

L O O K S G O O D O N P A P E R

An Original Screenplay By
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FADE IN:

EXT. PORTLAND SKYLINE - DAY

Skyscrapers pierce the low clouds. It's gloomy and raining.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Umbrellas. Overcoats. Puddles in the street. A MAX light rail train rumbles by.

INT. MAX LIGHT RAIL - DAY

The train is half full. ALEX BASSOS, mid-30s, sits in the back. He's wearing a scrappy thrift store suit. His shoulders are slumped. His hair's a mess. His eyes look right through the other passengers.

A 10-year-old KID is reading a comic book. Alex studies him a moment, fondly remembering his own comic book collection.

ALEX

Can I see that a sec?

KID

Go to hell.

Alex persists.

ALEX

Jack Kirby was the greatest comic book artist ever.

KID

No way. Todd McFarlane.

ALEX

Gimme a break. Kirby invented hundreds of characters. He created the new grammar of storytelling and a cinematic style that...

KID

What is he, your gay butt buddy?

ALEX

He's been dead since '94.

KID

So yer boning his corpse then?

ALEX
No, I...

KID
Are too.

ALEX
Am not.

KID
Are too!

ALEX
Am not!

KID
You know you are!

Alex bites his lip. The train lurches to a stop. Alex yanks the comic out of the kid's hand and slips out the door.

KID
Hey... motherfucker!

EXT. FIFTH STREET - DAY

As the train pulls away, Alex drops the comic into a trash can. The kid flips him off.

Alex ducks under an awning and waits for the light to change. Collecting water reaches its breaking point. Alex looks up just in time. He steps into the street as a deluge of silty muck pours on the umbrellas of a few hapless pedestrians.

ALEX
(to himself)
Skills.

HONK! A bus roars by and soaks Alex to the bone.

EXT. U.S. BANCORP TOWER - DAY

Alex arrives at the rose-colored tower and heads inside.

INT. ELEVATOR - DAY

Packed into the elevator like a sardine, Alex vacantly watches the numbers climb higher. He's miserably wet.

INT. LOBBY - DAY

The Integrity Insurance logo is featured prominently above the reception. The company tagline reads: "The Freedom of Security." Alex passes through the lobby like a ghost, leaving only soggy footprints.

INT. CALL CENTER - DAY

Alex slumps in a cubical at the center of a vast, soulless call center. Water drips from the tip of his tie. He talks on a headset, face expressionless, voice cold and by-the-book.

ALEX

No ma'am, you don't have flood coverage. Our records show your agent explained that when he sold you the policy.

CUT TO:

Alex turns over his memo pad and sketches as he talks. A figure emerges. A nude.

ALEX

You're welcome to shop around for a lower premium Mrs. Arinsberg. But with your medical history I'd be surprised if another company would even talk to you.

CUT TO:

The drawing develops. Locks of hair cascade delicately over the figure's shoulders. Breasts deny the pull of gravity. Hips hold her weight.

ALEX

I understand Dr. Mitchell says your childhood allergies had nothing to do with the onset of Lou Gherig's disease Mr. Jarvis. But your failure to disclose those allergies is still grounds for cancellation.

CUT TO:

Alex's nude becomes a living, breathing figure on the page.

ALEX

It's an awful predicament Mrs. Berwick, and I'm sorry he's been so disfigured. But the fact is we can't cover Tommy's medical bills because you took the batteries out of the smoke detector to run your vibrator.

CUT TO:

He draws a distant, longing expression. It's clear Alex has real talent.

Alex's boss taps him on the shoulder. IAN is Alex's age, a dandy, sporting a hip sharkskin suit and sleek German glasses. He drops a file on Alex's desk.

IAN

This one's a real bleeder, right up your ally. Line seven.

Alex picks up the file and scans the information.

IAN

Hurry. She's been tying up agents all morning. Productivity is way down.

Alex punches line seven.

ALEX

Grace Walker? (beat) Yes, I'm the supervising claims adjuster. How are you today?

Listens a moment.

ALEX

I understand. There's no doubt that what your boss did was wrong. But it doesn't change the fact that you weren't enrolled on the plan when you were diagnosed. And that means...

The client interrupts. A hint of dismay crosses Alex's face.

ALEX

I understand it's a very serious disease. But we can't cover a previously-existing condition.

We can hear the client yelling. Ian gives Alex a thumbs-up and heads back to his office.

ALEX
(calmly)

The legal precedents are quite clear Miss Walker. I'm confident an attorney will tell you the same thing.

Alex steels himself against a tirade of insults.

ALEX

Sorry, but I can't give out any personal information. I'm happy to give you my company I.D. number. It's 117-1976.

He turns down the volume on his headset.

ALEX

Thank you for calling Integrity Insurance.

And terminates the call.

ALEX
(to himself)

Have a nice day.

Alex crumples his drawing and tosses it in the trash.

EXT. STAIRWELL DOORWAY - DAY

Alex hides from the drizzle. He takes a long drag off a cigarette as customers scurry in and out of a nearby Starbucks.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB (O.S.)
Hoo-wah-wah-wah! Hoo-wah-wah-wah!

Ian and a co-worker nicknamed TWO-DOLLAR BOB cram into Alex's dry alcove. Bob is shuffling like a Native American dancer, slashing his forearm like a tomahawk.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Hoo-wah-wah-wah!

IAN

Alex Bassos scalps 'em faster than a schoolboy can cream his jeans at make-out bluff.

Bob is the youngest of the three, scruffy and overweight, more boy than man.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

No woman's too old, no man's too sick, no accident's too gory, no child's too maimed...

ALEX

C'mon guys.

IAN

C'mon what? Take a fucking compliment. You're good at what you do.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

His mom would be so proud!

ALEX

I'm not in the mood, okay?

IAN

You're never in the mood.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Dude, can I bum a couple'a bucks? I need a mocha before my blood sugar tanks.

Alex mechanically pulls out a five.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Thanks, bro.

Bob crumples the bill into his pocket and waddles into Starbucks.

IAN

(hollers after him)

Don't forget the whipped cream! For your blood sugar!

Ian laughs to himself.

IAN

Fucking Two-Dollar Bob. Why do you keep giving him hand-outs?

ALEX

It's easier that way.

IAN

Y'know, you've been a downer ever since you started this job.

Alex shrugs.

IAN

You make way more now than you ever did doing that artsy-fartsy crap.

ALEX

That's true.

Ian checks his reflection in the glass. Smiles at what he sees.

IAN

We're on top of the food chain.

ALEX

We're wage slaves. Just like everybody else.

IAN

Fuck the pity party, man. I've got a BMW in my garage, a plasma TV on my wall, and a new chick in my pants every Saturday night.

ALEX

Good for you Ian.

IAN

Let's go out after work. Oyster shooters at Jake's tonight?

ALEX

I'll think about it.

IAN

Think about what?

ALEX

Jake's isn't my scene.

IAN

What's wrong with Jake's?

ALEX

Yuppies.

IAN

What the hell're you?

ALEX

I dunno.

IAN

You're a fucking yuppie, man.

ALEX

Yeah, well, the last thing I wanna do after work is shoot the shit with some dude about how Microsoft Vista sucks ass and how his stocks are in the toilet.

IAN

You're not there to talk to dudes.

ALEX

Yuppie chicks are even worse.

IAN

Speaking of yuppie chicks, didn't I hook you up with Ann Redding?

ALEX

I never called her.

IAN

You're kidding?

ALEX

Nope.

IAN

Shit, man! She's smokin' hot. Likes to talk dirty, too. She uses "that" all the time. As in "gimme *that* dick" or "lick *that* pussy." Sounds like a freakin' porn star.

ALEX

Yuppie porn star, huh?

IAN

Yeah! Anyway, I only did her twice so you don't have *that* much to live up to.

ALEX

No thanks.

Two-Dollar Bob returns with his extra-large mocha.

IAN

That was fast.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

They saw me comin'.

IAN

How could they not?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Ha-ha. So what'd I miss?

IAN

Have you ever met such a successful guy with such an unsuccessful penis? (to Alex) You should be getting laid every night. Condo by the river. Steady job. Fully insured.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Yeah, man. You look good on paper. Women love that.

IAN

(scoffs)

Like you know shit about women.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Hey, I'm *married*.

Bob sticks his face in a mound of whipped cream and burns his tongue.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Oww!

IAN

My point exactly.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

(holding his tongue)

I get laid way more than if I was single.

IAN

That's for damn sure.

Alex stubs out his cigarette and makes for the door.

ALEX

Later guys.

IAN
You're coming tonight, right?

ALEX
No.

IAN
Okay that's it. No more Xanax for you. I'm telling Dr. Nancy you can't get it up anymore.

Alex pins Ian with a gaze that means business.

ALEX
You're not telling Dr. Nancy anything.

IAN
(laughing)
Okay. Okay. Pop a Valium, dude.

EXT. STUMPTOWN COFFEE - DAY

It's drizzling outside. Homeless beg for spare change. A JESUS FREAK rants at passersby.

JESUS FREAK
Because when we pray to *God*, we got the power to *excel!* We got the power to *leap!* We got the power to *fight!*

INT. STUMPTOWN COFFEE - DAY

Stumptown is a cozy place frequented by pierced and tattooed locals. A "Keep Portland Weird" bumpersticker is affixed to the espresso machine. It's a smoke-friendly establishment and there's a pack of Pall Malls on the table. Alex takes a drag and stares into space.

An attractive woman walks in the door. It's SARAH, Alex's ex. She's fit and stylish as ever.

SARAH
Thought I might find you here.

Alex isn't thrilled to see her.

ALEX
Oh good, it's you.

SARAH
This seat taken?

ALEX
Which seat?

Sarah points at the only other seat at Alex's table.

ALEX
(annoyed)
Be my guest.

SARAH
You're crumbly as ever.

ALEX
No lectures please.

SARAH
No lecture. I just get tired of
seeing you like this.

ALEX
Then stop seeing me.

SARAH
But where would I get my second-
hand smoke?

Alex isn't in the mood.

SARAH
So how's work?

ALEX
Just dodging bullets all day.

SARAH
Yeah? How do you do that?

He half-heartedly ducks and dodges about.

SARAH
I'm sensing you don't wanna talk.

ALEX
About what?

SARAH
I dunno. Regular stuff I guess.

ALEX
Regular stuff.

SARAH

Yeah. I worry about you.

ALEX

You weren't so worried when you bailed.

SARAH

(sighs)

Shit happens Alex. You can't choose the hand you're dealt...

ALEX

I know, I know. I folded. You've said it a million times.

Uncomfortable silence.

SARAH

I wish we could be friends.

ALEX

I don't need any friends, Sarah.

SARAH

We all need a little help sometimes.

ALEX

Not me.

SARAH

Listen, I'm fixing up the shed in back. It's gonna be a workshop. I'd love some creative company.

