

Truth, Trash and Infinite Lies

by

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A racially ambiguous boy's childhood in foster care leads to his career as a con-man until he confronts the mother who abandoned him in a dumpster.

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EXT. STREET - DAY - 2016

A man sits in an alley by a dumpster. He is JOHN Washington. His race is ambiguous. He is 35yro, short and lean. He appears homeless, scruffy and dressed in rags. Nearby sits a HOMELESS MAN, who eyes him suspiciously.

HOMELESS MAN

I been watching you all day. You ain't homeless, are ya?

JOHN

No. Or... Maybe yes, I don't know.

A meek, fearful woman, BETTY (51 yro), scurries down the street. John watches. She heads for an apartment building across from John and the Homeless Man.

HOMELESS MAN

Whatchoo mean?

JOHN

I mean that I own several houses.

HOMELESS MAN

So you ain't homeless?

JOHN

If a house is a home, no.

HOMELESS MAN

Why are you on the street then?

JOHN

I'm watching her.

John watches Betty go into the building. She glances in his direction but looks away and doesn't make eye contact

HOMELESS MAN

Whatchoo want with her?

JOHN

I'm gonna tell her I'm not dead.

He goes into the building after Betty.

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

John hesitates outside Betty's apartment. He almost knocks on the door, then stops himself. He moves a few steps away and pauses to take a deep breath.

INT. APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Betty has just put her groceries away when there is a KNOCK on the door. She looks through the peephole but doesn't recognize John. She almost opens it, then hesitates. She tiptoes at the door as quietly as possible.

JOHN (O.S.)

I know you're in there, Betty. My name is... Well, I don't have a real name, not if by "real name" you mean "birth name". You can call me Paul, Jose, Jonathan, Rashad, Baby Doe, Pierre, Eddie, Farag, Joseph, whatever, it doesn't matter. It's okay if you don't want to open the door yet, I understand that. We don't know each other, but we have met. There's something important I want to say to you. It's about a secret of mine. But it was your secret first.

(Betty looks again; a flash of understanding appears in her eyes; she sobs softly)

I want a mother. I've never had one. I'm not asking you, of course, I'm just telling you because I've never admitted it and I can't think of anyone else I would ever admit it to. I want a mother, even if she hates me now, even if she's dead, even if she died when I was just one minute old. I want a mother who loved me for a moment.

(she stops trying to be quiet)

Can you open the door? No? Not ready yet?

(pause)

I'm a compulsive liar. That's your fault. I'm not trying to make you feel bad, it's just a fact.

EXT. STREET - DAY - 1989

John (8yro) runs a three-card monte game on a city street. TOURISTS have flocked to him. John has a charismatic black persona as he shuffles the cards and addresses the crowd.

JOHN

You can't argue with facts. You got a one in three chance -- that's statistics, and you can't win if you don't play. You got this opportunity to win the most beautiful red queen of all time, but you gotta seize her. You gotta find the nugget of gold in every situation, and in this situation, that nugget is a red queen who's gonna pop up one in three times. So step right up to get what you get while the getting is gettable! The cards are always movin' so if you don't pick one now, you'll never find her. If you play the game right, it's-

INT. JUVIE - DAY - 1997

John (16yro) visits with a PAROLE OFFICER just before his release from juvie. He poses as a light-skinned Latino with a thick accent.

JOHN

-a game you can't win at, that's what I learned in juvie, *señor*. The drug game is a mug's game. I shoulda never brought that cocaine into my foster father's house and violated his trust like that.

PAROLE OFFICER

You have a history of conning tourists. Are you conning me now?

JOHN

No, *señor*. Before I went into juvie, I was a scammer, I'll admit it. I was always puttin' on a show. I can tell what kinda show anybody wanna see. But there ain't no show in a place like this, it's all real, all the time. When the shit goes down, only truth can set you free.

PAROLE OFFICER

You're not putting on a show now?

JOHN

Shit, ain't we all, *señor*? You

puttin on' the little show you learned in ya criminology program. Yo' mama's somewhere puttin' on the show she learned from her mama when she was a girl.

(pause)

So yeah, I'm puttin' on a show. It's a show where I am the most law-abidin' motherfucker ever to go on stage. It's a show where I got a commitment to follow the rules and quit connin' tourists and runnin' away from my foster homes. That's the show I'm puttin' on, and it's gonna run for a long time and I-

INT. FORTUNE-TELLING SHOP - DAY - 2004

John (24yro), posing as a Romani (Gypsy) fortuneteller, sits across from a CUSTOMER as he shuffles tarot cards. A woman -- EMILY -- sits at a register in the background.

JOHN

-think it is wise to be skeptical of my powers. My gift for telling truths about the future comes from my mother's side. It is an heirloom, my only inheritance. I feel such a compulsion to use it I will divine the future of strangers on the bus for no benefit to me. The truths flow through me and to everyone I meet. Truthful predictions are all that matters to me. You can always trust me not not to lie about the truths that-

INT. TENT - DAY - 2011

John (31 yro) preaches to a CONGREGATION in a large church tent, posing as a cream-suited white Pentecostal minister. There is a 12yro boy nodding along (John's assistant, he is SAM). The congregation AMENS along with John.

JOHN

-refute his perfidy! We gonna say to him, all together and for all time, that we do not want his demonism and his falsity!

SAM

Amen, brother.

(the crowd AMENS with
him)

But what will happen if we don't raise the money we need? What if we can't afford to continue? What will people do without this community behind them?

JOHN

That is a good question. In that case, my brother, we will all risk our immortal souls like so many in this world. We will be easy targets for Him, I fear, the Prince of Lies.

(points to parishioners)

He preys upon those who are alone, without friends or family or a church-community. It is those folks to whom the Prince of Lies goes, and says, 'I offer you comfort in your loneliness, power when you feel weak and a place to go when you are lost'.

(the crowd AMENS)

And those are real problems -- being lost, weak, alone, but the solutions to those problems, the solutions that the Prince of Lies doles out like food stamps, they are not real solutions. They are the weakest answers to the strongest questions. They will drive you from the truth. They will drive you from the light, and they will drive you from Jesus and eternal salvation, and they will drive you from God!

The crowd AMENS.

SAM

And when that happens, will the Prince of Lies take care of you?

JOHN

Of course not! The Prince of Lies cares for no one. Why is that, folks? Why do you think that is? Is it because God cast him down? Into the pit of man, leaving him there to rot, alone, scorned and

despised? Did God, whose love is supposedly infinite, hate the Prince of Lies for no reason? Or is that foul Prince just plain bad? Was he a bad seed? Was God wise to reject-?

INT. APARTMENT/HALLWAY - DAY - 2016

Betty sobs as she sits in front of the door. John talks from the hallway outside her apartment.

JOHN

-me. I'll try not to lie to you.

(pause)

Do you know what reactive attachment disorder is? It's what happens when kids fail to learn how to form emotional bonds. It manifests differently in different kids, but it's found among children who switched caregivers a lot at a young age. Those first few hours, months and years are important. That's when humans learn what it means to form an emotional attachment. If your caregiver hugs you or beats you, you learn that either care and support or scorn and pain are the basis for personal relationships. If your caregiver changes from hobo to firefighter to doctor to social worker to foster parents A through Z, well, then you don't form emotional attachments - you learn that personal relationships are based on functions and results. You don't learn to see humans as people you might want to connect with; you see them as devices that sometimes produce candy or celery, or rage or health care, and you start experimenting to see how to switch them from one output to another. If you break one, you move on to the next. You learn that relationships are transactional - you put something in, and something else comes out.

(pause)

Please let me in, Betty.

INT. OUR LADY OF TRUTH GROUP HOME OFFICE - DAY - 1993

A nervous white YOUNG MAN is with his new BOSS, who leads him through a group home. Boss keeps an eye through the windows on the kids outside, including John (now 12yro), who appears to be trying to get the other children to go somewhere with him.

BOSS

Remember when I said these kids will manipulate the hell out of you if you let them? I'm reluctant to assign you John because he is the poster-child of that. He will talk the cock off your crotch. He will bleed you dry. You can't trust him any farther than you can throw him. Actually way less than that even, he's small, you could probably throw him a good ways.

YOUNG MAN

I won't throw him, sir. Thanks so much for this job. I won't trust-

The Boss BANGS on the window, startling the Young Man. Outside, John walks away with the other boys following. The Boss opens the window. John and the others stop.

BOSS

John! You stay right there, I'm watching you!

(John flicks him off; the others boys LAUGH)

I know I sound harsh - reactive attachment disorder is a mental illness, after all. It's not his fault he was an abandoned baby. But it is more than that. When you were young, you were raised by your parents. You were probably babysat sometimes, maybe by a sibling, grandparent, neighbor, whoever. But if we listed everyone who cared for you, it wouldn't be a huge list, and most of them would be similar to your parents. You learned to interact with people like them. That's called "cultural fluency", by the way.

(knocks on the window, gestures to John)

Did John just take money from those boys? Did you see that?

YOUNG MAN
No, sir. Sorry.

BOSS
I would search him but John always hides it. He's good at sleight of hand. Keep your wallet in your car.
(pulls out a fat file,
montage begins)
This is the documentation of John's guardians, babysitters and social workers. He's learned cultural fluency with whites, blacks, Christians, Muslims, disableds, atheists, Communists, priests, witches, nerds, thugs, jocks, bankers, lesbians, stoners, cowboys -- you see where I'm going with this? You learned how to act in front of your parents, he learned how to act in front of everyone of every kind. Reactive attachment disorder is a skill, after all, from John's perspective, it's what he's been trained to do since birth, and he is legendary good, okay? He will figure you out in an instant.

MONTAGE AS HE SPEAKS: FAMILY SNAPSHOTS

As the Boss speaks, we see family photos from John's file; John conspicuously remains apart in all of them.

IMAGE: Middle-class WHITE FAMILY says grace around a dinner table; John looks confused and dismayed.

IMAGE: Extended BLACK FAMILY watches a football game as they eat. John does not watch the game; instead he watches the family he is not a part of.

IMAGE: DERANGED MAN, wearing a *college is a bourgeois trap*-t-shirt, screams at HIS FAMILY; a very young John watches from the side, and POLICE OFFICERS drag the man away.

IMAGE: LARGE FAMILY plays catch. John nominally participates, but no one has thrown him the ball.

IMAGE: WOMAN receives a makeover from her DAUGHTERS, while John watches them interact.

IMAGE: Burly PLUMBER fixes a pipe under a sink, showing his KID how to do it. John holds a wrench and tries to peer

over the Kid's shoulder.

IMAGE: John, alone, lugs a trash bag full of his stuff.

INT. GROUP HOME HALLWAY - NIGHT - ONE MONTH LATER

The Young Man is now working in the group home. John stands in the doorway of his bedroom. The lights are off. The other residents are all asleep.

JOHN

I'm not asking you for any kind of special favor.

(takes his hand, tries to steal his wallet but it isn't there)

I feel like we've got a special bond, you and me. You're not like the others.

YOUNG MAN

You're pretty unique yourself.
(stops John from leaving)
It's past lights-out, John.

JOHN

It really means a lot to me that you took the time to learn my name. I've moved around to so many foster homes, I've spent years at a time with no adult in my life who consistently remembers that I'm *John*, not *Jonathan*. I hate that. So I don't want to risk losing you as my primary counselor. I like you, you're like my hip, cool uncle. I won't do anything to risk your job.

YOUNG MAN

They told me you're manipulative.
They told me not to trust you.

John confidently tries to walk out of his room. Young Man stops him again.

JOHN

That makes sense, dude. I wouldn't trust me. I've always been a liar. You know why?

(tears up)

You don't know what it's like being a shrimpy white foster kid

in the ghetto. All I got to defend myself is my tongue. I've never felt safe, like I always had to keep a front up... until I got here. With you. That's why you can trust me. I could never tell the truth because I couldn't face it myself, but now I'm here with you. I finally feel safe enough to be the real John. Everything's changed.

(pause)

I trust you so much. I know you'll follow through on our deal.

YOUNG MAN

(blushing)

I didn't promise anything.

JOHN

Oh, yeah, sure, I know. I'm not asking for anything. *Deal* was the wrong word. We're just on the same page now.

YOUNG MAN

You asked me to look the other way while you sell cigarettes to the other kids.

JOHN

No, no, I was presenting you with a hypothetical. I'm looking to get out of this place. I don't want to get in trouble, and I know you need this job. You told me that.

YOUNG MAN

Well, yeah-

JOHN

And all cigarettes have to come from someplace.

YOUNG MAN

A tobacco farm, presumably.
(stops John from walking away again)
John, stay in your room.

JOHN

If I got caught -- not that I'm doing it -- suspicion would naturally flow to you.

YOUNG MAN

Why?

JOHN

Because you're my group life counselor. Who else could have given me cigarettes?

YOUNG MAN

Uh... I mean, anyone, John-

JOHN

Not anyone. You. That's what the rumors say.

YOUNG MAN

What rumors?

JOHN

Oh, I don't know. I don't like to spread gossip. That's no way to earn privileges. I just overheard some kids, they have the impression you're smuggling in cigarettes to me.

YOUNG MAN

I'm not!

JOHN

I know, I know, I told them that. But they thought I was covering for you. Look, I want to keep you out of this, okay? Just let me handle it. I'll tell them I steal cigarettes from the cars in the parking lot. Promise you won't get Mr. Hanford involved?

John subtly rearranges his body, gradually shifting until he is out of the doorway. The Young Man has not noticed.

YOUNG MAN

(sighs, thinks about it)

Fine. I promise. Mr. Hanford doesn't have to know. But if I see you with cigarettes, I'm confiscating them.

JOHN

Keep your eyes closed, you'll see less.

YOUNG MAN

You are bizarre, John. Where do kids like you come from?

JOHN

(points away)
Over there.

Young Man turns around, and John uses the opportunity to bolt in the other direction. He smiles as he runs out the door and into the night.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT - 1981

A drunk homeless man -- RATFUCKER -- walks down an alley carrying a trash bag filled with his belongings. He crawls into the cardboard box he uses as a home. The sound of a BABY CRYING can be heard. Ratfucker hesitates before looking for the source of the noise. He goes to a dumpster, peers inside and finds infant John, covered in blood except his face. He looks around for people but no one is nearby.

RATFUCKER

(picks the baby up and
hurries down the street)
Well hell, it's a baby. Somebody
dropped their baby in the dumpster.
Hey, police! Anybody out there?! I
guess Ratfucker gonna have to take
you somewhere nice, little baby.
You shouldn't be hanging out in
dumpsters anyway.

(he leaves the alley
with the baby)

Somebody wiped the blood off yo'
face, Baby Doe. Reckon yo' momma
took one look and knew she
couldn't take care of you, and the
cold hard truth is she was proolly
right. Not that I met her or
nothing -- the kind of woman who'd
do this was definitely not ready
to be a mother. Don't make what
she did okay. But it's important
to acknowledge the truth, even if
it don't help nothing. If you
don't, you're gonna be running
away from it forever, that's what
my mama always said. That's why
you should always 'fess up.

(pause)

I got a gambling problem, Baby Doe.
I normally deny that, but since you

won't remember it anyway, I'll say
it to you. Don't tell no one.

(pause)

Couple thousand years ago, Baby
Doe, you could've founded Rome.
Couple million years before that,
yo' mama would just eat yo' ass
like the runt of the litter.
That's the cold hard truth too.

(pause)

Say, are you white or are you
black? Guess you might never know.
It don't matter.

(pause)

But it do. It matters a lot. If
you got a choice, you tell folk
you white. Except if you go to
college or prison, then you be
black.

He stops at a fire department and knocks on the front door.

EXT./INT.

A FIREFIGHTER hands over infant John to a PARAMEDIC. Flash forward through the next couple changes-of-custody -- the Paramedic hands him over to a DOCTOR who gives him to a SOCIAL WORKER. He then grows older through a series of FOSTER PARENTS, BABYSITTERS and TEACHERS. Transition in a blatantly artificial way, with actors getting in costume and passing John between each other like a prop, while sets are moved into place by unseen mechanisms or stagehands. Only John remains in character and in focus, confused by the constant changes as he grows into a toddler. Slow down enough to see a few slices of time:

John pushes a vase off an endtable to get the attention of Asian Indian ADULTS with their backs to him.

John is smiling and hugging a white FOSTER MOTHER; he is being saccharine to get attention and cookies from her, as she has just taken cookies out of the oven.

John imitates a stern military salute to a black UNIFORMED MAN, who laughs, egging John on. John discovers he has an audience of MILITARY FAMILY adults who want to watch him pretend to be someone else.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING - 1986

John is five years old. He fidgets but lets a black TOUGH THUG tie his shoes.

TOUGH THUG

You know you can pass as white or black? That's like a superpower, boy, you can have two identities. You could be a con-man.

JOHN

What's that?

TOUGH THUG

A person who says lies for a living.

JOHN

Miss Dee says lying is bad.

