

Mama & Me

Jodi Johnson

Jodi Johnson  
received one of the five Academy Nicholl Fellowships awarded in 1993

Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences  
Academy Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting  
8th Annual Competition

**[www.oscars.org/nicholl](http://www.oscars.org/nicholl)**  
**[www.facebook.com/nichollfellowships](http://www.facebook.com/nichollfellowships)**

**For additional information about the screenplay or the Academy Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting, contact: [Nicholl@oscars.org](mailto:Nicholl@oscars.org)**

FADE IN:

EXT. DAY: DESERT

A small town like a hundred others scattered across Nevada like buckshot. Weathered husks of buildings crouch beside the road, and the sign bidding "Welcome to Paradise, pop. 65" includes the half-dozen graves in the dusty churchyard.

It's a town best viewed on the way to someplace else: the market with the gas pumps out front; men in overalls staring sullenly at passing cars; the barefoot girl towing a bag of potatoes in a red wagon--all obscured in the rear-view mirror by the dust from your car.

In an instant it's gone--the town, the graveyard, the stony faces--only the white-hot desert stretching away towards the purple horizon, the promise of mountains.

INT. DAY: CAR

A late model Cadillac, the dash bearing evidence of many days' travel--maps, empty soft-drink cans, wrappers from innumerable hamburgers bought from innumerable drive-through windows. MAMA, of indeterminate middle-age, sweaty in the blaze of the setting sun despite the hum of the air-conditioning, drives blankly while B.J. TUCKER, sixteen-ish, lanky and pale, peers anxiously through the bug-spotted glass at the road ahead. A jewelled crucifix swings on a chain suspended from the rear-view mirror. The cassette player recites a scratchy version of a classical symphony.

B.J.

Slow down, dammit. I said it weren't too far outta town.

Mama does not respond, but the whine of the engine decreases and B.J. hunches nearer the windshield. In the harsh evening light streaming through the window, Mama's face bears a fine stubble faintly visible beneath heavy, powdered make-up.

B.J.

(pointing excitedly at a crooked mailbox)  
There! Turn there! I knowed it'd be here yet.

The Cadillac makes a slow left turn onto an unpaved track perpendicular to the highway. It sways majestically on the rutted road like a ship at sea.

EXT. DAY: DESERT

A long white plume of dust heralds the car's approach. It makes

an abrupt right turn and stops, the dust sifting down like soot. Both front doors of the Cadillac open and the faint, warped sounds of the symphony waft out over the desert. B.J. and Mama climb out, he rapid and eager while Mama is hunched and stiff, her large body unwieldy with age, although under the shapeless dress her breasts seem strangely pert. Mama follows B.J. towards what remains of a concrete pad.

B.J. stands mute at the bottom of three wooden steps that lead nowhere. It is clear from the rectangular shape of the pad and the blocks at each corner that a trailer once stood here. Now there is only cracked concrete with weeds sprouting through. Fragments of wire dangle from a peeling utility pole.

Mama pauses a step behind B. J.'s back, sensing that he is crying without seeing his face.

EXT. EVENING: DESERT

B.J. and Mama sit on the wooden steps in the swiftly falling darkness. The Cadillac's headlights glow eerily in the dusk. They examine a few items he has found: a cracked red water pistol, a fork, a scrap of blue-flowered material. Mama mops her brow.

MAMA

(voice harsh, unfeminine)  
It's late, B.J.

B.J.

This is all I found.

MAMA

They don't forward the mail on memory lane.  
Let's go.

Mama shuffles towards the car. B.J. also rises, but when they arrive at the car he turns back.

Reaching the steps again, he quickly knots the blue material around the fork and then thrusts the fork upright in a crack at the top of the steps. He returns rapidly to the car where Mama waits, the headlights throwing her shadow hugely over the sand; B.J. climbs in and shuts the door hard. When Mama is slow in moving, he opens the door again and sticks out his head impatiently.

B.J.

Mama--c'mon!

Mama hesitates, wiping her face again. Then she trundles towards the driver's seat. As she walks, she removes a wig from her head, revealing a receding hairline and thinning gray hair.

MAMA

Fuck it all, anyway.

In the glare of the headlights she is clearly an aging male.

The driver's door shuts firmly, and the engine starts. The Cadillac swings onto the dirt road toward the highway, its taillights glowing like half-lit cigarettes.

In the weak light of a quarter moon, the blue scrap tied to the fork waves like a flag from the top step.

INT. DAY: TRAILER

MABEL TUCKER, young despite the lines around her eyes and mouth, her shoulder-length hair tucked carelessly behind her ears, stands in a blue-flowered dress in front of a sink crowded with dirty dishes. Flies rise as she selects a plate from the pile, scrapes off the remains of a dinner, and drops it none-too-gently in a bucket of soapy water. She picks up a glass and is about to add it to the bucket as well when something catches her eye. She holds it to the light and sees an unmistakable print of red lipstick on the rim.

EXT. DAY: YARD

B.J., age five, is playing in the cleared plot of dirt that passes for a yard. He sneaks up on an old dog dozing in the sun and takes careful aim with a red water pistol. The stream catches the dog squarely in the belly. He raises his head, startled, and the next shot hits his muzzle. The dog stumbles to his feet and trots off, shaking his head, while the boy chases after him, shouting and firing his water pistol.

INT. DAY: TRAILER

Mabel is sitting motionless at the kitchen table, the glass clutched in both hands. B.J. enters, holding his empty pistol before him.

B.J.

I need more water, Mama.

MABEL

(her tone stops the boy in his tracks)  
For God's sake, Billie-Joe, can't you see I'm busy?

He retreats wordlessly.

EXT. DAY: YARD

B.J. sits on the last of the three wooden steps leading down from the trailer's screened front door. He bends over his water pistol, struggling to pry out the plug at the end. Successful, he stands and unzips his pants, then pees carefully into the pistol.

He is zipping his pants again when he hears the growl of an approaching engine. A battered blue Chevy pick-up bounces into the yard.

B.J.

Daddy! Daddy!

Tall, tan, roguishly handsome and 30-ish, PETE TUCKER is climbing out of the truck. He sweeps up the boy in his arms, brushing away the water pistol aimed menacingly at his face.

PETE

Hey, B.J., how's my boy? Where'd you get this?

B.J.

(attempting take aim)

From Granmama. Wanna fight?

Setting down his son, Pete perches for a moment on the bottom step and leans confidentially towards the boy.

PETE

When did you and your mama get home?

B.J.

'S morning. We wanted t' surprise you.

PETE

I'm surprised, alright. Where's your mama?

B.J.

Inside. (eagerly) Can we fight now?

PETE

Not now, kid. Let your mama and me have a little talk.

Pete rises and heads inside the trailer; as he shuts the screen door behind him B.J. sights along the gun again.

B.J.

Bang! Daddy--you're dead!

INT. DAY: TRAILER

From inside the cramped kitchen, Pete can be seen approaching; when he reaches the doorway, he leans around the doorjam and smiles his best impish grin. But before he can speak a glass is hurled in his direction, narrowly missing his head as it shatters against the wall. Pete ducks back, and when his face reappears, it wears a feigned expression of shock.

PETE

Mabel--darling--we've got to stop meeting like this.

MABEL

Don't you Mabel darling me, you two-faced son of a bitch. Who was it this time--another lonely widow?

PETE

(wheedling)

What? Mabel, now, . . .

MABEL

Cut the crap--I'm sick of it. I drove straight through to be back this morning. You haven't been here all night--the bed's not slept in, I could tell that. And there's three days of dishes in the sink, with somebody's slut-red lipstick on 'em. I thought the whole county'd be on alert by now, but I gotta hand it to you, you always find a way.

PETE

As a matter of fact, I've been workin'.

MABEL

Like shit you have--you've only got one working muscle in you and it ain't your brain.

PETE

(sidling up and seizing her around the waist)  
But you must admit, it's a muscle in fine working order.

MABEL

Keep your goddamn hands off me, Pete Tucker. I work my butt off, paying the rent and puttin' food on the table--you've got a lotta nerve thinkin' you can pull another one over on me. I ain't so dumb as before.

PETE

You were smart enough to pick me, weren't you? As a matter of fact, you ain't the only one bringin' home bacon (he pulls a wad of bills from his pocket)--Lookit here.

MABEL

You fuckin' bastard--nothing's too low for you, is it?

PETE

It's not what you think--no services rendered for this. It's an investment.

MABEL

Investment, my ass!

Pete pins her against the counter and presses the full length of his body against hers, rustling the money beside her ear in his other hand.

PETE

No, Mabel, my ass, which isn't yet part of the deal but will be, if needed. She's divorced, with a pile of her ex-hubby's loot that she doesn't know what to do with. I'm helpin' a damsel in distress--what's the harm in that? If I get a little myself, recompense for my trouble so to speak, that's the American way, isn't it? And there's lots more where this came from--lots. Just think what we could do with that, Mabel, you and me. Get us a real house, not a lousy tuna-can. A car. Clothes. (he lowers the hand clutching the money and fondles one breast) Don't you worry, honey, I always save the best little bit of me for you.

Trying to shove him away, Mabel's hand falls on a butcher's knife lying on the counter; she brandishes it threateningly.

MABEL

Yes, little bits of you, Pete Tucker, itsy bitsy little bits--like the one between your legs.

PETE

(backing away warily)

Put that down, Mabel.

B.J. appears in the doorway, his water pistol still in his hand. He watches, wide-eyed, as his parents stalk each other around the kitchen table.

Suddenly, Mabel lunges at Pete, screaming madly. He dodges the slashing knife and grapples with her. They wrestle in the tight confines of the kitchen, slamming into the furniture. A cupboard opens with a crash, sending plates and glasses cascading to the floor.

Rooted to the spot in terror, B.J. cowers against the wall, whimpering.

B.J.

Mama.

Mabel still clutches the knife; when Pete slips on the broken glass and falls, she leaps on him, rolling him onto his back and pressing the blade against his throat. Pete's face is suddenly shiny with sweat; he swallows visibly. Mabel is breathing hard, her teeth clenched, her eyes narrow with anger. Pete's chin, grazed as he fell, oozes a thin line of blood.

PETE

(with a sickly grin)

Lighten up, Mabel. Somebody could get hurt.

Mabel only narrows her eyes further in a hard, angry glare. Her breathing is harsh, almost hypnotically rhythmic. Pete glances sideways and catches sight of B.J.'s tear-streaked face.

PETE

(forcing a chuckle)

Not in front of the kid, honey.

Oblivious to B.J.'s presence until now, Mabel looks up; at the sight of her frightened child, her face softens. Quick as a rattlesnake, Pete seizes the opportunity; twisting her wrist cruelly, he breaks Mabel's grasp on the knife and sends it flying across the room. He throws her face down onto the littered floor, pinning her arms behind her with one of his hands. With the other hand, he grabs her hair in his fist, wrenching her head back.

PETE

You fucking bitch. You goddamn fucking bitch.  
I'll give you something to remember me by, all  
the rest of your fucking life.

Methodically, silently, grimly, he pounds her face into the floor. Yanking her head up by her hair, he slams her again and again into the shards of glass and pieces of broken china. Her screams turn into choking gasps for air as blood and broken teeth fill her mouth. And still he beats her, a stony expression frozen across his features, blood and flesh smearing the linoleum.



Only a few feet away, B.J. stands, tears streaking his horrified face.

B.J.  
(softly)

Mama. Mama. Mama.

INT. DAY: DOCTOR'S OFFICE

With the overhead room lights dimmed, a DOCTOR, paunchy and greying, peers intently into the eyes of a female patient seated before him on an examining table. She adjusts the flimsy paper gown that is slipping from her shoulder in what is only a half-hearted attempt to cover her nakedness. But the doctor doesn't seem to notice as he shines a bright penlight into her eyes.

DOCTOR  
Look to the right, Mrs. Tucker. Uh-huh. And to the left.

As directed, the patient looks first right, then left. But something about her eyes seems unusual; the left one doesn't move quite as far in either direction. And the pupil is fixed and staring.

DOCTOR  
And now look down, Mrs. Tucker.

Her eyes focus on the doctor's crotch.

DOCTOR (cont'd.)  
Further down if you can; look at my shoes, Mrs. Tucker. Uh-huh, that's good. And now up. All the way up. Look at the ceiling, Mrs. Tucker.

After reluctantly lowering her gaze to the floor, the patient looks up as instructed.

DOCTOR(cont'd.)  
Very good. And now look at me.

Eagerly, the patient shifts her attention to the doctor's face-- but only the right eye moves; the left one remains rolled up, gazing skyward.

DOCTOR (cont'd.)  
Shit!

PATIENT  
What's the matter?

DOCTOR

The left one again.

PATIENT

It's stuck?

The doctor steps back and switches on the room lights as the patient fumbles to readjust her false eye. She blinks repeatedly in the newly bright room.

PATIENT(cont'd.)  
(looking up hopefully)

Better?

Mabel Tucker's face is hardly recognizable. Her hair is cropped very close, and it sticks out in unruly bunches. Her skin is mottled red in patches, and jagged white scars crisscross her forehead, cheeks, and chin. Her nose, broken in two or three places, has healed crookedly, permanently off-center. When she smiles, several gold caps can be seen on her teeth.

DOCTOR  
(resignedly)

As good as we can expect, I suppose. (He consults her chart) It's been how long, now, Mrs. Tucker . . .

MABEL

Mabel.

DOCTOR

Mabel. How long since the . . . injury.

MABEL

Five years, almost.

DOCTOR

And this is your, what, third car accident since then?

MABEL  
(whiningly)

It's the eye, Doctor; I've got no--what do you call it--"deception?"

DOCTOR

Depth perception. It's because you have only one eye. You shouldn't drive, Mabel. Still living with your mother-in-law? (Mabel nods) Then you'll just have to get her to drive. But other than that, you have no complaints?

MABEL

Shit--look at my face--look what that bastard did to my face!

DOCTOR

Considering the damage, you've healed remarkably well.

MABEL

(batting her eyes seductively)

Do you think so? Do you really think so?

DOCTOR

(turning to leave)

Yes, certainly. Now, Mabel, you get dressed and then come in to my office.

As the doctor turns towards the door, Mabel hops nimbly off the table and catches his sleeve. Her gown flaps open in the back.

MABEL

There's no need to go.

DOCTOR

What?

MABEL

While I get dressed. (coyly) I mean, what's the harm? It's not like you ain't seen me naked.

DOCTOR

(coldly)

I'll be in my office, Mrs. Tucker.

MABEL

(desperate, she clutches his arm)

You will write me a refill on that prescription, won't you? The pain--I can't hardly stand it at times.

DOCTOR

(suspicious)

Still?

MABEL

My head, my eyes--I'm tellin' you, it kills me sometimes.

DOCTOR

We'll see, Mrs. Tucker.