Alex stubs out his cigarette.

ALEX

I don't think so.

SARAH

Have you been painting at all?

ALEX

Don't have time.

SARAH

Oh Alex. There's a light inside you that's brighter than all of Portland's sunny days stacked together...

Sarah reaches across the table to touch his hand. Alex jerks away and spills coffee on his white shirt.

ALEX

Nice.

SARAH

Oops. It's okay. Adds a little character.

Alex is seething, but he's numb to real anger.

ALEX

Just because you can wear whatever potato sack's in fashion this week doesn't make *this* okay.

He gets up to leave.

SARAH

What happened to you?

ALEX

I need this shirt. So I can wear it to work and make enough money to buy cigarettes to speed up my demise so I can stop selling my soul in a clean white shirt every fucking day.

EXT. ALEX'S BUILDING - LATER

Alex's older complex is dwarfed by high-rise construction. All the trees have been ripped out to make room for expensive new condos.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex is obsessed. He's rubbing at the coffee stain with a towel. He can't get it out. He rubs faster, harder. No luck.

ALEX

(through clenched teeth)

Worthless piece of no good fucking shit.

Alex stops and collects himself. He pushes the shirt aside and calmly opens the medicine cabinet. He pops the lid off a prescription bottle and throws back a handful of pills.

EXT. U.S. BANCORP TOWER - DAY

The skyscraper rises over the gate leading into Chinatown.
Bums panhandle in the ceaseless rain.

INT. BREAK ROOM - DAY

Employees gather in the cluttered break room, exhausted from pushing themselves all week.

Ian enters. Everyone scurries back to their desks, leaving a listless Alex and a chip-munching Two-Dollar Bob alone at the water cooler. Ian slaps Bob on the back, spilling Doritos everywhere.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

What the fuck, bro?

IAN

I'm showing you love asshole.

Ian pours some coffee.

ALEX

How's Dr. Nancy?

IAN

She's a freak! Unfortunately her husband came home on the Red Eye so I had to split early. Which sucks because I love it when she makes me breakfast.

ALEX

Did she come through?

IAN

Doesn't she always?

Ian pulls signed prescription slips out of his jacket and waves them in Alex's face. He yanks them out of Ian's hand, sorts through them and hands a few back.

ALEX

These are yours.

IAN

Vegas here I come.

Two-Dollar Bob licks his fingers.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Man, I wish I was goin' to Vegas.

IAN
You couldn't handle Vegas.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Sure I could.

IAN
I really don't see you in Vegas
with your wallet open, your cock
out and your liver on fire.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
I can do it if you can. It's all
about the drugs, right?

IAN
Couple'a Norcos, a bottle of scotch
and a Viagra. Bada-bing, bada-boom.

Alex examines a label, lost in thought.

ALEX
It's funny. I wouldn't even take an
aspirin two years ago. Upset my
stomach.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
They have a prescription for that.

IAN
Better living through modern
chemistry.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Amen.

IAN
Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Special
delivery.

Ian chucks a prescription bottle at Two-Dollar Bob. It
bounces off his head.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Shit, bro!

IAN
Think fast.

Bob waddles after the bottle and picks it up.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Cool! You can't hardly find these
babies in the U.S. anymore.

ALEX
What is it?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Ephedrasil.

IAN
Amphetamines and opioids.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
You get high and lose weight.

IAN
It's not working.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
How 'bout you Alex? What's your
favorite flavor these days?

ALEX
Vicodin. Provigil. OxyContin. A few
others.

IAN
Can't beat the classics.

CINDY, late 30s, enters the break room. She's cute and
athletic, the type that rides her bike to work. She drains
the water cooler into a Nalgene bottle.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
It's empty.

CINDY
I see that.

Cindy uncorks a new bottle and hefts in onto the cooler. The
guys don't lift a finger.

IAN
Hey, Cindy. I was just thinking
about you.

She flashes a strained smile.

CINDY
You were?

IAN
I was thinking I needed to let you
know that you've been fired.

CINDY
(horrified)
But... why?

IAN
You've been late six times this
month. It's a pattern.

CINDY
But my son's had the measles.

IAN
Well, now you'll have plenty of
time to take care of him.

CINDY
But I really need the insurance.

IAN
But, but, but... Save your butts.

CINDY
I can't believe you're doing this.

IAN
Oh look!

Ian kicks a cardboard box in Cindy's general direction.

IAN
Here's a box for your stuff.

Long silence. Tears well up in Cindy's eyes. She storms out
of the break room. Alex and Bob are mortified.

IAN
What?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
That was cold, bro. Everyone knows
her kid's been sick.

IAN
No choice. She's been talking to
union reps.

ALEX
You can't fire someone for that.

IAN

Of course not. But we're not required to hold her freakin' hand while her germ-infested offspring cut into productivity.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Dude, Cindy saved us millions on those 9/11 claims.

IAN

Mutiny is mutiny. Too bad though. She has a great ass. Maybe I'll call her. Y'know, cheer her up a little.

INT. SAFEWAY - DAY

Alex withdraws six 40 ounce bottles of Olde English 800 from the beer cooler. In front of the pharmacy, he unhooks a box of condoms.

He gets in line and notices the clerk is attractive, early 30s, with bright green eyes. Her name tag reads: SHAUNA. She scans the forties.

SHAUNA

Hi there. You have a Club Card?

ALEX

Um... yeah.

SHAUNA

Swipe it for me would ya? Thanks.

He does. Shauna scans the rubbers and glances at her monitor.

SHAUNA

\$29.68 is your total. You saved about two bucks Mr. Bassos. Paper or plastic?

Alex hands her thirty dollars.

ALEX

Paper. And don't use my name.

Change clinks into it's metal receptacle as Shauna bags everything up. She smiles at Alex with her striking eyes.

SHAUNA

You're gonna have a good time tonight.

Alex snaps at her.

ALEX

Look. You're not my therapist or my bartender so please don't psychoanalyze the shit I buy.

SHAUNA

Whoa, cowboy! I know I'd be having a good time with a six-pack of forties and a box of condoms.

He grabs his bag and storms off.

ALEX

Fucking hell.

SHAUNA

Don't forget your change!

EXT. SAFEWAY - DAY

It's pissing down rain. Alex loads the grocery bag into a nondescript Volkswagon Passat. He slams the door and bangs his forehead against the roof in desperation.

INT. SAFEWAY - DAY

Alex pulls a flimsy grin onto his face and returns to Shauna's line. She's checking out an OLD WOMAN with the help of a BAG BOY.

SHAUNA

That's \$68.74 Mrs. Fletcher. You saved over six dollars with your Club Card. Need help with your bags?

MRS. FLETCHER

Yes, thank you.

SHAUNA

You're welcome. 'Bye now.

The bag boy escorts Mrs. Fletcher to the door. Alex steps up, sheepishly.

ALEX

Hey, I'm really sorry about blowing up at you.

SHAUNA

Yeah, well, some people are just that way.

ALEX

I'm just... having a bad day.

The CUSTOMER behind Alex crowds forward.

CUSTOMER

C'mon pal. This isn't a meat market.

Shauna begins checking the customer. Alex moves to the end of the counter.

SHAUNA

(to customer)

Hi there. You have a Club Card?

CUSTOMER

I think so.

SHAUNA

Swipe it for me would ya? Thanks.

Shauna turns to Alex, still checking groceries.

SHAUNA

Okay. Apology accepted.

ALEX

Okay. Great.

She pins Alex with her eyes.

SHAUNA

Interested in making it up to me?

EXT. RESCUE MISSION - DAY

Just West of the Burnside bridge, half a dozen bums loiter on the wet street outside the soup kitchen. A scruffy guy named WILLIAM hoots at Alex as he approaches with the grocery bag.

WILLIAM

Alex! How ya doin' bro?

ALEX
Getting by. How about you William?

WILLIAM
Great, bro! Livin' in the here and now where da grass is always green 'n shit!

ALEX
I'm glad to hear it.

WILLIAM
Yeah. Say, bro. Whatcha got in the bag? Somethin' for us?

ALEX
Sure enough.

WILLIAM
Shit Alex. You da man!

Alex passes out the forties and the box of condoms to the REGULARS. He just made their day. They show it with a round of high fives and "right on's."

ALEX
You guys seen Doc?

WILLIAM
Yeah, bro. He's in there somewhere.

INT. RESCUE MISSION - DAY

Alex searches the cots until he finds an old man napping. He puts his hand on DOC's shoulder, glad to see his friend.

ALEX
Hey Doc. You asleep?

DOC
(groggy)
Alex? Is it Saturday?

ALEX
Yep. Wanna go to Jonny D's?

Doc sits up.

DOC
Let me get my coat.

ALEX
I got it right here.

Alex helps the old man into his overcoat.

INT. JONNY D'S - DAY

A smoky dive. The NBA playoffs flicker on a TV above the bar. FINK, the 20-something bartender, wipes down the counter.

ALEX
Hey Fink.

FINK
Thought I might see you guys in here today.

ALEX
Yep.

FINK
What can I getcha?

ALEX
Gin and tonic.

Doc bellies-up to the bar. He looks Fink in the eye and gestures with his hand to make a point of getting his drink exactly the way he likes it.

DOC
I'll have a dry Manhattan, on the rocks, with V.O. and an olive. No lemon. No bitters.

FINK
You got it.

Doc turns to Alex.

DOC
What're you doing here drinking with an old man? You should be chasing skirts in the Pearl.

ALEX
(teasing)
What, like shopping?

DOC
You know what I mean.

ALEX

I wanna watch basketball with my friend. That okay with you?

Fink delivers their drinks.

DOC

I'd like to buy my friend a drink.

ALEX

No way. (to Fink) Can I run a tab?

FINK

Already runnin'.

ALEX

Thanks.

FINK

You comin' in for the finals?

ALEX

You know it.

Fink knocks on wood and heads down the bar.

DOC

Why don't you let me buy sometime?

ALEX

Because you can't afford it.

DOC

You must be working again.

ALEX

I've been working for awhile.

DOC

That's good.

ALEX

It's got a downside, believe me.

DOC

Like what?

ALEX

I don't wanna talk about it.

Doc thinks a moment.

DOC

Well, it must be better than the street.

ALEX

I could make a case for the street.

DOC

(laughs)

You were as lost as a blind bear in a bramble patch.

ALEX

And still would be if it wasn't for you. That's why I'm buying.

Doc smiles and sips his cocktail.

DOC

How's your drink?

ALEX

Gin isn't cold. Tonic's flat. I'd say the limes have been sitting there since Wednesday.

DOC

I used to make gin and tonics. Always used the good stuff. Not the swill they pour here.

ALEX

I guess cocktails are a lost art.

CUT TO:

EXT. LAW FIRM - DAY

A stately brick building. Lettering in the second story window reads: "Herbert Putney, Attorney at Law."