TOUGH THUG

Lying to yo' family is bad. But it's your family against the world, John. You gotta be loyal to yo' family and to God and maybe yo' niggas if you got good ones.

(pause)

So remember, be loyal to yo' family. Whatchoo say if anyone ask who live here?

JOHN

Miss Dee lives here. No other adults.

TOUGH THUG

That's right. Good boy.

JOHN

I'm keeping a secret for you, so does that mean I'm your nigga?

TOUGH THUG

(laughs)

You think you black enough to be my nigga, huh?

JOHN

What does that mean?

TOUGH THUG

You can only be someone's nigga if you black and that someone is black. You ain't exactly black.

JOHN

But I'm white and black? Right?

TOUGH THUG

You ain't white *and* black. You can pass as white *or* black. That's different. You can switch, but you can't be both at the same time.

(switches to a very white accent)

Can you talk like this? This is how white people talk. If you're talking to a cop, you should talk like this, because you can pass for white. Cops like white people. If you're talking like this, you can't call someone a nigga.

(switches back to his urban accent)

But if you black, like in this family, you can say *nigga*.

(pause)

That's called code-switching.

JOHN

(practicing a white accent)

So this makes me sound white.

(practicing a black accent)

This make me sound black, nigga.

TOUGH THUG

You got it.

(pause)

White guys call each other *dude* instead.

Long pause. John puts on a coat.

JOHN

What's a Latino?

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - 1987

John is six years old. He sits alone, parentless, in a classroom near a chart of students' "Reading Progress Scores". The other KIDS have PARENTS there, fawning over an alphabet-writing project they have completed. John studies the other kids. One BOY is so excited he dances around as he shows his MOTHER a picture he drew of her.

BOY

I drew a picture of you, Mommy! I love you!

MOTHER 1
 Beautiful, darling, good job.
 (looking at John,
 whispering to Mother 2)
 That must be the foster boy. No
 one's here for him. Poor thing.

MOTHER 2
 Is he white or black? I can't
 tell.

MOTHER 1
 Sssh...
 (goes to John)
 Hi, I really like your project.
 I'm sorry your foster parents
 couldn't be here.

John shows his project, dancing and jumping excitedly like
 the Boy did. Mother 1 politely nods.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT - 1987

John (6yro) sneaks into the kitchen and struggles to open
 the refrigerator. He pulls out a pizza box and hurriedly
 eats the last piece of pizza.

The lights turn on. A big Italian-American MEAN MAN glares
 at him. John stuffs the pizza in his mouth.

MEAN MAN
 I knew it. You eatin' my pizza,
 boy. I'm gonna have to punish you,
 you know that. That bitch ain't
 gonna stop me this time.

He advances aggressively, hand raised.

JOHN
 That bitch said I can have it!

MEAN MAN
 (hesitates, then gets
 ready to hit John)
 You lie a lot, boy, I ain't got no
 reason to believe you. You's a
 thief and a liar and a cheat.

JOHN
 She said... Uh... Uh...
 (panicking)
 Uh... She said you'll get what's
 coming to you tonight. She said

not to worry about the pizza.

MEAN MAN

(stops)

What did that bitch tell you?

JOHN

I don't know... Something about a wire? She said I ain't gotta worry about you no more.

MEAN MAN

A wire? She wore a wire? Tonight?

JOHN

I dunno when she wore it.

(shrugs, finishes pizza)

She said not to be scared of you cuz you're a limp-dick pussyfaced shitwaffle who ain't gonna be around much longer. What does that mean?

MEAN MAN

It means she done made a serious mistake. You need to go to bed and shut ya ears, boy.

He turns around and heads towards the bedroom. The sound of FIGHTING and ARGUING can be heard, while John hides a jar of peanut butter in his room. He puts it in a backpack full of cookies and chips, which is hidden in his closet.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY - 1989

John (8yro) is in a crummy bathroom, making faces at himself in the mirror. He is practicing facial expressions: happy, sad, angry. A TIRED WOMAN appears in the doorway.

TIRED WOMAN

John, you need to go next door. They called me in to work.

JOHN

No.

TIRED WOMAN

I've got no time to argue! Go see Mrs. McDonnell, she'll give you a cookie.

JOHN

Her cookies are shit.

TIRED WOMAN

What are you doing anyway?

JOHN

Practicing faces.

TIRED WOMAN

Why?

JOHN

So I can make them.

(pause)

Just leave me here.

TIRED WOMAN

You can't be here alone. Go to-

JOHN

Mrs McDonnell's in Virginia, you piss-titted bitch! She told you that yesterday. She's visiting her daughter.

He pushes past her into the hallway.

TIRED WOMAN

Well you have to go somewhere.
I'll call Mr. Hardesty.

(pause)

You can't talk to me like that.

JOHN

Okay. I'll run away. Then I won't talk to you at all.

TIRED WOMAN

John! Don't you run away again!

JOHN

(as he walks out)

You don't control me. I'm going where I wanna go and I'll talk to you however I wanna talk to you -- you ain't got shit for me, so I got no reason to stay on your good side. If you don't like it, you can get rid of me, see if I care. I never even unpacked, and I'll still go where I wanna go. Fuck you! I'm making decisions about my life from now on, not you, not some shit-licking social worker, not Child Services, no one. I control me. You can send me off to

some new house if you want, I
won't unpack there either.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT - 1991

John (10yro) has a swollen lip and a black eye. He listens intently as an adult redneck, CHAPMAN, rants. John pours him a big glass of whiskey, and Chapman drinks it.

CHAPMAN

I know you prolly still smartin',
but you deserved that for lying to
me and stealin' from my mama.
Don't you lie to me, shortwad. I
will always find out.

JOHN

(Southern accent)
Yessuh.

CHAPMAN

Good. You pickin' up my mama's
accent.

JOHN

Yessuh.
(pours more liquor,
finishing the bottle)
Drink up, hoss.

CHAPMAN

(chugs as much as he
can)
You ain't a bad boy, John.
(he doesn't notice John
begin weighing the empty
bottle, deciding where
to smash it)
Even the lying... I can understand
that. You from the ghetto, no one
taught you better. You prolly need
to lie livin' wit' *them*. That's a
shit-brown environment.

(sees his skin color)

You mulatto or what? Nevermind,
don't tell me. I ain't prejudice.
I don't wanna know. I ain't like
them animals in the ghetto. When
you in my family, John, you part
of my tribe, and I'll protect you
as long as you respect me and mind
yer manners. And don't lie to me.

(pause)

You know how to take yer lumps,
John, I can give you that-

Chapman jumps as John smashes the empty bottle of liquor on the floor. It SHATTERS. John, still holding the neck, jabs the jagged end towards Chapman's crotch, applying enough pressure that he can't move without getting cut.

JOHN
(mocking hillbilly
accent)

I don't want yer protection,
bitchface. I protect myself, like a
turtle on Tuesdays. If you ever
touch me again, you best make sure
rip my heart out and salt the
ground where I fall, ya hear me,
boy? And you best burn down e'ry
place I ever been, cuz I done took
a picture of my dick wit' yer
camera and I hid that shit
somewhere. You know what that is?
Got enough education to know that?

(pause)

I do, Chapman, I read books.
That's called a 'dead man's
switch'. If I die, that photo is
gonna be found, and like a switch
gettin' flicked, it's gonna turn
on a mountain of police to comb
through every inch of your life to
find proof you made child porn.
They might not make the porn
charge stick, but we both know
they'll find plenty of other shit.

(pause)

So the next time I disrespect you
-- which is gonna happen in about
seven seconds, sure as sows screw
so sweetly, yessuh -- you decide
whether you hate me enough to kill
me and go to prison. Cuz if you
hit me again and don't kill me, I
will slit ya goddamn throat.

(pause)

You got the brain and balls of a
dead rat, you cunt-cocked clotrag.
I got more respect for that fart
you cut last night than you.

(pause)

So whatchoo think? You gonna kill
me? You as quiet as a dead duck
now. Your temper is under control,
hoss, you should tell your anger

management counselor, all it takes
is broken glass in your crotch.

(takes Chapman's wallet,
removes four dollars)

Four bucks, jellynuts? You suck,
and that ain't a lie.

He walks away, broken bottle in hand.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT - 1991

John (10yro) pretends to be asleep in his bed. He gets up and goes to his closet, where he pulls out a brown duffel bag full of cash. He takes most of the cash out and hides it in the bottom of a bucket of legos, but keeps one wad of bills. He brings the (now-empty) brown duffel bag to a different bedroom, where he leaves the bag on the floor. He checks that a thug named RAY-DEE is asleep in bed there. He puts the small wad of cash from the duffel bag in Ray-Dee's crumpled up jeans on the floor. Then he goes to the house phone and dials.

JOHN

Yo, Pilenine.

(pause)

Johnny Dubs, remember? Ray-Dee's
momma's foster boy?

(gets a piece of cake
from the kitchen)

Ain't got a bed-time,
motherfucker. I take charge of my
life. Callin' outta respect,
nigga. You should know-

(pause)

Yeah I can say it, I'm black --
who the fuck told you that?

(checks on an ELDERLY
BLACK WOMAN sleeping in
the master bedroom)

Whatever. I got respect for you,
my nigga. I ain't got respect for
Ray-Dee. He suck dick, and you
ain't wanna know how I know that.

(pause)

I worried about him. He been
fuckin' up, he gamblin' again,
losing all that money you give
him. He got a problem. I know you-

(pause)

You ain't give him a brown duffel
bag full of cash? He say he got it
from you. Maybe he found it, I
dunno. He losin' every last dime

on the dice, you know how he do.

(John smiles; PILENINE
can be heard shouting
angrily)

He over here right now, nigga. I
think he gots a gambling problem
for real. The money that's left is
in his pocket. Rest is gone, I
expect.

He hangs up, sits in the living room and eats cake.

EXT. STREET - DAY - 1991

John (10yro, acting black) runs a three-card monte game.
Two POLICE OFFICERS (one Korean, one white) approach,
trying not to be seen by him or the crowd of TOURISTS who
gawk at the child-cardshark.

JOHN

She gone. Where's the queen? Huh?
You see her? She ain't in England,
she's right here on this table.
But where she at? You got a one in
three chance, and that ain't no
lie. I don't like lies, and I
don't like cheats. I don't like
unfair games, folks, that's why I
don't pay taxes.

(tourists LAUGH)

I kid, that ain't why I don't pay
taxes. I don't pay taxes cuz of...
uh, general thievery.

(LAUGHTER; John salutes)

General Thievery, reporting for
duty, sir!

(LAUGHTER)

As I said, I don't play unfair
games. Your chances here are one
in three. That's just a fact. You
can't argue with facts, can you,
folks? So who wants to play a
round of this fair game? Facts is
facts, and fair game is fair game.
As long as you follow the rules,
odds even out. Eventually you come
out a winner if you play along,
that's always been my motto.

The Police Officers get closer. John still hasn't seen them.

TOURIST

You sure you don't palm a card?

JOHN

That would be cheating, and I ain't no cheat! I been growing up in foster care for years, so I know a thing or two about unfairness. I may be an orphan-
(crowd aahs)

But that don't mean I reject the system. It means I know better than most how important it is to follow the rules.

(pause)

Those rules say there's gotta be a red queen. There has to be one, waiting for you, one beautiful lady to be by your side always. You got a one in three chance of finding her. That's thirty-three percent. You're bound to win eventually, if you just play along. So who wants to-?

POLICE OFFICER 1

Okay kid, let's wrap it up-

John is surprised as Police Officer 1 (who is Asian) jumps out from behind the crowd. John tries to dart away but Police Officer 2 -- OFFICER PRAWDASKI -- catches him, sneaking up from behind.

INT. POLICE STATION - LATER THAT EVENING

Police officers and criminals fill the station. John yawns as he watches. He is now acting white. Officer Prawdaski is with him, John pacing by his desk.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

(looks at his watch)

Where is your foster mother?

JOHN

I told you she wouldn't come. Just let me go, Prawdaski. Gimme the paperwork. I'll show up to court. That juvie court clerk has got an amazing rack. I won't miss that.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You are ten years old, you wouldn't know what to do with an amazing rack. Anyway, I can't do that. I have to release you into the care of a responsible adult.

JOHN
I don't know any, I'll go by
myself.

John walks away.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
Stop.
(he stands up and follows
after John)
It's late, John. It's dark out.
You can't walk home alone now.

JOHN
I wasn't going home.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
Where are you going?

JOHN
Nowhere special, just exercising
my mojo. Gotta hustle, Prawdaski!

John slowly meanders and Officer Prawdaski follows. John gradually speeds up until he is walking towards the parking lot, with Officer Prawdaski keeping up with him.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
You're ten years old.

JOHN
Not everyone is like forty and
waiting for their mojo to drop,
Officer Shrivelcock.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
You got quite a mouth on you, John

JOHN
What happened to Officer Slanty
Jap-Jap? I thought he was gonna
watch me. You should go home.
You're almost off-duty.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
His name is Officer Kim, he's
Chinese, and he's not a nerd,
he's... just Chinese.

JOHN
He's Korean. Kim is a Korean name.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
Whatever, he's not gonna watch you.

JOHN

Why not?

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Because he's new and I think you will run circles around him.

JOHN

Oh. Damn it. That's why I was trying to get you to go home.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You knew you could manipulate him?

JOHN

I'm sure of it. He's a patsy. And I could steal his wallet.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You're good at that, John. Manipulation. I'll give you that. But that's not something to be proud of.

JOHN

Never said I was proud of it. It's what I got. Some people got money. Some people got a pretty face. Some people got smarts or muscles. All I got is manipulation.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Look... I know it's hard for you. You probably do have to manipulate people to get your needs met. I met your foster father awhile ago. I... I'm not surprised you have to lie to him.

JOHN

Chapman? He wasn't my foster father. He was my foster mother's step-son from her ex-husband's previous marriage, so he was like my half-step-foster-brother-in-law. I just told you to drop me off there cuz I wanted to slice his dick off with a broken whiskey bottle.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You said it was your foster home!

JOHN

No I didn't. I just started giving you directions.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You're a manipulative prick. I could lose my job for that, y'know.

JOHN

Oh come on, I'd tell them you're okay. I'm an orphan, I can be very sympathetic. I'll tell them you saved me from crack dealers.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Don't lie for me, John.

(sighs)

You need to have someone to be honest with. If you don't tell the truth sometimes, you might forget how. Do you have anyone you can talk to like that? A teacher or social worker or someone?

JOHN

Not really... Maybe you. Sort of.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Me? John... You have always lied to me. Every time I arrest you, you give me a different name.

JOHN

I told you the truth about wanting to manipulate Officer Chinkwad Japdick.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Well, yeah, I guess that was a brief spurt of truth. But you need more than that. Are you just gonna lie for the rest of your life?

JOHN

Maybe.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

That's not okay, John. You need a solid identity, and a sense of purpose in a community. You won't get that from a lifetime of lying.

JOHN

Those aren't needs. Needs are

food, water, shelter. Truth is a luxury. Identity is a bourgeois trap.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Where do you get this shit?

JOHN

Your identity comes from the things that are important to you, like your religion and your family. But those things are really a weakness. They're how people like me will get at you to manipulate you. When you let things be important to you, someone will threaten to take them away to get you to do whatever they want. It's better if you don't have anything like that. No identity, no way for anyone to get to you.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You're a smart kid, John, but I think you'll eventually learn that who you are matters. A worthwhile life is something constructed over time, not a series of ad-hoc circumstances. You won't be happy pretending to be different people every day.

JOHN

I can try.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You can't just construct new identities willy-nilly. The important part of what makes you you is your relationships with others. That takes time to create. You have to make the commitment to build the real identity you want to have. Or else you'll be alone, with nothing important to you and no reason to live, just a series of fake names. There won't be a real John behind it all because those things you want to skip -- religion, family, friends -- those things are what make up a real identity.

JOHN

There are no real identities. If you haven't built your own lies, someone else built them for you. Your parents, your church, your boss, they control you, they made those lies and they made you who you are. You're just too blinded by love and faith and bullshit like that to see it.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

That isn't the same thing. People like my family and my priest "control" my identity because they love me, and I love them. It's not oppression. It's just that real life is a collaboration. Lying is a solitary, lonely lifestyle.

JOHN

Reality is lonely too. It's better if you lie about it. You can be anything you want in a lie. Deception will set you free.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

I don't think that's true.

JOHN

Because you're an idiot. If you're not a liar, then you're a patsy, like Officer Orient. But you already know you're a patsy.

(Prawdaski doesn't know what he means)

You were talking in the break room, about your union and shit. You were right, they are lying to you. I eavesdropped on them last week when Burton arrested me. He's your union rep, right? He's already sold you out. They're laughing at you behind your back, all the way to the bank, and those banker fuckers are lying to you too, I lived with a banker four foster homes ago. They laugh about fools like you. You just eat it all up and vote for your favorite clown and write a letter to the editor because it makes you feel like you did something, but every part of your life is a lie. It's

just their lie instead of your own. They're taking the money outta your pocket and the dignity outta your spine, and you ain't even got the balls to look them in the eye when they do it. I'm different. I'll always be different. I don't listen to lies, I speak them. Those bankers and union fucks and social workers will never get to the real me. No one gets to me.