The doctor shuts the door firmly behind him. For a moment, Mabel stands there, staring dully at the closed door, her gown slipping from her sagging shoulders. Then, as she turns to begin dressing, she catches sight of herself in the small mirror over the sink. She approaches it and stares critically at her reflection. She turns her head first to one side, then to the other; she arches her eyebrows and simpers coquettishly, gauging the effect this produces on her features. Then, her face falling, she stares grimly ahead at her ravaged visage.

MABEL  
(bitterly)

"You've healed remarkably well, Mrs. Tucker."  
Like shit I have.

She whirls around towards the empty room, as if to confront her husband.

MABEL(cont'd.)  
Bastard! Look what you've done to me, bastard!

She turns to face the mirror again and, in a rage, picks up an instrument lying on the counter and smashes it into the glass, which shatters into a crazed pattern.

MABEL(cont'd.)  
All of them--fucking bastards!

Dazed, she touches the mirror tentatively, as if feeling her own skin in its fractured surface.

MABEL(cont'd.)  
Oh, God, let me out of this; please please  
please let me out of this.

EXT. DAY: LAS VEGAS STRIP

In the unforgiving light of a desert noonday sun, the gaudy fronts of hotels and the blinking neon of casinos seem unreal. The distorted, disjointed images are those of a tortured dream, born of a brain thick with the fumes of drink and cigarettes.

INT. DAY: CAR

In an ancient but immaculate Dodge sedan, Mabel and her mother-in-law, EDITH TUCKER, are driving. They pass the glitter of the Strip without seeing it, like sleepwalkers. Diminutive and upright, Edith perches close to the steering wheel. All the windows are rolled down and the sultry Las Vegas heat billows in, but not a wisp stirs on Edith's blue-rinsed, hair-netted head. Mabel, in the passenger's seat, leans her arm out the window and stares blankly ahead.

EXT. DAY: LAS VEGAS SUBURB

A sparsely landscaped street of identical one-story houses. Edith and Mabel pull into the driveway of a neat but sun-scorched habitation. They climb out--Mabel bumping her door closed with her hip--and walk into the house. Mabel hurries ahead of Edith and lets the screen door bang shut behind her.

INT. DAY: HOUSE

As Mabel enters the dim hallway leading from the front door, EDNA, Edith's sister, steps suddenly in front of her from around a corner. A decade older than Edith and bent with age, Edna is still a large, imposing woman. She wears a nun's wimple and thick black-rimmed glasses. She appears to be hiding something behind her ample back.

EDNA

So soon--you're back?

MABEL

No, we're still gone; you're hallucinating.

Mabel attempts to pass by her in the narrow hall, but Edna isn't moving. The screen door bangs again as Edith enters behind Mabel.

EDNA

That you, Edith? Mabel says you're not back yet.

EDITH

We're back, Edna.

EDNA

Good. (To Mabel) I've got something for you.

MABEL

What?

EDNA

Guess.

MABEL

Guess yourself.

EDITH

Show her the surprise, Edna.

EDNA

(petulantly)

I want her to guess.

MABEL  
I'm not going to fuckin' guess.

EDNA  
(reprovingly)  
Language.

EDITH  
Just show her, Edna.

As Mabel tries again to push past her, Edna moves heavily to the side and produces a sight that stops Mabel in her tracks. It is B.J., now a shy, fair-haired ten-year-old who sports a bizarre haircut: long, eye-grazing bangs and smooth, straight blond hair that has been coaxed into a riot of curls below his ears. But it is not B.J.'s hair--which she has become accustomed to--that stops her; it is his attire. He has been decked out in a flowing feminine costume; he wears a long, toga-like gown, belted at the waist, a braided headband of ribbons and flowers, and clutches in his hand a Bible, a crucifix and two plastic blossoms.

Mabel is momentarily speechless.

EDNA  
(prodding B.J.)  
Go on, tell her.

B.J. ducks his head shyly and says nothing.

MABEL  
Billie-Joe, what in heaven's name are you doing?

EDNA  
Go on, boy.

B.J.  
I'm a saint.

MABEL  
Mary-mother-of-Christ, I don't believe it.

EDNA  
(smugly)  
No, not Our Lady; tell her who you are, son.

B.J.  
Saint Cecelie. The chaste wife. Patroness of celery.

EDNA  
Celibacy. (to Mabel) We're going to do a saint

a day. Their history and significance. It's an education.

MABEL

If he wants education, let him get it at school.

EDITH

(to Edna)

Why isn't he in school?

EDNA

It's summer vacation.

EDITH

(to Mabel)

It's summer.

B.J.

It is not--it's only May.

EDNA

(innocently)

Is it?

MABEL

(angrily)

Why isn't this boy in school? How's he gonna learn to read? And what've you done to him--he's wearing a goddamn dress!

EDITH

(trying to step between Edna and Mabel)

You leave him be. What do you care about raising him--you don't even look at him most days.

EDNA

He can read. (She nudges B.J.) Go on, boy, read to your mama. Your mama who won't even call you her son.

MABEL

(irrationally)

He ain't my son. (points to Edith) He's her son's son.

B.J.

(opening the Bible and reciting mechanically)  
Genesis 1:1. In-the-beginning-God-created-the-  
heaven-and-the-earth-and-the-earth-was-  
without-form-and-void-and-darkness-was-upon-

the-face-of-the-deep-and-the-Spirit-of-God-  
 moved-upon-the-face-of-the-waters-and-God-  
 said-Let-there-be-light-and-there-was-light.

EDNA

(closing the Bible and patting B.J.  
 approvingly)  
 There, see, he can read. What does he want  
 with school, where they breed heretics and  
 blasphemers?

MABEL

Christ!

EDNA

Take not God's name in vain.

MABEL

(shaking Edna)

How else am I gonna take it? Tell me one  
 goddamn thing God ever did for me!

Mabel pushes Edna out of the way and stalks past her at last,  
 muttering under her breath.

MABEL(cont'd.)

Jesus holy-fuckin' Christ.

EDNA

(chidingly)

Language.

INT. DAY: BATHROOM

Mabel storms into the bathroom and shuts the door behind her. She  
 opens the medicine chest, searching frantically for a pill  
 bottle. She pops off the lid and dumps the contents--two white  
 tablets--into her hand. Her hand is shaking visibly as she  
 examines the pills.

MABEL

Shit. Two left. No goddamn refills.

Mabel tosses one of the pills into her mouth and swallows it.  
 There is no glass by the sink, so she turns on the faucet and  
 slurps water noisily out of her hand. She puts the other pill  
 back in the bottle, snaps on the lid, and is about to replace it  
 in the cabinet when she reconsiders.

MABEL (cont'd.)

What the hell.



She gulps down the second pill, throws the bottle in the trash, and yanks open the bathroom door.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON: SHOP

On a Las Vegas side street a few blocks off the main boulevard, the scattered small shops begin to give way to residential housing. Evening is coming on, and the caramel-colored light washes over the sidewalk and storefronts; it falls in warm waves through the plate-glass window of one shop, bearing the name "MAMA'S LITTLE ANGELS" in baroque, hand-painted lettering, and glows like a halo around the objects displayed there.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: SHOP

Inside the shop, the late-afternoon light slants through the window, stirring the air into lazy spirals of dust motes. Every square inch of space in the shop is crowded with religious icons. Crucifixes collect in one corner: big ones, small ones, wooden ones, plaster ones; Christ clothed and naked; smiling beatifically, swooning piteously and stony-faced with resignation; Nautilus-sleek and anorectic Christs; unblemished or bleeding; bearded or clean-shaven. Statues of saints, grouped by name, clutter a display case. An artificial Christmas tree dominates one wall, sagging under religious ornaments; creches cover a nearby table. Reproductions of famous religious paintings hang crookedly from the wall or lean against it on the floor. By the old-fashioned cash register various religious accoutrements are displayed: rosary beads; Biblical bookmarks; "Virgin" eau de toilette; "genuine" splinters of the cross, shreds of Christ's clothing, plastic reproduction crowns of thorns.

The shop is deserted. But from behind the curtain of beads that separates the main shop from the small, crowded storeroom and office comes the faint, scratchy warbling of a worn-out operatic recording.

Mama, the store's proprietor, leans backward in a weathered office chair, feet up, eyes closed, a cigar dangling from a mouth outlined in red lipstick. At the tinkling sound of the bells from the front door, jangled by an entering customer, Mama jolts upright. Grabbing the out-dated wig resting on a bust of the Virgin Mary and arranging it hurriedly, Mama grinds out the cigar, takes a quick swig from a bottle of mouthwash, then parts the curtain and steps imperiously into the shop.

The customers are Edna and B.J., still wearing his saintly garb. Mama walks over to them as they are examining the statues.

MAMA

(in a well-modulated, almost oily voice)  
And what can I do for you ladies this evening?

B.J.

I'm not a lady.

MAMA

(stooping for a better look)

Why so you're not--all the better, I say.

Mama pinches B.J.'s cheek playfully and then straightens stiffly, addressing Edna.

MAMA (cont'd.)

I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting this particular cherub.

EDNA

(beaming)

My sister's grandson. Billie-Joe, say how d'you do.

B.J.

How-do, ma'am.

MAMA

A fine boy you have here; they don't raise them like this anymore.

EDNA

Do you have any St. Cecelie's?

MAMA

St. Cecelie? I'm sure I must. (Rummaging through the statues) St. Caroline. St. Clementine. St. Cecelie. (Reads aloud) "Honored for her virtue and chastity, St. Cecelie converted her husband on her wedding night rather than sacrifice her virginity. She then converted her brother as well. The three of them lived together as a model of Christian love and chaste marriage. Patron saint of celibacy." Not one of our more popular items.

Mama's eyebrows rise sardonically but Edna misses the point.

EDNA

We'll take it, thank you.

Mama moves to the front counter to ring up the purchase. B.J. follows, idly examining the displays on the counter; Edna, absorbed in her perusal of the various saints, has her back to the pair. Mama leans over and whispers confidentially to B.J.

MAMA

Don't let all that talk of chastity get you down; she might not have given him any, but he was getting it just the same. Why else make a big deal about the brother?

B.J. regards him uncomprehendingly.

MAMA (cont'd.)

"Christian love," my boy. Day after day, the priests and the monks, with no one around but each other. Why do you think they wore skirts? It's easier, quicker--hike 'em up and go at it. Skirts'll hide a multitude of sins; impossible to get caught with your pants down if you don't wear any. Just think of the temptations. The alter boys, their sweet, serious faces like flowers wreathed in incense, swinging the censors, carrying the chalice cupped in their palms. And those choir boys, whole rows of them, their delicious pink cheeks nestled among white collars. Those were the days.

Glancing up, Mama sees Edna approaching, wearing a bemused expression.

MAMA (cont'd.)

But don't worry, pet; they're over--my days, at least. A season for everything, you know. (to Edna) Will there be anything else? (Edna doesn't answer) No? Eight-fifty, please.

When Edna doesn't respond, Mama leans nearer, peering into her face.

MAMA (cont'd.)

You alright, ma'am? It's eight-fifty total.

B.J.

(interrupting)

She's okay; it's the fuzzies.

MAMA

"Fuzzies?"

B.J.

(matter-of-factly)

She goes fuzzy sometimes. Eight-fifty, you said?

B.J. fishes Edna's wallet out of her purse and counts out the money.

B.J. (cont'd.)

One, two, three, eight, twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five, fifty-five; you owe her five cents.

Mama selects a nickel from the register drawer and drops it in B.J.'s outstretched palm; Edna appears oblivious to everything around her. Tucking the statue under one arm, B.J. takes Edna's hand; she follows meekly as he leads her towards the exit. Mama lumbers ahead and gallantly opens the door. Edna totters through first, then pauses, as if struggling to remember something, resting against the door frame. Behind her, B.J. also stops. Mama bends down slowly until his face is level with B.J.'s.

MAMA

Do you know the story of Pope Gregory and the English boys? Gregory's army brought some home as slaves and Pope Gregory admired their beauty. "Such skin, like honey and roses," he said. They told him the boys were called Angles--from the Germanic tribe of the Angles. "It is well," he replied, "for they have the faces of angels and should be the co-heirs of the angels in heaven."

B.J. meets his gaze squarely, unblinkingly, not understanding his meaning. Mama sighs, then puckers his lips as for a kiss and closes his eyes. For a long moment, B.J. studies Mama's face uncertainly. Finally, hesitantly, he leans out and kisses Mama lightly. Mama's eyes fly open in surprise.

MAMA (cont'd.)

"Oh brave new world, that has such people in it!" Billy Shakespeare--one of those fair English boys; remind me to tell you his story, too, someday.

Mama straightens up and finds himself eye-to-eye with Edna.

EDNA

(slowly, as if puzzled)

In those saints over there, you've got one I never heard of. St. Buggery. I can't figure out who he was.

INT. EVENING: BATHROOM

Edna, B.J. and Edith are crowded around the bathroom sink. There is a bottle of mouthwash on the counter and B.J. is gargling

noisily as Edith supervises. Edna looks on sheepishly.

EDITH

How dare she kiss him, the old witch.

EDNA

If only I'd been more careful.

EDITH

(accusingly)

You can't expect the boy to know better--  
you're not fit to be watching him. (to B.J.)  
That's enough--spit now.

B.J. obediently spits into the sink. Edna swabs more mouthwash on a cotton ball and wipes his chin and lips.

EDITH (cont'd.)

Filthy habit. You could have picked up who-  
knows-what kind of germs.

B.J.

It was only a little kiss, Granmama.

EDITH

I don't care what kind it was--you're not to  
do it again. Never kiss anyone you're not  
related to.

EDNA

(brightly)

Tell him about papa.

EDITH

Papa?

EDNA

When he kissed mama.

EDITH

That's right. Our father--your great-  
grandfather--once kissed someone he wasn't  
supposed to. He worked in a shipyard in  
Lorain, Ohio, and our mama was a clerk in a  
drugstore across the street. He got to walking  
her home after work in the evening. Sometimes  
they'd set awhile on the front porch, talking.  
One night he leaned over and kissed her; her  
mother was watching--peeking through the  
curtains--and she spied him kissing her  
daughter there on the front porch, bold as  
day. Caught them red-handed, she did. "Now

that you've kissed her, you've got to marry her," she said to papa. And so he did. That's how our mama and papa met. Let it be a lesson to you.

EXT. DAY: PARK

Mama is sitting alone on a bench, reading under a tree. Nearby, playground equipment glistens in the sun. The park is nearly deserted; only an occasional young woman pushing a stroller or an aged couple passes along the paths. Mama reads without looking up, marking passages with a pencil, while perspiration beads his forehead. At the end of a page, Mama closes the book and reaches into a small black purse for a soiled handkerchief; he mops his face, pushing back the lank strands of his wig, and wipes along his high, tight, laced-edged collar. He closes his eyes and rests his head against the back of the bench.