INT. LAW OFFICE - DAY

PUTNEY is at his desk speaking with a client on the telephone.

PUTNEY

They'll drag it out with red tape. And they have deep pockets, so we could *both* be dead before it settles.

He pauses, an annoyed look on his face.

PUTNEY

Look, I understand you're getting screwed. But if I take your case then I'll be getting screwed too.

Increasingly annoyed.

PUTNEY

No one ever said life was fair Miss Walker.

CUT TO:

EXT. ALEX'S BUILDING - DAY

It's an especially wet day. The denuded landscape around Alex's flat is a muddy swamp. We hear a TV is on.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Alex is dressed in an old muscle shirt and dirty underwear. His hair's doing headstands. He finds enough coffee in the garbage can for one bad cup.

Alex pokes his head in the refrigerator and takes a swig of maple syrup. He rummages around and discovers a pack of moldy hot dogs. He throws them out and scoops relish out of a jar with his finger.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Popcorn ceilings and Spartan decor: white walls, basic furniture, no photographs of family or friends. Mini-blinds are closed tight.

Alex flops onto the couch with his relish jar and flips through daytime talk shows. People trapped in bad marriages, trapped in bad jobs, trapped in a man's body. He digs an old butt out of the ashtray and lights it up.

There's a KNOCK at the door.

Alex's POV of Ian and Two-Dollar Bob through the peep hole.

ALEX

(under his breath)

Shit.

He tiptoes back to the couch, cleaning the relish jar with his fingers. The doorbell RINGS.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB (O.S.)
C'mon, bro. We know you're in there.

EXT. FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

Two-Dollar Bob's ear is fixed to the door. Ian jackhammers the doorbell. DING-A-DING-A-DING-A-DING-A-DING-A-DING-DONG!

IAN
Open the freakin' door, man.

ALEX (O.S.)
Nobody's home.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
We're not leaving without you.

ALEX (O.S.)
Not interested.

IAN
Look around for the spare key.

Bob peeks under the mat.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Bingo!

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The doorknob wiggles and turns. Ian and Two-Dollar Bob burst in. Ian throws his arms in the air, triumphant.

IAN
Ta-da!

Two-Dollar Bob shuffles in after him, tracking muddy footprints.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
You should hide your key in a better spot. Doormat's the first place an axe murderer will look y'know.

Ian throws open the curtains and finds a concrete wall. A once great view of the Willamette River is now blocked by the construction of the luxurious new condos.

IAN

Ouch. That sucks. At least you don't have to worry about moving. No way you could ever sell the place now.

Alex is slumped on the couch, staring at the TV. He can barely contain the irritation he feels at this invasion.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

This rave's gonna be sick, dude.

ALEX

I told you. I'm busy.

IAN

Too busy for this?

Ian pulls out an Altoid's tin, shakes it and grins cryptically. He sits down next to Alex. Two-Dollar Bob plops down on the other side, almost tipping Alex into his lap. Ian opens the tin. A dozen capsules are inside. Alex's mood shifts.

ALEX

Did you get these from Dr. Nancy?

IAN

No, man. I got this shit in Vegas.

ALEX

What is it?

IAN

The good stuff.

EXT. PACKING DISTRICT - NIGHT

A shabby warehouse throbs like a beating heart. Thumping electronica and flashing lights burst from the building's seams.

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

The place is packed. Strobos flash. Lasers pulse. Bodies bump and grind to the heavy beat.

We notice a radiant girl in a bright RED DRESS. She steadies someone who trips and almost falls over. She hands her water bottle to a spun-out raver.

Ian is grinding on MONIQUE, a real hottie. Two-dollar Bob pounds PBR's with his frumpy wife JULIE. Dressed in over-tight jeans and an unflattering top, she's completely out of her element.

JULIE
(sarcastic)
This is fun.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
What?

JULIE
(louder)
I said this is FUN.

Bob crushes the beer can against his head.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
No thanks. Wanna dance?

JULIE
With you? No.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Can I have a couple of bucks?

JULIE
For what?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
I'm wanna get some pizza.

JULIE
We just ate, you fat fuck!

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Awww c'mon, Julie.

JULIE
No way.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Where's Alex?

JULIE
How should I know?

Bob scurries off, oblivious that Alex is hiding in a dark corner with their coats. His pupils are dilated like black swimming pools. He's having a bad trip.

ALEX'S POV: The warehouse looks like a vast prison of tortured souls. Some curl together in the shadows, clawing at each other's flesh. Others writhe like a heap of maggots melding into a single, oozing mass. They laugh and lunge at passersby.

Alex is nauseous. He wants to run. But he can't. He's paralyzed with fear.

Ian and Monique are ready for another hit. They walk over to their coats and find Alex trembling.

ALEX
(stutters)
I knew this w-would suck.

Ian pulls out the Altoids tin. He opens it, withdraws two pills and passes the tin to Alex. He lurches away.

IAN
Do another one. You'll feel better.

ALEX
No f-fucking way.

IAN
Okay, they're in your coat. In case you change your mind.

Ian turns to Monique and kisses her deeply. She sticks out her tongue and he places a pill on the tip. Down the hatch. They disappear onto the dance floor.

Alex is alone again, but only for a second. A blinding light shines into his eyes. An OGRE barks orders at Alex in a language he can't understand.

Alex is grabbed from behind and pushed toward the door. Terrified, he lashes out, limbs flailing. THUD! His elbow smacks against flesh and bone.

ALEX
Oww!

Alex's arm is twisted behind his back.

ALEX
Jesus Christ!

EXT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

It's drizzling outside. Alex is thrown head first against a squad car. He hits it hard, cutting his lip. He falls to his knees and pukes.

OFFICER DOWLING

Oh, that's nice.

Alex spits and stands up. OFFICER DOWLING, ripped with muscle, glares at Alex down the barrel of a gun. OFFICER McINTYRE reads Alex his Miranda Rights.

OFFICER McINTYRE

You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you...

ALEX

Wait. Wait. W-what did I do?

OFFICER McINTYRE

Drug deal.

ALEX

I wasn't d-dealing drugs!

OFFICER DOWLING

And resisting arrest.

ALEX

Huh?

Alex's knees buckle, but he's suddenly pulled back onto his feet by an angel. GRACE WALKER is the girl with the bright RED DRESS we saw on the dance floor. Early 30s, she exudes the kind of beauty that intrigues, but doesn't sell magazines. She wraps a furry blue coat around Alex.

GRACE

There you are!

OFFICER McINTYRE

Please step back, ma'am.

Grace doesn't budge.

GRACE

What the hell's going on?

Officer McIntyre starts to pull her away, but she holds Alex tight.

GRACE

What've done to my boyfriend?!

OFFICER DOWLING

Your boyfriend's under arrest.

GRACE

For what?

OFFICER DOWLING

We saw him hand out some pills and found this in his jacket.

Officer Dowling shakes the Altoids tin.

OFFICER McINTYRE

We came to question him and he assaulted my partner.

ALEX

Assaulted?

OFFICER DOWLING

Damn near broke my nose with the elbow you threw.

ALEX

I didn't...

GRACE

Look, officers. Someone gave us something on the dance floor, which he took especially hard. He just swallowed some Advil to relieve a terrible headache.

OFFICER McINTYRE

What's your name, Miss?

GRACE

Grace Walker.

OFFICER McINTYRE

And he's your boyfriend?

GRACE

Yes.

Alex is blown away. Who is this chick?

OFFICER McINTYRE

We saw what we saw, Miss Walker. We have his coat. We have his drugs.

(MORE)

OFFICER McINTYRE (cont'd)
He punched my partner in the nose.
This guy's going downtown.

Grace gets in their face with a self-confidence that surprises the cops.

GRACE
You're gonna go to a judge with
that? Gimme a break.

She reaches into the furry blue coat's pocket and produces a small bottle of Advil.

GRACE
This is his coat, not that one.
These are his "drugs". You can't
prove otherwise.

She turns to Officer Dowling.

GRACE
Plus, mister Body-by-Charles-Atlas,
tell me you're gonna go into court
and say this skinny little guy
"assaulted" you? Especially after
you just beat the crap out of him?
We oughtta sue for police
brutality.

She turns to Alex and kisses him sweetly on the cheek.

GRACE
How's your arm, baby?

ALEX
It f-fucking hurts.

Officer Dowling towers over Alex, who's covered in blood and puke. He lowers his gun and wipes at his nose.

GRACE
That's what I thought. Now why
don't you guys go bust some
terrorists? Do something
productive.

INT. VOLVO WAGON - SUNRISE

A dreary sun rises. The rain has stopped for now. Grace drives Alex home in her beat-up 1980 Volvo Wagon. He holds a compress of Kleenex to his bloody lip and leans his head against the half-open window, trying to make sense of what just happened.

ALEX

How'd you know all that s-stuff?

GRACE

I dated a lawyer for awhile. Public defender actually. Fucking cops. It's not rocket science. You just have to know the rules of engagement.

Alex checks out his new coat. It's a long woman's overcoat, light blue suede with faux fur trim.

ALEX

Whose coat is this?

GRACE

Dunno. Picked it up on the way outside. You're lucky it fit.

Alex lets that sink in.

ALEX

Why'd you rescue me?

GRACE

Looked like you needed rescuing. What's your name?

ALEX

Alex.

GRACE

Hi Alex.

CUT TO:

EXT. LOWER MANHATTAN - DAY

It's a crisp fall morning. The twin towers of the World Trade Center cast long shadows over the island metropolis. We PAN TO a nearby building, gleaming in the sun.

INT. DDB WORLDWIDE - DAY

Hallways are abuzz with activity. Everyone is working hard to meet their next deadline. A perky intern named BRANDY makes her way to a corner office. The door says "Managing Account Director."

INT. CORNER OFFICE - DAY

DEBORAH KELLER'S name is affixed a dozen polished advertising awards. Brandy peeks in the doorway.

BRANDY

Ms. Keller? I need your signature on this insurance authorization.

KELLER

Just set it there.

Brandy gingerly puts a folder on her boss's desk. Keller looks cranky, as usual.

KELLER

Is Grace in yet?

BRANDY

Haven't seen her.

KELLER

Do you think she made her own hours at Saatchi?

BRANDY

I dunno.

KELLER

When does layout need her copy?

BRANDY

Tomorrow morning.

KELLER

That's what I thought. She'd better do a bang up job this time. The client nearly took my head off at our last presentation.

Brandy backs toward the door.

BRANDY

That paperwork needed to go out over a month ago.

KELLER

(annoyed)

I'll take care of it.

She opens the folder and finds a letter from Integrity Insurance.

We see that "GRACE WALKER" has become eligible for enrollment in the agency's health plan. A form is attached with a "sign here" sticky.

Without a second thought, Keller swivels in her chair and drops the form into her shredder.