(pause)

You're off-duty now. You're allowed to take me home, let's go.

Officer Prawdaski thinks about it. He and John are outside now, near his car.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Fine. Pick something to tell me the truth about on the way, okay?

JOHN

Your face looks and smells like a crackhead's asshole.

(pause)

You can just drop me off at the corner. I'll tell you where.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

You want some dinner? I'll buy you a hamburger if you want.

(pause)

What did Officer Burton say?

John smiles.

INT. OFFICE - NIGHT - 1992

Two Italian MOBSTERS sit across from each other at a desk.

MOBSTER 1

It is an incriminating list. We must recover it. Talk to-

The door opens. John (Ilyro) walks in, in the guise of a cocky New York Italian-American wise-guy-kid.

JOHN

Good evening, gentlemen.

They both reach for guns, then see that it is a child and

stop. They are confused.

MOBSTER 2

You lost, kid?

MOBSTER 1

Hey, don't you live upstairs? With that colored family? You related to them? You're lighter-skinned-

JOHN

I am Italian, motherfucker, do not call me a nigger!

The Mobsters are taken aback by his reaction.

MOBSTER 1

Relax, son...

JOHN

I'm Italian, okay? I'm a foster child, so I have to live with nigger families.

MOBSTER 2

I like your moxie, kid. What's your name?

JOHN

Joey de Santo. From Queens.

MOBSTER 1

A fine Italian name. Pity you live with *them*. Damn government.

JOHN

They ain't gonna turn me into a nigger, that's for damn sure. They ruined this neighborhood -- or so I assume, I know fuckall about it. They ruin every other damn thing they touch, am I right?

MOBSTER 1

Hell yeah! You should run for motherfucking president, kid.

JOHN

I ain't old enough. I am old enough to work for you.

MOBSTER 1

What?

MOBSTER 2
We don't hire kids.

JOHN
You ain't gotta hire me. I already started.
(he plops a wad of cash
on the desk)
This is what you're owed.

MOBSTER 1
What?

JOHN
I was the one who stole that list of debt. I know that's what you was talking about in here. You keep track of who owes you what. It's illegal. I don't really get why it's illegal, but maybe that's something that'll make sense to me when I'm older, like why some folks put their cocks inside faggots outside of prison.

(pause)
I got your attention with that, huh? I call it how I see it. That's how we do it in New York, baby. That's how my father taught me to do it.

(makes the sign of the cross)
May his soul rest in peace. He was shot by a nigger, you know.

MOBSTER 1
So you wanna collect on debt?

JOHN
Try and keep up, *nonno*. This ain't a goddamn TV show with a twist before every commercial break. I already started working for you. That's what my father did, he collected debt. He taught me. Now I'm doing it for you. Here's a list of who paid what.

He hands over a piece of paper with names on it.

MOBSTER 2
We still ain't gonna hire no kid.

JOHN

I ain't ask you if you wanna hire me. I just started doing work. If you want, you can stiff me. Maybe I accept that and walk away. Maybe not. Maybe I got backup plans. Maybe it'd be easier for you to pay me the fifteen percent you would pay me if you hired me, and if the cops ever question me, I'll say you you talked me out of a life of crime. I'll say you taught me to ride a bike.

MOBSTER 1

And if I say no, you'll tell the police I said yes? You're blackmailing us?

JOHN

Ain't blackmail, sir. Just an honest boy, looking for an honest day's pay.

MOBSTER 1

Honest? How'd you get all these deadbeats to pay up, anyway?

He begins counting the money.

JOHN

I got ways. I can be very convincing. I got techniques that only a kid can use.

MOBSTER 2

You think you can get a payment out of Big Tee Madrella? That son of a bitch is slippery.

JOHN

He got a mama?

MOBSTER 2

Doesn't everybody?

(awkward pause)

Oh... I mean everyone had a mother biologically... Sorry.

JOHN

I don't need a mama, I'm gonna get Signora Madrella. She'll do. Maybe she got cash, maybe she got jewels, maybe she throw a bake sale. Maybe

I turn her ass out on the street and make some money that way. Lotta maybes, but one for-sure is that she's leverage. Mothers are always the ultimate leverage. That's why I'm glad I ain't got one.

Mobster 1 hands over a wad of bills.

MOBSTER 1

Here's your fifteen percent. And I'll give you another couple bucks cuz I like your style, and to help you put up with those niggers upstairs.

John laughs along with the Mobsters.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING - 1992

John sits with a bathrobed elderly Italian-American woman, SIGNORA MADRELLA. He (in his Joey persona) shows her a bill of her son's debt to mobsters.

JOHN

I think ya son has got a real problem wit' gambling. I tells him he should stop. It's a sin. That's in the Bible.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

You seem like such a good boy.

JOHN

(sign of the cross)

I's a sinner like all the rest. I lie. I cheat. I steal.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

But God forgives. You're Catholic?

JOHN

Yes, *Signora*. I's Italian. Sicilian.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

Sicilians are basically Arabs. You look Arab.

JOHN

That explains why I'm so good at haggling.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

I don't want my son to owe money,
but I don't have this kind of
cash. I can't pay this off.

JOHN

I realize that, *Signora*. And I
don't wanna put you out. If yer
son's knees was broken-

SIGNORA MADRELLA

Oh lord! Is that going to happen?

JOHN

I dunno what they gonna do. I just
wanna get this debt off my books.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

You don't talk like a child. I'm
surprised they would hire a boy to
collect a debt.

JOHN

They ain't exactly offer me a job.
But I do good work, and they don't
dare not pay me. I bet you got
some valuable stuff you could sell.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

I have a car. And I have a pearl
necklace.

JOHN

Those would be amazing, *Signora*.
I'd be glad to handle the sale for
you. I know a guy who will pay
top-dollar for that car.

(heads towards the
bedroom)

I can appraise pearls, *Signora*, on
account of a trace of Jew in my
blood. Will you make me some pasta
while I work? I like red sauce.

(she is hesitant)

If it's too much trouble, that's
okay. I'm an orphan, so I get food
from the soup kitchen. They let me
cut to the front of the line.

SIGNORA MADRELLA

Oh, is that... How it works?
Nevermind, I can't let a boy go
hungry. I'll make you some food.

JOHN

I know. Thank you, *Signora*. I wish
you was my mother.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT - 2010

John comes home to his apartment. He is alone. The place is unfurnished except for a mattress on the floor and a few trash bags full of his belongings. He drops a locked briefcase, then hears WHISPERING in the other room. He pulls a gun and sneaks towards the sound.

In an unfurnished bedroom, there is a 12yro boy (Sam) and his mother (MELINDA), cowering in fear.

MELINDA

Oh god, I'm sorry! Don't shoot us!

JOHN

Who are you?

MELINDA

(lying)

My name is Melinda. Melinda Varner!
This is my son, Sam. Please don't
hurt us.

JOHN

Why are you here?

MELINDA

We don't have anywhere else to go!

JOHN

Why did you come here?
(figures it out)
Someone told you this place was
abandoned? Cuz no one's ever here.

MELINDA

(nods)

How did you know that?

JOHN

I'm good at reading people. This
place is not abandoned. It's mine.

MELINDA

We wouldn't have come here if we
knew, just don't hurt us.

JOHN

(puts his gun away)

I won't hurt you. But you can't stay here.

(looks outside, it is dark and raining)

Oh for fuck's sake! You can stay here tonight. But tomorrow you leave! I'll find a homeless shelter.

MELINDA

I can't go there, those places are terrible. You don't know what goes on there-

JOHN

I know exactly what goes on there! You'll have to cope with it. I'll find you a battered woman's shelter.

MELINDA

I couldn't find any with an open bed.

JOHN

You don't have my resources. I can find you a goddamn battered woman's shelter.

MELINDA

I'm not really a battered woman. I mean, my husband was abusive, but-

JOHN

You can either lie or let me batter you so it won't be a lie. Don't tell me you're a stickler for the truth? Cuz we ain't gonna get along if that's the case.

(Sam giggles)

Little man knows what I'm talking about. Is your mom always making you tell the truth?

(Sam nods)

Yeah, moms suck. I had like fifty of 'em. They're the worst.

(looks at Melinda)

Sorry. You're prolly pretty good.

(pause)

So do I have to feed you too?

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT - LATER

After having heated up a couple cans of stew, John eats with Melinda and Sam. He doesn't have any chairs or a table, so they sit on the floor.

SAM

Can I have something else?

MELINDA

Just eat it.

(to John)

What do you do, Billy?

JOHN

(resists the urge to
lie)

I'm a con artist.

SAM

What's that?

JOHN

It means I lie to people. I cheat them out of money, or cars, or cocaine, or this one time a boat.

SAM

You have a boat?

JOHN

I sold it. What would I do with a boat?

SAM

Sail it. You could sail anywhere in the world.

JOHN

It was a motorboat.

SAM

What?

JOHN

It didn't have a sail. It had a motor.

SAM

Oh. You should have motorboated with it. That'd be fun.

JOHN

I guess. Fun is not the point of

conning.

SAM

What is the point?

JOHN

To make money. I got bills to pay. Got situations I need to bluff my way out of.

SAM

That's so cool. How do you become a con artist?

JOHN

It's the only thing I know how to do. I was born into it. I remember the exact moment I decided. It was some kind of parent's day in school. All the parents were there. Except mine. My foster parents were -- I don't remember, either smoking crack or evangelizing crackheads -- they weren't there. I was embarrassed. I think it was the first time I ever felt humiliation. And then I sat there while everyone else got hugs and updates on their reading progress scores. They just looked at me and whispered *where's his parents? Oh, that's the foster kid, it's not a surprise that no one came for him. Poor thing.* And I saw that the other children smiled and danced, and they said things like *I love you* and *I drew a picture of you*. I tried saying those things too. But it didn't work.

(pause)

I knew then that there was a difference between a foster mother and a real mother, and these were real mothers. I thought if I said the right thing, they could become my real mother. But I wasn't good enough. I needed to get better at manipulating people if I wanted the same things the other kids had.

(pause)

I didn't really get what a con artist was, but that's when I decided to be one. I decided to

learn how to trick people to get what I needed. I haven't really stopped lying since.

(pause)

I'm a compulsive liar. I've never admitted that before. Telling the truth is painful. It gives me panic attacks.

MELINDA

Are you lying about being a con artist?

JOHN

Maybe the *artist* part.

MELINDA

Do you target the greedy rich? Like the scammers on TV?

JOHN

No. I don't go around talking little old ladies into signing away their homes. But no, I'm not a vigilante, just a con-man.

MELINDA

Why are you telling us this?

JOHN

You asked.

MELINDA

I assume you don't go telling everyone you meet that you're a con artist. So why'd you tell me?

JOHN

Because I can read people. I can tell you're not undercover or trying to get me.

(pause)

Another reason is that you're a homeless alcoholic single mother -- you didn't have to tell me that, it's tattooed on your face. You don't have anything I might want to con you out of, and you won't for the foreseeable future. Not until I figure out how to steal tax deductions.

(pause)

But that's not really it. I'm telling you the truth because I

never have, and I don't have anything to lose giving it a try, especially with someone who doesn't matter. Nothing personal. Someone once told me I needed to find someone I could be truthful with, or I'd forget how. I stole his wallet.

(pause)

I was abandoned as a baby. I was left in front of a police station.

MELINDA

Oh, wow. You must hate your mother.

JOHN

No, I don't hate her, I understand. Children are difficult -- no offense, Sam. She couldn't handle it. It's as simple as that. She couldn't cope. I could cope, with anything, even being abandoned. People can be adapted to anything if they're raised for it from birth. The brain molds itself to its early environment.

(sees that Sam is bored)

Another nice thing about being a con artist is the chicks. Seduction is just a simple form of conning.

SAM

Can I be a con artist?

JOHN

You have to learn young. Stick with your mom instead.

Long pause. They have finished eating. Melinda begins cleaning up.

SAM

Are you white or black?

MELINDA

Sam! That's rude.

JOHN

It's okay. I'm both. Or neither. That's the other reason I know I was born to be a con artist.

(urban black accent)

I can be as black as coal at

midnight, my nigga.
 (Minnesota accent)
 Or I can be as white as undriven
 snow, dude.
 (Hispanic accent)
 And I know enough *español* to pull
 off Spanglish, *gringo*.
 (Arab accent)
 I can pass for Arab.
 (bad Polynesian accent)
 I can pass for Polynesian too, or
 half-Polynesian anyway. But... I
 lost the accent, that one's hard.
 I gotta go meet some more
 Polynesians in person.

SAM
 What's a Polynesian?

MELINDA
 They're just a race of people.
 They live in the Pacific.

SAM
 In the ocean?

JOHN
 (Polynesian accent)
 On islands, mate.
 (pause)
 There, I got it. My name is Joseph
 Kakaloki, and yes, you may laugh
 because my name starts with *caca*.

Sam laughs. John grins along with him.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

John and Melinda are making out on a pile of blankets on
 the floor. They are about to have sex.

JOHN
 Wait, this is a safehouse for me.
 That makes it a dangerhouse for
 you. You can't stay here.

MELINDA
 (frowns)
 Is that a lie?

JOHN
 (pause)
 Yes.

He kisses her. They make passionate love on the floor of John's unfurnished apartment.

INT. STUDY ROOM - DAY - 2001

John (20yro) studies French alongside four college-age male STUDENTS, one of whom is DELANEY.

DELANEY

J'étudies le français parce que...
Uh, because I need a language credit.

(the others laugh)
French is lame. I should have taken German. I heard it's easier.

STUDENT 2

Why *did* you take French, Delaney?

DELANEY

I hoped it would help me seduce girls. But I doubt *je viens a l'école en voiture* is really gonna take anyone's underpants off.

JOHN

Girls will find any foreign language sexy if you do it right.
(looks at Student 1,
takes his hand and
speaks seductively)
J'étudies le français, car il est une autre langue que je peux mentir dans.

STUDENT 1

(laughing)
If I was gay, I'd be so seduced right now. I didn't catch most of that though.

JOHN

See? If you say it right, you'll get 'em.

DELANEY

Are you some kind of wizard for girls?

JOHN

Not exactly. I'm an airline pilot.

DELANEY

I don't get it, that makes you good with women?

JOHN

Basically. It's because we travel so much, so far away, we feel free to try out a bunch of different seduction techniques. We get turned down a lot. And it hurts to lose, to get beat up on by some girl's boyfriend in a foreign city, it's scary. But in the end, that kind of practice is what makes you good at it. It also makes you unable to do anything else. When all you know how to do is fly away, you forget how to stay put.

STUDENT 3

You get laid a lot?

JOHN

Yeah.

STUDENT 1

Should we believe you? You could be lying.

JOHN

I do lie a lot. You should not trust me.

STUDENT 1

Why do you lie?

JOHN

Same reason I'm learning French. Gives me another way to get people to do what I want. Women, I mean.

(pause)

I love my job. I know y'all probably wouldn't like it, even with all the women. It's hard, constantly moving between cities, having no place to call a real home. But then, I've never had a real home. I've never known anything better. Might as well live out of a suitcase, there are worse things to be living out of.

(pause)

I like this study group. You guys

are cool.

DELANEY

We hang out a lot, more than we study, really. You wanna join?

JOHN

I mean... I'll be in and out due to my job, but I like you guys.

STUDENT 3

(mock arrogance)

Yeah, we're pretty sweet.

(points to Delaney)

Except him, we only keep him around because he's loaded. Heir to the Delaney Pig Dildo Fortune or something.

DELANEY

Not really, it's in a trust fund, and it's my family's money, not mine. But yeah, I'm sort of a millionaire. Pig dildos have been very good to us.

JOHN

Oh... Cool...

John thinks while the group returns to studying French, their voices fading into the background. He studies Delaney surreptitiously. He gets visibly nervous as he has to resist his urges, and he can't decide what to do.

DELANEY

Hey, Arthur, your turn on *besoin*.

JOHN

(reading from a workbook)

Je ne pas besoin d'argent.

(beat)

Je besoin de l'amitié.

MONTAGE: 2002-2004

John (early 20s) as a successful con artist through surveillance photos, like a police dossier.

Conference Room: John, dressed as an airline pilot, presents a graph to Delaney and his FAMILY.

Front Door: Delaney and his family weep as they walk out of

an empty home while REPO MEN carry a couch away.

Environmentalist Rally: John as a hippie, leading a crowd in a chant.

Office: John shaking hands with an EXECUTIVE in front of a Save-the-Porpoises logo.

Bank: The same Executive cursing at a frightened BANK TELLER.

Ghetto House: John, dressed as a cholo, flashes gang signs at the door.

Parking Lot: John stares down a much larger CHOLO in front of a crowd.

Crackhouse: The Cholo angrily rips floorboards up looking for money and drugs that aren't there.

