I need you take it slow, Walter, not get too far ahead.

WALTER (O.S.)

Ladder phobia?

ED

Sort of. At the moment I only have one foot.

WALTER (O.S.)

Are you sure?

ED

Yes, Walter.

Walter, back at the top of the ladder, is visible in the window. Curious, he looks down to confirm, then back up. He speaks with determination.

WALTER

Right you are, Ed. Count on Walter to be your other foot! You'll be happy to know I have previous experience.

ED

You're a man of many... strange talents.

Walter descends, followed by Ed.

INT. ED'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY (MINUTES LATER)

Walter and Ed walk along the hallway leading to Ed's apartment. They stop at the sound of a goat's baas o.s.

WALTER

Quite a progressive place you live in, Ed. I wish they allowed goats in my building.

They continue down the corridor, reach Ed's door.

DOOR

The door is padlocked, with an official letter taped to it. Ed leans towards it for a better look.

LETTER

"Evicted -- Failure to pay rent" is emblazoned at the letter's top.

BACK TO SCENE

ED

I guess that saves me from complaining about not having my key.

Across the hall, Sal's door opens.

ED'S POV

Sal steps into the hallway, smiles at the sight of Ed. He wears traditional 19th century Dutch peasant garb, complete with wooden shoes and a yellow-blond wig. A goat runs out his door, into the hall, baas. Sal shoos it back in.

BACK TO SCENE

SAL

Ed! Where have you been?

ED

It's kind of a long story that I can't get into right now. When did they padlock my apartment?

SAL

Yesterday, I think. They cleaned it out, too.

ED

What?!

Ed looks at the written notice a second time, looks back at Sal.

ED

I only missed one month's rent!

SAL

A landlord without a heart -- what a shock.

Sal looks harder at Ed, points, mockingly laughs.

SAL

What's with that getup, man?

ED

I was going to ask you the same thing. You auditioning for the lead role in Heidi?

Sal looks down, notices Ed's missing foot.

SAL

Landlord take one of your feet, too?

ED

Actually, it was stolen by a sex-crazed psychiatrist.

SAL

Kinky. Can you give my her phone number?

Ed waves Sal off.

ED

Sal, I need something to wear. We're about the same size. Do you have anything I can borrow that isn't out of a painting by Van Gogh?

The goat re-enters the hallway, nibbles at Sal's pants.

SAL

Sure, I'll take a look. I'd ask you in, but I'm 'entertaining' a friend. Wait here.

WALTER

How about me? Can I come in? I get along especially well with goats.

SAL

When a manatee wins Dancing with the Stars, pal.

WALTER

Ooh, I'll have to start watching.

EXT. APARTMENT PARKING LOT - TEN MINUTES LATER

Back in the parking lot of Ed's apartment building, Ed, wearing a lavender velour jumpsuit, and Walter approach the latter's blue station wagon.

WALTER

Where to now, boss?

Ed drums his fingers on the car roof, ponders.

ED

What time is it?

WALTER

Right now?

Ed stares at Walter, who produces a pocket watch.

WALTER

It's nearly ten-thirty in the morning.

ED

Thanks, I never would have known it was morning unless you specified. Let's run over to the store. Katie should be opening and I can get my spare foot from the office.

They get into Walter's car, drive off.

EXT. BAY VIEW MALL PARKING LOT - FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

Walter's car proceeds through the nearly empty lot, parks, takes up two spaces. They exit the vehicle. Ed takes a few steps, Walter evaluates his parking.

WALTER

Hold up, Ed; I want to repark the car.

Ed stops, looks at the car, then peruses the empty, massive lot.

ED

What difference does it make? For crying out loud, the lot's empty, Walter. Let's go.

Walter shakes his head, opens the car door.

WALTER

I take great pride in my parking skills. I really blew this one. I need you to spot for me.

Ed dismissively waves, starts walking towards the mall. Walter's sobs are heard o.s.

WALTER (O.S.)

I just saved you from certain death. That sex maniac might have taken your other foot, if it wasn't for me. That's some gratitude.

Ed stops, sighs, limps back to the car, pats Walter on the shoulder. It starts to rain heavily.

ED

Get in, I'll spot for you.

Walter wipes his eyes, gets in, starts the car. Ed spots, signals when the car occupies one space. Walter exits the car, inspects.

WALTER

There's still room for improvement.

Soaked, Ed gives Walter a look of imminent doom, grabs him by the sleeve. They move quickly towards the mall's entrance.