There is the sound of shuffling feet approaching; B.J. appears, dressed in an old-fashioned costume of knickers and a white shirt with a wide, feminine collar. A red kite dangles from his hand. Recognizing Mama, B.J. pauses. Then he tiptoes closer, peering curiously at Mama's half-reclining form. Oblivious to the boy's presence, Mama recites aloud to himself and B.J. listens raptly, mesmerized by the words.

MAMA

(softly)

"Give me my Romeo: and when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night,  
And pay no worship to the garish sun."

Mama sighs and wipes his brow again.

MAMA (cont'd.)

Shit, it's hot. (he sits up, opening his eyes abruptly, and finds himself suddenly face-to-face with B.J.) Hello! This is a surprise.

B.J. looks down shyly, kicking the dirt with his shoe.

MAMA (cont'd.)

I see you've given up sainthood.

B.J. looks up to meet Mama's gaze. Mama moves over, motioning for B.J. to sit beside him. Reluctantly, B.J. does; they both sit wordlessly for a moment, staring straight ahead.

MAMA (cont'd)

A boy your age should be in school. (he checks

his watch) For another thirty-five minutes and eighteen seconds, to be exact.

B.J. says nothing. He studies the kite which twists idly between his knees.

MAMA (cont'd.)

I know because I come here in the afternoon and wait; that's all I can do. What a waste-- that beautiful young flesh locked up inside. (B.J. casts a questioning look at the book Mama holds) Shakespeare, my boy.

Mama offers B.J. the book; B.J. takes it eagerly and thumbs through it, upside down.

MAMA (cont'd)

Can you read, angel?

B.J.

(eagerly)

Oh, yes m'am!

MAMA

(raising his eyebrows in mock surprise) Really? (he reaches over and turns the book right-side up in B.J.'s hands, then opens it to an early page) Read to me.

Mama shuts his eyes and leans back, listening.

B.J.

(breathlessly)

In-the-beginning-God-created-the-heaven-and-the-earth-and-the-earth-was-without-form-and-void-and-darkness-was-upon-the-face-of-the-deep . . .

Mama quickly opens his eyes and leans forward over B.J. again, stopping him. He opens the book to a new page further on, and B.J. continues in the same headlong fashion.

B.J. (cont'd)

. . . And-the-Spirit-of-God-moved-upon-the-Face-of-the-waters-and-God-said-let-there-be-light-and-there-was-light . . .

MAMA

Whoa! (he snatches the book away and shuts it up) Enough--you've got the right words but the wrong book.

B.J. looks down, ashamed; Mama softens his tone.

MAMA

Maybe you're not so far off after all, kid. All the stories that people have to tell, and never two of them exactly alike; each one like a fingerprint, unique. But underneath, they're all the same. Like under the skin, we're made of the same stuff--bones, or souls, or atoms, whatever you want to call it. All the stories are really just the same story, over and over --and they're all love stories. Sometimes it doesn't seem like love--not the way we usually think of it anyway--but believe me, it's the only thing there is.

B.J.

(haltingly--from memory)

"Give me my Romeo: and when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars. . ."

MAMA

That's pretty good.

B.J.

Words just stick in my head. Auntie-gran reads it to me, and then I say it back. It ain't readin' 'cause I've got to hear it first. But it's like reading.

MAMA

Tomorrow you meet me here. Ten o'clock. I'll bring the book. You'll see what I mean about love. (Mama stands up, straightening himself slowly) Now, what do you say we see if that kite can fly?

B.J. smiles broadly; hopping off the bench, he runs a few steps, the kite fluttering in his wake.

EXT. DAY: DESERT

On a cactus-studded hillside outside of town, B.J. and Mama are flying B.J.'s kite. The desert wind whips through B.J.'s blond tresses and threatens to dislodge Mama's wig; his skirt flies about his legs, revealing white wisps of a slip and knee-high stockings.

Mama holds the kite for B.J., poised a few yards away. When Mama tosses it up, B.J. runs, holding the string high. Slowly the kite climbs into the sky. B.J. stops, feeding string out in a long arc. The kite rises steadily, its tail streaming behind it. His



eyes trained on the red paper diamond, B.J. walks slowly backward until he joins Mama silhouetted against the sky.

EXT. EVENING: DESERT

Mama and B.J. sit on the crest of the hill in the fading sunlight; the kite is a distant bright spot in the pale sky, hardly any larger than the winking stars just starting to be visible.

MAMA

"Give me my Romeo: and when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night,  
And pay no worship to the garish sun."

EXT. EDITH'S HOUSE: NIGHT

A car with one headlight pulls to the curb; B.J. hastily climbs out, clutching his kite, and runs towards the house. As he dashes up the steps to the unlit front porch, he stumbles over the shadowy forms of a man and woman embracing there.

MAN

Shit!

WOMAN

Dammit, Billie-Joe!

B.J.

Mama?

B.J. peers into the darkness at Mabel's ravaged face. She is accompanied by a YOUNG MAN with shoulder length hair, about ten years her junior. Mabel is hurriedly straightening her clothing.

MABEL

Watch where the fuck you're goin', B.J.

B.J.

Sorry.

MAN

This your kid? You didn't tell me you had a kid.

MABEL

(laughing nervously)

Nah, B.J.'s my brother.

MAN

Your brother? Shit--no way this kid's your brother.

MABEL

Honest--ain't you, B.J.? My kid brother. (she reaches out and shakes him) Tell him you're my brother.

B.J.

(confused)

I'm . . .

MABEL

(interrupting)

See? (to B.J.) Now scram, kid--get your ass in the house. (she gives him a shove) Go on.

Dazed, B.J. turns toward the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he sees Mabel grasping the young man by the hair, roughly attempting to kiss him. The man resists vaguely. Their muffled voices reach B.J.

MAN

It is your kid, ain't it?

MABEL

I told you, it ain't mine.

MAN

Shit!

As B.J. slips in the front door, the two figures on the porch merge abruptly into one.

INT. NIGHT: EDITH'S HOUSE

B.J. leans his kite against the wall by the front door and walks into the brightly lit hallway. From a nearby room comes the blaring sound of a T.V. game show. As B.J. passes the open doorway, he sees Edith and Edna seated on a sofa, watching hypnotically.

B.J. continues on to the kitchen. A plate covered with a dish towel waits at the one place setting left on the wooden table. B.J. lifts one corner of the cloth; underneath, he finds cold fried chicken, mashed potatoes in a pool of congealed butter, and a limp pile of green beans. He is about to lower the cloth with disdain when Edna's severe face appears over his shoulder.

EDNA

Not good enough for you?

B.J. starts guiltily.

EDNA (cont'd.)

Sit down, boy. (B.J. obeys and Edna whips the dishcloth off the plate with a flourish)  
Behold the fattened calf; the prodigal is come home. Say your grace.

B.J.  
(mumbles)

May the Lord bless . . .

EDNA

Louder, boy!

B.J.

May the Lord bless this food, this house, and us, His humble servants. Amen.

Edna ties the dishcloth around B.J.'s neck as a bib and pulls up a chair beside him. She begins to feed him silently, holding the fork poised with the next mouthful while B.J. chews each bite.

As Edna feeds him, tears form in her eyes, and she bites her lip to keep them back. At last, a thin stream trickles from behind her thick glasses, staining her cheek.

INT. DAY: MAMA'S OFFICE

Mama and B.J. are sitting together at a cluttered counter, Mama sprawled in an armchair, B.J. straddling a stool. A fan whirls in the background. B.J. is reading from a book.

B.J.

"The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,/ Burn'd on the water; the poop"--  
what's a poop?

MAMA

The stern.

". . . the poop was beaten gold,/ Purple the sails, and so perfumed, that/ The winds were love-sick with them. . . ." What'd she look like?

MAMA

If you quit asking questions and read you'll find out.

B.J.

I mean the real Cleopatra.

MAMA

Who said this isn't the real Cleopatra?

B.J.

Shakespeare never saw her, right?

MAMA

He did in his mind.

B.J.

That's not the same.

MAMA

It's better. Now shut up and read.

B.J.

". . . She did lie/ In her pavilion--cloth-of-gold of tissue. . . ." Was she beautiful?

MAMA

The most beautiful woman in the world.

B.J.

But you said Helen of Troy was the most beautiful.

MAMA

That was last week--fashions change.

B.J.

". . . on each side/ Stood pretty-dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids . . . ."

The bell on the front door tinkles as a customer enters the shop.

MAMA

(under his breath)

Damn--just when we get to the good part.

Mama gets up reluctantly and shuffles out towards the shop, calling back over his shoulder to B.J.

MAMA (cont'd.)

Go on--I can still hear you--" . . . dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids . . . ."

B.J.

(raising his voice so it will carry)

". . . .With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem/ To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,/ And what they undid did . . . ."

B.J. trails off as he hears voices from the shop and realizes that Mama isn't listening. He looks around idly. Bored, he begins twirling in circles on the stool, raising and lowering its height. He stops, dizzy, and grasps the counter for support, knocking against a small lidded chest as he does so. The chest spills open, disgorging a treasure of cosmetics, hair ornaments, and cheap costume jewelry.

Guiltily, B.J. begins to pack the things back into the chest, but hearing the continued drone of voices from the shop, he curiously examines the items. He opens brightly colored tubes of lipstick and compacts dusty with face powder, then looks quizzically at an eyelash curler, mascara, assorted pencils and shadows. He finds a barrette with a black velvet bow and fastens it in his abundant locks, giggling at his reflection in a hand-held mirror. He begins to adorn himself with the necklaces and bracelets; soon a mismatched pair of heavy earrings dangle from his lobes. He boldly rouges his cheeks. Then, selecting a garishly bright shade of red lipstick, he purses his lips and peers closely into the mirror, steadying his hand to apply it. He leans back and studies his reflection in the mirror.

Suddenly, Mama's glowering visage appears in the mirror as well; B.J. jumps in surprise, nearly falling off the stool.

MAMA

What the hell do you think you're doing?

B.J.

(sheepishly)

I'm Cleopatra.

MAMA

Like shit you are. (he begins roughly stripping him of the jewelry) What made you think could wear this stuff?

B.J.

(defensively)

Auntie-gran lets me all the time.

MAMA

Not here you don't! (he wipes off the make-up with a tissue) Disgusting stuff.

B.J.

You wear it, Auntie-gran wears it, Granmama--everybody.

MAMA

Ladies can get away with it. You can't.

B.J.

But why?

MAMA

Because, angel, you are beautiful without it.

Mama steps back to scrutinize his handiwork: B.J.'s scrubbed face glows and the jewelry has been removed. Only the velvet bow remains, holding back his blonde curls.

A sudden inspiration strikes Mama. He trots heavily out of the room for a moment and then returns, a large white towel and a pair of scissors in his hand.

Mama ties the towel around the startled B.J. He takes the bow out of B.J.'s hair and begins cutting. Within minutes, B.J. sports a somewhat uneven but otherwise quite passable haircut. Mama presents B.J. with the mirror so that he can view the results.

B.J.

What did you do to my hair?

MAMA

I cut it--what does it look like I did?

B.J.

But it's so short.

MAMA

(untying the towel and shaking it out)  
Like any boy's should be. Hop down, angel.

B.J. obediently slides off the stool and Mama squats stiffly until he is at eye level with the boy, critically examining the haircut.

MAMA (cont'd.)

Turn around--slowly. Yes, that'll do. Now, angel, I'm going to explain something to you. The world likes boys to be boys and girls to be girls. And the world always gets what it wants, one way or another. If it has to kill you, it gets it. Sometimes it doesn't bother to kill you--just twists you out of shape, makes you not what you are and not quite what it wants you to be either. Which is worse than death. So, if you want to survive in the world, you better find out what it wants as soon as you can; find out what it wants and give it to it, at least on the outside. Give the world what it thinks it wants on the outside, and on the inside, there you keep

what's important--your secrets, your love,  
yourself--safe, where the world can't touch  
it.

INT. NIGHT: EDITH'S HOUSE

The kitchen table is set for dinner. Edna and Edith are putting the last few dishes on the table.

EDITH  
Mabel! Billie-Joe! Supper!

Mabel comes in and sits down hurriedly. She begins filling her plate immediately. Edith and Edna remain standing by their chairs, waiting for B.J. Edith takes a dish away from Mabel.

EDITH  
Where's B.J.?

MABEL  
Beats me.

EDITH  
Call him then--dinner's getting cold.

MABEL  
(hollers)  
Billie-Joe, get your butt in here!

EDNA  
I won't have vulgar language in this house.

MABEL  
Tough shit. Gimme those peas, will ya?

Mabel reaches for another dish. Edna grabs it, and the two struggle momentarily. Edna finally wrests it from Mabel's grasp, spilling some peas as she does so. Mabel begins to pick the peas up one at a time with her fingers, popping them into her mouth.

Meanwhile, B.J. has entered the room quietly. He wears a wide-brimmed cap and keeps his head averted. He pulls out a chair for Edith and seats her with studied formality, then does the same for Edna. At last he takes his own seat.

EDNA  
Billie-Joe--grace, please.

B.J.  
May the Lord . . .

EDITH  
For heavens, sake, take off that hat!

B.J. ducks his head lower but makes no move to remove the hat.

EDITH (cont'd.)  
Did you hear me, boy?

B.J.  
(softly)  
Yes, ma'am.

EDITH  
Well then. . . .

EDNA  
Do as you're told.

Still B.J. does not obey. Mabel reaches again for the peas. Edna slaps her hand.

EDNA (cont'd.)  
Glutton!

MABEL  
"The Lord helps them that helps themselves."

EDITH  
Take off that hat and say grace, Billie-Joe.

B.J. slowly lifts the hat from his close-cropped hair. The others at the table stare at him, dumfounded.

EDNA  
Sweet Mary, mother of Christ--your hair.

B.J.  
(mumbles)  
I cut it.

EDITH  
What? Speak up, boy.

B.J.  
I cut my hair.

MABEL  
We can see that.

EDITH  
Why would you do such a thing?



B.J.

I dunno.

EDITH

You don't know? You cut off your hair and you don't know why?

EDNA

(near tears)

Your beautiful, beautiful hair.

MABEL

The hell with his hair--I wanna eat.

Mabel once again begins filling her plate with food, this time without resistance from Edith or Edna, who are still staring numbly at B.J. Mabel starts to eat noisily.

Edith and Edna sit back in their chairs in stunned resignation. They lower their eyes to their empty plates.

EDITH

We're still waiting to hear grace, B.J.

B.J.

May the Lord bless . . .

EDNA

Wait.

Edna reaches over, picks up the hat from the table, and places it on B.J.'s head. Edith, indignant, snatches the hat off. Edna once again replaces it.

EDNA (cont'd.)

I can't bear the sight of it.

This time Edith does not try to remove the hat. B.J. continues.

B.J.

May the Lord bless this food, this house, and us, His humble servants. Amen.

EDNA AND EDITH

Amen.