Street: John walks into a casino past two BOUNCERS.

Casino Office: John checks out with a huge stack of chips.

Coming out of the casino in an alley, John sees a woman, Emily, waiting for him.

EMILY

I saw you cheating in there. You're pretty impressive. My name's Emily.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT - 2008

Mr. ZHANG sits with his two BODYGUARDS in a crowded restaurant. John sits across from him, dressed as a Kuwaiti sheikh in a thawb, with Emily as his slutty American wife.

ZHANG

How will I know you have lived up to your end of the deal?

JOHN

When it is complete, you will receive a call indicating your permit has been granted. If you receive such a call, it could only be because of me. Such permits are not given out except through the favor of someone with the best interests of the Kuwaiti people at heart, someone like myself.

ZHANG

I see.

(he hesitates)

I don't know, I've never paid a
bribe before.

JOHN

Sir, you insult me. You are simply
paying me for my experience and my
contacts, my knowledge of my
country and my people. It is a fair
trade. It is a quirk of both our
country's legal systems that we
must keep it a secret.

Mr. Zhang does not look convinced. He glances at his
bodyguards and the exit.

Freeze time. John stands. No one else is moving at first,
then two of the restaurant's other patrons stand. They are
GERALD, a middle-aged man and CHARLIE, a much younger man.
They all, but mainly Charlie and John, pace around and
closely inspect Mr. Zhang's face and body as they talk.

CHARLIE

He's not going for it.

JOHN

Not yet. He's nibbling. We can do
it, the jury's still out on this
one. We should do a teaser. That's
a classic. That's when we do a
small deal to show we can be
trusted, to get him to give up more
money the second time-

CHARLIE

I know what a teaser is, I'm not a
rookie. That's a hack move anyway.
He'll see that coming. He's from
China, they invented conning.

EMILY

I don't know, a teaser seems like a
good idea.

GERALD

If I told you all my real name,
would you tell me yours?

(they are all startled by
the change in topic)

I've been thinking... We said these
damn dinars would be our retirement
money, that we'd be done. Done with

what? Done with life? Is this it?

(pause)

I don't want to retire with no one to know my real name. I had a lifetime of experiences but none of it was me, it was a series of fake names. I've done nothing. My real name is a fart's shadow, and...

CHARLIE

What, now? You're getting senile, old-timer. We're literally in the middle of conning this fuckbelt.

EMILY

I'll tell you, Gerald. I do think the same way sometimes. I'm nervous about retiring. This isn't a job, it's a lifestyle. It's not going to be easy to quit.

JOHN

Oh come on, can we stay on topic? I used to get babysat a lot by this family that owned a Chinese restaurant, I hung out in the kitchen, and I learned-

GERALD

Are we friends?

JOHN

What?

GERALD

Are we friends, Paul? Would you say you're my friend?

JOHN

Please, Gerald, call me *Faraq*. *Paul* is not my real name. Being grifters means we don't have to give our real names.

GERALD

They used to say knowing a demon's name gave you ultimate power over it. But you're not a demon, *Faraq*, you don't have anything to lose. It just feels that way. Tell me what name you were born with.

JOHN

Garbage.

GERALD

It's not garbage! It's an important question. Names matter. Everything I say or do is a lie because I'm doing it under an assumed name.

JOHN

You're a con artist. You were never going to lead a normal life. You can't go by your real name because then everybody would know who you are - Nevermind, you know all the reasons.

GERALD

Yes, I do.

CHARLIE

Real names suck, Gerald. We need to figure this guy out. We can talk about names after the con.

GERALD

Tell me your real name.

JOHN

We don't have time for this! This is our last con, Gerald, I'm not blowing it because you suddenly care about real names.

GERALD

I want to know that you're real. I want to know someone real before I'm too old to understand.

JOHN

Of course I'm real!
(pinches himself)
This is real, old man. Names aren't real. Names can change. Every time you move, your name can change, and you can be a whole new person. You don't have to be the same cuntknuckle everyone already decided was a cuntknuckle. When no one knows who you really are, you can be anyone you want to be. If you tell people your real name, you have to stick to being you.

EMILY

Gerald, let's just finish this con.

We can talk about it afterwards. If we're retiring, I want to retire with something real too.

JOHN

Okay, let's save all this nonsense about telling the truth for later, or never.

INT. TRAIN - DAY - 2008

Gerald, Charlie, Emily and John are on a train with Mr. Zhang and a BODYGUARD. Mr. Zhang checks his cell phone, then exchanges worried glances with his bodyguard. Emily pretends to be very drunk and trying to seduce the bodyguard, while John pretends to be aloof and arrogant towards her.

ZHANG

I wasn't born yesterday, as they say in this country. So don't think I'm handing over the briefcase until I get the call.

JOHN

I wouldn't dream of it. In my culture, payment is only expected when the job is done, and done correctly. You can trust me. My family is royalty. Without our good name, we would be nothing more than common trash.

(Emily scoffs)

This is an opportunity for me as much as for you. I know very well that one must seize any opportunity to prove one's worth, to take advantage of the situations that you are in while you can. For me, that advantage is proving to you that I am trustworthy. You are my people's gateway to China.

(pause)

You will receive the call. The wheels of bureaucracy turn very slowly indeed, even with prodding from myself.

EMILY

Everything in Kuwait moves very slowly.

(she makes googly eyes at the bodyguard; John looks at him menacingly)

Aren't you a big boy?

JOHN

Don't act like an American.

EMILY

Don't treat me like your Arab cow!

JOHN

(seemingly about to
strike her, then stops)
You are a shameful slut. Your
father is in hell weeping at the
sight of your worn-out vagina. And
you drink too much.

Mr. Zhang fidgets and looks away. His Bodyguard pretends not to notice the argument. They exchange awkward glances with each other, then look at Charlie and Gerald who roll their eyes as though this happens a lot.

EMILY

You said *too much* when you meant
too little, sweetheart. Your
English is poor, and your dick
smells like a pig's asshole.

(pause)

Marrying you was the dumbest thing
I've ever done.

(to Mr. Zhang)

Never marry an Arab man. They rape
maids like it's going out of style.

(to the Bodyguard)

I'm feeling a little unsteady,
would you carry me to the bar?

BODYGUARD

(she tries to jump into
his arms)

I think you've had enough-

JOHN

(stands up)

Do not touch my wife! I shall not
allow you to besmirch my name, you
dungface fuck-

BODYGUARD

Don't you come at me, you terrorist
shit! Yo' bitch-ass wife is
throwin' her nasty pussy at me-

Gerald and Charlie unobtrusively switch Mr. Zhang's
briefcase with another one.

ZHANG

Quiet!

(stands up, grabs the
briefcase)

You are attracting too much
attention!

(pause, scared, bows
awkwardly)

I'm sorry, Sheikh. It is just vital
that we remain unobtrusive.

JOHN

You are correct, of course.

(simmeringly angry,
glares at Emily)

My people will call shortly. You
will have your permit.

INT. TRAIN - LATER

The train lurches and then begins to rapidly slow down.
Everyone falls silent. Lights flicker then come back on.

CONDUCTOR (O.S.)

(loudspeaker)

I apologize, ladies and gentleman,
there's a stopped vehicle on the
track ahead. It'll be only a few
moments.

ZHANG

That's odd.

(grabs the briefcase)

I don't like that. That's not
supposed to happen.

They all go out into the hallway. Other PASSENGERS are
already there, crowding out to see what's happening. Mr.
Zhang and his Bodyguard find their way to a window. A car
has stopped on a junction with the track, and police cars
are there.

Only one GIRL notices Gerald, Charlie, Emily and John jump
out of the train in the other direction. John helps Gerald
down with the briefcase. Emily stops to wave at the Girl,
who looks like a young Emily. They run into the woods.

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Gerald, Charlie, Emily and John hurry through the woods with
the briefcase. They are serious, but first Charlie, then
John, then Emily smile before they arrive at a road. A car

is parked there. They get in, John driving, and head off.

JOHN

Remember the cover story if we get pulled over is that we're a family, and we got lost leaving our friend Wilma's house.

CHARLIE

What do we need a cover story for that? It doesn't matter, Zhang can't go to the police-

JOHN

It's just always good to have a clear idea what identity you're using in any given moment.

GERALD

We are a family, of sorts. It's not even a lie exactly.

JOHN

Don't start this again.

GERALD

I'm just suggesting we take this money and, rather than retire separately, we all move in together.

EMILY

It's not a bad idea. We could pretend to be a real family. Single dad, two brothers and a sister. If we did something gimmicky like buy a dude ranch, it'd be a sitcom.

CHARLIE

(scoffs)

You folks feel free to do that. I've been trying to get away from families my whole life.

GERALD

You know, Charlie, when I was younger, I ran away from my family too. I started a dozen families and ran away from them all. I'm not sorry I did it, but I'm sorry I didn't become the kind of person who would feel sorry. You three are still young yet. There's still time to change. I don't know if there's

time for me.

JOHN

Gerald... Can we not talk about this now?

GERALD

You're always putting it off. You didn't want to do it before the con. You didn't want to do it during the con. Now you don't want to do it after the con? If you don't want to do it, just say so.

JOHN

I don't want to have this conversation. My answer to every conceivable questions is 'no'.

CHARLIE

I've never told the truth and I'm not gonna start now. Let me just take my share and I'll go.

GERALD

Emily? What about you? We can settle down somewhere, get new lives, run a small-time scam for spending cash now and then.

EMILY

(takes out a piece of paper, writes on it; Gerald does the same)

I think somewhere in there the real Emily -- let's just call her *Emily* for now -- the real Emily is still there. I thought she didn't want to ever tell the truth again...

JOHN

Now you want to settle down? Remember when we met? You said you didn't want a friend or a lover, just an ally and a fuckbuddy.

EMILY

People change. Most people, anyway, not you. Even though you're someone new every week, you never change. I want a friend now. Sorry you don't count, Faraq. I've spent a lot of time with you, but we're not friends. When we were fortune-

tellers together, I enjoyed spending time with Tuesday Jones. I wished he was you. But then I remembered that it was made up. There was nothing under it all; you're lies all the way down. I'm scared that that's me too. I want there to live something real with someone real, even if that makes us less safe.

(takes a deep breath, she and Gerald exchange the slips of paper)

Here, my real name.

They read each other's names and smile. John and Charlie make eye contact in the rearview mirror. Emily whispers in Gerald's ear, then he whispers back.

GERALD

No one's called me my real name in decades... Not entirely true. I went by my real name in a con once. Just the first name. It was weird, it was like a fake name, but not. It was a fake name that was accidentally real. It felt even faker than a fake name.

(pause)

Thanks.

John pulls into a motel parking lot.

JOHN

If you guys can put the truth-gasm on hold for a minute, we gotta check in to the motel. Hang on, I'm gonna be black.

He pauses to concentrate, then gets out of the car.

CHARLIE

Wait, did you say you're gonna be *back* or you're gonna be *black*?

JOHN

Black. But this nigga be back too.
(as he moonwalks away)

Why you gotta make the black man go in and pay for the room, huh? You racist honky motherfuckers!

INT. MOTEL ROOM - LATER

John, Charlie, Gerald and Emily are in a crappy motel room. They each have personal effects, plus the briefcase full of cash. John snaps it shut and sucks his teeth, which makes Emily frown.

JOHN

Yo, we gotta get in disguise. Who got the bathroom first? I'm treatin' my hair, it might be awhile.

CHARLIE

It's so cool you can play different races. I wish I could do that. What are you really? It's probably something weird, right? Like Turkish or whatever.

JOHN

That's right, it's whatevuh, yung'un.

CHARLIE

Why do you switch sometimes, like now, just for, what? For fun?

JOHN

To prove that I can. You can't be safe till you in control of yo' own identity, Charlie. That's the problem wit' whiteboys, you don't know how to reinvent yaself.

He sucks on his teeth like an arrogant thug. Gerald and Emily make subtle eye contact and nod at each other.

EMILY

John, I hate that sound. Can you be a less annoying kind of black guy?

JOHN

I be whatever kinda black guy you want, girl.

(pause, as he goes into the bathroom, switching to a Mexican accent)

But anyway, just for you, *mamacita*, I think I'll go Latino. You guys like Mexicans or Puerto Ricans better?

GERALD

That makes me hungry, I'll see if this town has a decent Mexican restaurant.

(picks up the phone,
startled)

Oh, I was just about to dial down there. I had a question for you.

EMILY

(whispers to Charlie)

I'm going to see if there's a tampon machine downstairs.

CHARLIE

Oh, okay.

She leaves. The sink turns on in the bathroom. Before Emily goes, she pauses, takes in the sunset, turns around and grabs her purse. Charlie is trying to seem nonplussed about menstruation, so he doesn't look and does not notice her take the briefcase too.

GERALD

(into the phone)

Oh dear, don't worry, darling, I'll be right down.

(hangs up)

They said they didn't realize four of us were going to share the room. There's a local ordinance against that, this room can only have three adults max. I'll just go pay for a second room.

He leaves. Charlie hops up onto a bed. He smiles and scoffs to himself.

CHARLIE

Like I'm gonna retire just to start a family with some old coot and-

He realizes the briefcase is gone.

CHARLIE

Oh shit! Hey Paul! Or Faraq! Or whatever, you! Hey!

Charlie runs out of the hotel room just in time to see Gerald and Emily driving away in a car (not the one they came in). Charlie throws his hands up.

John comes out of the bathroom naked, his chest half-shaved. He now has a thick Latin accent.

CHARLIE
They're gone. Fucking shit!

JOHN
You fuckin' cabron, why'd you let
'em leave?

CHARLIE
(sighs)
Sorry, it's... I'm an idiot.
(pause, sees John's half-
shaved chest)
Why were you shaving your chest?

JOHN
I was gonna be a smooth Latin lover
for Emily, *esé*. I had all the best
lines, I was gonna mix up my *Inglés*
in the most charming way. Make her
forget about real names.
(pause)
I can't believe you let them get
away with our money, *pinche gringo*.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY - 2011

John comes home with a few bags of groceries, including ice
cream and trash bags. He sees Sam fidgeting alone.

JOHN
Sam, where's your mom? I got the
ice cream for your birthday-
(beat)
Oh shit! She's gone, isn't she?

Sam sobs. He runs to hug John, who is dismayed.

SAM
She said I'd be better with you. I
think she's drinking again.

JOHN
How did I not see this coming?

SAM
She said she'll find me when she's
ready.

JOHN
So I'm just supposed to take care
of you until then? No offense, but
your mom is a fucking idiot.

There is a KNOCK at the door. John shushes Sam, then tiptoes to check the peephole.

ASIAN MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Delivery! I need a signature, sir.

John runs into the kitchen again, picks up Sam and runs for the fire escape.

JOHN
Climb on my back.

SAM
Why? What's happening?

Sam gets on John's back as he goes out the fire escape. John carries him down to the alley.

JOHN
Those men are yakuza.

SAM
What's that mean?

JOHN
No time to explain. They're bad men, and they're here to kill me. And you, if they find you with me.

John stops at a dumpster. He can hear Japanese shouting from his apartment. He urges Sam into the dumpster, and then joins him.

SAM
Ew, this is gross! Smells like old coffee and farts in here.

JOHN
Keep down. Don't talk.

John peers through the dumpster's opening as he sees a few JAPANESE MEN come running down the fire escape, looking for him. He is seen, and John panics.

JOHN
(like a black bum)
Yo, you Chinese motherfuckers get outta here! I's tryin-a smoke some goddamn crack! That honky went the other way!

The yakuza are satisfied that he is not the person they are looking for. They run the other direction, guns drawn.

John and Sam are scared at first, but they stay there and settle down in the garbage.

JOHN

Well, happy birthday, Sam.

SAM

Will you teach me how to be a con artist?

JOHN

I guess I don't have much choice. I'm not gonna put you in the system.

SAM

What system?

JOHN

Any of them. I don't have anything to teach you except grifting.

SAM

That's what I wanna learn. I wanna be a grifter.

JOHN

No you don't.

SAM

Why not? I thought you liked it.

JOHN

I love it. I get a thrill every time someone falls for something I say. I feel powerful, like I can control the world. And I don't care about not having a family.

SAM

You do have a family.

JOHN

No, remember, I was abandoned-
(realizes Sam meant himself)

Oh. Yeah, I guess... You. I guess I'm your... Well, let's just say, 'stepfather'. De facto, nonconsenting stepfather.

SAM

Does this mean I don't have to go to school?

INT. STORE - WEEKS LATER - 2011

John and Sam head towards the door of a bookstore, with a plastic shopping bag. Inside is an introductory textbook to economics. They walk through the mall to an outside door.

SAM

I don't get what economics has to do with conning people out of money.

JOHN

You need to be able to pass yourself off as anything. Today we're gonna learn how to pretend to have beliefs. You'll be a liberal, a conservative, an anarchist, a libertarian.

SAM

This is worse than school.