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Brandy weaves down the crowded hallway to a cubicle deep in the bowels of the bustling ad agency.

INT. GRACE'S CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS

The cramped space is dominated by oversize file folders and wallpapered with vintage rock posters. We notice the date on a "Far Side" calendar says SEPTEMBER 11th, 2001.

Grace sits upright at her desk, almost tasting the words on her monitor.

BRANDY

You're here early.

GRACE

(without looking up)

Yeah.

BRANDY

Keller wants to see you.

GRACE

Can't. Busy. Deadline in two hours.

BRANDY

I think it's important.

GRACE

(sighs)

Shit.

Grace shoves her keyboard and stands. She shakes out her body and stretches like a yogi. She blows her lips, releasing tension with a bull-charging snort.

INT. CORNER OFFICE - DAY

Grace enters to find Keller peering over copy that's been desecrated by a red pen.

KELLER
You're in early.

GRACE
That's so unusual?

KELLER
Actually it is.

GRACE
Inspiration doesn't always arrive
on the 8AM train.

Keller flaps the marked-up pages.

KELLER
What the hell is this?

GRACE
Good copy.

KELLER
The client will never go for it.

GRACE
Why not?

KELLER
Still too clever. They burned me at
the stake last week, remember?

GRACE
(incredulous)
Um, it's an ad for *dog food*.

KELLER
Purina doesn't want us to be
clever. They want us to do what
they tell us to do.

GRACE
Then why not do it themselves?

KELLER
Because we're the professionals.

GRACE
So we're just wrists then?

KELLER
Wrists?

GRACE

Puppets. Y'know, clients pull our strings.

She throws the pages at Grace.

KELLER

If you want to write poetry do it on your own time. This is a business.

GRACE

Maybe that's how we should promote ourselves. DDB Worldwide. Bend us over and we'll take it up the ass.

Keller raises an eyebrow.

KELLER

A hundred writers would beg to have your job for the health coverage alone.

Grace stands tall, but the fire in her eyes is gone.

GRACE

Okay. I get it.

KELLER

Good. Now write some copy I can approve. Or I'll find someone who will.

GRACE

That all?

Keller shoos Grace out of her office.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Grace storms back to her cubicle.

BRANDY

That bad huh?

GRACE

She's gonna fire me because I assume dog owners have half a brain.

BRANDY
 You're way too talented for this
 job. Why don't you follow your
 heart and be a real writer?

KA-BOOM!!! A huge EXPLOSION rocks the building. Grace and Brandy are thrown off their feet.

BRANDY
 Omigod!

Grace helps Brandy up. They're both terrified.

GRACE
 You okay?

BRANDY
 I think so. Was that an earthquake?

Smoke billows and sprinklers engage. Screams erupt from nearby offices.

INT. OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Grace enters an office and finds the windows have burst inward. There's glass everywhere and a CO-WORKER is bleeding profusely.

GRACE
 Call 9-1-1!

CUT TO:

EXT. ALEX'S STREET - DAY

It's drizzling, as usual. Alex is hunched over a pile of garbage that's been scattered by neighborhood dogs. He scoops the rotten remains into a trash bag and then reaches for a soggy egg carton. A pile of maggots squirm underneath.

ALEX
 Ugh!

Lurching away, Alex slips and falls on his ass. The bag rips apart, spilling junk mail and coffee grinds onto the street.

Alex pulls out a cigarette and lights it. He sits, defeated, smoking in the trash. A Lexus coupe convertible zooms up. Tinted window slides down. Grace is behind the wheel.

GRACE
Wanna go for a ride?

ALEX
I'm kinda overdressed.

GRACE
Get in.

EXT. HIGHWAY - LATER

The sun breaks through the clouds as the sports car speeds down Highway 26.

INT. LEXUS COUPE - CONTINUOUS

The roof is down and the sunshine warms their faces. It feels glorious.

ALEX
I was pretty fucked-up last night,
but I think I'd remember you
driving a car like this.

GRACE
I just stole it.

ALEX
Oh, okay.

Alex looks at her for the laugh. Doesn't get it.

GRACE
Holy shit!

She punches the gas.

ALEX
What?!

GRACE
The cops!

She guns it over 100 MPH. Alex white-knuckles the dashboard. Grace careens like a mad woman through traffic.

Braking suddenly, Grace takes the next exit and pulls quietly into a dealership parking lot. She hops out. The SALESMAN scurries over.

SALESMAN

So, what'd you think?

GRACE

It's not quite fast enough.

She tosses the keys to the salesman and struts over to her Volvo. Alex sits motionless in the sports car, his hands still glued the dashboard.

INT. VOLVO WAGON - DAY

Alex looks at Grace like she's a Monet: confusing, colorful, more beautiful than real life.

GRACE

Hope I didn't scare you too much.

ALEX

Not too much.

GRACE

You up for another adventure?

ALEX

I dunno. I've had like two hours of sleep, I'm on my second pair of pants, I think I sprained my wrist white-knuckling the dashboard of that Lexus, and I'm pretty sure I stopped breathing for about six and a half minutes.

GRACE

Sounds like a pretty good day so far.

Grace's energy is infectious. Her smile lights up the car.

ALEX

You always like this?

GRACE

Like what?

ALEX

Bat-shit crazy.

GRACE

No. It's a recent affliction. You always like this?

ALEX
Like what?

GRACE
Reasonable.

ALEX
Absolutely.

Grace veers onto a forest road.

GRACE
Then I'll take it easy on you.
For now.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Grace's Volvo pulls into a muddy parking area. She gets out and stretches, which induces a fit of violent COUGHING.

ALEX
You okay?

GRACE
For the moment. We're here.

ALEX
Where?

She grabs two towels and a small backpack.

GRACE
Follow me.

EXT. TRAIL - LATER

Grace leads Alex down a lush forest path lined by old-growth redwoods. Giant ferns cover the damp soil. Water trickles everywhere.

GRACE
You hike much?

ALEX
No.

GRACE
How come?

ALEX
Never comes up I guess.

GRACE

Yeah, the forest rarely comes knocking on your door. Fear of rejection I think.

Alex is baffled by this girl.

GRACE

We're here.

EXT. BAGBY HOTSPRINGS - CONTINUOUS

The trail opens up to reveal a rustic hotspring. Steaming water flows along a sluice, feeding large communal tubs from the source.

Nude people bathe and lounge about. Even from a distance Alex can tell it's not a "good" nude. Most of the bathers are older, overweight and definitely not attractive. Stuff you never want to see, especially on a first date.

Grace sets down her bag.

GRACE

Howdy.

Bathers wave and smile. Alex stands nervously, unsure of what to do next. He keeps his eyes fixed on a tub wall, intently reading the carved names, dates and declarations.

ALEX

Amazing what some people will carve into a hot tub.

GRACE

Yup.

ALEX

So I don't have a...

Alex looks up and sees Grace standing beside him, naked. She's spectacular.

GRACE

Don't have a what?

She steps nimbly into a nearby tub.

ALEX

Nothing.

EXT. HOT TUB - DAY

Alex and Grace are squashed between three enormous bathers, RAY, KAT and MARGARET, all in their early 50s. Alex is feeling claustrophobic and very uncomfortable.

GRACE

Thanks for squeezing us in.

KAT

No problem.

RAY

The more the merrier.

MARGARET

I'm Margaret. This is Ray and Kat.

GRACE

Hi. I'm Grace. This is Alex.

MARGARET

This your first time at Bagby, Alex?

ALEX

How'd you guess?

MARGARET

Just a hunch.

Ray stands up and offers an unpleasant view of the crack of his ass. He bends over to retrieve a flask.

RAY

Whiskey anyone?

GRACE

Sure.

She takes a slug and passes the flask around. Kat turns it down.

KAT

No thanks. I gotta get to work pretty soon.

RAY

All the more reason to hit the hooch.

KAT

Nope. I had a helluva night last night. Couldn't get a bunch'a drunk assholes outta the bar, so I didn't get off 'til after two.

MARGARET

Don't you have to be at the bakery by four?

KAT

Yeah. I drank coffee all morning to pull myself through. But then I couldn't sleep when I got home.

MARGARET

At least you have work. The temp agency hasn't called me all week.

Ray takes a swig of the whiskey.

RAY

Work, schmerk. Who needs it?

MARGARET

Not all of us can be trustafarians like you, mister.

Kat checks her watch.

KAT

Crap guys. I gotta go.

RAY

Aaaww c'mon! We just got here!

The women stand up, wilted breasts dangling in Alex's face.

MARGARET

We've been here for hours. Look! I've shrivelled down to a B-cup!

EXT. HOT TUB - LATER

Grace dumps a bucket of stream water into the tub and mixes it with her hand, feeling the temperature.

GRACE

Perfect.

She slips back into the water. Alone at last, Alex finally begins to unwind. His lingering inhibitions seep away as he connects with Grace.

GRACE

So you're an artist?

ALEX

I was. Always wanted to work for Capitol Records designing record jackets.

GRACE

You mean CD's?

ALEX

No, records. You know, vinyl. It was such a cool format. Jewel cases suck. They're so small and...

GRACE

(excited)

I know! I dig the ones made out of paper. Plastic ones feel so cheap.

ALEX

Exactly. What about you?

Grace wiggles her toes out of the water.

GRACE

I always wanted to be a rock star.

ALEX

No kidding?

GRACE

Yeah, but then I found out I can't sing. So I decided that getting paid to go to kickass shows and hang out with rock stars backstage was the next best thing.

ALEX

You do that?

GRACE

Sure. I write freelance for a small online magazine. It doesn't pay much, but I like it.

ALEX

Ever send your work to *Rolling Stone*?

GRACE

Nah, too corporate.

ALEX

Didn't Kurt Cobain wear a shirt that said "Corporate Magazines Suck" on the cover?

GRACE

Yeah, I loved that. Anyway, I'm not into selling-out. Plus it turns out I'm not really into hanging with rock stars either.

ALEX

How come?

GRACE

Once I talk to them they become real people. And I already know plenty of those.

ALEX

But good music is like making art. It transports you. Makes you... feel something.

Grace sits quietly, taking in Alex's presence. He gets self conscious.

ALEX

But what do I know?

GRACE

A lot.

They hold each other's eyes for a moment. Alex dunks his head underwater. He comes up with a SMILE on his face, something we see for the very first time.

GRACE

Nice huh?

ALEX

There's this Buddhist proverb I like.

GRACE

Tell me.

ALEX

It's easy for the monk to achieve enlightenment if he lives alone high on the mountain. Much harder if he lives in a cage full of monkeys.

Grace smiles back, which electrifies Alex even more.

GRACE

You like to dance?

ALEX

I used to.

GRACE

I've always wanted to learn to salsa.

ALEX

Me too.

GRACE

They have a free class at Tabú on Saturday night. Wanna go?

ALEX

Yeah, okay.