Edith, Edna, and B.J. begin to eat silently. Mabel helps herself to a second serving; she belches loudly.

MABEL

(cutely)

Did an angel speak?

EDNA  
 (after a pause--and to no one in particular)  
 It's an affront to God.

MABEL  
 (mockingly)  
 'Scuse me.

EDNA  
 What?

MABEL  
 (exasperated)  
 I said, "Excuse me."

EDITH  
 (to Mabel)  
 She meant his hair.

INT. DAY: MAMA'S SHOP

B.J. sits on the edge of the cluttered counter as Mama rings up a purchase for an ELDERLY WOMAN CUSTOMER.

MAMA  
 That's one crucifix and an Apostles' address book. Anything else I can do for you today, Mrs. Simmons?

MRS. SIMMONS  
 No, thank you, dear--that'll be all.

MAMA  
 It comes to \$12.50.

Mrs. Simmons hands Mama a \$20.00 bill; B.J. looks on intently as Mama makes the change.

MAMA (cont'd.)  
 I'm afraid I'm all out of fives, Mrs. Simmons; will ones do?

MRS. SIMMONS  
 (absently examining a jewelry display)  
 Certainly.

MAMA  
 (flashing a fistful of ones and some change)  
 Here you are, Mrs. Simmons, seven dollars and fifty cents is your change. Would you like a bag for that?

MRS. SIMMONS  
(stuffing the money in her purse)  
If you don't mind.

MAMA  
My pleasure.

Mama places the things in a paper sack and hands it to her. He comes around to her side of the counter and puts his hand on her shoulder, ushering her towards the door.

MAMA  
And how is your daughter--Susan, isn't it?

MRS. SIMMONS  
Susan, yes--she's fine, thank you. Expecting her second child any day now.

MAMA  
(opening the door)  
You must be so proud.

MRS. SIMMONS  
Yes, I am, she's a good girl, so thoughtful.  
And that little boy of hers, Jason, he's . . .

MAMA  
(abruptly shutting off the conversation)  
Thank you so much for coming by, Mrs. Simmons;  
do come again. Good day.

Mama shuts the door firmly in her face. He walks back to the counter where B.J. is waiting.

MAMA (cont'd.)  
Silly old twit.

B.J.  
I thought you were rude.

MAMA  
I was.

B.J.  
She won't come back if you keep doing that.

MAMA  
I do it every time--she keeps coming back.

Mama begins to straighten the items on the counter.

B.J.  
You shorted her two dollars, you know.

MAMA  
(feigning innocence)  
Did I?

B.J.  
You did it on purpose--I saw you.

MAMA  
So what if I did?

Mama picks up a feather duster and moves towards the Christmas tree display; he begins dusting the decorations. B.J. follows him doggedly.

B.J.  
Why?

MAMA  
Why what?

B.J.  
You know--why'd you cheat her?

MAMA  
(irritated)  
Dammit, don't be tiresome B.J.! And don't try to make me feel guilty; you're the Catholic--that's your job.

There is a long, stubborn silence. Mama continues to dust the tree ornaments; B.J. watches.

B.J.  
You don't believe in God, do you?

MAMA  
What is this--twenty questions?

B.J.  
Why don't you?

MAMA  
Because He deserves better. Shit, B.J., look at this junk. If there was a God, do you think He would want this? If you were Him, and you were making a world--from scratch--would you make it like this one? Would you fill it with people like the ones that're here? Hell, no--not if you're God--if you're God you do it

right. So, no, I don't believe there is a God, because I don't believe He would have fucked up so badly. I have too much respect for God to believe in Him.

INT. DAY: EDITH'S HOUSE

At the end of a dim hallway, from behind a closed door, a muffled voice can be heard.

VOICE  
(ecstatic)

Oh, Peter, Peter--I'm ready! Jesus, I'm ready!

B.J., head cocked sideways as he listens, walks down the hallway peeking into rooms as he passes, looking for the voice.

VOICE (cont'd.)

I'm coming, I'm coming! Get ready, Peter, I'm coming!

B.J. halts before the closed door, listening intently.

VOICE (cont'd.)

Oh, sweet Lord! Oh!

B.J. yanks open the door and confronts a dazed and startled Edna within the depths of the coat closet.

EDNA

Lord--the light! (she peers out of the closet, blinking at B.J.) Is that you, boy?

B.J.

Auntie-gran, what are you doing?

EDNA

Isn't this heaven?

INT. DAY: MAMA'S SHOP

B.J. and Mama sit behind the counter in the shop, laughing.

MAMA

What was she doing in the closet, for Chrissakes.

B.J.

Beats me. She thought she'd died and got buried--she was waiting for St. Peter to open the gates and let her in.

MAMA

Lord--what a twit!

The front door opens as Mrs. Simmons walks in.

MAMA (cont'd.)

(under his breath to B.J.)

Speaking of twits . . . . (to Mrs. Simmons)  
Good day, ma'am.

MRS. SIMMONS

Good day, Mama, B.J. I was wondering if you  
received that mobile I asked you to order,  
Mama.

MAMA

(reaching under the counter for a box)  
I did. For the new baby, isn't it?

MRS. SIMMONS

Yes.

Mama opens the box and lifts out a baby's playpen mobile, holding  
it in the air. At the top is a cross with a beaming, cherubic  
Christ; suspended from the cross at various levels are plastic  
medallions bearing likenesses of the Apostles.

Mama winds a small device in Jesus's stomach and a tinny  
rendition of "When the Saints Come Marching In" begins to play.

MRS. SIMMONS (cont'd.)

It's a musicbox, too. How lovely--Susan will  
be so pleased.

MAMA

(packing it back in the box)

Cash or charge, Mrs. Simmons?

MRS. SIMMONS

(handing Mama a credit card)

Charge.

B.J.

That sure is a pretty dress, Mrs. Simmons.

MRS. SIMMONS

Why, thank you . . .

B.J.

Is it new?

MRS. SIMMONS

Good heavens--I've had this thing forever. Mr. Simmons, Lord rest him, gave it to me for my birthday, the year before he died. That's nigh on four years ago.

B.J.

The blue's the same color as your eyes.

MRS. SIMMONS

(blushing with pleasure)

Do you think so?

B.J.

Yes, ma'am--the same shade I always imagined the Virgin's eyes must be. Like these earrings, here.

B.J. holds out a pair of earrings enameled with a picture of the Virgin Mary.

B.J. (cont'd.)

If you look real close you can see her eyes. Blue--like yours.

MRS. SIMMONS

(squinting closely)

Why, so they are. Lovely earrings, aren't they?

B.J.

I think so ma'am. 'Course, they wouldn't suit everybody. But you could wear them.

MRS. SIMMONS

(examining herself in the mirror on the counter)

They do look nice. How much did you say they were?

MAMA

They're on sale--\$9.95 each--today only. Usually twenty dollars a pair.

MRS. SIMMONS

I'll take them.

Mama rapidly adds the earrings to the bill and hands the charge slip to Mrs. Simmons to sign. He tears off the receipt and places it in the bag with the mobile and earrings, then thrusts the whole package into Mrs. Simmons arms. B.J. leaps off the counter to help her.

B.J.  
Here, let me get that.

MRS. SIMMONS  
(to Mama, while patting B.J.'s head)  
Such a thoughtful young man.

B.J. and Mrs. Simmons go out the front door. A moment later, B.J. returns; he climbs back onto his seat behind the counter near Mama, who is busy counting the money in the cash register drawer.

B.J.  
Silly old twit.

INT. MORNING: EDITH'S HOUSE

Edith, Edna and Mabel are seated around the kitchen table. Edith and Edna read the paper and pick at a breakfast of toast and coffee while Mabel slumps forward, holding her disheveled head in her hands. Two brightly gift-wrapped packages occupy the center of the table. B.J. enters excitedly.

B.J.  
Morning Granmama! Auntie-gran. (he plants a kiss on each of them) Good morning, Mama. (he attempts to kiss Mabel also, but she brushes him roughly away)

B.J. sits expectantly at the table, eyeing all three women in turn. They ignore him; Edith and Edna seem absorbed in the paper and Mabel moans softly, rocking forward and backward in her chair. Finally Edna glances over her paper at him.

EDNA  
Aren't you going to have breakfast?

B.J.  
(with an eager glance at the packages)  
Do I have to?

EDNA  
(puzzled)  
Do you have to . . . ?

EDITH  
Do you think the starving children in Mongolia ask if they have to eat their breakfast?

B.J.  
(meekly)  
No, Granmama.



EDITH

Then eat it and be glad.

B.J. leaps out of his chair and dashes to the cupboard. He pours out a bowl full of cereal, tosses on a couple of spoonfuls of sugar, then grabs the milk from the refrigerator. He sits down at the table again, splashes some milk on his cereal, and begins to eat hastily. The cereal consumed, he again casts a meaningful glance at the packages.

B.J.

Now?

EDNA

Now what?

EDITH

(looking suspiciously at the bowl)

Is it empty? (B.J. holds out the bowl for her to inspect) Drink up that milk. (he does so obediently) Yes, now, if you want.

B.J. reaches eagerly for the presents and rips off the paper. In a moment he is staring blankly at a package of underwear and a needlepoint kit of the Ten Commandments.

EDITH

Well, what do you say, boy?

B.J.

(weakly)

Thank you.

EDITH

You're welcome. (pointing at the underpants) Those are from me and the other is from her (indicating Edna).

EDNA

What are those?

EDITH

It's his birthday.

EDNA

Your birthday?

B.J.

Yes, Auntie-gran. You got me this. (he hands her the needlepoint kit)

EDNA

Oh, how nice. I had one of these as a little girl. You have to be careful and take little stitches and then you can hang it on the wall.

Edna hands the kit back to B.J. and rises from the table. She begins peering into various cupboards. Edith leans across the table to B.J.

EDITH

You put one of those new pair on before you leave the house. You never know when you might have an accident and wind up in the hospital.

EDNA

Where's the cake?

EDITH

There is no cake.

EDNA

But it's his birthday.

EDITH

There's no cake. (nodding her head towards Mabel) Ask her.

EDNA

(shaking Mabel)

Where's the cake, Mabel?

MABEL

Like she said, there ain't none.

EDNA

You didn't eat it, did you?

MABEL

No, I didn't eat it.

EDNA

There has to be a cake. I gave you money for a cake. (to Edith) Didn't I give her money?

EDITH

You gave her the money. God knows what she did with it.

B.J.

(not quite under his breath)

Put it up her nose, probably.

Mabel makes a swift, secretive, obscene gesture at him.

EDNA  
(as if he were jesting)  
Now, B.J., that's not nice.

EDITH  
He means drugs, Edna.

EDNA  
Oh. (to Mabel) You bought nasal spray?

MABEL  
For chrissakes!

EDNA  
(plaintively)  
I don't understand. Why didn't you get a cake?  
I told you to get a cake.

Exasperated, Mabel rises and strides to the cupboard, yanking the door open. She grabs a box of Ding Dongs and throws one on a plate, then opens a drawer and rummages wildly in it for birthday candles and some matches. She lights several candles, thrusts them into the Ding Dong, and sets the flaming cupcake in front of B.J.

MABEL  
Here. Happy birthday.

EDNA  
(clapping her hands brightly)  
And many more!

INT. AFTERNOON: MAMA'S SHOP

Mama is showing several customers out the door. After they leave, he shuts the door firmly behind them and locks it. He turns over the sign on the door so that it reads "CLOSED" and draws down the blinds, casting the store into a warm half-light. B.J. looks up in surprise from where he is sitting behind the counter reading.

B.J.  
What are you doing that for? It's only 3:30.

MAMA  
I know what time it is.

B.J.  
But you're not closed now.

Wanna bet? MAMA

But why? B.J.

You know why. MAMA

Shit. I've had enough birthday for one day. B.J.

Well, I haven't. Now you just sit there a minute. MAMA

Mama leaves the room. B.J. twists in his chair to look after him.

MAMA(cont'd.)  
No fair peeking. You turn around and shut your eyes.

B.J. does so. Mama enters carrying a beautifully decorated cake shimmering with candles.

MAMA(cont'd.)  
Okay, open your eyes.

Wow. It's beautiful. B.J.

MAMA  
Marble cake. Your favorite. I made it last night. (as B.J. seems ready to blow out the candles) Wait, wait. There's something else.

Mama sets down the cake and pulls out a book from under the counter; it is very old, bound in cracked leather.

MAMA(cont'd.)  
Here. This is for you.

Oh, Mama. (he opens the book carefully) It's so old. B.J.

MAMA  
Shakespeare's sonnets. It was my mother's. (he opens the book to the flyleaf) See, you can see where she wrote her name: "Harriet Joanna Townsend, 1919."

B.J.

Wow.

MAMA

(turning the page over)

I've added something for you. Read it.

B.J.

"To my friend, B.J., for his twelfth birthday. With love from Mama: 'In me thou see'st the twilight of such day/As after sunset fadeth in the west . . . This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,/To love that well which thou must leave ere long.'"

MAMA

Sonnet 73. Now, make a wish.

B.J.

(closes his eyes, then opens them again)  
Can I blow now? (Mama nods. B.J. takes a deep breath and blows out the candles) Know what I wished for?

MAMA

Don't tell or it won't come true.

B.J.

But I want to tell you. I wished I could always stay here with you.

MAMA

That's nice.

B.J.

Maybe it will come true?

MAMA

Maybe. (he hands B.J. a knife) Now cut your cake. (as B.J. bends intently to his task, Mama begins to sing, hoarse and slightly off-key) "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear B.J. Happy birthday to you."

EXT. EARLY MORNING: LAKE

Mama's battered, one-eyed car bounces down a rutted dirt road in the pre-dawn darkness. He pulls to a stop in a small parking area beside a dilapidated dock.

Mama and B.J. get out of the car in silence and walk towards the dock, carrying fishing gear and a lunch pail and lighting their way with a weak flashlight.

They walk out along the dock, which creaks and moans under their feet. The water laps softly against the sides of the boats tethered there. They pile into an old rowboat; B.J. settles into the bow, arranging their gear, and Mama takes the oars. He begins to row them out across the lake.

EXT. DAWN: LAKE

As the horizon lightens and turns pink, Mama and B.J. put down the anchor not too far from the rocky shoreline.

MAMA

(whispering)

Hand me your pole, B.J. (when B.J. knocks it loudly against the side of the boat in doing so, Mama winces) Shhh. Be careful.

B.J.

Sorry. Can the fish really hear us?

MAMA

Of course. (he examines the hook) Give me the pliers from the tackle box.

B.J.

(hands him the pliers)

Where are their ears?

MAMA

(absorbed in putting on a new hook)

Hmm?

B.J.

The fish. Where are their ears?

MAMA

Trust me, they've got 'em. (looks at his handiwork) That's better. Dig me out a worm.