JOHN

It's better than school because I won't get mad if you lie. To be fair, it's worse because it's all homework. It's a trade-off.

SAM

It's still stupid. I'm a Democrat.

JOHN

You're twelve. And politics isn't really the same as economics.

SAM

My mom's a Democrat.

JOHN

It's not genetic. Politics is for shitmunchers, Sam. Don't munch shit.

(pause)

I don't give a farting fuck what you actually believe about economics. That is not what we're gonna be talking about. I'm gonna teach you how to make people think you know about economics. That does mean you have to learn a little bit though. You're gonna have to learn a little bit about everything. You're gonna learn how to sound like you know what you're

talking about in history, in physics, in theology, and we're gonna get real specific on one thing, so you can pretend to be some kinda nerd. Like me, I know a buttload about porpoises, so I could pretend I'm a biologist who specializes in porpoises. I won't teach you that one, we'll do something else, that way I'll learn that too. Maybe hummingbirds?

(Sam rolls his eyes)

Oh you probably wanna do something cool like lions or tigers right?

They step out of the store into the parking lot.

SAM

Wolverines! They're the coolest animal, they're badass!

JOHN

Yeah, I guess we can do that. But we start with economics.

SAM

Can I learn how to count cards?

JOHN

You can't count cards until you know math. Are you good at math?

SAM

Well... Not great.

JOHN

Then maybe counting cards isn't for you. Maybe conning isn't for you, I don't know. Not everyone can do it, probably.

SAM

Oh. Sorry.

JOHN

You gotta have focus. We need to do one thing at a time, Sam. We're doing economics today. I know it's hard. But you'll get it. Don't stress out. Remember you don't have to learn it, you just have to pretend you did. That's all it takes to manipulate people. If you

have the right kind of cultural fluency, you can bullshit your way anywhere.

(pause)

Can I tell you something? You have to keep it a secret.

(pause)

Remember when I said I was an abandoned baby? I lied about where it happened, it wasn't a police station. It was a dumpster. I was a dumpster baby. My mom threw me in a dumpster. I was found by a homeless guy named Ratfucker. He was the first person I had to manipulate. If I didn't cry at the right moment, I would have died there in the dumpster.

(John's voice breaks as he gets in the car. Sam is awkward at first, then goes to hug John.)

Sorry. I've never said that before.

SAM

There, there, little guy. Things are gonna get better. You're not alone. I'll tell you a secret too. Sam Varner is not my real name.

JOHN

I know, I did research on your mom. I know your real name. But I'd rather not use it. Real names are for losers and IRS agents.

INT. JUDGE'S CHAMBERS - DAY - 2013

A silver-haired male JUDGE enters his chambers, wherein sits John in the guise of a political flunky who is flamboyantly gay. John is (pretending to be) on his cell phone. The Judge is very homophobic, so he responds increasingly badly as John emphasizes his apparent gayness.

JUDGE

(slow to realize John is on his phone)

Mr. Swanson, so nice to meet you. I didn't realize Mayor Jenkins had hired a chief of staff already. So soon before the election...

JOHN

(nods, on his phone)
 I gotta go, sweetcock. Talking to
 my personal psychic.
 (hangs up, then to the
 judge)
 Sorry, silverpie. I didn't want to
 say I was meeting with you. We
 shouldn't be leaving records of
 our little rendezvous.
 (gives him a cigar)
 Cigar?

JUDGE

(lights the cigar)
 I see. You don't want anyone to
 know about this? Should I have my
 lawyer present?

John lights his own cigar and holds it phallically in his
 mouth, annoying the Judge with obscene gesturing.

JOHN

Oh you wouldn't want that. Let me
 be frank. I see a role for you in
 the upcoming Governor Jenkins
 administration. This isn't an
 offer of anything, it's just an
 observation -- our cabinet
 discussions have a you-shaped hole
 right about in the Attorney-
 General slot. Is that a hole you
 can see yourself filling?

JUDGE

Not if you word it like that. I
 assume Jenkins will want me to
 endorse him?

JOHN

Indeed. You're a well-respected
 figure in party politics, and an
 all-around gentleman-hottie. 9/10
 in the over-50, white, non-biker
 bracket.

JUDGE

You wouldn't show up here without
 calling beforehand if all Jenkins
 wants is an endorsement. We're in
 the same party. We both know I was
 gonna endorse him eventually.

JOHN

Of course. The mayor's wife wished for me to discuss something with you. There's a young man in your juvenile docket. He was arrested for commercial fraud under the name *Sam Varner*.

JUDGE

A juvenile commercial fraudster? Sounds interesting. You know I have a reputation as a tough judge, right? I can't cut one kid some obvious slack.

JOHN

That's why the Mayor had me pull some strings to get him on your docket. He's crossed the wrong folks. I'm here to be sure he doesn't bother the important people ever again. He needs to know just what worthless garbage he really is. Know that what happens in court-

JUDGE

I'm sorry, you're here to make sure I throw the book at a juvenile?

(pause)

That is mind-bogglingly inappropriate. Are you bullshitting me? You want me to, what, send him to adult court? Ruin his life because of whatever petty beef the fucking Mayor has with a goddamn child?

JOHN

He's not a sympathetic child, once you know-

JUDGE

I don't want to know. If he's on that shitweasel Jenkins' bad side, he must be a pretty good kid. Maybe I'll find a way to go easy on him. You can tell Jenkins his idiocy has backfired yet again. He's the kind of bilgewater bumpkin that's gonna lose this state for the party, and I'm sorry, I must have forgot to

mention, get the fuck out of my office, you soulless political goon! Cocksipping faggots like you are the reason I'm a homophobe.

JOHN

(embarrassed)

Sorry, sir, pretend I wasn't here. I didn't say anything.

He ducks out, smiling when the Judge can't see him.

INT. BETTY'S APARTMENT/HALLWAY - DAY - 2016

Betty sobs. John paces and talks to her from the hallway.

JOHN

So... obviously you've figured out that thing, the one thing I said I wouldn't lie to you about. Which is funny, because I always lie about it to everyone else. Almost everyone.

(pause)

Can you say it? Do I have to say it? Will you let me in there to say it?

(very threatening urban thug accent)

You say it, you cowardly bitch! Tell the goddamn truth! Who am I?! Lemme in there! Look me in the eye and tell me I belong in the trash!

(back to a reassuring tone)

Sorry. That was Rashad. He has a temper, that's what makes him a good tool to scare people. I won't let him hurt you.

(pause)

It was a lot easier to find you than I thought it'd be. I figured you were probably a high school student nearby. I just tracked down a few classmates and asked questions, I got a couple possible names. I got your DNA from a coffee cup you threw away. You were the fourth woman whose DNA I tested, but I knew it was you as soon as I saw you. I could tell. You had a dead soul, and you look like me.

(pause)

I've always been too rational to think in terms of souls or auras or any of that nonsense. But you... I could see your dead soul, hanging off you like a fart that will never waft away.

(pause)

Maybe I could tell because I feel like that too. Both our souls died when you threw me away, Betty.

(pause)

Ratfucker told the police my face was clean. There was blood all over, but you wiped my face off. The grifter in me, the person who reads every action for signs of what's in a mark's heart, that guy says that means you cared for a second or two. Was there something wrong with me? Is that why you threw me away? You cared for a second, you wiped my face off, and then you threw me away. Did you see in my eyes that I was going to be like this?

(pause)

There were coffee grounds on my face, Ratfucker said. He didn't clean me off, he just gave me to the firemen.

Betty lets out a loud, tortured SOB.

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - 1987 - DAY

John (6yro) is registering for first grade with his FOSTER FATHER, a portly middle-aged man in a wheelchair. They are talking over a desk with an officious SECRETARY.

FOSTER FATHER 2

I need to register John for classes.

SECRETARY

Starting first grade near the end of the year is tough-

INT. CLASSROOM - 1987 - DAY

John (6yro) walks into his seat in another new classroom. TEACHER 1 is a kind-looking white woman.

TEACHER 1
 -for new children to make friends,
 so please everyone give a warm
 Central Heights Elementary welcome
 to Jonathan-

INT. AUDITORIUM - 1988

John (7yro) speaks as part of a Thanksgiving presentation with his classmates. Their parents are there, including one white DRUNK FATHER.

JOHN
 -Trumbull of Connecticut-

DRUNK FATHER
 (whispering to his WIFE,
 but loud enough that
 others can hear)
 That was another one of his lines!
 (to TEACHER 7)
 You took away half my boy's lines
 to give 'em to some new boy, this
 Mexican who prolly isn't even
 legal-

TEACHER 7
 He's not Mexican, sir! I... think.
 Please keep it down! His name is
 Johnny. Or Jonathan. Or no,
 Johnny. I had to give him a part
 in the show, he's the new boy.

INT. CLASSROOM - 1989 - DAY

John (still 8yro) walks into another new classroom. TEACHER 2 is a young black woman.

TEACHER 2
 I'm sorry, John, not Jonathan,
 isn't that right?

JOHN
 Yeah.

TEACHER 2
 Welcome to Pine Springs-

INT. CLASSROOM - 1990 - DAY

John (9 yro) settles into a seat in another new classroom,

next to a GIRL; this is an entirely white classroom.
TEACHER 3 is a jolly old white man.

TEACHER 3
-Elementary School. We're glad to
have you Jona-
(checks his paperwork)
John. It's good to have new faces.

GIRL
(whispering)
Hey, new boy, are you mulatto?

INT. CLASSROOM - 1990

John (9yro) in another new classroom. TEACHER 4 is an old white lady.

TEACHER 4
Our new boy-

INT. CLASSROOM - 1991

John (10yro) is in another new classroom. TEACHER 5 is a middle-aged black woman.

TEACHER 5
-new boy-

INT. PLAYGROUND - 1991

John (10yro) watches kids playing in a playground. Three black BULLIES around his age approach him.

BULLY 1
Hey, new boy, punk-ass white-boi,
c'mere so I can give ya-

INT. CLASSROOM - 1992

John (11yro) is in another new, mainly Latino classroom. TEACHER 6 is a Latin woman with a thick accent.

TEACHER 6
-a friendly welcome to our new
boy, John. Please tell us about
yourself, John.

JOHN
No.

TEACHER 6

Why not?

LATINO KID

(whispering to others)

Mira al pequeño pinche gringo!

JOHN

It doesn't matter.

INT. OFFICE - 1993

John (12yro) sits bored in front of a GUIDANCE COUNSELOR.
John is wearing a fedora and a colorful suit.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

It matters to me. It's okay to feel nervous. It's nerve-wracking being the new kid. It's okay to be anxious about fitting in.

JOHN

I've never not been the new kid. It doesn't make me anxious. Being in the same place makes me anxious. I don't need to fit in.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

That must be tough for you. Where are you living now?

JOHN

The homeless shelter on Lennox.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

What?

JOHN

I'm between foster homes. My last foster mom got arrested for second-degree menacing an abortion lady nineteen times. My new family will be one that lives around here, they just need to boot out their last foster kid when he turns eighteen. But that's what they said last time too and it fell through.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

I bet you just wanna settle down.

JOHN

No.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

(scrutinizes John)

You dress with class, that's for sure. The kids around here all dress in tee shirts and jeans. What's with your getup?

JOHN

Attention. I dress outlandishly because otherwise everyone will forget about me.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

Oh. That's surprisingly candid of you, Jonathan.

JOHN

Can I go now? I don't-

INT. APARTMENT - DAY - 1999

John (18yro) talks to his aging male SOCIAL WORKER.

JOHN

-care about college.

SOCIAL WORKER

Why not?

JOHN

I got other stuff to do.

(pause)

Did you look up what I asked for?

(sees he doesn't

remember; John sighs)

Who named me?

SOCIAL WORKER

Oh yes, I'm sorry, I did look, your file doesn't say. It was probably whoever your first social worker was. That person wasn't named either.

JOHN

Okay. Can I go?

SOCIAL WORKER

We have to come up with an age-out plan, Jonathan - er, John I mean,

I apologize-

JOHN

Jonathan's fine. It doesn't matter anymore.

SOCIAL WORKER

Okay, so we need an age-out plan-

JOHN

What's this we bullshit? I've got a plan. You're not aging out of anything except the last "productive" years of your life.

SOCIAL WORKER

Don't be difficult. I have a form I have to fill out. It's policy.

JOHN

Just put down *supervillain*.

SOCIAL WORKER

You want to be a supervillain?

JOHN

I already am.

EXT. STREET - DAY - 2015

John walks down a crowded street, trying out different gaits -- a pimp lean, a limp, a flamboyant flounce.

Graphic overlays appear over the people he passes by. First just one or two, words pointing out objective details like *faded wedding ring tan line suggesting recent separation and military tattoo suggesting Navy background*.

John continues, and he smiles. The graphic overlays become more numerous, popping up on everyone he sees. They are all potential marks. The notations become more subjective: *scared of black people, be Rashad or must be the center of attention*. His movements become more terpsichorean, and he steals wallets, jewelry, etc as he goes by.

Then the street is empty. John is alone. His smile vanishes. A figure representing death appears, something like a Grim Reaper, and John dances a strident tango or waltz with it.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY - 1999

John (18yro) lays on a hospital bed with his abdomen

bandaged. He tries to get into a wheelchair, but he is in pain and a NURSE keeps talking to him.

NURSE

Make sure you take those antibiotics with food.

(pause)

You're only eighteen, your parents aren't picking you up? Do you have anyone at home?

JOHN

No, my parents are not helpful. You can send my mom the bill though. I'll take a cab, my car's probably been towed. Shit!

(sighs)

There's just my landlord waiting for me, trying to make me pay a hot water heater rental fee. That's bullshit, right? I think he knows it's my first apartment and he's taking advantage.

NURSE

Probably, sounds like bullshit. My dad honestly handles that stuff.

(pause)

An appendectomy is only minor surgery if you can recover with support. Do you have a friend or anyone to help you?

JOHN

(long pause)

Yeah. A friend. I have friends.

(getting up, in pain)

I can walk. See? I don't need anyone. I barely need the wheelchair.

NURSE

It's Thanksgiving tomorrow... Do you want to come to my mom's house? We always have tons of people over, and we can come around to get you-

JOHN

(eases into a wheelchair)

I'm not a lost puppy. Just give me the pills and let me go. Holidays are bullshit, your church is bullshit and hot water heater rental fees are bullshit.

Antibiotics and pain meds are real.
(wheels away)
Sorry, I'm not myself. Peace be
with you or *shalom aleichem* or-

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT - 2003

John engages in some post-coital spooning with a pretty BLACK WOMAN. He pretends to be a rough ex-Marine, complete with a (fake) tattoo of his battalion on his bicep.

JOHN

It means *dungface fuck* in Arabic, it's the only Arabic I could remember. He looked like he would have ripped my cock off if I wasn't pointing a gun at him, but he gave back the camel.

BLACK WOMAN

No way!

JOHN

It was a crazy war, I tell you.

BLACK WOMAN

You must have made some good friends in your unit.
(she kisses him)
You were close to them, my little vanilla bear.

JOHN

Not really, babe, I ain't like that. We were friendly. But I don't keep in touch with them. I don't need them, don't want them.

BLACK WOMAN

Oh, it wasn't like a movie with friendships forged under fire?

JOHN

No. Or maybe it was, and it was just me who never fit in. I was in the fire but not the forge. They were good guys, better than me.

BLACK WOMAN

That true or are you being humble?

JOHN

It's definitely true. It doesn't

matter, I'm not really a "having-friends" kind of guy. I'd rather be alone. Besides, most of them are a mess, I'd be picking them up at the bus station in the middle of the night a lot more often than they'd be picking me up. They-

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - 2013

John spoons with a different woman, an attractive BLONDE. John is now pretending to be a very rough black thug.

JOHN

-was never my friends. They all stab you in the back as soon as look at you. I ain't have a crew.

BLONDE

Oh my god, you're totally the only black guy I ever dated who didn't have a bunch of asshole friends holding him back.

JOHN

Hell yeah! I ain't never rely on some buncha niggas from my 'hood to back me up.

(long pause)

Maybe I should've. A lotta things would've gone down different. I think it's too late for me now.

(pause)

But I made my choices.

BLONDE

(seductive)

I'm better than a friend.

(John kisses her)

You're so tight-lipped about yourself, Rashad.

JOHN

I-

EXT. PORCH - DAY - 2016

John cuddles on a porch swing with a PRETTY GIRL. John is pretending to be Samoan, with a (fake) tribal tattoo and wearing a sarong around his waist.

JOHN

-can stomach silence. I do not like to say things that do not need to be said. But I will not stop you from asking me questions.

PRETTY GIRL

What are your friends like?

JOHN

I have none. I do not value friendship. I have chosen the pursuit of solitude.

PRETTY GIRL

You are an enigma. You never talk about yourself from before we met, Joseph Kakaloki. Tell me something I don't know about you.

JOHN

My mother rejected me. She was an alcoholic. She threw me in a ditch by a taro farm when I was a few minutes old.

PRETTY GIRL

Oh, wow. That's terrible.