ED'S POV

A large, depressed section of the lot bears significant cracks into which rain water drains and steam escapes.

BACK TO SCENE

Ed and Walter sidestep the depression. Alarmed, they look back, momentarily, enter the mall.

INT. MALL - CONTINUOUS

Ed and Walter proceed, pass an unending series of storefronts, all closed.

ED

Is anybody left in this place besides Joy's Toys?

WALTER

Joy's Toys?

ED

Yes, my store, where you work. Remember?

WALTER

So that's the name. I always wondered.

Vargas, owner of Expired Health & Beauty Aids, emerges from a nearby restroom, recognizes Ed. They all stop to talk.

VARGAS

Ed, I didn't think I'd get to say goodbye.

ED

You closed up, too?

VARGAS

I just put the last box in the truck. Bastards railroaded me. (he points to the restroom) Thought I'd leave the owners a not so little token of my appreciation before heading out.

ED

Really sorry to hear that, Vargas. The neighborhood needed a reliable place to buy expired products. Looks like I may have a monopoly on this place now.

Vargas turns somber, rolls his eyes, walks away, waves goodbye. Walter and Ed continue on, turn the corner.

ED'S POV

From a different entranceway, Katie enters the corridor, a short distance from Joy's Toys. She looks at the store entrance, then blankly at Ed and Walter.

BACK TO SCENE

Ed and Walter walk up to Katie. She embraces Ed. He responds in kind, holds her tightly.

KATIE

Ed! I was so worried! I started thinking the worst when I didn't hear from you.

They release.

ED

It was horrible, a healthcare nightmare, but fortunately, fully paid for by the state. I'm okay now.

She smiles, they embrace a second time. Unemotional Walter observes, pulls a candy bar from his pocket, unwraps it, takes a bite, slowly chews.

WALTER

They took Ed's foot.

Shocked, Katie tears herself away.

KATIE

What?

She looks down at Ed's feet, covers her mouth, swoons. Ed catches her by her shoulders.

ED

My prosthetic foot. Some crazy doctor took it away so I couldn't leave... or to make love to it.

Walter sticks out his chest, pokes it.

WALTER

But they didn't count on me, Walter, coming to the rescue!

Proud of his achievement, Walter steps away, heads for the store's front door, munches his candy bar.

KATIE

You never mentioned having only one foot.

ED

Does it make me less of a stand-up guy to you?

She laughs.

KATIE

Of course not.

Ed puts his arm around Katie's shoulder.

ED

Good, let's go in. I've got a spare foot in the office, plus there's about a thousand things I need to do.

Katie hesitates.

WALTER

You're not going to be able to do anything, Ed.

ED

Oh, damn, the keys again. Wait -- Katie, you've got yours.

Katie, sullen, points to the front door.

POE (O.S.)

Go read it, Ed. Go read the notice on your door, or what was your door. It's the notice Katie saw when she walked in a minute ago, but couldn't bring herself to mention, amongst all the hugs.

Poe joins the threesome, then steps to the store's entrance, pulls off the legal notice, attaches it to Ed's wet jumpsuit, from which it immediately falls off.

WALTER (O.S.)

Masking tape won't stick to wet
velour, not ever. I know, I've
tried many times.

Ed picks it up, silently reads, slouches.

POE

The board of directors finally came
to its senses. Joy's Toys is
finished. Whatever inventory is in
there will be liquidated at the
order of the bankruptcy court and
the proceeds used to pay past due
rent.

KATIE

Don't worry, Ed. There'll be money
left over. You'll get something.

Ed curls up, hides his face in the crook of his arm.

ED

When, in six months? A year?

Poe snickers.

POE

You'll be lucky to get enough for a
Not-so-Happy Meal after the list of
fines and penalties for that
birthday party is added to the
unpaid rent.

Ed, stunned, stands up straight, takes a deep breath.

ED

Then that's the end of Ed Plinth.
I've got nothing -- no store, no
apartment, no family, no future.

Walter presents Ed with the remainder of the candy bar. He
ignores it, crumples the legal notice, jams it into a
pocket. Numb, he heads for the closest door, exits into
driving rain. Katie runs to the exit, opens the door.

KATIE

Ed! Ed! Where are you going?
You've got to fight this!

KATIE'S POV

Ed, oblivious to Katie's words, walks away in the downpour.
The German shepherd that was trapped in the store days ago,
crosses Ed's path, the jump rope still entangled in its
tail.