INT. CALL CENTER - MORNING

Alex's phone blinks with clients on hold. He's absorbed in doodling. The bathers from Bagbee hot springs come to life on the page.

Ian careens down the aisle in a swivel chair and deliberately slams into Alex's desk. CRASH! Loose papers fly.

IAN

Whassup?

ALEX

(annoyed)

Working.

IAN

What happened to you the other night?

ALEX

Went home early.

Ian grabs a pen and defaces Alex's drawing as he talks.

IAN

I don't get you, man. That party was sick. Oh and guess what? Monique's one of our clients so I looked up her medical records. That chick's had three abortions!

ALEX

A fact her mother probably doesn't even know.

IAN

No kidding.

ALEX

I guess you don't have to worry about breeding with her.

IAN

I didn't even wear a condom, dude!

Two-Dollar Bob walks by with a bag of Cheetos. He flips through some paperwork, covering the files in bright orange processed cheese.

IAN

Hey Bob, too bad you fucked-up the numbers on that Henderson claim. Always seems to happen the week of evaluations, huh?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

You think I'll still get a raise?

IAN

Wake up man. You're never getting a raise. You're lucky they don't fire your ass.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

You could help me out y'know?

IAN

That's true.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

So why don't you?

Ian thinks about it. Shrugs.

IAN

Ehhh.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

What the fuck, bro? I'm...

Bob looks around and quiets his voice.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

I'm taking care of that *accounting* glitch from your Vegas trip.

IAN

Good.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

It's worse than you thought.

IAN

That's why I keep you around.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

I thought we were friends?

IAN

We are.

Ian pins the defaced drawing onto Alex's cubicle wall. He rolls back to his office.

IAN

Just make sure I get those revised spreadsheets before the quarterlies are due.

We see Ian has drawn enormous boobs and a big hairy penis on the Bagbee Bathers. Alex's blood begins to boil.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Looks like you could use a Valium.

Bob offers him a couple pink tablets. Alex automatically reaches out... and then stops short.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

You sure?

Alex turns away, picks up his headset and answers a call.

ALEX

Sorry to keep you on hold...

INT. TABU - DANCE FLOOR - NIGHT

A swanky Nuevo-Latino restaurant. Couples are scattered on the dance floor, gyrating to the sexy salsa beat. A female INSTRUCTOR glides among them, tweaking their form.

The song ends. Everyone claps, except for Alex, who's intimidated as hell. Grace shines at his side.

GRACE

At least you don't have to do it
naked.

She shudders. He smiles.

INSTRUCTOR

(thick accent)

Okay, guys. Let's learn cross-body
lead this time.

The DJ cues the next song.

INSTRUCTOR

Hold you partner in closed
position, okay?

They adjust their feet and hand positions. Alex holds Grace awkwardly, uncomfortable with the stance.

INSTRUCTOR

Start basic step. On three, guys
step aside, push her shoulder,
ladies go by, then right foot back,
and up to middle, okay? I count for
you. One, two, three (hold) five,
six, seven (hold). One, two,
three...

Alex is totally lost. He bumps into someone, recoils, turns to apologize but the couple has moved on.

ALEX

I'm not feeling it tonight.

Grace coaxes him with a radiant smile.

GRACE

You're doing great.

INSTRUCTOR

One, two, three (hold) five, six,
seven...

Alex steps on Grace's foot. Her smile shifts to a funny squooshed face.

ALEX
Crap. I can't get it.

Grace locks their hands together.

GRACE
Don't give up so easy.

ALEX
Okay.

GRACE
You need to lead.

INSTRUCTOR
One, two, three (hold) five, six, seven...

ALEX
Why should I have to lead? I dunno how to do this.

GRACE
Yeah, but the man leads.

ALEX
What about women's lib? Salsa dancing trumps equal rights?

GRACE
Puh-lease. Someone has to lead, that's how it works. Besides, I like to twirl.

She twirls and comes back into his arms.

INSTRUCTOR
One, two, three (hold) five, six, seven...

GRACE
Just surrender to the beat. Your body will figure it out.

Alex starts to move with the music. The repetitive step imprints itself into his muscle memory. Their feet sync up. Their bodies move closer. Grace twirls on cue.

INSTRUCTOR
Very nice!

Alex and Grace hit a stride. They're actually pretty good. More importantly, they're having fun. The song ends.

INSTRUCTOR

Very good guys, thank you. See you next time, okay?

The class is over and the floor opens up to the slick regular crowd. These folks are spectacular dancers. Alex and Grace try to hold their own amidst the seasoned veterans, but Alex gets self-conscious and escorts Grace off the floor.

ALEX

I need a drink.

A handsome Latino named RAMONE approaches.

RAMONE
(polite)

Dance?

Grace is already on the dance floor.

GRACE

Love to!

Ramone takes control and Grace follows his every lead. They dance beautifully. The DJ cuts to a hot number. Ramone draws Grace tight against his body and they dance in a fantastic whirl of sex and sweat. Alex turns away, defeated.

INT. TABU - BAR - LATER

Grace finds Alex slumped on a bar stool.

GRACE

There you are! This your drink?

ALEX

Yeah.

She holds the icy Mojito against her forehead.

GRACE

That was great!

ALEX

(sulking)

Looked like fun out there.

Grace tries to catch Alex's eyes. She can't. She gently touches his shoulder.

GRACE

Hey. I didn't mean to upset you. I just like to dance.

ALEX

Go dance.

GRACE

Nah, Ramone's not my type.

ALEX

Sure seemed like your type on the dance floor.

GRACE

I like my men bitter and sulking.

She growls seductively at Alex and runs her finger up his arm. He still won't look up.

GRACE

Okay, I get it. That probably wasn't much fun to watch. How about I make it up to you?

Alex shrugs.

GRACE

I know this place where I make a complete fool of myself on a regular basis.

ALEX

What place?

GRACE

Let's go.

EXT. THE DOUG FIR - NIGHT

A hipster lounge. The sandwich board reads: LIVE KARAOKE, 9:00 PM TONIGHT!

INT. THE DOUG FIR - NIGHT

The bar extends to an open dancing area and a small stage with guitars, drums, keys and the HOUSE BAND. The role of lead vocals is left up to the evening's patrons.

There's a good crowd tonight. A guy on stage lives out his unrequited dream of stardom with a painful rendition of Bob Dylan's, "Like a Rolling Stone."

Alex and Grace do shots of tequila at the bar. Grace grimaces and shakes her head like a wet dog.

GRACE

Woof!

ALEX

Ready?

GRACE

I need another one.

ALEX

Two more please.

The BARTENDER pours another round. Grace throws the shot back and shakes her head. The booze is giving Alex a boost of confidence. Drunk is familiar territory.

ALEX

Ready now?

GRACE

No. But screw it.

Bob Dylan wraps up and Grace takes the stage. She huddles with the band. They know her request. She takes the microphone.

An acoustic guitar strums. The drums kick-in. The band explodes into "Bargain" by THE WHO. Grace's head shoots up from the microphone, hips gyrate, lips curl. She swings the mic like Roger Daltrey then windmills an air-guitar like Pete Townsend. Grace transforms before Alex's eyes... but she can't sing worth a damn! It's like nails on a chalkboard!

Grace gives it her all. But as good as her moves are, they can't make up for her horrible voice. The audience cringes. The band grimaces. Alex cracks up laughing.

As the song builds to its big climax, Grace signals the band to wrap it up on her cue. The lead guitarist rolls his eyes. She leaps off the stage in a showy crescendo... but the band keeps right on playing! Grace does it again and again, trying to close the song with rock star prowess. The band laughs, toying with her, then noodles out in their own time.

Grace sets the microphone in its stand.

GRACE

Thanks y'all! Let's hear it for the band!

Everyone claps, happy she's leaving the stage. She hugs a couple of band members who grin with faux enthusiasm. They send her off with a mocking clown diddy.

Grace returns to Alex, who's still whistling at the bar. She COUGHS painfully.

GRACE

Okay, you're next.

ALEX

I don't think so.

GRACE

Oh, come on! Did you see me up there?

ALEX

Yeah, you were great.

GRACE

So what song are you gonna do?

ALEX

I'm not gonna do it.

GRACE

Why not?

ALEX

I thought it was your turn to make a fool of yourself.

GRACE

Can't be any worse than me, right?

ALEX

(laughs)

That's for sure.

GRACE

Fine. But you're gonna be up there someday.

ALEX

Wanna bet?

GRACE

When's your birthday?

ALEX

September 2nd.

Grace extends her hand.

GRACE

Five hundred bucks says you're on stage by September 2nd.

ALEX

This year?

GRACE

Yep.

ALEX

Okay.

He reaches to shake on it, but Grace yanks her hand away.

GRACE

Busted.

ALEX

What?

GRACE

I can't believe you're gonna put five hundred bones on staying stuck until your birthday.

ALEX

Is this a trick?

GRACE

Damn skippy. What's the matter with you? Be the change you wanna see in the world Alex.

ALEX

Oh great. Bumpersticker philosophy.

GRACE

Hey, if it's real.

A light goes off in her head.

GRACE

Speaking of change, I'm gonna trade in my CD collection. Wanna come help me pick out some new tunes?

ALEX

Sure.

EXT. MUSIC MILLENNIUM - THE NEXT DAY

It's fairly nice weather by Portland standards. The used-record store is tucked away on pedestrian-friendly NW 23rd street.

INT. MUSIC MILLENNIUM - DAY

With Alex in tow, Grace drops a heavy box of CDs on the counter. The hipper-than-thou CLERK isn't too happy about actually doing some work.

CLERK

Woo-hoo. Trade-ins.

GRACE

Yep. Check 'em out.

The clerk fingers the jewel cases. His mood brightens a bit.

CLERK

The Brian Jonestown Massacre. Chuck Prophet. Lucinda Williams. You've got some halfway decent stuff here.

GRACE

Which means you'll give me top dollar.

The clerk picks up a CD.

CLERK

Who's Little Thom?

GRACE

Singer-songwriter. That's a great record. You'll laugh, you'll cry.

CLERK

I'll give ya seventy-five bucks.

GRACE

One-twenty or I'll take 'em to Jackpot.

CLERK

Ninety. Trade not cash.

GRACE

Deal. (to Alex) Let's go shopping
honey!

Grace pulls Alex into the stacks.

ALEX

(incredulous)

You had like a hundred records in
there.

GRACE

And?

ALEX

And he's giving you six cents on
the dollar.

Grace flips through the cases of music.

GRACE

Out with the old, in with the new.

ALEX

You're gonna get like five new
albums.

GRACE

Maybe ten if I buy 'em used.

ALEX

Still...

She pulls out a CD.

GRACE

Have you heard the new Ray
LaMontagne?

ALEX

I think you got screwed. You
shoulda kept your collection.

Grace sighs at Alex without looking up.