B.J. picks up coffee can and probes in the dirt with his finger. At last he plucks out a fat, wriggling worm. He hands it to Mama with trepidation.

B.J.

You're not really going to put that on the hook, are you?

MAMA

I ain't gonna eat it. Don't watch if you don't want to. (B.J. grimaces and looks away) There, all done.

Mama drops the line in the water and hands the pole to B.J.

MAMA (cont'd.)

Let it go all the way to the bottom, then back it up a few feet.

B.J. watches the line run out. When it stops, he carefully winds the reel a few turns.

MAMA (cont'd.)

Now, we wait for Mr. Trout to come along, looking for breakfast.

B.J.

What a breakfast.

MAMA

(while baiting his own pole)

Nothing like it, if you're a fish. Hand me one of those Twinkies, will you?

EXT. MORNING: LAKE

The sun is fully risen, the light dancing on the rippled surface of the water. Mama sprawls dozing across two seats. B.J. leans over the side of the boat, staring into the green depths. He sighs and sits up, then begins reeling in his line. Mama starts suddenly awake.

MAMA

You got something? You got a bite?

B.J.

Nah.

MAMA

What are you doing then? You got me all excited for a second.

B.J.

I'm glad one of us is.

MAMA

That's no way to talk. I bring you out here in the fresh air, the sun, the lake all to ourselves; you gotta have patience.

B.J.  
I've got patience. What I don't got is fish.

MAMA  
That's how it goes. Sometimes you get lucky.  
Sometimes you don't. It's the thrill of the  
hunt.

B.J. lifts his line from the water, addressing the pale, limp  
worm.

B.J.  
Some thrill, huh?

MAMA  
I'll put a new one on. Can't catch fish  
without bait.

B.J.  
No--please. I'll just watch you fish.

MAMA  
It's not my idea of a spectator sport.

B.J.  
I'll look at the scenery then.

They both turn to the stern and beautiful landscape, full of  
stones and cactus, beckoning, forbidding.

MAMA  
That's the strange thing about fishing--what  
you catch is usually something you can't take  
home.

B.J.  
(picking up a worm from the floor)  
We can take these home.

MAMA  
(taking the worm and looking at it tenderly)  
Worms are wonderful creatures.

B.J.  
I feel sorry for them.

MAMA  
Yes--poor harmless things. They're  
hermaphrodites, you know.

B.J.  
They're what?



MAMA

Hermaphrodites. Male and female. Two worms in one.

B.J.

(squinting closely at the worm)  
Which end is which?

MAMA

I don't know.

B.J.

I bet the worms know, though.

MAMA

When they get cut in half, each part grows a new whole, like starfish.

B.J.

Does the boy half grow a new girl half, or is it now just a boy?

MAMA

I imagine it grows a new female part, to replace the lost one. And the other half grows a new male part.

B.J.

That's nice, you know. That way they're never lonely.

MAMA

No, never lonely.

EXT. DAY: LAS VEGAS SHOPPING MALL

Like a beached whale, an indistinguished shopping mall bakes in a sea of asphalt and parked cars. A bus grinds to a halt in front and disgorges its passengers. Edna and B.J. stumble out into the shimmering noon heat.

INT. DAY: SHOPPING MALL

Edna and B.J. are engaged in a serious shopping expedition.

They enter a clothing store, heading for a table piled with discounted boys' wear. Edna roots through the shirts and pants, pulling out several items. She holds them against B.J. to gauge their fit and appearance; he indicates his disapproval by various facial contortions. Inevitably, Edna rewards his most vigorous grimaces by buying the items in question.

B.J. follows Edna's lumbering form, clutching the bag with their purchases.

They stop at a shoe store. Edna perches in a chair while a salesman brings her a new pair of shoes identical to the heavy brown laced ones that she wears. B.J. examines the Nikes and Air Jordans on display as Edna walks back and forth to test the shoes, pausing critically in front of the mirror. When she decides to buy the shoes, she puts the old pair back on and has the salesman wrap up the new ones.

B.J. lags further behind, arms full of a growing collection of bags. Looking over her shoulder for him, Edna catches him studying the mannequins in a Fredrick's of Hollywood window display.

INT. DAY: MALL COFFEE SHOP

Edna and B.J. sit at the counter finishing their lunch, packages piled around their feet. B.J. dips his french fries one by one in ketchup and tilts backward to drop them into his mouth. Edna sips her ice tea vacantly through a straw.

On their way out of the coffee shop, Edna disappears into the restroom. B.J. leans against the wall outside the ladies' door, holding the bags. He watches women go in and come out again, with no sign of Edna. He shifts uneasily, waiting.

Suddenly, several women come out hurriedly, glancing over their shoulders and gesturing. B.J. tries to peek in while the door is open behind them. He cocks his head, listening to the sounds of rattling metal and a raised voice that escapes for a moment before the door shuts.

B.J. waits with growing concern. The noise from the bathroom is audible now even over the saccharine sounds of the coffee shop's background music. The next woman who approaches the door pauses outside it, listening, then hurries away without entering.

INT. DAY: COFFEE SHOP RESTROOM

B.J. pushes open the bathroom door and sticks his head inside. A furious rattling noise assaults his ears; he hears a voice moaning.

B.J.  
Auntie-gran? Are you okay?

The rattling reaches a deafening crescendo.

INT. DAY: RESTROOM STALL

Edna paces the stall like a caged animal, hurling herself blindly against the partitions, which she clutches and shakes with an appalling, frenzied strength.

INT. DAY: RESTROOM

B.J. rushes to the door of the stall, struggling to open it from the outside.

B.J.

Auntie-gran! Auntie-gran! Open the door!

INT. DAY: RESTROOM STALL

His efforts futile, B.J. drops to the floor and squeezes under the door. Edna, in the throes of a hallucination, is terrified by his appearance, rising as if from the ground itself.

EDNA

(screaming)

No! Thou shalt not have me, Satan!

B.J.

Auntie-gran, it's me.

B.J. tries to grasp her, but Edna recoils in horror, scrambling up onto the toilet. She raises her hands beseechingly towards the ceiling.

EDNA

Lord! Don't leave me! Don't let the devil take me, Lord! (to B.J.) Thou shalt not have me, Satan!

A seizure racks her, and her cries become incoherent. B.J. lunges forward to catch her as she collapses towards the floor. The stall door swings open as they sprawl on the linoleum. B.J., pale with fright, grasps her shoulders as her head lolls back.

B.J.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

INT. NIGHT: HOSPITAL

Edna lies unconscious on a bed, tubes and hoses connecting her to a phalanx of life support systems. Her chest rises and falls with the mechanical pumping rhythm of a respirator. A constant low hum pervades the room.

B.J. stands by her side, gripping one of her mottled hands in both of his. He watches her face intently, as if willing her to live. Behind him is Mama, haggard in the bluish hospital light. At the foot of the bed, Edith, her face looking even more pinched and harder than usual, confers with A DOCTOR attended by A NURSE.

EDITH

Shut it off.

DOCTOR

If that's your decision.

EDITH

It is.

DOCTOR

You understand . . .

EDITH  
(curtly)

I understand. Shut it off.

The doctor turns to the nurse, who nods her head; he then moves towards the machines at the head of the bed. B.J. glances at the doctor with alarm.

B.J.

I don't want her to die.

NURSE

(attempting to lead him out of the room)  
Come with me, Billie.

B.J.

(panicked)

No! Don't let her die. Please. (to Mama) I don't want her to die!

EDITH

She's dead already.

B.J.

That's a lie!

MAMA

It's okay, son.

As the machines shut down, a terrible silence fills the room.

INT. DAY: CATHOLIC CHURCH

Solemn organ music echoes hollowly off the walls as an open

casket, draped in flowers, is rolled slowly down the aisle. An altar boy proceeds the coffin, swinging a censor; the priest in his ornate robes follows behind. A few dozen mourners are scattered throughout the pews.

In the front row B.J. stands between Edith and Mabel. He wears a stiff black suit and stares numbly forward. Mabel's black dress is tight, short, impossibly low-cut. She sneaks a peek in a small compact tucked in her palm, checking her too-bright red lipstick. Edith is imperious in a black hat and veil.

As the casket comes down the aisle, one wheel squeaks persistently.

When the procession reaches its end, the priest steps to the altar and lifts his voice into the sonorous tones of the funeral mass.

INT. DAY: CHURCH

B.J. follows Edith and Mabel as they file past the casket after the service. He watches as Edith stops and looks down impassively for a moment; she crosses herself and moves on. Mabel casts a desultory glance as she hurries by.

B.J. stops by the casket. He has to stand on tiptoe to see in. He gazes at Edna's face for a long moment.

Mama at last appears by his side, placing a hand on his shoulder.

B.J.

She looks beautiful.

He leans in as far as he can and gently kisses her cold cheek.

EXT. DAY: GRAVESITE

A small group of mourners clusters around an open grave. The priest intones the last words before burial and closes his breviary, crossing himself as he does so. One by one the mourners step towards the coffin poised over the grave; each places a single flower on the casket, crosses himself or herself, and turns away. As the last flower is laid in place, the casket is lowered into the earth.

EXT. DAY: CEMETERY

Mama and B.J. are walking among the rows of headstones. B.J. scuffs his feet in the thirsty-looking grass, hanging his head. Mama reads aloud the inscriptions of the tombstones as they pass.

MAMA

"Here lies Mary Christianson, who fell asleep December 17, 1964. . . . Robert Phillips, beloved husband and father, passed on to his reward. . . ." They never say that word, do they? "He up and died." Just once I'd like to hear someone tell it like it is. Here's a good one: "Ellen Tracy Stoller, who sleeps in the arms of her Lord. . . ." Wonder what her husband thinks of that, huh?

B.J.

Shut up.

MAMA

A little touchy today.

B.J.

Don't you care that she's dead?

MAMA

Of course I care.

B.J.

You don't show it much.

MAMA

You prefer this?: "Michael John Bergman, age 2, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. . . ." Like it's some kind of prize.

B.J.

Maybe it is. What do you know?

MAMA

And maybe it's not. So why all the pretty pictures and sweet talk? Why go around making believe when you're not sure?

B.J.

Because if you love somebody you want them to be happy. What's wrong with that?

MAMA

Ignorance isn't the same thing as bliss. I don't care what they say--anything that's not the truth is a lie. Anything you can't prove for a fact is as good as a lie.

B.J.

And you think heaven's a lie.

MAMA

Yes, I think it's a lie. And there are no good lies. There's no truth so bad that lying about it won't make it worse.

B.J.

(sarcastic)

And you've never lied about anything.

MAMA

On the contrary, my boy. My whole life is a lie. And it's hell; I didn't have to die to find out about that.

B.J.

Easy for you to say--you're not dead.

MAMA

Someday I will be. And I'm just as scared as the next guy. But at least I'm going with my eyes wide open.

B.J.

(angrily)

Gimme a break! Let me tell you something, Mr. Know-it-all: someone I loved is dead--dead!--and there's nothing I can do about it. How's that for telling it like it is? And I'll tell you something else: you talk like you're some kinda expert about love and death, but what do you know about any of it? All you know is what you've read in your precious books. What kind of love or death is that? If it starts to hurt too much you can just close it up and put it back on the shelf. But this is real--I can't just turn back a few pages and have her alive again. She's gone forever, and you act like I should just forget her. I hope when you die nobody misses you. I know I won't. In fact I hope I never see you ever again--dead or alive!

For once, Mama is speechless. B.J. stares at him fiercely, defiantly, then turns and runs, tears streaming down his face.

EXT. DAY: EDITH'S HOUSE

B.J. runs madly along the sidewalk towards Edith's house; he carries the coat from his suit wadded up in one hand, and the shirt is soaked with sweat. His face is red and hot, his hair clinging damply to his forehead.

When he sees the big, black, shiny Mercedes parked at the curb in front of the house, he stops abruptly and stands staring at it, panting. He leans closer to the car, examining its flawless, gleaming surface.

He walks slowly backward toward the house, watching the car constantly like an omen.

INT. DAY: EDITH'S LIVINGROOM

Inside the house, the drawn drapes lend a somber funeral air. Edith is standing by one of the curtained windows, her back towards the room. Her son, Pete--older, heavier, with more dangerously sophisticated charm--leans with studied nonchalance against the fireplace.

EDITH

I want them out of here, both of them.

PETE

Mama, I told you . . .

EDITH

No, I'm telling you--I want them out of here, the sooner the better. I wouldn't have tolerated it this long, except for Edna; she was attached to him, God knows. Of course, she hadn't been quite right for years, so I can't blame her. Still, she's well out of it now.

PETE

You've been through some tough times, Mama. I'm sorry I couldn't have been here sooner, to help and all. . . .

EDITH

You're not sorry one bit, and don't you pretend to be. I didn't need you anyway. I don't need you now. I'm just telling you that I want them out--that they're going to be out --in case you have any interest at all in what happens to your son and your wife.

PETE

(glancing nervously at the open door)  
Shh, Mama, not so loud; Doreen'll hear you.

EDITH

Humph--do her good, too. But if she's stupid enough to believe your stories that's not my business.



PETE

I'm as good as divorced and you know it. It's just a hassle, that's all.

EDITH

It's just bigamy.

PETE

I'll get it taken care of before then, don't worry.

EDITH

Don't flatter yourself that I do.

There is a stubborn pause.

PETE

I'm glad that we agree, then, about B.J., I mean.

EDITH

And his mother?

PETE

Mama, she's not my responsibility.

EDITH

Whose is it, then?

PETE

Not yours. She'll find something, I'm sure; she's a resourceful girl.

EDITH

She's a whore.

PETE

Mama!

EDITH

Well, she is.

B.J. comes suddenly into the room. There is an awkward silence. Then Pete walks solemnly over to his son and extends his hand towards him.

PETE

Hello, son.

B.J. eyes him suspiciously, timidly.

EDITH

It's your father, B.J. He's come to take you home.

B.J. glances rapidly from one face to another, trying to interpret this news.

PETE

(with his hand still extended)

That's right, son. You're going to live with me now.

B.J.

I live here.

EDITH

You used to live here. You're going to have a new home now. But I'll leave you two to talk about it.

She sweeps out of the room past the wide-eyed boy and pauses in the doorway.

EDITH (cont'd.)

I'm going to pack his bag. Shall I send Doreen in?

PETE

Yeah, in a minute.

Edith goes out. Pete finally abandons the attempt at a handshake and leans over until he is at eye-level with B.J. His voice carries a tone of forced friendliness.

PETE (cont'd.)

So, how've you been, sport? (B.J. doesn't answer) Long time since you've seen your old man, huh? But there's not a day that goes by that I'm not thinkin' of you, son. (he sees that B.J. doesn't entirely buy this) Not many, anyway.

B.J.

Why are you here?

PETE

(straightening up)

For Aunt Edna's funeral, of course.

B.J.

It's over. You missed it.

PETE

It's a long drive from Reno.

B.J.

Why are you really here?