Ed crosses the parking lot, reaches the sidewalk, slowly and
aimlessly continues.

BACK TO SCENE

KATIE

(to Poe)

You and your scumbag partners must be pleased with yourselves. You finally got what you conspired to take.

POE

Whatever are you-

KATIE

Shut the hell up, Poe.

Katie surges towards Poe; he defensively steps back.

KATIE

I overheard you, that slimy bitch Dominique and Brian in the stairwell of the Davenport Building. You pushed out decent, hard-working people and intentionally killed this mall for your own personal gain -- for a goddamned commission!

Poe remains icily calm.

POE

Admittedly true and, happily, the ink is dry on all the contracts. Bay View Mall now belongs to Brian Hovland.

DOMINIQUE (O.S.)

Slimy bitch? Slimy? Bitch? Sounds like someone could use a refresher course in business etiquette.

Katie turns, looks in the direction of Dominique's voice.

KATIE'S POV

Dominique slinks around the corridor's corner, coolly struts her way to Poe's side, smirks.

BACK TO SCENE

DOMINIQUE

You're taking everything that happened way too personally, Ms. Venturi. Business is not always a virtuous endeavor. Sometimes those involved get stepped on, crushed under... buried alive. It's the nature of the beast.

Katie, disgusted, shakes her head, approaches Walter.

KATIE

C'mon, Walter, let's get out of here. I have no intention of ever letting anything or anyone bury me alive. It's time to get Ed.

EXT. STREET ADJACENT TO MALL - DAY (MINUTES LATER)

In still heavy rain, Katie drives along the mall's periphery, looks out the side window for Ed. Walter follows in his car.

KATIE'S POV

Ed sits on a concrete bench, slumps forward. A torrent of raindrops pelt his soaked jumpsuit. A HOMELESS MAN pushes a wobbly shopping cart loaded with junk, stops in front of Ed. He pulls out a large, black plastic garbage bag, drapes it over Ed, completely covering him, moves on.

BACK TO SCENE

Katie's car pulls up to the curb, close to where Ed sits. She gets out, runs to him. Walter approaches, stays a few feet away. Katie pulls off the bag.

KATIE

Ed, snap out of it. You're better than this. Come with me; I'm taking you home.

ED

I don't have one -- it must be National Eviction Day. I got kicked out from my apartment, too.

WALTER

It's true, Katie. And goat-friendly apartments are few and far between. Good luck finding another one.

ED

I have absolutely nothing.

KATIE

Ed, you've got me. We're going to my place. You can stay there.

Ed looks up, smiles, stands. He puts his arm around Katie. They walk to her car.

WALTER

Can I tag along? I'm curious to see how this ends.

Katie waves Walter on, indicates he should follow. He takes two steps, stops, as do Katie and Ed. The ground shakes, loud rumbling is heard o.s. followed by creaking and cracking.

Ed, Katie and Ed look back at Bay View Mall, labor to remain standing.

KATIE

That's no California Cha-Cha.

THE THREESOME'S POV

A two-hundred-foot section of the parking lot buckles, collapses, sends up geysers of dust, steam. The quaking continues. Other sections of the lot collapse, adjacent to the mall, with similar results.

A huge crack in the mall's edifice starts at ground level, rises, spreads like tree branches. The wall shatters, falls into what becomes a widening sinkhole.

BACK TO SCENE

With deer-in-the-headlights expressions, the threesome watches the catastrophe unfold. They are joined by the homeless man.

MALL

The devastation progresses. Steel girders, interior walls, briefly evident, slide into the growing abyss. Wall after crumbling wall sinks into oblivion. Seconds later, the mall and most of the parking lot are swallowed up.

All that's left is a circular pit. The quaking stops, the rain subsides.

BACK TO SCENE

HOMELESS MAN

Damn! I needed to take a wicked crap in there. Now where the hell am I supposed to go?

WALTER

I highly recommend the Denny's across the street -- stall three.

The homeless man gestures thanks, departs.

KATIE

Dominique was right after all.

ED

What do you mean?

KATIE

She said that in business,
sometimes you can get buried alive.

They turn away, head for their respective cars. Ed goes with Katie.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY (TWENTY MINUTES LATER)

Katie's car, followed by Walter's, pulls into the driveway of a somewhat neglected home with a detached garage. The cars stop short of the garage door; their engines are turned off. Walter exits his vehicle.