GRACE

Music is like porn. It gets boring
after awhile. You gotta freshen up
your stash.

ALEX

Fresh porn, huh?

GRACE

Yeah.

INT. MUU MUU'S - DAY

Grace and Alex are seated in a dark wood booth at the funky Northwest eatery. She sorts through a small pile of CDs.

ALEX

Nine CDs.

GRACE

I think I did pretty good.

ALEX

You got screwed.

Grace sets the music aside. Alex is getting on her nerves.

GRACE

You planning on having kids?

ALEX

No.

GRACE

Good.

ALEX

Why do you say that?

GRACE

You'd be a terrible father.

Alex laughs uncomfortably.

ALEX

Yeah. I can barely run my own life.

GRACE

You're gonna miss out.

ALEX

Nah. Besides, there's already too many people on the planet.

GRACE

It just takes one person to change the world.

ALEX

Your kid's gonna change the world?

GRACE

I hope so. Maybe she'll be the next Jesus or Martin Luther King.

ALEX

Whaddaya do if she isn't? Send her back?

GRACE

(annoyed)

So what're you doing to save the world?!

ALEX

Me? I'm the greenest motherfucker around. I don't have kids and I recycle!

GRACE

What does having kids have to do with anything?

ALEX

Are you kidding? The absolute *worst* thing you can do to the planet is bring another American consumer into the world.

Grace sighs, disappointed.

GRACE

How come you're so negative all the time?

ALEX

Negative?

GRACE

Yeah. How come you're not happy?

ALEX

Well, let's see... my job sucks. My condo sucks. My friends, they suck.

GRACE

Sucking is a point of view.

The WAITRESS comes over.

WAITRESS

Hi. What can I get for you two?

Grace picks up the menu. She reads each item carefully, flips the menu over and reads the fine print. Flips it back over, reads some more. This takes awhile.

ALEX

Know what you want?

GRACE

It depends. Where do you get your beef?

WAITRESS

Excuse me?

GRACE

Your beef. Does it come from Joe rancher up the road or a Monsanto death factory?

WAITRESS

It comes frozen in a truck every Tuesday.

GRACE

Good enough. I'll have the Southwestern salad. Dressing on the side. Are the cucumbers organic?

WAITRESS

I doubt it.

GRACE

Then no cucumbers please.

WAITRESS

You want chicken on that?

GRACE

No thanks.

Grace smiles. The waitress looks over to Alex.

ALEX

Cheeseburger. Extra pickles.

WAITRESS

Gotcha.

The waitress leaves. Alex sticks his tongue out at Grace. She stares at him. He's like a little kid. She decides to let go of her anger.

GRACE

I'll cook you dinner sometime. I make a killer vegan sausage lasagna.

ALEX

Um... cheese and meat and eggs are pretty important ingredients...

Grace taps his noggin.

GRACE

Better judge with your taste buds.

ALEX

I've never been with a girl who could cook.

GRACE

Really?

ALEX

Too old school I guess.

GRACE

Old school?

ALEX

Our grandmothers cooked. After that, a generation of liberated feminist mothers gave birth to a generation of microwave dinner daughters.

Grace looks at him sternly.

GRACE

How come your life sucks so much?

ALEX

It just happened.

GRACE

Nothing just happens. You were an artist right?

ALEX

Yeah.

GRACE

And?

ALEX
You really wanna know?

She nods.

ALEX
Okay.

Alex lights a cigarette.

ALEX
I wasn't really into the whole
starving artist thing, so I studied
graphic design in college.

GRACE
Very practical.

ALEX
I worked in a couple'a big agencies
for awhile but I realized I could
make more freelancing. So I opened
my own studio.

GRACE
That's cool.

ALEX
Yeah, it was. No boss, made my own
schedule, took six week vacations,
met a girl...

GRACE
What was her name?

ALEX
Sarah.

Alex takes a long drag off his cigarette. It feels good to
open up.

ALEX
Anyway, things were pretty good. I
had a house, a business and a
relationship. Then one day one of
my employees ran over Edward Chen.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNSIDE STREET - FLASHBACK - DAY

KA-RASH! A delivery van emblazoned with a "ROGUE DESIGN GROUP" logo runs a red light and plows into a BMW convertible. The car crumples like a tin can.

ALEX (V.O.)

A 42 year-old father of three.

Cars slam on their brakes. People gasp, scream, cry for help. The DRIVER flops out of the van, bleeding.

ALEX (V.O.)

Brad was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and did eighteen months.

BACK TO:

INT. MUU MUU'S - CONTINUOUS

Grace absorbs Alex's story.

ALEX

The Chen family sued me in civil court. They won and I lost everything.

GRACE

Why?

ALEX

Brad was driving a company vehicle on a work-related errand.

GRACE

So how were you responsible?

ALEX

The business wasn't incorporated so the lawyers went after my personal assets. Insurance covered \$100 thousand bucks, but after that it was all me. They took everything. Then my girlfriend dumped me and I ended up on the street.

Alex stubs out his cigarette and waits for a response. Grace is attentive, but quiet.

ALEX

I was homeless for about six months before an old college buddy hooked me up with a decent-paying job. I have to sell my soul to do it, but I need the money.

Grace considers Alex with a warm, accepting gaze.

ALEX

That's pretty much it.

GRACE

Quite a story.

ALEX

Yep.

Long pause. She doesn't take her eyes off him.

GRACE

Maybe it was a good thing.

ALEX

It was definitely not a good thing.

GRACE

Maybe it shook you up. Forced you to really find yourself.

ALEX

(defensive)

Yeah well, I found myself in a fucking dumpster scrounging for food.

GRACE

Sounds to me like you've spent your whole life going through the motions. Racing from one regimented social institution to the next: family, high school, college, work. Maybe you needed to have the rug pulled out from under you.

ALEX

Maybe I'm just unlucky.

GRACE

Maybe you're extremely lucky and you just don't see it yet.

ALEX
My life was perfect.

GRACE
That's why the rug got pulled out.

Alex is bitter.

ALEX
You don't get it.

GRACE
I'm just saying that if you lost
your happiness that easily, then it
probably wasn't real in the first
place.

ALEX
Yeah, well what about you?

GRACE
What about me?

ALEX
How do you avoid the confines of
regimented social institutions?

GRACE
I take good care of my skin.

Alex gives her a stern "bad cop" look.

ALEX
Just answer the questions ma'am.

GRACE
I wanna talk to my lawyer.

ALEX
C'mon! Tell me something. Why do
you live here?

GRACE
Because Portland's the greenest
city in the United States. And I
like the color green.

ALEX
Okay. How about New York? You were
a copywriter, right?

Grace withdraws. She doesn't feeling like letting him in.

GRACE
I was a lot of things.

ALEX
Well you must've worked somewhere.

GRACE
I did.

ALEX
And?

GRACE
And I quit.

ALEX
What happened?

GRACE
I stopped showing up. They stopped
paying me. Pretty standard stuff.

ALEX
But why?

GRACE
It was time.

ALEX
(firmly)
C'mon Grace. It's your turn.

GRACE
We can't change what happened
yesterday and we don't know what's
gonna happen tomorrow, so why miss
today sweating it?

ALEX
Carpe diem?

GRACE
Radical acceptance.

ALEX
Just accept our shitty lives?
That's your secret?

GRACE
When you stop trying to get
somewhere else, you start living
where you are.

The waitress brings their food.

WAITRESS

Here ya go. Southwestern salad, no
cukes. Cheeseburger, extra pickles.

GRACE

Thank you.

WAITRESS

Enjoy.

Grace digs in.

ALEX

I'll buy that for now. But you
gotta tell me the story someday
okay?

GRACE

(mouth full)

Deal.

INT. JONNY D'S - DAY

The NBA championship series is on the television. Doc sits at
the bar, alone, nursing a cheap draft beer.

FINK

I thought Alex said he was comin'?

DOC

He is. Alex is honest as a looking
glass.

FINK

But it's the third quarter.

Doc looks dejected.

DOC

I showed Alex the ropes down at the
Shelter.

FINK

I remember you telling me that.

DOC

He won't forget.

Fink brings Doc a Manhattan. He knocks twice on the bar.

FINK

Yeah, you're right. This one's on me.

CUT TO:

MONTAGE - DAY AND NIGHT

Alex and Grace enjoy each other's company. They critique paintings at an ART WALK in the Pearl District. SKIP THROUGH PUDDLES in Pioneer Square. Grace picks out a stylish NEW SHIRT for Alex. He looks great and she buys it for him. They SHARE A SUNSET PICNIC overlooking the city at Mt. Tabor park.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Salsa music is on the stereo. Alex's hair is styled and he's standing tall. He practices his Salsa step in front of the mirror.

ALEX

One, two, three (hold) five, six, seven (hold). One, two, three (hold) five, six, seven...

He opens the medicine cabinet to grab his toothbrush and notices all the prescription meds.

EXT. DUMPSTER - CONTINUOUS

Alex pitches the medication into the trash.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNT HOOD WILDERNESS - DAY

It's a beautiful day. Grace's Volvo winds up the road toward snow-capped Mount Hood.

EXT. TRAIL - DAY

Grace and Alex climb a rocky path through the forest. They hike in silence, taking it all in. Sun streaks through the pines. A nearby waterfall roars.

EXT. WATERFALL - DAY

Grace cups her hands under the cascade and splashes herself with water. Alex sits on a boulder and lights a cigarette.

GRACE
(windy)
How can you smoke up here?

ALEX
I'm an addict.

GRACE
I'm surprised you don't pass out.

ALEX
My lungs are used to being deprived
of oxygen.

Grace yanks the cigarette out of his mouth.

EXT. MEADOW - DAY

The path opens up to a sunlit meadow. Wildflowers bloom through the field. Snow-covered peaks rise in the distance.

Grace stops to smell a bright purple flower. She discovers a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. There's another. And another.

GRACE
Check this out.

The butterfly breaks free, stretches its wings and soaks up the sun. It flies off. Another butterfly hovers over Alex's shoulder. Two more fly up from the grass at their feet. One brushes Grace's nose. She giggles.

All around them dozens more, then hundreds of butterflies break free of their cocoons and fly into the great wide open. Grace tilts her head back, closes her eyes, and opens her arms. Butterflies swirl around her. Alex smiles. He's on top of the world.

CUT TO:

EXT. MANHATTAN APARTMENT - DAY

A shabby building hugs the corner of a busy intersection. The street is shrouded in a thick chalky dust.

Black garbage bags line the sidewalks, waiting for the long-overdue pick-up service.

INT. GRACE'S STUDIO - DAY

Grace is curled-up on a futon in her tiny studio apartment. Beads of sweat pour down her face. She convulses with a violent, hacking COUGH. She grabs the phone and dials.

INT. D.D.B. WORLDWIDE - DAY

CROSS-CUT between Brandy and Grace:

BRANDY

This is Brandy.