JOHN

It doesn't matter. I lived.

(pause)

I hate her. When I was seven, someone told me about it. I shrugged it off then. I didn't care where she abandoned me. But the older I get... I hate her.

PRETTY GIRL

That's understandable.

JOHN

That's the only emotion I have. I still feel like I'm in that ditch. I can smell the mud. It smells like coffee and garbage. I think the smell seeped into my skin. Perhaps that is why everyone comes to dislike me, or me them. Or maybe it is just me. Maybe she knew what I would be like, and that is why she threw me away.

(pause)

I want to track her down and drown

her in day-old coffee.
 (long pause)
 But that would offend the spirits
 of my ancestors. Or whatever.
 (gets up, almost knocks
 her over)
 I'm leaving.

PRETTY GIRL
 What? Where are you going? You
 don't smell like mud.

JOHN
 (as he gets in his car)
 I don't wanna be Samoan anymore.

PRETTY GIRL
 (shocked; he drives off)
 That's... not my fault.

INT. HOME - DAY - 1988

An older BLACK WOMAN walks into her living room, where John
 is watching cartoons on the TV.

BLACK WOMAN
 Who the fuck are you?

JOHN
 (glares at her)
 I'm John. Who the fuck are you?

BLACK WOMAN
 I live here, so you best explain
 yaself-

JOHN
 You're babysitting me.

BLACK WOMAN
 You the new foster boy from next
 door?
 (rants as she walks away)
 Just dropping off some whiteboy
 without even waking me up first-

JOHN
 I'm not white.

BLACK WOMAN
 What?

JOHN
 (switches accent)
 I ain't white.
 (pause)
 I ain't some suck-ass cracker, so
 don't treat me like one.

BLACK WOMAN
 (unsure if she believes
 him)
 You look white.

JOHN
 Bitch, shut ya face. I look white
 on account of my mama got raped by
 some white man, that's all. So
 don't you dare call me white!

BLACK WOMAN
 (flustered)
 First of all, you better check your
 tone-
 (pause)
 Wait... You're the new boy... Your
 mama threw you away, right? I mean,
 sorry... She abandoned you. In a...
 (pause)
 I know you was lying, boy. You
 don't know if you're white or not.
 You don't know ya mama or ya daddy.

JOHN
 How do you know that?

BLACK WOMAN
 Your foster mama told me about you,
 about you being... You know... Do
 you not know? Ask your social
 worker where they found you. You
 should know the truth but it ain't
 on me to tell you.
 (pause, awkward)
 Sorry. It's okay that you're white,
 or mixed or whatever. You ain't
 gotta lie about that to me.
 (pause, walks away)
 God loves you just the same, boy.
 You ain't trash, remember that.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - 1988

John (7yro), fully-clothed, including shoes, lays in bed in
 a foster home. He stares at his trash bag of belongings on

the floor. A black PORTLY FATHER comes to the doorway.

PORTLY FATHER

What are you doing? You're supposed to be ready for bed.

JOHN

I am ready. I'm in bed.

PORTLY FATHER

John... I don't want to have this discussion again. And you have to unpack.

JOHN

No.

PORTLY FATHER

You may not sleep in your shoes and pants. It's bad for the mattress.

JOHN

That's bullshit.

PORTLY FATHER

Language!

(pause)

You promised you wouldn't run away any more.

JOHN

I'll leave whenever I want.

PORTLY FATHER

In this home, we stand by our word and we-

JOHN

I'm not part of this home.

PORTLY FATHER

Yes you are. How do you think this makes me feel, John? I've treated you right! And you're just waiting for an opportunity to bolt. Where do you go anyway? You can't sleep on the street.

JOHN

I got a place, it's outside but it's safe. I can always go there no matter where they send me and you can't stop me.

PORTLY FATHER

You better believe I'll stop you.
You're not sleeping in your
clothes again. I'll rip them off
if I have to. I bought you nice
pajamas, you have to wear them.

(advances, then picks up
a trash bag of stuff)

And you have to unpack!

He starts to dump out John's things, but John SCREAMS. He attacks and kicks Portly Father in the shins. He pulls a knife he had hidden in his mattress.

JOHN

(crying, panicked)

Get off my stuff! I'll stab your
face off, bitch!

Portly Father quickly disarms him; he is shocked by John's emotional reaction and the knife.

PORTLY FATHER

You crazy shit! I've had it with
you, John. That's it! I'm calling
CPS. You pulled a knife on me! I
won't put up with you anymore!

INT. STORE - DAY - 2012

John and Sam walk through a big box store. A BLACK MAN bumps into John.

BLACK MAN

My fault, 'scuze me, my brotha.

SAM

Why'd he think you were black?

JOHN

People see what they expect to
see. He probably comes from a
black neighborhood. He's used to
seeing black people.

SAM

I heard you talking black to that
cashier at the hardware store.

JOHN

So?

SAM

It wasn't part of a con or anything. You were just doing it, because she was black.

JOHN

That's called code-switching. I talk black to black people, white to white people, unless I have a reason to do otherwise.

SAM

So do you talk white to me because I'm white? Or is that how you really talk? Which one is real?

JOHN

Neither. Kids learn how to talk from their families. I had a bunch of those, so I learned a bunch of ways to talk. None of them are less real than any other. I have no native dialect.

SAM

I can't do that. I'm not good at accents. I can't pass for black anyway.

JOHN

No, but we'll work on accents soon. You can pass as redneck, cockney, Boston, Scottish, Aussie, all the whities, the whole honky spectrum. But you still need to work on your lies. I'm good because my whole life is lying. It's my bread and butter. No, more than that, it's my wheat, water and cow.

(pause)

You're getting there. You have to learn to tailor your lie to the person hearing it. It has to be specific to you and specific to the situation.

(A KID and his SINGLE DAD squeeze past John and Sam.)

Let's try something.

(points to Single Dad)

What do you think about him? If you had to come up with a lie for him, what would it be?

John leads Sam in following the Single Dad at a distance.

SAM
Like what kind of lie?

JOHN
Doesn't matter, whatever. Let's say you want to get him to invite you to stay with him for awhile. How would you do it?

SAM
Why can't you just make friends with him?

JOHN
That takes too long. He'll probably be gone by then. Or you will be.

SAM
Gone where?

JOHN
I dunno, wherever. He'll have moved away, or gotten mad at you or something.

SAM
He won't get mad at you if you aren't lying and manipulating him, and if he moves away, you can call him. If he moves away, you can't stay with him anyway, because he doesn't live around here.

JOHN
You're missing the point of the exercise.

SAM
And if you have friends, you don't need to manipulate strangers. You can just live with your friends. You don't have to be alone all the time, Billy. We don't have to be alone all the time.

EXT. STREET - DAY - 2007

John is dressed as an African mystic, standing behind Emily, dressed as a Gypsy (Romani) fortune-teller. A MAN

has his palm read by Emily as crowds stream by.

EMILY

Yes, I see from this line here that
you suffer from loneliness. You
feel that no one knows your soul.

MAN

I've always felt that way!
(pause)
Honestly I don't believe in
psychics and Gypsies and stuff.
(glances at John)
Or, uh, African, uh... dudes.

JOHN

I am a sorcerer. I traffic in-

Delaney -- much older now -- walks past on the street. He
stops and looks at John, who doesn't notice him. Then he
runs to the stand and punches John in the face.

DELANEY

You fucking piece of shit, Arthur!
You cheated me out of-

JOHN

You hit me, sir? I don't know you,
but I will punch you also and with
a thousand times fury if I must.

DELANEY

Drop the fucking African act,
you're not even black-
(peers at John, unsure
if it's the same guy)
Your name is Arthur. Or I guess
that was a fake name, but you used
to go by that. You had an American
accent. You were white. You said
you were a pilot. We learned
French, and you cheated me.

JOHN

(to the Man)

I am sorry, perhaps you can
explain what he speaks of. I am
mixed race. My father was white. I
do not claim to be purely black. I
do not understand America.

MAN

There's nothing I can say that
won't make me look racist.

EMILY

Sir, perhaps you have the wrong man, he is not named Arthur-

DELANEY

(much less confident)

You are... What's your name?

JOHN

Thursday Jones. I am mixed-race Ghanaian. I did not think that was a problem in this country. I do not pretend to be black.

DELANEY

No, this is not a racial thing! I'm confused... You look just like him. Exactly. He's like the white version of you.

(pause)

He ruined my life when he took that money. Then Arthur vanished, tossing me away like garbage.

EMILY

Ah, but that could not be Tuesday. The spirits would not come to him so freely if he were not a man of sterling reputation.

DELANEY

I'm sorry, I guess it's not you. He's your white doppelgänger. If you ever meet him, punch him with a thousand times fury for me.

(pause)

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have hit you. I thought I had moved beyond revenge. I had come to accept that I can't do anything about what happened, that I just have to find a way to move forward. I made a decision that I deserve to be happy in the future, but that requires me to leave the past in the long ago. I guess one cold hard truth is that some pasts can't be outrun.

JOHN

You had better get away from me.

(glares at him as

Delaney walks away)

Dungface fuck!

MAN

That was so weird. Are you okay?

INT. FORTUNE-TELLING SHOP - DAY - 2014

John (pretending to be a Romani fortuneteller) gives a tarot reading to a FEMALE CLIENT. He flips over a card. It is the Hermit, upside-down. He clucks his teeth.

JOHN

You have long spoken in the dialect of loneliness. Even in a crowd, you are alone. Even with friends, you are alone.

FEMALE CLIENT

Oh my god, that's right. I've always felt that way.

(giggles, shivers)

I'm so glad I came here tonight. I never even thought about getting a tarot reading, but I got that coupon in the mail.

JOHN

(begins reading her palm)

Indeed. I used my art to find recipients. I divined the names of wthose women who most needed my help, and most possessed the open mind needed to accept it. That was you. I am glad you are here.

FEMALE CLIENT

Your coupon said you can help with specific issues, like romance? I got divorced four years ago. I just haven't been able to get back out there. I don't know how to meet people any more.

JOHN

How long were you married?

FEMALE CLIENT

Fourteen years. We met in high school but we didn't start dating until afterwards.

JOHN

Yes, I am sensing that your problems start there, as they so often do. My third eye beckons in

that direction, towards the past.
 There is something there...
 (gasps, sees something on
 her palm)
 Were you cursed?

FEMALE CLIENT
 (laughs)
 What? No.

JOHN
 Do not laugh. Someone has indeed
 cursed you. I can see it in your
 soul. That is what has beckoned me
 to your school time, your final
 year, I should expect. What year
 was that?

FEMALE CLIENT
 I graduated in 1981.

JOHN
 Yes. This curse has a female spirit
 to it. It was a woman. A young
 girl. Your own age, approximately,
 maybe a year or two off.

FEMALE CLIENT
 Why would she have cursed me?

JOHN
 You were popular, were you not?

FEMALE CLIENT
 (giggles)
 Well, I don't like to brag... I did
 okay in school.

JOHN
 You were popular. You must have
 been mean to this girl. That is
 what the spirits say. Or perhaps
 not you, but one of your friends.
 (pause)
 This girl, I'm sensing, would have
 been weird, shy, but not painfully
 shy, not like having panic attacks.
 She was bold enough to lie and get
 in trouble sometimes at school.

FEMALE CLIENT
 How do you know all this about her?

JOHN

Hush. Soothsayers like myself can peer into the soul of she who cast a curse. She was a thick girl. She may have lost weight, yes, a lot of weight. She was never small, but she lost weight suddenly in November of 1981.

FEMALE CLIENT

The spirits know that?

JOHN

A girl who was never all there, never quite with it. You could tell she wanted to fit in, but she didn't seem to have any idea how to do it. She was a pushover, you could talk her into anything. She started crying suddenly once or twice that year. Urgent bathroom visits.

FEMALE CLIENT

The spirits told you about her bathroom habits-?

(pause)

Oh my god, Betty Freemantle! I haven't thought of her in years. She did start crying for no reason, and she peed herself once, or that was what everyone said.

(pause)

She was always desperate to hang out with us. I feel bad now. You're right, she would do anything to fit in. My friend Stacy made her eat toenail clippings once. She thought she'd be popular. Then we rejected her.

(pause)

I feel bad that I hurt her so much she cursed me. I would apologize to her if I knew where she was.

JOHN

I think she may have other, graver sins on her soul. But be glad that you have become the kind of person who would feel bad about that.

(pauses)

I will cancel the curse. All I needed is her name. Names are power, ma'am. If you know someone's

real name, you know everything. You can go now.

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT - NIGHT - 2014

John (now a boisterous Southern black preacher) idles in the parking lot, trying to leave. A black CHURCH ELDER has caught him and speaks to him through the car window.

CHURCH ELDER

You don't look fine. You've seemed depressed lately, and then these accusations... I'm worried about you, Reverend. About this church.

JOHN

I'm fine, my brother. You, on the other hand, are on the brink of falling into the Prince of Lies' lonely abyss. That accountant is trying to steer you from the Lord's truth. The Lord wants you in Guatemala building that school. The Lord wants you working your heart out. If that accountant wants you poring over paperwork, he is doing the devil's bidding.

CHURCH ELDER

He said it's standard accounting procedure-

JOHN

Secular lies and nonsense! That is how you know he is of Satan. His falsehoods are legion, and will bring you nothing but pain and sorrow. The Lord's work brings you the glory of eternal truth.

(pause)

I will answer to your accountant in good time. I forgive you your mistrust.

(sighs)

Church jobs used to be fun. Was it easy for you to join this church?

CHURCH ELDER

Well... Yes. Anyone can join.

JOHN

That's not what I mean. You're

really a part of this. Anybody can show up and pretend, but you feel a sense of... brotherhood, or whatever. That was easy for you. It's always been easy for you to buy in. You believe in this church, and in the local small business alliance, the NAACP-

CHURCH ELDER

I have a lot of disagreements with the NAACP-

JOHN

Even quibbling is a form of believing. You buy into all this shit. It all means something to you. Beliefs matter to you.

CHURCH ELDER

I'm afraid I'm not sure where this conversation has taken us.

JOHN

I don't have real conversations much, but I thought I'd try. I know I'm difficult. That's why I prefer faking it. Talking is easier if you don't care what you say, if you just say what it takes to get the conversation from point A to point B.

(pause)

I had a difficult childhood. My mama tried to throw me in the Susquehanna like baby Moses in sunny Egypt, my brother. And it weren't no better after that. I became the way I am, because I had to, in order to survive then.

CHURCH ELDER

Without God, I would've never made it too. Only by His grace-

JOHN

But I ain't gotta play this game no longer. I could retire. When I was younger, I preached to live. Now I have preached until there was no more need for salvation, but then what? How does this sermon end? Why didn't it end a year ago, or ten years, or thirty-

three years ago? Maybe I should have drowned in that river. I'm no Moses. I'll never lead any Jews to freedom, my brother. My entire life has been devoted to spreading the gospel truth. Without that, there is only the slow downward slide to death.

CHURCH ELDER

Reverend, you're so young, and you just started. You can't retire. The Lord's work is never done. Salvation is always needed.

JOHN

Indeed.

(pause)

I'm an atheist.

CHURCH ELDER

What?

JOHN

I never really thought about it till recently. Religion was just another box to tick. It's a nice one because no one can ever disprove it. The idea that I might actually have an opinion on it hadn't really occurred to me. Might as well ask whether a moldy coffee cup wants to buy coffee futures. But I guess I'm an atheist. I'm certainly not a believer anyway, in anything.

CHURCH ELDER

I can't believe this. A preacher who never once thought about God?

JOHN

You're a good man. You're an honest man. You're part of a community, a family, an organization. Good for you. You don't need riches, do you? You have people. If only I could trick you out of your earnestness, my brother. You tell that accountant I'll be along first thing Monday to explain. The sun is blindingly bright today, but soon, clouds of truth shall rain righteousness

down upon your crown.

He drives away.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - 1991

Officer Prawdaski is drunk, in boxers and an Orioles t-shirt. His uniform is crumpled on the floor. He shuts his blinds, then puts on a lesbian porn VHS tape. There is a KNOCK on the door. He goes to the peephole.

JOHN (O.S.)

Hey, Officer Pussbrain! Where are you, you fat old slab of useless fuck? I know you're in there-

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

(opens the door)

John! What are you doing here? How did you find me?

JOHN

(comes in, holding a six-pack of beer)

I brought you beer.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

How'd you know my brand? How'd you get beer?

JOHN

I sucked the beer fairy's pussy.

John (10yro) comes in. He sees the lesbian porn onscreen. Prawdaski rushes to turn it off.

JOHN

That was porn. Those lesbians were 'eating out' of each other. I've seen that before.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

John, you can't be here.

JOHN

Why not?

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

It's inappropriate. I arrested you last week.

JOHN

And last month, and four times the

month before that. I love truancy,
it's my favorite.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Yeah, you gotta stop running away.
You get reported missing so much
they don't even count you in the
stats.

(pause)

Where do you go anyway?