PETE

Because, like your Granmama said, you're going to come home with me.

B.J.

What if I don't want to?

PETE

(changing tactics)

How old are you now, B.J.

B.J.

Don't you know?

PETE

Yes, I know.

B.J.

Then why do you ask?

PETE

Twelve. You're twelve, aren't you? Well, then, you're old enough.

B.J.

Old enough for what?

PETE

For a straight talk, father to son. I'm going to tell you something, B.J., man to man. I don't want you anymore than you want me. Understand? We haven't seen each other all these years because neither of us wanted to. I'm not going to pretend it was otherwise. But things have changed now. For both of us. I need you. And I think you need me.

B.J.

What do you mean?

PETE

(bluntly)

You can't live here anymore. Your Granmama and me were just talking about that. She doesn't want you anymore. (B.J.'s eyes brim with

tears) Crying won't help you B.J., so dry up. You're going to find that the world's a crueller place than this, one of these days. So, you need me 'cause you gotta live somewhere. That's the beauty of it. You need me, and I need you.

B.J.

What do you need me for?

PETE

(glancing towards the door)

There's a special lady in my life, B.J.--I need your help for her. She wants a family, and it's a bit late for her to be getting one in the usual way. But if she marries me--and I've got you--then she's got a family ready made. And then everybody's happy. Understand?

Pete looks up to see DOREEN HOFSTADLER walking through the door.

PETE(cont'd.)

Mum's the word, okay, sport? (to Doreen)  
Darling--we were just talking about you. Come on over and meet my boy.

Doreen, plump and matronly, fifty-ish, approaches B.J. almost coyly, holding out both soft, white hands to cradle his face. Her hair is bleached a brittle platinum-blonde, her face heavily made-up to disguise her years. Her voice bears traces of a Southern accent.

DOREEN

Why, honey, aren't you just the sweetest thing? (she pinches B.J.'s cheeks) You're gonna come live with us, you hear? Your daddy's done nothing but talk about it for months now. And I'm so glad, honey. You and me, we're gonna be good friends, just you wait and see.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON: DESERT HIGHWAY

The powerful black Mercedes speeds down the otherwise empty highway, raising swirls of dust from the shoulder in its wake.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: CAR

B.J. sits in the back seat, staring out the window at the blurred countryside. Pete is driving; Doreen sits in the passenger seat, half-twisted around towards the back. She divides her attention

between watching the monotonous dark ribbon of pavement stretching ahead, looking fondly at Pete's profile as he drives, and casting blissful, girlish glances over her shoulder at B.J. No one speaks.

EXT. NIGHT: DOREEN'S RENO HOUSE

It is very late when they pull up a curving brick drive and stop in front of an imposing home. Lights are turned on inside the house; a MAID opens the door and stands waiting on the threshold.

INT. NIGHT: CAR

B.J. is slumped against the window, sleeping. Doreen leans over him and gently shakes him awake.

DOREEN

William, honey, wake up. We're home now.

B.J. sits up, dazed and rubbing his eyes.

INT. NIGHT: HOUSE

As B.J. walks sleepily into the house, he stares blankly around him at the rich furnishings. A heavy chandelier casts a dazzling light in the entrance hall where he stands blinking.

DOREEN

(putting her arm gently around his shoulders)  
William, this is Lucille (indicating the maid, who nods in greeting). She's going to take you upstairs to bed, and I'll be up in a minute to say goodnight. Anything you want, you tell Lucille, you hear?

B.J. nods vaguely.

INT. NIGHT: B.J.'S BEDROOM

Lucille is fluffing the pillows behind B.J.'s head as Doreen and Pete enter.

LUCILLE

I just got out his night things, ma'm; I thought I'd unpack in the morning.

DOREEN

Yes, that's fine Lucille, thank you. You can go now.

LUCILLE

Thank you, ma'm.

Lucille goes out, and Doreen comes beaming to B.J.'s bedside. She sits down on the bed, fussing with the comforter. Pete hangs back against the wall by the door.

DOREEN

There now, honey, how's that? Okay?

B.J. nods. Doreen leans forward and gives him a warm, moist kiss on the forehead, leaving a faint print of lipstick.

DOREEN (cont'd.)

You sleep well, you hear? Sweet dreams, honey.

She stands and gazes happily at B.J. for a moment. Pete walks up behind her.

PETE

You go on to bed, darling; I'll be right up.

Doreen smiles at him, throws one last fond look at B.J., and leaves the room. Pete sits down on the bed in the place vacated by Doreen.

PETE (cont'd.)

Not too bad, huh, sport? You'll see, you'll like it here just fine. About what we talked about, you keep it like that, okay. It's our understanding, you and me, man to man. Alright? (B.J. shrugs noncommittally) You understand, sport, I know you do.

Pete stands up and moves toward the door, turning out the light.

PETE (cont'd.)

Sleep tight; don't let the bedbugs bite.

INT. MORNING: B.J.'S BEDROOM

B.J. is jolted awake by Lucille's drawing back the heavy curtains with a flourish. The morning sunlight streams in the window onto the bed, surrounding him in a yellow halo.

INT. MORNING: BREAKFAST ROOM

B.J. is seated at a large, well-polished table, where he is confronted by a bewildering selection of cereals. Doreen hovers over his shoulder, milk-jug in hand. B.J. reaches first for one box, then another, then hesitates and finally selects a third brand from the dozen varieties before him.

After he fills his bowl, Doreen carefully pours the milk over the cereal, then sits dotingly beside him to watch him eat.

EXT. MORNING: DOREEN'S HOUSE

Doreen conducts B.J. on a tour of the house's extensive grounds; they visit the pool, the tennis court, the croquet lawn. B.J. curiously examines the wickets and the brightly colored balls lying about on the manicured grass; he and Doreen playfully hit a few balls back and forth. As they walk back towards the house through a rose arbor heavy with blossoms, Doreen places her arm around his shoulders, drawing him close to her ample figure.

INT. AFTERNOON: DOREEN'S HOUSE

B.J. walks slowly down a dark, wood-panelled hallway. He moves aimlessly, pausing to examine pictures on the wall and a cabinet displaying porcelain figurines. He comes eventually to door which stands partially ajar; through it he can glimpse tall bookcases lined with richly bound volumes. He pushes the door open and walks gingerly into the library.

INT. AFTERNOON: LIBRARY

The afternoon sun filters dully through the velvet curtains, dimly lighting the large room and its dark leather furniture. B.J. wanders to one of the bookcases and pulls out a book at random, running his fingers lovingly over the leather cover and turning the stiff, expensive pages. Suddenly, from a small alcove along one wall, Doreen appears.

DOREEN

Do you like to read, William?

B.J., badly startled, nearly drops the book.

B.J.

Sorry--I didn't know you were in here.

DOREEN

You're more than welcome to come in any time you like--this is your house too, now.

B.J.

(looking admiringly at the books)  
Have you read all these?

DOREEN

(with a laugh)

Lord, no--what would I do that for! This was my daddy's study. We moved here from Georgia when I was fifteen. I can remember coming in here in the evenings, after dinner, with my homework. Daddy would be sitting over there in that big chair, reading the paper. I'd sit on

the rug beside him, and he'd help me with my math. I never did have much of a head for numbers. "Never you mind about that," my daddy used to tell me, "just you put on a new dress and nobody gonna ask you to do sums." Or sometimes he'd be at his desk, writing--Daddy was a lawyer, a good one; when he was working I wasn't supposed to bother him, but pretty soon he'd see me stuck on some hard figures, and he'd call me over to him, to help me out. I suppose he read all these books, one time or another.

B.J.

I wish I had all these books.

DOREEN

But, darling, they are your books. You can come in and read them whenever you want.

Nevertheless, B.J. carefully replaces the book on the shelf.

B.J.

I think maybe I'll go on up to my room now, if that's okay.

DOREEN

Wait, honey, I need you for a minute. Come on over here; I want you to help me make a decision.

B.J. obediently joins her in the alcove. A large safe, built into one wall of the alcove and disguised as a bookcase, is open, its contents spread before it. Cases of opulent jewelry overflow onto the floor and are strewn on nearby chairs.

DOREEN (cont'd.)

I was trying to decide what to wear to that party your daddy and I are going to tonight, but I just can't make up my mind. What do you think?

B.J.

I never saw so much stuff.

DOREEN

It's a bit silly, isn't it?. It would be so much easier not to have so many things. But what do you think--should I wear these (holding up a pair of emerald earrings) or these (holding up a pair of diamond earrings)?



B.J.

I like the green ones.

DOREEN

These? (she examines herself in a handheld mirror) Yes, I like them too. I think there's a necklace to go with them somewhere. You don't see it, do you, William?

B.J. drops to his knees beside her and helps her look for the necklace. He picks up various pieces wonderingly, examining the brilliant jewels. His eye falls on a relatively plain piece, a gold crucifix set with small precious stones. He lifts it out and holds it up to the light.

DOREEN

Isn't that a nice one? It was my grandmother's; she got it for her thirteenth birthday, and she was going to give it to me when I turned thirteen. "To celebrate becoming a woman," she told me. But she died when I was only twelve, so I got it a year early. Ah, here it is! (she triumphantly holds aloft the matching necklace) I knew it had to be here somewhere.

B.J. watches as she tries to fasten the necklace around her plump neck. He turns the crucifix over and over in his hand.

B.J.

I just turned twelve.

DOREEN

(distractedly)

Really? Do you think you could help me with this, love?

Still clutching the crucifix, B.J. attempts to close the clasp on the necklace. The crucifix drops into Doreen's lap.

DOREEN (cont'd.)

Careful, honey. Did you get it? (B.J. nods and she looks again in the mirror.) Oh, yes, that's very nice. What do you think, William?

B.J.

They kinda match your eyes.

DOREEN

(coquettishly)

Aren't you a little charmer--just like your father. (she picks the crucifix up out of her

lap) Here--put this back in one of those cases  
and help me put this away.

B.J. takes the crucifix but does not move to put it away. He  
looks closely at it.

B.J.  
Are those real diamonds?

DOREEN  
Yes, honey, they're real.

B.J.  
(awed)  
They're almost like stars, the way they shine.  
(recites) "Give me my Romeo, and when he shall  
die, / Take and cut him out in little stars. .  
. . ."

DOREEN  
What's that?

B.J.  
Just something I read.

DOREEN  
It's lovely. Did you learn it at school?

B.J.  
No. From a friend.

DOREEN  
That's nice--to have friends like that. (she  
fingers the crucifix thoughtfully) Would you  
like this?

B.J.  
No, ma'am--I couldn't take that.

DOREEN  
Why not?

B.J.  
It's yours.

DOREEN  
Well, I'll give it to you. I have too much  
stuff already.

B.J.  
No--I couldn't.

DOREEN

Why ever not, honey? I want you to have it.

B.J.

It's . . . it's so expensive.

DOREEN

Not really. Those are just little bitty stones.

B.J.

But your grandmother gave it to you.

DOREEN

And she would have wanted me to give it to someone, too. Here, let me have that. (she fastens the crucifix around his neck) It's yours now. A present from me--a special present.

B.J.

(fingering the crucifix on his chest)  
But why?

DOREEN

For coming to live with me here. For being my friend.

B.J.

Am I your friend?

DOREEN

I think so. So you keep this, always, to remind you of that. That I'm your very special friend. (she tucks the crucifix under his shirt against his bare skin) You wear it there, right next to your heart, so it reminds you of me.

INT. NIGHT: DINING ROOM

B.J., Pete and Doreen are seated around the table, eating dinner. Pete and Doreen sit at opposite ends, with B.J. between them.

B.J.

Can I have some more mashed potatoes?

DOREEN

Of course you can, honey (she passes them to him) How about some carrots, too?

B.J.

No thanks.

PETE

So, what time does your plane leave tomorrow?

DOREEN

Ten-thirty. I really do hate to leave you two, you know.

PETE

Don't worry about us; we can take care of ourselves, huh, B.J.?

B.J., his mouth full, does not answer.

Lucille comes in from the kitchen to clear the table. She brings in huge wedges of pie for dessert.

B.J.

Lemon meringue--my favorite.

DOREEN

I'm sure I shouldn't let you have any--you didn't eat a bite of your vegetables.

PETE

(clearing his throat)

Put down your fork, B.J.

B.J.

Aw, Dad . . .

DOREEN

I didn't really mean that, Peter.

PETE

Don't worry, I'm not going to deprive anyone of their dessert. I'd just like to make an announcement.

DOREEN

What is it, Peter?

PETE

Now that I have your attention, I'd like to propose a toast.

Pete rises from his seat dramatically, lifting his wine glass.

DOREEN

A toast? Whatever for?

PETE

For us. For the three of us.

DOREEN

Peter, how nice.

PETE

Wait--I'm not finished. (he pulls a small black velvet case from his pocket) I would also like to propose . . . a marriage. (he opens the case to reveal a large diamond ring) Doreen, will you marry me?

DOREEN

Oh, Peter!

PETE

(handing the ring to a stunned B.J.)  
Here, son, you take this over to her.

B.J. numbly accepts the ring, holding it at arm's length in front of him. He carries it over to Doreen, who takes it from him with trembling hands, misty-eyed. Doreen places the ring carefully on her finger, then gazes raptly at it. Tears stream from her eyes as she clasps B.J. to her.

DOREEN

I'm so happy, William, aren't you? We're going to be a real family now. I'm so very, very happy.

INT. DAY: LIBRARY

B.J. is reading a book when Pete comes striding purposefully into the library, carrying a small suitcase.

PETE

Hi, sport. Whatcha doin'?

B.J. doesn't answer, but he watches as Pete hurries past him towards the small alcove with the safe.

Curious, B.J. puts down the book and follows Pete a moment later. He finds him on his knees in front of the safe, twirling the knob with a practiced hand.

B.J.

What are you doing?

PETE

(opening the safe)  
A little housecleaning, son.

B.J.  
What do you mean?

PETE  
You'll see.

Pete begins pulling case after case of jewelry out of the safe and stuffing them into the suitcase.

B.J.  
Those aren't yours; put them back.

PETE  
Don't get uptight, kid; I'm gonna put them back. (the suitcase full, Pete stands up)  
C'mon, B.J., we've got work to do.

INT. DAY: CAR

Pete and B.J. drive through a seedy industrial area in the outskirts of Reno. B.J. looks around apprehensively. Pete pulls to the curb in front of a large warehouse.

EXT. DAY: RENO WAREHOUSE

Pete and B.J. climb out of the car and enter the warehouse through a narrow door.

INT. DAY: WAREHOUSE

Inside, the warehouse is empty and shadowy; its cavernous space dwarfs B.J. and Pete. Pete heads directly for a stairway leading to an elevated office space at the back of the building, B.J. following nervously behind. Their footsteps echo hugely around them.

When they reach the office, Pete pauses, then raps sharply on the door.

VOICE (off-screen)  
Who's there?