GRACE

(hoarse)

Hey, Brandy, it's Grace.

BRANDY

Grace? You sound terrible.

GRACE

Yeah. Listen, what's the name of our insurance company?

BRANDY

Integrity. Why?

GRACE

Do you have the number?

BRANDY

Sure. Hang on. Do you need a doctor?

GRACE

Yeah.

BRANDY

Are you okay?

GRACE

I dunno.

BRANDY

The number is 800-555-6004.

GRACE

Thanks Brandy. (cough) Gotta go.

Grace hangs up. She dials and gets stuck in an automated voice-mail loop. She enunciates short phrases into the phone, increasingly frustrated.

GRACE
 English. (beat) Group plan. (beat)
 Yes. (beat) Physician list. (beat)
 No. (beat) No! (beat) NO!!

Grace COUGHS a speck of blood onto her sheets. She presses zero repeatedly until she gets a real person.

INT. CALL CENTER - INDIA - DAY

Telephones blink incessantly in a bustling room packed with hundreds of operators. A plaque affixed to one woman's phone reads "Stacy". CROSS-CUT between STACY and Grace:

STACY
 (thick accent)
 Hello. My name is Stacy.

GRACE
 Finally! I've never needed to use my company's health insurance before so I don't know which doctors are covered under my plan and...

STACY
 Tell me your name please.

The pain worsens. Grace has trouble breathing.

GRACE
 Grace Walker.

STACY
 I.D. number please Miss.

GRACE
 I don't have an I.D. number. I've never used my insurance before. I'm covered through my job.

STACY
 Your company please.

GRACE
 DDB Worldwide.

STACY

Your city please.

Grace clenches her midsection. She's really scared.

GRACE

New York.

STACY

Yes, I find it. Hold please. (long
pause) Miss? Spell your name,
please.

Grace can barely understand her.

GRACE

What?

STACY

Spell your surname, please.

GRACE

W-A-L-K-E-R. Listen, I just need to
know which doctor...

STACY

I'm sorry. I find no plan for Grace
Walker at that company.

GRACE

(in agony)

That's impossible. Please check
again. I know I'm covered.

STACY

I'm sorry Miss, but there's no
record under your company's plan.
I'll transfer you. Hold please.

Blood is streaming down her nose. She tries to stand... but
passes out instead!

CUT TO:

EXT. GAS STATION - LATE AFTERNOON

Grace's Volvo pulls off the mountain road and into a grimy
backwoods gas station. Alex heads to the men's room. The
ATTENDANT walks over and Grace hands him a twenty.

GRACE

Gimme what ya can.

ATTENDANT

Andrew Jackson don't pump as much
as he usedta.

GRACE

Tell me about it.

INT. MEN'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The toilet flushes. Without warning Grace jumps into the stall with Alex.

ALEX

Hey!

He tries to zip up, but Grace halts his progress. She presses her body against his and reaches into his pants. Alex hesitates.

ALEX

Maybe we should...?

Grace kisses him passionately. Resistance melts. Alex begins kissing, squeezing. Grace strips off her shorts, her panties. She balances a foot on the toilet and wraps her leg around Alex's waist. He presses her against the stall.

ALEX

I don't have a...

GRACE

I don't care.

She takes him inside her and rides Alex hard.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - SUNSET

Grace's wagon heads down the mountain.

INT. VOLVO WAGON - SUNSET

Alex runs his fingers along her arm. He's in heaven.

GRACE

Don't fall in love with me.

ALEX

Huh?

GRACE

You don't wanna fall in love with me.

ALEX

That's a pretty weird thing to say.

The mood shifts. Grace COUGHS and spits out the window.

GRACE

Just listen for a second, okay?

ALEX

Okay.

GRACE

I'm not gonna live a very long life.

ALEX

Why not?

GRACE

There's this type of cancer... Mesothelioma.

ALEX

That's what 9/11 survivors have been diagnosed with.

GRACE

How do you know that?

ALEX

The insurance industry is fighting those claims...

Grace looks at him queerly.

ALEX

I, um, saw a story on 60 minutes.

GRACE

Yeah, well thousands more people got killed on September 11th. They just don't know it yet.

ALEX

But they haven't found any definitive links...

GRACE

Come on! Those towers burned at over 1800 degrees Fahrenheit, then collapsed at 120 miles an hour, instantly vaporizing two and a half million tons of concrete and glass and asbestos.

ALEX

You've done your homework.

GRACE

I was there. I saw the towers fall. I breathed them in.

Alex picks at his fingernails.

ALEX

That doesn't necessarily mean you're sick.

GRACE

I know my body. I can still taste that black air. My skin still itches. I had to get outta that city. But those towers are in my lungs. They're in my blood.

ALEX

Have you seen a doctor?

GRACE

Can't afford it. I'm already ten grand in debt just for the x-rays and other tests.

ALEX

Don't you have health insurance?

GRACE

Nope.

ALEX

I thought you worked for a big ad agency.

GRACE

My cheap-ass boss never filed the paperwork.

ALEX

What do you mean?

GRACE

She never signed me up. Saved the agency like \$200 bucks a month. It never came up until I was doubled-over in the Emergency Room.

Alex squirms in his seat.

ALEX

Weren't you covered after confronting your boss?

GRACE

That's the best part. When I finally got enrolled on the plan, the insurance company called it a pre-existing condition. I waded through a festering cesspool of blood-sucking zombies until this spineless bastard finally turned me down. The guy wouldn't even give me his name.

ALEX

That's... awful.

GRACE

Yeah, well, It was a wake-up call. I quit my job and I'm living for the moment. Having as much fun as I can for whatever time I have left.

Alex stares blankly out the window. He feels sick.

GRACE

Anyway, I thought you should know.

INT. CALL CENTER - DAY

Alex looks like shit. Mussed hair, bloodshot eyes, his face is once again expressionless, voice cold and by-the-book. He leans back in his chair and lights a cigarette.

ALEX

Tell you what Mrs. Blodgett. Lose the life raft where your ass used to be and then we'll talk about setting you up with a lower deductible.

Two-Dollar Bob peeks into Alex's cubicle.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Dude. You can't puff in here!

Alex punches hold and removes his headset.

ALEX
You got any OxyContin?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
No.

ALEX
Provigil?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
No.

ALEX
What the fuck ya got Bob?

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
I got some Prozac. And a couple
Norcos I bummed off Ian.

ALEX
That'll do.

CUT TO:

Two orange pills are on Alex's desk next to the crushed-out cigarette. He's fading into a drug-induced haze.

ALEX
Yes sir, you probably should be covered. But our business model counts on the fact that schmucks like you won't read the fine print. (beat) How do I live with myself? I choke down a lot of Prozac, sir.

CUT TO:

Alex's eyes bob as another client talks. He jolts awake.

ALEX
Huh? Oh, sorry. Hold please.

Alex punches hold, drops his headset and walks away.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

CLOSE on Alex's blinking answering machine: 4 messages. The phone rings, answering machine picks up.

ALEX'S MACHINE

Leave a message and maybe I'll call you back.

GRACE (O.S.)

Hey there. It's Grace again. So I guess I kinda freaked you out last week. I shoulda warned you, I'm a closet hypochondriac. There it is, I've come out. Might as well tell you I'm also a God-fearing existentialist. Anyway, I'd love to hear from you. Call me back. 'Bye.

Alex stares into space, indifferent.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Alex lies awake on soiled sheets, numb to the world. The phone rings, machine picks up. It blinks: 7 messages.

ALEX'S MACHINE

Leave a message and maybe I'll call you back.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB (O.S.)

Hey buddy, Bob here. Where've you been, bro? Hey, if you come to work tomorrow, can I borrow some cash? They docked my pay for that Henderson claim. Anyway, sorry to ask. I wish I didn't have to. Thanks, bro.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Alex is slumped on the couch. He reaches for a cigarette and finds the pack's empty.

ALEX

Fuck.

Alex gets up and throws on the NEW SHIRT Grace bought for him. The phone rings, machine picks up. It blinks: 11 messages.

ALEX'S MACHINE

Leave a message and maybe I'll call
you back.

GRACE (O.S.)

Where are you? I haven't seen you
in forever. Should I be worried?

Alex is out the door.

INT. SAFEWAY - NIGHT

Alex notices Shauna's working. He gets in her line.

ALEX

Pall Malls please.

She smiles with her bright green eyes.

SHAUNA

You're kidding?

ALEX

No.

SHAUNA

They taste like dusty socks.

ALEX

You smoke?

SHAUNA

When I'm out.

ALEX

What's your brand?

SHAUNA

American Spirits. They're all
natural.

ALEX

I enjoy a major corporate brand
like Pall Mall. The tobacco's
dissolved into a big vat of goo so
it can be mixed with a bunch of
addictive chemicals. Then they roll
it out, dry it like paper, and cut
it up so it looks just like tobacco
again.

Shauna retrieves the Pall Malls from their case.

SHAUNA

Really?

ALEX

Yep. These babies are the perfect nicotine delivery system.

SHAUNA

Well, you enjoy 'em okay?

ALEX

I will.

Shauna's gaze washes over Alex.

SHAUNA

I like your shirt.

He suddenly feels cocky.

ALEX

Picked it out myself.

SHAUNA

You got that Club Card handy?

ALEX

Yep.

SHAUNA

Wanna swipe it for me?

He does. Shauna scans the smokes and glances at her monitor.

SHAUNA

\$5.79 mister... oops. Sorry, it's a habit.

Alex meets her gaze.

ALEX

You still interested in getting together sometime?

SHAUNA

Maybe.

ALEX

What time do you get off work?

INT. JONNY D'S - NIGHT

Alex pulls up to the bar and plops down a \$20. The NBA Finals are on and Doc is quietly nursing a glass of warm beer.

ALEX

Hey Doc.

No response.

FINK

Hey Alex. Gin and tonic?

ALEX

Make it a double, wouldja?

FINK

You got it.

Fink pours and sets the drink in front of Alex. Doc keeps his eyes glued to the TV.

ALEX

You're awful quiet.

DOC

Game 7 is on.

ALEX

Oh shit. I missed the whole series?

DOC

Times must be harder'n a banker's heart.

ALEX

No, I've been...

Alex is unsure of what to say.

ALEX

Good games?

FINK

Best series ever. Two over-times and the Lakers are making a comeback.

ALEX

No way.

FINK

Yeah. I fuckin' hate the Lakers.

Guilt creeps onto Alex's face. He's really blown it.

ALEX

Jesus Doc. I'm sorry.

DOC

You're here for this one.

Alex checks his watch. Downs his drink.

ALEX

Actually, I gotta split.

Doc finishes the last of his beer.

ALEX

Got a date in twenty minutes.

Alex drops a twenty on the bar.

ALEX

Next round's on me. See ya soon,
okay Doc?

The old man just stares at the TV.