JOHN

There's this place I stay at, when
it's not too cold out. It's not
comfortable but I can see anyone
coming in and I've been going there
since like seventeen foster homes
ago and it's always the same. Can I
come here instead?

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

No. I can't have runaways crashing
at my place-

JOHN

I'm just one runaway. And I don't
even count -- literally, it seems.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

If you're in danger, you can come
here, or if someone's hurting you.
Or call me, I bet you have my
number too. But we can't just hang
out. I can't be your homie, John,
my brotha.

JOHN

I'm not black. You always think
I'm black. But I'm not. I'm white,
like you. You're Polish, aren't
you? I think I might be Polish. I
like bigos.

(pulls out a crumpled
piece of paper with a
drawing on it)

I drew a picture of you. See?

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

That's nice, John.

JOHN

Did you watch the Orioles game
last night?

(Prawdaski is wary)

Do you want to go to the batting cages? I'll pay.

(pulls out money)

I've got money. See?

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

Is that scamming-tourists money?

JOHN

I won this money in a game. I'll give it all to you. You can have every dime. I know you've got credit card debt.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

What are you doing, John? How did you know-...? You searched my trash?! You're crazy, you-

JOHN

I'll follow the law!

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

What?

JOHN

If you hang out with me, I promise I'll never break the law again.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

I'm not negotiating on that point, John. You have to follow the law, or I'm going to arrest you.

JOHN

You can't arrest me now. You're drunk.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

I'll call someone else in to arrest you, if you do something illegal

JOHN

Showing me porn is illegal.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI

John, I didn't show you porn.

JOHN

I did see it. I'm not allowed to look at lesbians eating out.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
That's not how you say that.

JOHN
I think you should be my friend.
If people found out you showed me
porn...

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
I didn't show you porn. Are you
threatening me?

JOHN
Just be my friend!

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
We are friends, sort of. Or we
were, until you tried to blackmail
me into being your friend.

JOHN
I've known you for four years.
That's longer than I've known
anyone else right now, maybe ever
in my life.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
This is creepy, John.

JOHN
Why? I'm just trying to be nice.

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
Uh, look, John, you gotta go.

JOHN
Tell me what to do! I'm trying!
I'm showing an interest in your
hobbies! I'm giving you a gift!
(smashes a beer bottle
against a wall)
I'm asking you questions and
making jokes and smiling and
talking like you do and I'm Polish
like you are! I'm doing what
everyone else does!

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
John, stop it!

JOHN
I'll be whatever you want me to
be! I'll do anything you want!

OFFICER PRAWDASKI
I want you to get the fuck out!
Just stay away, John! Go to
school! Don't be fucking truant
all the goddamn time! We're not
friends! We can't be friends.

John throws a beer bottle at his head, which distracts Prawdaski as John steals his wallet from his pants on the floor. Then John runs out the door.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT - 1990

John (9yro) stomps down the street. An unmarked van pulls up beside him, and a man rolls down the window. He is John's former TEACHER.

TEACHER
Hey, you're John, right? Do you
remember me?

JOHN
(thinks about it)
You used to be my music teacher.

TEACHER
That's right. I, uh, I don't work
there anymore.

JOHN
I don't go to school there anymore
either.

TEACHER
That's good. I had to leave
because... Well, I had to leave.
(pause)
What are you doing out this late?
Your parents around?

JOHN
I dunno. My foster parents suck.

TEACHER
Right, foster parents, I forgot
about that. You wanna come back to
my place? I've got pizza.

JOHN
Really? Okay!

John gets in the van.

TEACHER

Don't worry, we'll have a sleepover. You can trust me. I just need a little favor. When we get home, I'll need your help taking some trash to the dumpster.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY - 1995

John (14yro) has never fully unpacked. His things are scattered among trash bags that cover the floor. The door opens, and the sound of his foster family SINGING HYMNS is heard. John enters, smiling, singing along.

As soon as he shuts the door and locks it behind himself, his smile vanishes. He locks the door. He takes a package of cocaine out of his pocket.

Someone tries to open the bedroom door, but it is locked. He is startled. There is a loud KNOCK. He panics and hides the cocaine underneath the bag in his trash can.

FOSTER FATHER (O.S.)

(BANGS on the door)

Jonathan! What did I say about locked doors?

JOHN

(winces at the name)

I was about to change my clothes, I swear. You can't stop me from locking the door when I change my clothes. That's in the foster care standards. I can cite section and paragraph number if you want.

He takes his shirt off right before he opens the door. FOSTER FATHER glowers at him.

FOSTER FATHER

You still haven't unpacked. Are you planning on leaving? This is your home. Why are you changing clothes right now anyway?

JOHN

I wanted to look my best for evening prayers. That shirt was-

FOSTER FATHER

That shirt was just fine. Don't give me your lies, Jonathan.

JOHN

That's not my name.

FOSTER FATHER

Yes... I'm sorry, I know it's not your name. I'm sorry.

(pause)

I don't like locked doors in my house, and I don't like liars in my house either.

JOHN

I am a Bible-believing-

FOSTER FATHER

Don't gimme that. Your social worker said you had no interest in church. And then the day you move in, you suddenly give a crap? Do I look like a guitar, son? Cuz I don't appreciate being played.

JOHN

I do believe! I'm Christian now. I haven't always been Christian, no. But I've seen the light of the Lord! You showed me.

FOSTER FATHER

Reverend Mitchell said he saw you hanging out with thugs, Jonathan.

JOHN

Still not my name, and I was ministering! I showed them the error of their ways.

FOSTER FATHER

That is a load of lies, and you know that I know it.

JOHN

What do you want from me?

FOSTER FATHER

A little truth. But failing that, you have to really participate in Family Night. Sing with us.

JOHN

Seriously? Fine.

FOSTER FATHER

Yes, seriously! What is wrong with

you?

JOHN

I've got stuff to do! I can't spend hours singing hymns! What's the point of that?

FOSTER FATHER

The point is that it's family and spirituality time. That's how it works in this household. Quit finding excuses to leave the home.

JOHN

I have a life outside this house.

FOSTER FATHER

What is it? If you have friends, I want to meet them.

JOHN

I've got... big plans, okay? I don't have to tell you everything.

FOSTER FATHER

I am your guardian, Jonathan. I have a right to know what's going on in your life. Are you scamming tourists again?

JOHN

Definitely not my name, and no!

FOSTER FATHER

John! I'm sorry, your name is John. I apologize for that. Our last foster boy was Jonathan, I keep getting mixed up.

(pause)

You running a 3-card monte table?

JOHN

No! I'm past all that.

FOSTER FATHER

I don't believe you, and I don't believe you're Christian.

JOHN

I'm not Christian. You're right, I was lying. I feared persecution, but I'm coming out. I'm Buddhist.

FOSTER FATHER
Buddhist? You're not... Are you
Asian?

JOHN
I might be. But you don't have to
be Asian to be Buddhist. I gotta
leave for temple now. To study the
Noble Eightfold Path.

FOSTER FATHER
Is that a real thing?

JOHN
Yes.
(as he leaves)
I had Buddhists six foster
families ago. I converted and you
can't prove otherwise. So you can
shove my chakra up your rectory.

FOSTER FATHER 2
I don't have to put up with this.
I can tell Miss Marlin your
placement isn't working out.

JOHN (O.S.)
(from the hallway)
I know. That's why I never unpacked
my trash bags. It was obviously
never going to work out.

His belongings are spilling out of the trash bags on the
floor of his room. Foster Father 2 searches the room, and
soon finds the cocaine. He says a prayer, then calls 911.

FOSTER FATHER 2
Hi, I found some drugs. You'll
want to catch my foster son, it's
his. His name is Jonatha- I
mean... John.
(pause)
He's probably walking away from
the house right now. He's short, a
bit skinny, he's.... Well, I think
he's technically African American,
but a lot of people think he's
Caucasian. Don't listen to
anything he says. He's a liar. He
might pretend to be a Mexican or
Puerto Rican named *Jose*, he can be
very convincing.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - 2011

John lies on a pile of blankets on the floor, alongside Melinda. They have just had sex, but he didn't undress, just pulled his pants down, while she is naked. Melinda scurries under the blankets.

MELINDA

I'm the worst mother in the world.

JOHN

Not the worst.

MELINDA

Bottom five percent.

(pause)

I was never cut out to be a mother. I don't have the strength for it. I couldn't even finish a community college theatre tech degree. What made me think I could be a single mother?

JOHN

It didn't sound like you had a lot of choices. You had to leave him.

MELINDA

I have to provide for my son. I should have stayed until I could figure out a plan.

JOHN

I won't argue that point. Always have an exit strategy. Know where the out-door is. Never unpack.

MELINDA

(sees that he is wearing clothes)

Are you sleeping with clothes on these days or what?

JOHN

I like to be able to get up and go in a hurry.

MELINDA

Don't run away, Billy. Is that your real name?

JOHN

No.

MELINDA

Will you tell me your real name?

JOHN

(long pause)

No. I could lie. I was about to say *Mortimer*.

(Melinda laughs)

But I'm on a streak of not lying to you.

MELINDA

You haven't said much.

JOHN

That's one way to avoid lying.

MELINDA

You're good with Sam.

JOHN

I'm good at charm. Kids are easy to impress.

MELINDA

So you don't actually care about him at all? You're pretending?

JOHN

Where's that coming from? I didn't say that. Why are we talking about caring?

MELINDA

I don't know. I guess I felt like we were becoming a family.

JOHN

We were not. I'm still finding you a battered woman's shelter.

MELINDA

Okay, fine, forget I said anything. We'd be a shitty family anyway.

JOHN

You're great, and Sam is an awesome kid. But if I said I was gonna stick around forever, I'd be breaking my streak.

MELINDA

You're leaving? This is your

place.

JOHN

Doesn't mean I have to be here.

MELINDA

Don't go. You can't go. Sam needs a father.

JOHN

He needs a mother. Everyone needs a mother, Melinda, and he's got one. I'd be a shit father.

MELINDA

I'm a shit mother! I can't take care of him! I can't even figure out how to enroll him in school without his dad finding him.

JOHN

You're talking to a fucking con-man, Melinda. You want a new identity, I'll get you a new identity. I know you already know how to do it, cuz *Sam* and *Melinda* aren't your real names.

(she is surprised he knew)

Yes, I checked you out. It's okay. I'm gonna keep calling you *Melinda* though. I prefer fake names.

(pause)

Do you want a drastically different identity? You can pass for Latina. You speak Spanish?

MELINDA

No.

JOHN

Just be sassy, for now, and start learning Spanish. Your whole country will be speaking Spanish eventually.

MELINDA

Isn't it your country too?

JOHN

Yes, but *también puedo mentir en español*.

(Scottish accent)

I can go wherever's easiest, mum.

I won a charming little tea shop
in Glasgow in a bloody card game.
I can always go there.

MELINDA

(giggles)

You can pull off an Englishman too?
You're so good at accents.

JOHN

(remains Scottish for
the rest of this scene)

How dare ye! 'Tis Scottish, not
English, ye yankee cow!

MELINDA

(laughs)

Billy, or whatever your real name
is, don't be scared by what I'm
about to say-

JOHN

Oh dearie, don't say it.

MELINDA

You don't know what it is.

JOHN

I do. You're going to say that you
love me. Don't say it.

(pause)

I don't love you.

MELINDA

That's kind of an asshole thing to
say. You could just tell me you
don't feel the same way.

JOHN

That goes without saying. I've
never in my life felt the same
way, as anyone.

MELINDA

You're not the only one to suffer,
you know.

JOHN

You just want a man for your son,
lass. You said it yourself: Sam
needs a pa.

MELINDA

(pulls away from him)

I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that.

(pause)

Don't leave, Billy. Or if you do, just stay for tomorrow. It's Sam's birthday. I wanted to make him a cake. I thought you could pick up ice cream.

JOHN

You can't love me.

MELINDA

Don't run. Don't use that exit strategy, Billy.

JOHN

I'm Angus.

MELINDA

I didn't actually say it. Let's make a date. Tomorrow at midnight, I'll say it. You can run then if you want. Keep your shoes on.

JOHN

Fine.

(pause)

You're a sweet lass, Melinda. You deserve to find a real man.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY - 2012

Sam packs a suitcase in his bedroom. He hears John come in the front door, and Sam becomes nervous. He puts his suitcase down and leaves his bedroom. John nods hello.

JOHN

(puts a DVD on the counter)

I found this documentary about Australian Aborigines. I want to practice their accent, I think I can pass for a mixed race Aborigine -- a 'halforigine'-

SAM

Billy, can we talk?

(John scrutinizes him, reading his face)

Please don't read me, Billy. Let me say it.

JOHN
Too late. You're leaving?

SAM
(nods)
This isn't the life for me. My mom was wrong. I don't have to do this. Dad won't come after me if she isn't around.

JOHN
So you're going to Child Services?

SAM
I'll tell them my mom just disappeared today.

JOHN
(long pause)
Fine. Okay.

SAM
Billy... This isn't the end of us. We can still talk. You can call me. You can visit. I'll be in a foster home, not prison.

JOHN
(long pause)
Okay.

SAM
You're not the only person who can read faces. You're not okay with this.

JOHN
I will miss having you around. It was nice to tell a little truth sometimes. I'm sorry it didn't work out. I hope you had some fun along the way.

SAM
The church thing was fun.

JOHN
Yeah. Church scams are always a good time.

SAM
You didn't fail me, Billy. I'm not like you. I want to have a friend, like I used to, back before me and

Mom ran away. I want a friend
who's more... real than you.

JOHN

I swore I wouldn't put you in the
system.

SAM

You're not doing it, I am. You've
taught me enough to manipulate the
fuck right out of some foster
parents if I need to.

JOHN

Yeah, you'll be okay.

(pause)

I'm not going to call or visit. I
could tell you I will, but that
would be a lie. It won't happen.

SAM

Okay. Are you mad?

JOHN

No. It's probably for the best. I
don't have close friends, Sam.

SAM

Is this a close friend to you? I
barely know you. I feel like I'm
alone when I'm with you. I don't
think I've met the real Billy.

JOHN

There is no real Billy.

(pause)

My real name is John, by the way.
Or that's my "real" name. It
doesn't feel real. What is a real
name but the one you use most
often? Not the one some schmuck
made up for you when you were a
baby. By that definition, I don't
have a real name. There is no real
John, or Billy. I'm a pretend
person, Sam. You should forget me.

(pause)

Do you need help packing?

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT - LATER

John watches the documentary on Australian Aborigines by
himself. He repeats along with the Aborigines to practice

their accent. The documentary features an ABORIGINE in a dark suit speaking to the camera.

JOHN

When tragedy strikes, we must support each other. We rely on our community when we have sorry business. It is tough for us all, but we are there for each other, so we are never alone. Family is very important-

(rewinds, practicing the accent)

It is tough for us all, but we are there for each other, so we are never alone. Family is very important-

(holding back tears as he rewinds again)

It is tough for us all, but we are there for each other, so we are never alone-

He breaks down sobbing, until he throws the remote at the TV, shattering the screen.

INT. OFFICE - DAY - 2016

John (posing as a nerdy comic book collector) speaks to a SUPERVISOR at a garbage dump.

JOHN

I understand that you have policies, and please trust me that my only goal is to get the comic book before it's ruined. Even in damaged condition, it'll be worth thousands.

SUPERVISOR

Yeah, yeah, I believe you, I would let you in there, I really would-

JOHN

So you're allowed in, it's just me who's not?

SUPERVISOR

Yeah, that's what I'm saying.

JOHN

I mean... I would say that you could go get it. That seems like a nice idea, doesn't it? But I'd

have to describe it to you. You could take it and tell me you didn't find it.

SUPERVISOR

You got no reason to trust me.

JOHN

It's just so frustrating. You'd get a fortune for it at auction.

SUPERVISOR

I like you, and I do believe you.
(points to a computer screen, on which can be seen a webpage about an old comic book)
I can see it's worth a lot of money.

There is a loud CRASHING sound. John is startled. Outside, the remains of old cars are being crushed into cubes. He is entranced by the sight.

SUPERVISOR

(yelling to be heard)

Sorry about the noise! We should get out of here. There's a bar down the road. Let me buy you a drink. I have a proposal for you.

John smiles and nods.

EXT. DUMP - MOMENTS LATER

John follows the Supervisor into the dump, on their way out to the parking lot. John puts a hardhat on. He is just a few yards from the cars that are waiting to be crushed. He stops for a moment, awe-struck by the rumbling engine of the machinery and the power of its crushing grip.

His face darkens. There is a stack of dumpsters nearby. One could very easily fall on him.

INT. APARTMENT/HALLWAY - DAY

Betty sobs, leaning against the door. John speaks through the door from the hallway outside. Betty slowly sits and John, hearing her breathing move, goes to match her. He opens the mail slot and speaks through that.

JOHN

I avoided tracking you down for a long time because, when I thought about making changes in my life, there was just one thing I couldn't possibly tell the truth about. That was you.