PETE  
It's Tucker.

VOICE  
Come on in, Tucker.

INT. DAY: WAREHOUSE OFFICE

Pete opens the door slowly and steps into a smokey, cluttered office. Inside is MORGAN RICHARDS, a pale, heavy-set man. His

flesh hangs on him in baggy folds and his skin looks constantly damp. He sits in a tall, worn armchair in front of a desk, a single lightbulb glaring behind him.

B.J., who had lingered a moment outside the office, suddenly appears beside Pete. In a single, cat-like movement seemingly impossible for a man of his build, Richards whips a gun from his belt and trains it on B.J.

RICHARDS

Hold it! Don't move!

PETE

Shit! It's only my boy--take it easy.

RICHARDS

(lowering the gun slowly)

You tell me when someone's with you, Tucker.

PETE

Sure, sure; I just forgot. (he sits down opposite Richards) You're getting kinda jumpy.

RICHARDS

I got reasons to be. What did you bring him for?

PETE

Who's gonna suspect a family man?

RICHARDS

He was almost ex-family. This is no place for a boy. What've you got?

PETE

(opening the suitcase)

The crown jewels.

RICHARDS

This is some haul. (he picks out a necklace and holds it to the light) It's gonna take some time to do this job, you know.

PETE

She won't be home till next week.

RICHARDS

Come back Friday; we'll have it for you then.

PETE

(standing and extending his hand)

See ya Friday.

RICHARDS

(absorbed by the gems, he ignores Pete's hand)  
Yeah, Friday.

INT. DAY: CAR

B.J. and Pete drive along the highway. B.J. stares silently out the window. His hand fingers the crucifix inside his shirt.

B.J.

What if I tell her?

PETE

You won't.

B.J.

How do you know what I'm gonna do?

PETE

I figured you to be smarter.

B.J.

Well, you figured me wrong.

PETE

No, son, you figured wrong.

Pete pulls the car to the side of the road and stops.

B.J.

What are you stopping for?

PETE

To explain something to you, boy. What do you think happens if you tell the old girl? You think I'll go to jail, right? (B.J. shrugs) Maybe I would. But not before the whole thing falls apart. And that means Richards. Me, I'm just your ordinary run-of-the-mill kinda thief, but Richards--we're talkin' big time. You think he's gonna sit back and let some smart-aleck kid blow the lid off his game? Huh?

B.J. only stares at the floor, fingering the crucifix.

PETE (cont'd.)

Of course not. You squeal and you're dead, son. You and her and anybody else that gets in the way. Got it? (B.J. nods) Good. I'm glad that's settled. (his eye falls on the crucifix in B.J.'s hand) What's that?



B.J.  
What?

PETE  
There--around your neck--that cross.

B.J.  
(pulling away defensively)  
It's mine.

PETE  
Let me see it.

B.J. reluctantly takes the crucifix off over his head and hands it to Pete.

PETE (cont'd.)  
Where'd you get this?

B.J.  
She gave it to me.

PETE  
(holding it up to the light)  
Nice. Suppose these are real?

B.J.  
I dunno. Come on, give it back.

PETE  
(slipping the crucifix into his pocket)  
Sorry; no can do.

B.J.  
Hey--that's mine!

PETE  
(pulling the car back onto the highway)  
You never learn, do you kid?

INT. DAY: WAREHOUSE OFFICE

Richards and Pete sit on opposite sides of the desk, examining the jewelry. B.J. glumly occupies a nearby chair. One of Richards' cronies, BEETLE, lurks in the background.

Pete opens one of the jewelry cases on the desk and peers at the necklace in it.

PETE  
Nice work. You'd never know it in a million years. Is this all of it?

RICHARDS

It's all there.

Pete piles the cases into the suitcase again. As he reaches for one small ring case lying open in front of Richards, however, Richards' hand slams down on his wrist.

RICHARDS

That one's mine, Tucker.

He lifts the handsome, diamond-encrusted man's ring and waves it in Pete's face.

RICHARDS (cont'd.)

Too nice to strip, don't you agree?

PETE

Yeah, sure, but what do I do to replace it?

RICHARDS

Beetle here made you a copy.

Richards snaps his fingers and Beetle hands him another case containing what appears to be an identical ring.

PETE

What about the split?

RICHARDS

Ain't no split on this one, Tucker. Some things are a work of art. But maybe you don't know what art is.

PETE

Fuck art. What I'm after is money.

RICHARDS

Then consider this a little lesson in art appreciation. It'll do you good.

PETE

What if I don't like it?

RICHARDS

I don't remember asking you. This is what they call "prerogative"--as in my prerogative. You don't like it, you find yourself another man to deal with. If you dare.

Pete shuts the suitcase and places it on the floor beside him. He leans forward expectantly.

PETE

So, other than that, how'd we come out?

RICHARDS

(producing two ziplock bags containing gems)  
See for yourself.

PETE

(holding up the bags, so the gems glitter)  
Pretty. (he hefts the bags, one in each hand)  
Fifty-fifty?

RICHARDS

Your pick.

PETE

(tossing one bag on the desk)  
Thanks. (he slips the other bag in his pocket)  
By the way, what do you think of this?

He pulls out B.J.'s crucifix.

RICHARDS

Where'd you find this?

PETE

Same place. Is it worth the trouble?

RICHARDS

(turning around towards Beetle)  
Beetle--what do you think?

Beetle slips a jeweler's glass into his eye and squints at the crucifix.

While Richards' back is turned, Pete slips the ring on the desk into his pocket.

BEETLE

Why not? Money's always worth a little trouble.

Beetle leans over the desk, taking some jeweler's tools from his pocket. Working deftly, he removes the stones from the crucifix and makes a little pile of them on the desk. He turns to a counter behind the desk and returns with a tray divided into dozens of compartments, each holding a different kind and size of fake gem. He selects appropriate replacements for the stones he has removed and places them in the empty settings. In a moment the crucifix looks exactly as it originally did. Beetle hands it back to Pete.

BEETLE

There you go--good as new.

PETE

(handing the crucifix to B.J.)

Here, son, you can have this back now. (to Richards) Usual split?

Pete begins to divide the stones into two equal piles. But once again Richards' hand on his wrist stops him. Pete gulps visibly, a cold sweat beading his forehead.

RICHARDS

Just a minute. (to B.J.) Come here, son. (B.J. approaches shyly) Was this yours? (B.J. nods.) You're a goddamn greedy bastard, Tucker.

PETE

Now hold on . . .

RICHARDS

It's a lowdown son-of-a-bitch that steals from his own boy.

PETE

Who said I stole it? She gave it to him, and he's got it back. It's all staying in the family, anyhow.

RICHARDS

We're gonna make sure of that.

He scoops up the jewels, places them in a bag, and hands them to B.J.

RICHARDS (cont'd.)

Here son, you take these. Your daddy will show you what to do. And you keep it for yourself, you hear? Put it in a bank or something; save it for college. Then you get yourself a real job and stay outta this crap. You don't want to end up like your old man.

EXT. DAY: GAS STATION

B.J. sits in the car, watching as Pete talks on a pay phone. Pete hangs up, walks back to the car and climbs in.

INT. DAY: CAR

Pete starts the engine and pulls out onto a busy main street before turning to B.J.

PETE

It's all set--he's expecting you. When we get there you go in; I'll wait in the car. You tell him "Tucker sent me."

B.J.

"Tucker sent me."

PETE

That's right--he'll take it from there.

B.J.

Why do I gotta do it?

PETE

Because it's better that way.

B.J.

Why?

PETE

Shit--you're just full of questions, aren't you? Cameras, B.J., they all got cameras. I don't show my face, nobody knows my face, okay?

INT. DAY: CAR

They pull up in front of seedy-looking pawn shop on a street lined with seedy-looking pawn shops.

PETE

Okay, sport--hop to it.

B.J. scrunches the bags of jewels into a ball in the palm of his hand.

PETE (cont'd.)

Wait. I almost forgot. See what he thinks of this, too.

He pulls the ring out of his pocket and thrusts it in B.J.'s hand.

B.J.

How'd you get this?

PETE

Never underestimate your old man, sport.

B.J. glumly exits the car.

INT. DAY: PAWNSHOP

B.J. enters a dark and cluttered store, full of cast-off hopes and mortgaged dreams. He approaches a counter at the back where a shabby SHOPKEEPER perches, reading the paper. The shopkeeper looks up as B.J. nears, peering at him over the top of his reading glasses.

SHOPKEEPER

What can I do for you, son?

B.J.

"Tucker sent me."

SHOPKEEPER

(raising his eyebrows)

He did, did he? Where's he doing his recruiting these days--the playground? Let me see what you've got, kid.

B.J. places the two plastic bags of jewels and the ring on the counter.

B.J.

He's my dad.

SHOPKEEPER

My condolences, kid. (examines the goods)  
Awful lot of stuff here. Hang on a minute--  
I'll be right back.

The shopkeeper disappears into a room behind the counter. B.J. idly gazes at the various items on display. He glances out the front window and sees Pete sitting in the car, waiting. Then the shopkeeper returns, bearing a long slip of paper in his hand.

SHOPKEEPER (cont'd.)

Okay, you tell him same deal as before. Except the ring; that'll have to be separate.

B.J.

Wait--I made a mistake.

SHOPKEEPER

What do you mean, a mistake?

B.J.

I wasn't supposed to give you that ring. And I gave you two bags, right--a little one and a big one?

SHOPKEEPER

Yeah. So?

B.J.

The little one--that was a mistake too. I wasn't supposed to give you that one either.

SHOPKEEPER

What were you supposed to do with it?

B.J.

We got another stop.

SHOPKEEPER

Alright, alright (he crosses some items off the receipt) Here you go.

He disappears into the room again and returns with the small bag of stones and the ring. He goes to the cash register and counts out some bills.

SHOPKEEPER (cont'd.)

That's what I get for dealing with amateurs. One thousand up front. Tell Tucker to give me a few days, then come by for the rest. Tell him it'll take a little longer--more stuff than usual. And you tell him to remember to bring that receipt--no show, no dough. Got that? (B.J. nods) Good. Now scram.

B.J. pockets the money, the ring, and the small bag of jewels. He starts for the front door, then hesitates. Over his shoulder he sees a second door leading from the back of the shop. He turns suddenly and heads for the back door, breaking into a run.

SHOPKEEPER (cont'd.)

Hey, kid! You can't go out that way!

Panicked, B.J. dashes wildly for the back door, knocking over boxes and crashing into displays on his way. He bursts through the door into the alley behind the shop. An alarm bell rings violently as he thrusts the door open.

INT. DAY: CAR

Pete jumps at the sound of the alarm. He tries to see into the shop.

PETE

What the fuck . . .? Come on, B.J., get outta there!

EXT. DAY: ALLEY

B.J. sprints down the alley towards a side street.

INT. DAY: CAR

Pete takes a gun from the glove compartment and leaps out of the car, heading for the shop.

INT. DAY: PAWN SHOP

Pete runs in the front door. The shopkeeper is behind the counter, trying to disable the alarm.

PETE

What the hell's going on?!

SHOPKEEPER

You tell me--he just ran out the door!

PETE

Shit!

He dashes for the back door.

EXT. DAY: ALLEY

B.J. reaches the side street and turns the corner towards the main boulevard.

INT. DAY: PAWNSHOP

Pete stops at the open door and looks into the alley. He glances both ways, seeing nothing, then takes off in the wrong direction.

EXT. DAY: STREET

B.J. hits the main street and continues to run away from the shop. He sees a city bus coming towards him on the other side of the street, pulling over towards a bus stop. Heedlessly, B.J. runs out into the traffic, dodging cars to cross the street. He arrives at the bus stop just as the bus does. He shoves his way on board past the passengers trying to exit.

EXT. DAY: STREET

Two blocks down the street, Pete appears, gun in hand, glancing wildly up and down the boulevard for B.J.

INT. DAY: BUS

Crouched low in a seat in the back, with only his eyes peering



over the window edge, B.J. sees Pete standing on the opposite side of the street as the bus shifts gears and rumbles past him.

INT. DAY: RENO BUS TERMINAL

Along with a stream of other passengers, B.J. exits the bus at the terminal.

He fights his way through the hurrying people towards the ticket counter, where he stands nervously in line.

When he reaches the counter, he hands some money to the clerk, receiving a ticket and change in return. The clerk points to the left to direct him.

B.J. wanders among rows of waiting buses, checking his ticket often. Finally he finds the one he is looking for. He hands his ticket to the driver by the door, who punches it. B.J. boards the bus.

INT. DAY: BUS

B.J. takes a seat toward the back of the half-filled bus. Most of the other passengers seem to be elderly women sitting in pairs, talking or knitting or eating sandwiches they have brought with them.

The bus driver climbs into his seat and shuts the door. The engine roars to life and the bus rolls out of the terminal.

EXT. DAY: BUS TERMINAL

The bus pulls onto the street, its destination plate reading in bold letters: LAS VEGAS.

INT. EARLY EVENING: BUS

B.J. is bent over, with his back towards the window, rocking with the motion of the bus. He concentrates intensely on the objects in his hand.

With the smallest blade of his pocket knife, B.J. carefully pries out the fake stones from the crucifix. He lets them fall to the floor by his feet. As each one is removed, he digs in the small bag of jewels for a replacement stone, meticulously dropping it into the setting and tapping the prongs around it firmly. When all the original stones are back in place, B.J. holds the crucifix up in the fading light. Satisfied with his handiwork, he fastens it around his neck and slips it inside his shirt. Then he leans wearily against the window. The desolate desert landscape slips past outside as B.J. falls into an uneasy sleep.

INT. NIGHT: LAS VEGAS BUS TERMINAL

The bus carrying B.J. pulls into the terminal and stops. The doors swing open and passengers file out sleepily. B.J. is one of the last to disembark.

B.J. wanders aimlessly through the terminal, which is nearly deserted. The only people are those clustered around the brightly lit coffee shop, where travellers sit in booths, waiting for their buses, and an assortment of down-and-out hangers-on occupies the counter, drinking endless cups of coffee. A few prostitutes lurk by the doorway or pace restlessly back and forth in front, smoking.

Drawn by the lights and the people, B.J. heads for the coffee shop.

Just outside the door, he nearly bumps into one of the prostitutes pacing there. She snaps at him angrily.

PROSTITUTE

Hey, watch it, will ya?

She turns to glare angrily at B.J. With a start, he recognizes Mabel.

B.J.

Mama?

Mabel bends over B.J., clutching his shirt, anguish in her eyes.

MABEL

You got any money, kid? Huh?

B.J.

(frightened)

Yeah, I got some.

MABEL

Give it to me.

B.J. silently complies. Mabel takes the bills greedily, counting them.

MABEL (cont'd.)

Shit! What'd you do--rob a bank? Come on, let's get outta here.

B.J.

Where are we going?

MABEL

Anywhere outta here.