INT. KATIE'S CAR

ED

Aren't you going to pull into the garage? It looks like it could pour again any second.

KATIE

Umm, no -- no, not right now.

Katie is distracted when Walter walks to the garage door, reaches down to lift it.

KATIE

Walter? Walter, no! Don't-

Walter lifts the garage door all the way up, stands aside. O.s. the twins yell.

SAM AND DAN (O.S.)

Mommy's home! Mommy's home!

KATIE'S POV

The twins exit the house, stand on a small porch, followed by beleaguered Stella.

BACK TO SCENE

Ed is transfixed, dumbfounded over the garage's contents. He stumbles out of the car. Katie exits, is at a loss for words.

ED

What the hell?

ED'S POV

The garage is packed, floor to ceiling, with stacks of unopened new toys.

SAM AND DAN (O.S.)

Look at all the toys! We're rich!

BACK TO SCENE

Ed limps to the garage entrance, stares at the massive assemblage, lightly runs his hand over the closest pieces. Katie stands by him. He ignores her, walks away, down the driveway, to the sidewalk, continues on.

Katie runs after him, catches up. She grabs his jumpsuit, stops him. He turns to her.

ED

Tears run down his cheeks.

KATIE AND ED

ED

How could you? You of all people,
the person I trusted most. The one
person I actually felt something
for.

When he tries to walk away, Katie tugs harder on his jumpsuit.

KATIE

I didn't steal those toys from you,
Ed! Well, I sort of didn't.

ED

Isn't that the missing inventory
I've been obsessing about for
months?

Katie folds her arms, stomps her foot.

KATIE

Yes! Technically, yes.

ED

That missing inventory put me out
of business. You killed Joy's
Toys.

Walter comes within a few feet of Ed and Katie.

WALTER

And I helped.

KATIE

Get lost, Walter.

Walter sulks, walks away.

KATIE

Ed, you're a wonderful, sensitive thoughtful man, and I can honestly say that over the past few years I've quietly come to love you -- but you're a lousy retailer.

Katie gives Ed a light shove.

ED

I've mentioned having my faults.

KATIE

Oh, it's a whole lot worse than that. You're oblivious.

ED

To what?

KATIE

I recognized a year ago that Joy's Toys and Bay View Mall were both doomed. I also knew that 'persistent, oblivious Ed Plinth' was blind to that fact and that the store's end would be a bad one.

Ed steps closer to Katie. The rain resumes.

KATIE

So I began a secret stash of inventory in my garage, and kept adding to it.

WALTER (O.S.)

And I helped.

KATIE

(peevish at Walter)

And Walter helped. You needed to have goods that were outside the reach of Poe and Bay View's landlord. Merchandise that would allow you a fresh start somewhere, when you were ready. I did it for you. I did it because I love you.

Ed embraces Katie; they kiss long, passionately. Ed separates. Revived, he senses a moment of clarity.

ED

I'm ready right now, Katie, but I can't do it alone -- and I'm thankful for that. I need you and your love to amount to anything. I learned that through you.

They embrace, kiss again.

EXT. KATIE'S TOYS - DAY

SUPER: "THREE MONTHS LATER"

Bounded on either side by other small businesses in a quaint setting, Katie's Toys, with its colorful storefront, is a hub of activity.

INT. KATIE'S TOYS

The neat, well-lit store is busy. Ed carries a load of toys, sets them down in an aisle. He interacts with a customer MOS, opens a package, demonstrates how the toy works.

Katie, looking managerial, enters the aisle, approaches Ed, clears her throat.

KATIE

Excuse me, Ed, may I speak with you, privately, for a moment?

ED

Sure.

Ed excuses himself from the customer, walks with Katie. They pass Walter, happily ringing sales at the counter on an old-time manual cash register. Sam and Dan do the bagging.

INT. COMBINATION STOREROOM/OFFICE

Katie and Ed enter, close the door. Alone, they hug, kiss. Katie turns serious, separates.

KATIE

I really do need to talk to you about something.

She steps to her desk, picks up a spreadsheet.

ED

What's up?

KATIE

Look at these numbers.

Ed peruses the spreadsheet.

ED

Fantastic. You're doing an amazing job running this place.

KATIE

...We are.

ED

You are.

Katie nods in agreement. They hug.

KATIE

I think we've earned a little
vacation time together. What do
you say?

Ed's eyes light up.

ED

Yeah! I know of a little cruise to
nowhere that I think you're going
to love.

They kiss.

FADE OUT.

THE END