(pause)

I saw a bunch of therapists. One time each. I never told any of them about you. I tried. But I couldn't.

(pause)

I had to resist the urge to kill myself last month. I was grifting this guy at a trash dump. They were crushing cars into cubes. It smelled like garbage. There was a stack of dumpsters by the gate. One could have fallen on me.

(pause)

I didn't con the guy at the dump. I told him not to be so gullible in the future and took off to find Sam. You don't know him, but if there's a convention out there for shitty moms, you might have met his there. Bottom five-percent.

EXT. PARKING LOT - EVENING - 1992

Mobster 1 comes out of a diner. He walks very slowly, dreading the next step. He closes his eyes by his car and takes a deep breath. His car has one suitcase in it.

When he opens his eyes, he sees John (as Joey) walking by on the street. John pretends not to notice him. John is wearing a distinctively colored shirt.

MOBSTER 1

Joey?

JOHN

Hey, you sure are far from home.

MOBSTER 1

I was about to say the same to you.

JOHN

(looks behind himself)

Yeah.

MOBSTER 1

Are you running from someone?

JOHN

Always.

(pause)

Oh, you're here on vacation, right?
I forgot, you said you were coming
to the beach.

MOBSTER 1

Did I tell you that? I guess. I
just got to town, I haven't been to
my beach house yet, not since...
last summer. You wanna come with
me? I know you're just gonna sneak
in somehow if I don't invite you.
It's weird you're here alone. Am I
gonna get arrested if they find you
with me?

JOHN

I'll talk them out of it.

INT. BEACH HOUSE - NIGHT - 1992

Mobster 1 comes in, with John in tow. There is a framed
photo of him with a boy on a nightstand; the young boy, who
looks similar to John and is about the same age, is wearing
the same shirt as John too. Mobster 1 winces and faces the
photo down so he can't see it.

JOHN

Thanks for bringin' me here. It
sucks bein' in a beach town by
yaself. It's no fun swimming alone.

MOBSTER 1

Yeah. I guess so. I'm not much of a
swimmer though. I don't care about
the beach. No one here knows my
name. They treat me like a tourist
punk. No one respects me here. It's
kind of nice.

JOHN

I got mad respect for you, I could
tell as soon as I saw you that you
was the real deal. When I grow up,
I wanna be just like you. I always
wanted to be just like my old man.
He was my idol. But you, man, you
put him to shame. You got class.

(pause)

I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk about
my father like that. God bless his

soul.

MOBSTER 1
No, no, I understand. I know loss.

JOHN
(goes to the bar)
Yeah. You want a drink? A dirty martini, right?

MOBSTER 1
You know my drink?

JOHN
I know everything. You and me make a good team, don't we? We're cut from the same cloth. That was even my dad's drink too.

MOBSTER 1
Uh-huh.

JOHN
(gives him the martini)
Is it okay if I stay here tonight? I was gonna... Well, I had other, worse plans.

MOBSTER 1
I guess so. I don't know if I'm in a social mood tonight.

JOHN
No worries. I'll stay outta your hair. I bet on your vacation you just like to sit back and read a book. I get it.
(goes to the kitchen)
Is there anything in the fridge?

Mobster 1 looks increasingly upset. There are tears in his eyes. He picks up the photograph he had turned over earlier. He sees the boy wearing the same shirt as John.

MOBSTER 1
Joey...

John walks back in, smiling.

JOHN
There ain't jack-shit in there.

MOBSTER 1
(angry)

How's that nigger family of yours?

JOHN

I don't live there no more. Miss Jo-Jo got arrested for doing blowjobs in a non-blowjob area. My new family is white, and they're nerds. Fucking Mormons.

(pause)

What's up? Why are you upset?

MOBSTER 1

I was just wondering what's wrong with your family. Since you're trying to trick your way into mine. Did you pick the name *Joey* because of him?

JOHN

Oh shit...

MOBSTER 1

(sobs)

Was it ever about the debt?

JOHN

You got the wrong idea!

MOBSTER 1

(flash of realization)

The whole thing's made up! Who the fuck are you?

(pause)

We checked. No one in New York ever heard of your father. We thought you were just bullshitting about your dear old dead dad being a big-time motherfucker. But you made it up to replace my boy, didn't you?

JOHN

No, no, lemme explain. Was it the shirt? I thought it might be too much. But it's a common shirt-

MOBSTER 1

You trying to replace my son? You fucking goon, families don't work that way, you can't just slide in to his slot. You took my son's name! You know where I go on vacation, you know what I do there, you got my son's shirt on! Is your real name *Steven*? Father Wallis

said he knew you as *Steven*, I thought you were scamming him, but that's your real name, isn't it?

JOHN

My real name's John, okay? I ain't scamming Father Wallis, you know how little they get paid? I'm blackmailing a deacon, you don't wanna know why.

(pause)

I know I can't replace your boy, I ain't crazy. He ain't coming back. You gotta accept that. You can still have a kid, you-

MOBSTER 1

(crying)

He's my son, you fucking cuntknuckle!

JOHN

Okay, look, I'm sorry. I just... I got mad respect for you, man. Only losers become foster parents.

(pause, drops the accent)

Look, okay, no lies. I swear-

MOBSTER 1

You're not even Italian?

JOHN

(drifts slowly back to his Joey-accent)

I don't know, I could be. I wanna be like you. Everyone's scared of your name. You control every fucking thing, man, I know that. I got mad respect for that, man.

(pause)

Sorry, I went back to my New York accent outta habit.

MOBSTER 1

I can't just take in some fucking child. That ain't how it works. I don't know who you're supposed to be living with right now, but you need to go back to them. You can't replace my kid, you fucking monster.

JOHN

I can fix the custody thing, man.

You can apply to be a foster father. I know who to bribe to get them to miss your felony conviction, and I'll pay the bribe, man, come on. You get a check from the government, and I keep workin' for you. We be rollin' in the dollars, I swear, we'll make an Arab sheikh look like...

(pause)

Sorry. I's bein' honest now, sir, I was only gonna make that joke 'bout the Arabs on account of I know you don't like 'em. I got a real problem wit' manipulation. I's givin' out truth in buckets now, sir, and that ain't a bucket I bring out much.

(sniffles, holding back tears)

That's why I'm here, really. I know you's damaged too, sir. You's grievin' for ya boy. We both got problems. But together, man, we can run that fucking city.

MOBSTER 1

Joey... John.. Or whatever your name is... Go fuck yourself, you silver-tongued hellspawn.

JOHN

(suddenly calm and calculating)

Fuck you, you greasy dago bitch. Your son died because you couldn't keep him safe. You let a black guy shoot him, that was your fault.

(Mobster 1 sobs and roars in anger)

I could've acted just like him, y'know. It'd be the same fucking thing. I even look like him.

John grabs the picture of the teenage boy, smashes the frame and tears up the photo as Mobster 1 wails. John leaves.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY - 2015

John has arrived at one of his safehouses, a nice home in a suburb. He brings one suitcase to the door and fumbles with his keys. An old woman from the house next-door, MAMA KAY,

begins loudly rolling her trash can to the street. She sees John and stops to say hello.

MAMA KAY

Oh there you are.

JOHN

Howdy.

MAMA KAY

You've been scarcer than hen's teeth since you bought this place. I told my husband they took that house off the market, but I haven't seen anyone move in.

(pause)

We haven't met before, have we? Sometimes I'm forgetful.

JOHN

No, we haven't met. I've been traveling.

MAMA KAY

And I looked in the windows, so I saw there wasn't much in there.

(pause)

Hope you're not offended. I get nosy sometimes.

JOHN

Not at all. I always assume people will be snooping.

MAMA KAY

My name is Mama Kay.

She holds out her hand. John sighs, he is very tired.

JOHN

Noah. Noah Bronstein.

MAMA KAY

Oh... That's Jewish, isn't it?

JOHN

Yes, it is, ma'am. Mama Kay.

MAMA KAY

I do love a Jew. Won't you come over for supper? I always invite the family over on Sundays, and I like to have the neighbors over-

(pause)

I'm sorry, it won't be kosher. Do you keep kosher?

JOHN

No, don't worry. I'm not a strict Jew, Mama Kay.

(pause)

I never knew my mother. I've never called anyone *Mama* before.

MAMA KAY

Oh, you poor dear. That's what everyone calls me, even my mother before she passed away. It ain't my name, but it's the only thing I answer to.

JOHN

That must be nice.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING - LATER

John, seated at a large table, smiles as Mama Kay and her family laugh together. Her husband, an OLD MAN, is there, as are their adult SON, DAUGHTER-IN-LAW and young GRANDSON.

DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

So maybe my reaction wasn't entirely professional...

Everyone laughs along with her to an inside joke.

SON

It was the Denny's waitress all over again!

John smiles. He is flustered because he is distracted by his depression. Mama Kay's family gradually realizes he feels left out of their inside joke.

OLD MAN

So, Mr. Bronstein, when were you planning on moving the rest of your stuff in?

JOHN

My stuff? I, uh, I need to buy some, I guess.

(pause)

I don't have a lot of stuff.

DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

That's good. I think people are

too materialistic. It's great to
downsize your life.

JOHN

Yeah. Anti-consumerism... Yeah,
that's it.

SON

Mr. Bronstein, do you have any
hobbies?

JOHN

(thinks a long time)

Looking through missing persons
reports from decades ago. If I
find a kid who looks like me, I
can steal his identity.

(the family GASPS)

Not for financial reasons. I have
plenty of money. It's in various
offshore bank accounts, or in cash
buried in obscure locations. Some
of it is literally bloody money. I
have eight million dollars in
bloody dong hidden underground --
that's Vietnamese currency, by the
way, not penises.

(pause)

I want to steal a missing child's
identity so I can have their
family. I'll fake a DNA test. I
could say I got hit on the head,
that's why my memory is fuzzy, and
I act different. Do you think a
pretend family is as good as a
real one?

(pause)

I found one, once. I found a
missing kid who looked like me. I
chickened out. As soon as I saw
her -- the woman I was going to
pretend was my long-lost mother --
I knew what would happen. She
would say my personality had
changed since I came back. I'm not
the same person I used to be. I'm
a dick now. I'm a liar. I'm fake,
inauthentic. I'm the pyrite of
people. She'll say she doesn't
love me anymore, or worse, she
won't say it. But I'll see it in
her eyes. She'll tell me I should
have stayed in the garbage.

(gets up to leave)

I'm sorry. I'll go. My place is just a safehouse. I go there between crimes. Don't snoop around.

(points to Mama Kay)

You need to take away her access to her bank accounts. That's not forgetfulness, it's senile dementia. I could have talked her into signing away this house.

(points to a cookie jar on a top shelf)

That is way too obvious a place to keep your emergency cash.

He walks out the door.

OLD MAN

That damn kike.

EXT. PARK - DAY - 2016

Pretending to be an Israeli ex-soldier, John sits on a park bench next to an American VETERAN.

JOHN

I tried to qualify as a sniper too, but I was not quite good enough. Very close.

VETERAN

Oh yeah? That's impressive. I know the IDF has high standards. How long have you been out?

JOHN

Six years.

VETERAN

Was it a tough transition for you?

JOHN

Yes. It still is. The warzone sticks with you like a shadow. I know I don't have to act like a soldier in wartime, but at the same time, I do.

VETERAN

I know exactly what you mean. When I got back to the States, I didn't sleep through the night for years.

John doesn't listen, he sees Sam, who is now eighteen, arrive at the park with his WIFE and BABY GIRL. Sam sees John and stands there looking at him.

VETERAN
Where did you serve-?

JOHN
(annoyed, no accent)
What? I don't know, shut up.

VETERAN
What happened to your accent?

JOHN
I'm not Israeli. Probably.

VETERAN
(pause)
Oh. You... lied?

Sam comes towards John.

JOHN
Yep.

VETERAN
Why?

JOHN
It's what I do.

SAM
Hey, John.

VETERAN
He's a liar, be careful.

SAM
Thanks, I will be.

JOHN
That's your wife and daughter?
Your little girl is adorable.

SAM
I named her *Joan* after you. When
you're ready, I'll introduce you.

JOHN
Why'd you name her after me?

SAM
You said you didn't have a real

name, that nothing about you was permanent, but this is. You have a legacy, John. It's on her birth certificate. She'll be a reminder to the world that you existed.

(pause)

If you want, you can join us. She'll call you *Uncle John* when she's old enough.

JOHN

I said I wouldn't come visit you.

SAM

I heard a rumor you were a liar.
(the Veteran scoffs)

I bet you followed me, right? Even if you didn't call or visit? Of course you did, I can read it on your face.

(pause)

So you know I got arrested for running your scheme?

JOHN

You didn't do it right. Never con the spouse of a corrupt mayor. That's a rule. I should have taught you that.

SAM

Come on, let me introduce you to my wife.

(pause)

I'm going to tell her you're *John*. Not *Billy*. I don't use fake names anymore, and I don't want to lie to her. Is that okay?

JOHN

(long pause)

No. There's someone else I want to tell the truth to first.

INT. APARTMENT/HALLWAY - DAY - 2016

Betty still sobs in front of her door, while John talks from the hallway.

JOHN

I don't know why I came here. That's not normal, I'm very organized. I don't do things

without a reason. I don't know why I'm talking to you. Obviously you don't want to know; you never wanted to know me. It's just making you cry. I'm not trying to hurt you.

(pause)

I realize you probably had postpartum depression. I don't know what to do with that, but there it is. Can't argue with facts.

(pause)

My father was a rapist, wasn't he?

(she gasps)

That was just a good guess. It doesn't help me, it doesn't give me a real home or a family or a single solitary friend, but it's important to acknowledge the truth, even if it doesn't matter.

(pause)

That sucks. Being raped, I mean. It happens all the time in foster care. And my music teacher raped me in an alley once.

(pause)

That happened. I can't undo it. It's a fact. You can't argue with facts. I can... But they're still there. I can lie about it all I want, but the fact is that you abandoned me. You still put me in that dumpster.

(pause)

You shouldn't have thrown me away because my father was a rapist.

(pause)

I've always lied. But I've decided to change. I need something from you to make that happen. I don't know what it is. I put off coming here because I didn't know what to ask you for. I know everything about human behavior, but not that. I don't know what you can give me that will let me tell the truth. That's why I'm not here trying to manipulate you. If I knew what you had that would give me the truth, I would manipulate it out of you. All I can do is tell you the only truth that matters, that I know who you are,

and I know what I am.

BETTY

I'm sorry. I know that doesn't help anything, but it's the truth. It's a fact. I *am* sorry. I don't expect forgiveness.

(pause)

After I was raped that night, I fell asleep and didn't wake up for a whole day. Then I pretended it didn't happen. I knew it did, but I promised myself I could pretend it was a dream, so it wouldn't matter. It was nothing, just a nightmare. I even told my friends about it, and they hugged me and said it was just a bad dream and I said that made me feel better but it didn't because it wasn't and I knew that everything I said was a lie.

(pause)

And then I saw my belly getting bigger. I thought that if I wanted what happened to be a dream, I had better start eating a lot of food. That way I can believe that I'm just getting fat because I'm eating a lot. And my cycle was always irregular then, so I didn't have to believe it meant anything when I stopped having periods. I couldn't be pregnant because I wasn't ready to be a mother. Every part of my body told me I wasn't ready for my pregnancy, and every part of my mind told me I wasn't pregnant.

(pause)

I started having contractions and I thought I could be having bad menstrual cramps and babies are sometimes stillborn and I should take some Midol and go sit in the alley. Maybe that homeless Ratman who lives there will rape and kill me so I won't have to endure these menstrual cramps. When that baby fell out of me... When you came out of me, I couldn't accept it. I wiped the blood off its face just to see if it looked like *him*. It didn't. You didn't, you didn't look like him. You looked beautiful, but at the time, I didn't see that. I

only remembered it later, how perfect your face looked when I wiped the blood off. I thought no. This can't be right. That thing that happened, I decided it didn't happen. It was just a nightmare. I won't accept that that happened. And if that was a nightmare, then this isn't in my arms.

(pause)

I had to get this thing out of my arms. I absolutely had to. I couldn't bear to hold onto it anymore. It meant that everything was a lie. It was a lie, I had to believe that. So I threw it away.

(pause)

And then as I did it, and as I walked away, I thought *I'm going to regret this for the rest of my life*, and that was the first true thought I'd had in a long time.

(pause)

It was nine years later that I realized what I'd done and I cried for a whole day. I felt like I didn't know before then, as though I had just woken from a dream. I felt like I had witnessed some horrible person do this thing, and I wanted to accuse her of it but that horrible person was me.

(pause)

I didn't say that to defend myself. I'm so sorry. I just thought you should know how it happened.

(pause)

I don't have any right to ask you this, but can I hug you?

JOHN

Yes.

Betty opens the door. She and John look at each other -- he looks homeless, with shaggy hair and trash, including a coffee filter, stuck to his ragged clothes. He hugs her tightly.