EXT. LAURELHURST THEATRE - NIGHT

Alex and Shauna wait in line under the neon marquee. He feels buoyed by her company.

SHAUNA

So tell me about yourself Alex.
Oops. Okay if I call you Alex now?

ALEX

Yeah, sorry. I hate it when people
get my name off a card.

SHAUNA

It's a customer service thing.
They'll dock my pay if I don't say
it.

ALEX

Seriously?

SHAUNA

Yep. Supposed to make people feel special. And it works too. It's amazing how many people just want someone to say hello.

ALEX

No kidding.

SHAUNA

So what do you do?

Alex frowns. He doesn't want to talk about it.

ALEX

I work for the man.

SHAUNA

The man?

ALEX

Yep.

SHAUNA

You don't wanna tell me?

ALEX

Does it matter?

SHAUNA

What we do for a living says a lot about who we are.

Alex thinks about that for a second.

ALEX

Not me.

SHAUNA

I'm guessing you're not a janitor.

ALEX

No.

SHAUNA

Car salesman?

ALEX

Nope.

SHAUNA

Tell me you're not a sex worker.

ALEX
I'm not a sex worker.

SHAUNA
(smiles)
Too bad. That could be interesting.

The previous movie has just let out and Alex spots Grace exiting the theater. All the breath leaves his lungs.

ALEX
Oh shit.

GRACE
That seems about right.

SHAUNA
You guys know each other?

Alex ignores Shauna, unable to take his eyes off Grace. He can barely breathe.

GRACE
We sure do.

ALEX
Small town.

GRACE
It was bound to happen.

Grace nods at Alex's shirt.

GRACE
Nice shirt.

ALEX
Yeah.

GRACE
(to Shauna)
I picked it out for him.

Tension hangs in the air like humidity.

SHAUNA
(uneasy)
Oh. I like it.

ALEX
We gotta go.

GRACE
(to Shauna)
Will you excuse us for a sec?

SHAUNA
Sure.

Grace grabs his arm and pulls Alex out of earshot.

GRACE
(low)
Who's this?

ALEX
A friend.

GRACE
Liar.

Alex looks away, rattled.

GRACE
You seemed like a nice guy Alex.

ALEX
Yeah. Well.

GRACE
I scraped you up off the pavement.
Then you fuck me and I tell you
some really personal shit and I
never hear from you again?

ALEX
I barely know you.

GRACE
You barely know yourself.

ALEX
I know I wouldn't string someone
out like you did.

GRACE
How did I string you out?

They're not holding back anymore. Shauna overhears everything.

ALEX
Um, you've got *cancer*.

GRACE
That's why you didn't call me?

ALEX
Yeah, that's one reason.

GRACE
You shallow fucking prick!

ALEX
That's right. I am a shallow
fucking prick! Wanna know the other
reason I didn't call you?

GRACE
Sure, why not?!

ALEX
I'm the shallow fucking prick who
turned down your health insurance
claim!

Grace steps back as if she'd been shot in the gut. Her eyes
burn into Alex. He can't take it. He turns away.

GRACE
How many dreams have you crushed?

ALEX
My dream was crushed a long time
ago.

GRACE
I know.

Grace stands there a moment, feeling the hurt. She exhales
deeply and heads down the street.

Shauna's unsure how to deal with all this.

SHAUNA
So, what *exactly* do you do for a
living?

EXT. ALEX'S BUILDING - NIGHT

Alex stumbles up the path and into his condo.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

He opens the medicine cabinet. No drugs.

EXT. DUMPSTER - NIGHT

Alex digs frantically through the dumpster. No luck. The garbage has been taken away.

ALEX

Fuck.

INT. ALEX'S CONDO - NIGHT

Back inside, Alex tears through his flat, desperately searching for a hit of something, anything. Zip-loc baggies with no pot. Bottles with no booze.

ALEX

Fuck!

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Clothes fly out of Alex's dresser. Nothing. He's FURIOUS.

ALEX

FUCK!!

Alex drops to his knees and searches under the bed. He bumps into something. Pulls it out. It's an old painting, half-finished. He stares at the canvas, lost in the brush work. He traces his fingers along thick ridges of paint.

Dirty clothes are swept off a chair. Alex props the canvas on it. He rummages through the closet, determined.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The couch is shoved to the far corner of the room. Alex opens a tool box and mounts the canvas to the wall. He organizes brushes, paints and solvents on the coffee table. He turns on the stereo and cranks it up.

Alex whitewashes over the old image. He begins painting. His brush dances over the canvas in bold, broad strokes. He mixes colors passionately. Alex is inspired. He works all night, completely consumed.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - THE NEXT DAY

Blinds are thrown open. Light pours in. Alex steps back and absorbs his work. It's a portrait of Grace. This is no mirror image, it's a reflection of Grace through Alex's eyes: the most beautiful woman on Earth.

The phone rings, machine picks up. It's blinking: Full.

ALEX'S MACHINE

Leave a message and maybe I'll call you back.

IAN (O.S.)

Hey man. Stoned out of your mind doesn't count as sick, so if you're not in the office tomorrow you better be dead.

EXT. U.S. BANCORP TOWER - DAY

Sunlight breaks through the grey sky. Wearing paint-stained clothes, Alex walks into the building like he owns the place.

INT. CALL CENTER - DAY

Alex scrolls through files on his monitor as he talks on his headset.

ALEX

It's okay Mrs. Newell. I understand you're scared about losing your husband. So here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna purge a few files from our records. That way there's no official diagnosis until after May 2004, and his surgery will definitely be covered.

He hits the delete key.

ALEX

And by the way, there's a 96% survival rate if he has the procedure, so Bill has an excellent chance for a full recovery.

Alex smiles, feeling good about something for the first time in years.

INT. IAN'S OFFICE - LATER

Ian is behind his desk shuffling through a stack of files. Alex walks in, covered in paint.

IAN

What, you were attacked by a horde of rampaging kindergartners?

ALEX

I talk on the phone all day. No one sees what I'm wearing.

IAN

I have to look at you.

Two-Dollar Bob enters Ian's office holding a folder in his greasy mitts.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

(whispers)

Hey, I finished up those Vegas spreadsheets. That hooker really took you to the cleaners...

IAN

Shut the fuck up. You need to hear this too. Maybe you'll learn something.

Bob places the doctored spreadsheets on Ian's desk and takes a chair next to Alex.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Learn what?

IAN

(to Alex)

Wanna tell me about Mr. William Newell? Ms. Julianne Brown? Mr. Dan Reeder?

ALEX

What about 'em?

IAN

Dumbass moves, man. They're gonna cost the company a bundle.

ALEX

They paid their premiums. We should cover them when they get sick.

IAN

Who the fuck do you think you're working for? Integrity doesn't make money by paying claims. Your job is to make sure we're profitable.

ALEX

Think I'll get fired?

IAN

Do it again and you can count on it.

ALEX

Have you seen the Grace Walker claim yet?

IAN

No.

ALEX

Look it up.

Alex stands up straight.

ALEX

And hurry. I've got somewhere I gotta be.

Bob pulls the Vegas spreadsheets off Ian's desk.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB

Me too.

He follows Alex out the door.

EXT. GRACE'S BUILDING - DAY

Clear skies bathe the peeling apartment building in warm sunlight. Grace pick up her mail. There's a large manila envelope stuffed in the box.

INT. GRACE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Grace opens the envelope and rifles through the paperwork. We see a letter from Integrity Insurance that says "REINSTATED" and a packet from a OHSU Cancer Center where she has appointments for an "MRI" and "BIOPSY".

There's a knock at the door.

GRACE
(hollers)

No thanks.

Another knock.

GRACE
I'm a heathen, okay?

The knocking persists.

GRACE
Alright, alright.

EXT. GRACE'S DOOR - DAY

The door opens a crack. Alex is there, covered in paint from head to toe.

ALEX
Hey.

Grace looks him up and down. Alex wears his feelings in his eyes, on his clothes, and at his feet. Grace notices the painting.

GRACE
What's this?

ALEX
It's you.

Alex tilts the canvas. Grace stares at her portrait for what seems an eternity.

ALEX
I need help.

Grace looks Alex in the eye.

GRACE
Everyone does.

ALEX
I know.

She opens the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. ALBERTA STREET - ART WALK - SUNSET

It's a warm summer night and music spills into the street. Fire dancers entertain eclectic locals. Art lovers roam from gallery to gallery, sipping from plastic cups brimming with Pabst Blue Ribbon and Two-Buck Chuck.

EXT. TALISMAN GALLERY - SUNSET

A crowd has gathered on the sidewalk. People chat and smoke, waiting to get inside the crowded warehouse. The marquee reads: ALEX BASSOS: SEPTEMBER 2 - OCTOBER 9.

INT. TALISMAN GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

The industrial space provides a raw canvas for Alex's paintings. They're amazing. Many have sold.

Dressed in a funky suede jacket, Alex laughs and chats with his friends. His smile lights up the room. Two-Dollar Bob and Mary are here. They've lost weight.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Looks awesome, dude.

ALEX
Thanks for helping get it up.

TWO-DOLLAR BOB
Aw, it was nothin'.

ALEX
Couldn't have done it without ya,
bro.

Bob toasts Alex and spills beer on himself. Alex and Mary chuckle.

Sarah walks up and gives Alex a big hug. She whispers into his ear. Alex smiles warmly and introduces her to Doc, William and a few regulars from the shelter.

ALEX
Guys, this is Sarah.

WILLIAM
Baby, have we heard an earful about
you. Ooooh-wee!

Sarah gives Alex a stern smile.

SARAH

I'm sure you have.

DOC

Alex, you look happy as a flea in a doghouse.

ALEX

Thanks Doc.

DOC

The NCAA tournament starts this weekend.

ALEX

Fink's got names on our barstools.

There's a knock on the gallery window. Outside, Grace holds up two BACKSTAGE PRESS PASSES to the U2 concert at the Rose Garden. She wiggles with excitement.

ALEX

Oops. Gotta go.

SARAH

But Alex, this is your opening!

ALEX

Priorities.

Alex heads for the door. The GALLERY OWNER scowls at him for leaving his own reception. He grins and shrugs, "sorry."

EXT. MAX LIGHT RAIL STOP - SUNSET

Alex and Grace hurry across the street, hand-in-hand.

ALEX

You didn't even come in!

GRACE

Half those paintings are of me naked.

ALEX

So?

GRACE

It's a little voyeur-ific.

INT. MAX LIGHT RAIL - SUNSET

They blithely jump aboard the train.

ALEX

Since when are you so modest?

Grace grabs Alex's crotch.

GRACE

How about I write a pornographic
poem about your tackle and publish
it in the Willamette Week?

ALEX

Touché.

The train lurches forward and Grace leans into Alex for support. Alex puts his arm around her and holds her steady. He's right there for her.

FADE OUT.

THE END.