EXT. NIGHT: MOTEL

A cheap, sleazy motel not far from the bus terminal. A neon light flashes "Vacancy" like a heartbeat. A hand-lettered sign in the office window reads more discreetly "Hourly rates available."

INT. NIGHT: MOTEL

In a shabby room, B.J. sleeps exhaustedly, sprawled in his clothes on the stained bedspread.

In the bathroom, Mabel sits on the chipped edge of the bathtub, a black stocking tied around her arm in a makeshift tourniquet, shooting up.

INT. MORNING: MOTEL

B.J. wakes up slowly, rubbing his eyes to orient himself. Mabel lies on her back in her underwear beside him on the bedspread, snoring.

B.J.  
(shaking her)

Mama. Mama, wake up.

Mabel rolls over groggily, pulling a pillow over her head.

MABEL

Go 'way.

B.J.  
Mama, it's me, B.J. Come on, wake up.

MABEL  
(opening one eye)  
What are you doing here?

B.J.  
I found you last night, remember?

MABEL  
I'm hungry. Go get something to eat.

Mabel pulls the pillow more firmly over her head. B.J. slides off the bed. He spies Mabel's purse on the bedside table and digs in it for money. He pulls out a few crumpled bills, stuffs them in his pocket, and heads out the door.

EXT. MORNING: STREET

B.J. heads for a gas station convenience store at the corner. As he walks towards it, a familiar ancient car, one headlight missing, pulls in. B.J. quickens his step.

EXT. MORNING: GAS STATION

The car is stopped beside the pumps. A frumpy female form bends over the gas tank, her back to B.J. B.J. waits until the woman returns the nozzle to the pump and heads inside to pay.

Quickly, B.J. crosses the gas station pavement and hops into the passenger seat of the car.

When Mama returns, he slides into the driver's seat and puts the key in the ignition without acknowledging B.J.'s presence. B.J. looks at him expectantly. Mama starts the car.

B.J.  
Aren't you even going to say hello?

MAMA  
Hello.

B.J.  
Aren't you surprised to see me?

MAMA  
(pulling out toward the street)  
No.

B.J.  
No?

MAMA  
No.

B.J.  
Why not?

MAMA  
I knew you'd be back.

B.J.  
You did?

MAMA  
Yep.

B.J.  
 (settling against the worn seat)  
 So did I.

INT. NIGHT: MOTEL ROOM

Mabel is lounging on the unmade bed, leaning against the wall, smoking. B.J. paces back and forth in front of the curtained window. When he hears a car pull up outside, he peers out the window eagerly.

B.J.  
 She's here, mama.

MABEL  
 (grinding out the cigarette)  
 'Bout time.

B.J. leaps to open the door for Mama.

MAMA  
 (to B.J.)  
 You go wait in the car.

MABEL  
 Who the hell do you think you are telling my  
 boy what to do?

MAMA  
 (pushing B.J. out the door)  
 Go on. There's someone there--tell him to give  
 me five minutes.

MABEL  
 (stalking towards Mama)  
 Hey--I need that boy.

EXT. NIGHT: MOTEL

The door shuts behind B.J. He stands there a moment, then heads for Mama's car. He opens the driver's door and climbs into the back seat.

INT. NIGHT: CAR

In the front passenger's seat is a thin, pale, nervous-looking MAN, properly dressed in a business suit, white shirt and tie. He wears dark-rimmed glasses that he occasionally pushes up his nose with his forefinger. He watches B.J. anxiously, swallowing noisily.

B.J.  
Mama said you should give her five minutes.

MAN  
(clearing his throat)  
This is highly irregular.

B.J. and the man both watch the door to the motel room. The man swallows again, his Adam's apple bobbing, then glances at his watch.

MAN (cont'd.)  
Highly irregular.

INT. NIGHT: MOTEL ROOM

MABEL  
I want that boy back here, you hear?

MAMA  
I want to talk to you--privately.

MABEL  
Screw the talk. (trying to shove past Mama to the door) Outta the way, bitch; you're wasting my time.

MAMA  
(blocking the door)  
I'll pay for your time.

Mama holds up a fifty dollar bill. Mabel's eyes narrow calculatingly. She snatches the bill and turns away, tucking it into her dress.

MABEL  
So talk.

Mama follows Mabel across the room. When Mabel stops by the bed to light another cigarette, Mama leans close to her.

MAMA  
I need you.

MABEL  
(sneering)  
I don't do dykes.

Mama shoves Mabel back against the wall, pinning her there. He holds her face in his hand and kisses her fiercely. Mabel looks first shocked, then confused. But when Mama places Mabel's hand against his crotch, her eyes grow wide with comprehension.

MABEL (cont'd.)  
Shit. (sidling up against him) That changes things, don't it?

MAMA  
Maybe.

MABEL  
Whaddaya mean, maybe?

MAMA  
I don't want you. I want the boy.

MABEL  
My god--you're a fuckin' queer, aren't you?

Mama strikes her across the mouth. Mabel stares at Mama with wide, frightened eyes as he leans threateningly over her.

MAMA  
Don't you ever say that.

MABEL  
(defiantly)  
But you are.

MAMA  
To you, yes; to you I must be queer. What would you know about really loving another person?

MABEL  
I know it's wrong--what you want.

MAMA  
You have no idea what I want.

MABEL  
You want to sleep with my boy.

Mama slaps her again. Mabel spits at him. Mama steps back wearily, wiping his face. Mabel breaks away from him.

MAMA  
Think what you want; it doesn't matter. In the sewer that passes for your heart, in what's left of your brain, you can't possibly understand what I feel for that boy. Maybe nobody can. But I know you'll understand this: what you want for him--how much?

MABEL

Now you're talkin'.

There is a sharp rap on the door. Slowly, the door swings open and the pinched face of the man from the car looks timidly into the room.

INT. NIGHT: CAR

B.J. and Mama are driving down a nearly deserted highway. At long intervals, headlights loom towards them out of the darkness, slip past in a blinding glare, and fade away behind them. A soft rain is falling, and the windshield wipers scrape the glass rhythmically. A mournful country music tune can be heard in snatches over the static on the radio.

B.J.

I'm hungry.

MAMA

There's nothing but cactus between here and Provo, so you'd better get used to it.

A pause fills the space between them.

B.J.

I can't stop thinking about food.

MAMA

Try thinking about food you don't like.

B.J.

Like what?

MAMA

There must be something you don't like.

B.J.

I don't like pumpkin pie, not since one Thanksgiving when I ate five pieces and threw up after.

MAMA

Pumpkin pie looks like vomit.

B.J.

It looks like baby shit.

MAMA

Ever had okra?



B.J.  
What's that?

MAMA  
A mutant vegetable, green and slimy. About as long as your thumb, with little hairs sticking out all over--and it's slimy inside.

B.J.  
Liver's rubbery--like dried up tadpoles.

MAMA  
When did you ever eat tadpoles?

B.J.  
I didn't say I ate 'em; just the way they feel, when you pick 'em up.

MAMA  
I suppose you could eat them; people eat some pretty weird things.

B.J.  
Like squid.

MAMA  
Octopus.

B.J.  
Ants.

MAMA  
Monkey brains.

B.J.  
Jello.

MAMA  
Jello?

B.J.  
Yeah, don't you know? They make it out of dead horse hooves.

MAMA  
They do not.

B.J.  
They do so.

MAMA  
They do not.

Do so!

B.J.

There is a long pause. The road shines like gleaming black snake in the headlights.

MAMA

They do not make jello out of horses' hooves.

B.J.

Fine. But I'm still hungry.

INT. EARLY MORNING: CAR

Mama is still driving, bleary-eyed, as the sun rises sudden and newly bright above the horizon. He lowers the car's sun visor against the glare. B.J. sleeps curled up against the door on the passenger's side.

Ahead, a sign appears, marking the outskirts of a town. Mama cranes his neck to read it in passing. It says, "JESUS LIVES . . . in Pleasant Grove, Utah."

EXT. MORNING: BAPTIST CHURCH

Mama pulls to the curb in front of the church, turning off the engine. Several other cars are parked along the street and in the adjacent church parking lot, and despite the early hour there are small knots of people scattered across the lawn in front of the church and strolling down the walk towards it. A banner hung over an open side door proclaims "Revival Breakfast Today."

INT. MORNING: CAR

Mama leans over and roughly shakes B.J.

MAMA

Rise and shine, son.

B.J.

(rubbing his eyes sleepily)  
Where are we? Why'd you stop?

MAMA

Manna from heaven.

INT. MORNING: CHURCH

Mama and B.J. enter a bright, sunlit hall. Long tables bearing red and white tablecloths fill the room, with a speaker's podium on a raised platform at one end. At the other end, women in starched white aprons are serving breakfast. Many people are

already eating at the tables. B.J. and Mama cross the room toward the serving table.

B.J. and Mama pick up plates and utensils at the end of the line. A large, fleshy WOMAN with a beatific smile takes B.J.'s plate and begins to heap steaming mounds of scrambled eggs, pancakes, and hash brown potatoes on it. B.J.'s eyes grow wide.

The woman gives B.J. back his plate, then places her hand on his arm to stop him, breaking his reverie; she waves a pair of tongs loaded with sausage under his nose.

WOMAN

Do you want salvation today, boy?

B.J.

No, thanks--just some bacon, please.

MAMA

(holding out his plate for the sausage)  
Thank you, ma'am; that looks delicious. (to B.J.) C'mon, son, let's sit down.

EXT. MORNING: CHURCH

B.J. and Mama are standing outside on the lawn as the people begin streaming out the door. The sound of organ music and boisterous hymns swells out of the hall along with the crowd.

Mama and B.J. have set up a wobbly card table loaded with hymn books and cassettes from Mama's store; some of the departing worshippers linger over them. One elderly woman picks up volume bound in cheap imitation leather.

OLD WOMAN

How much is this?

MAMA

Eight dollars.

The woman digs in her purse for a twenty dollar bill. She gives it to Mama, who turns his back on the woman to get change in the shoebox that is a makeshift till. B.J. watches him fold a five dollar bill so that it looks like two bills in his hand. Mama holds the money tightly in his fist as he counts it out.

MAMA (cont'd.)

Five, ten, eleven, twelve--and eight is twenty.

He folds all the bills together in handing them to her, and she sticks the bundle in her purse without checking.

MAMA (cont'd.)  
Any thing else, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN  
No thank you.

She begins to shuffle away from the table, clutching her hymn book. B.J. grabs a five dollar bill from the shoebox and then dives towards the grass, as if picking it up from the ground. He calls to the old woman.

B.J.  
Hey, lady, wait! (she turns to him) You dropped this.

OLD WOMAN  
Did I?

She reaches in her purse for the wad of bills and counts them out. There are only seven dollars. She takes the five from B.J. gratefully.

OLD WOMAN  
Why, I guess I did. Thank you, young man; my old eyes aren't as sharp as they used to be.

The woman turns back down the walk. B.J. hesitates a moment, then returns to the table. He carefully avoids Mama's withering glare.

INT. DAY: CAR

B.J. and Mama are sitting in the car, parked under a tree along a residential street. There is a tense silence between them. B.J. has his arms folded doggedly against his chest and he keeps his head averted, looking out the rolled down window.

MAMA  
What the hell did you think you were doing, anyway?

B.J.  
Giving the lady her change.

MAMA  
It's my money--I make the change.

B.J.  
You cheated her! I saw you--you did it on purpose!

MAMA  
Oh, aren't we the righteous one all the sudden? It never bothered you before.

B.J.  
Only because you taught me so well.

MAMA  
And you were a quick study, too.

B.J.  
Well, I'm through. It's not right.

MAMA  
Since when does that make a difference? She never would have missed it, the old bag.

B.J.  
It doesn't matter. It's not fair.

MAMA  
Welcome to the world, angel; there isn't much that's fair. We need the money; she didn't know it was missing--in a sense it didn't even happen: "He that is robb'd, not wanting what is stol'n, / Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all." Shakespeare . . .

B.J.  
(interrupting)  
Damn Shakespeare! Shakespeare makes me sick. I know you tried to cheat her--that's enough. And you know it too.

There is a long pause. When Mama speaks again, his voice is softer.

MAMA  
Something happened while you were there, didn't it?

B.J.  
Where?

MAMA  
At your dad's.

B.J.  
(bitterly)  
He's not my dad.

MAMA  
You want to tell me about it?

B.J.  
No.

MAMA

As you wish.

B.J. looks away out the window again.

EXT. NIGHT: HILLSIDE

B.J. and Mama lie in sleeping bags on a hill outside of town. The lights of the houses shine in clusters like luminous flowers in the valley below them.

Mama has both arms behind his head, studying the night sky. B.J. holds up the crucifix around his neck so that it glitters faintly in the pale starlight.

Mama?

B.J.

Yeah?

MAMA

You still awake?

B.J.

Yeah.

MAMA

I thought so.

B.J.

Then why'd you ask?

MAMA

I dunno. I wanted to hear you say it.

B.J.

Better'n hearing me snore, I suppose.

MAMA

The rhythmic pulse of cricket-song fills the pause.

Mama?

B.J.

Yeah?

MAMA

I'm sorry about what I said today.

B.J.

Don't be sorry, angel. You were right.

MAMA

B.J.  
It is wrong, isn't it?

MAMA  
Yes.

B.J.  
Even if they never know it?

MAMA  
That's why we have a conscience.

B.J.  
But if nobody knows, then maybe nobody is hurt?

MAMA  
Maybe. It's like a story I heard once.

B.J.  
Not Shakespeare again.

MAMA  
No, not Shakespeare. It's about this man who married a beautiful woman; they were poor, but he loved her tremendously, and she made him very happy. Sometimes she went to the opera with a friend--he didn't like opera--and because she didn't have fancy clothes, she wore costume jewelry with her plain gowns. Then, very suddenly, she died. He was heart-broken; he didn't know if he could live without her. His despair was so great that he couldn't work, and soon he was starving. One day, he decided to sell her costume jewelry, which he never liked anyway, to buy something for supper. It turned out the jewelry was real. He sold it all and became very rich.

B.J.  
How could it be real?

MAMA  
The man never finds out for sure, but of course he believes she had a rich lover--someone she met at the opera probably.

B.J.  
Didn't she love her husband?

MAMA  
He always thought so. And he always loved her.

For the whole time they were married he was incredibly happy.

B.J.

So then what?

MAMA

Now that he is rich, he marries again. His new wife is completely faithful--and she makes him miserable.

B.J.

Why?

MAMA

That's the whole point. The value of something is not in the thing itself; it is what you think of it. He thought he was happy with his wife; when he finds out she was untrue, does that make his happiness false? The jewels he thought were fake were actually real, but he could have thrown them out and never missed them, because to him they were worthless. Now he has both money and a faithful wife, but he is miserable.

B.J.

But what does it mean?

MAMA

I think it means we are only happy if we think we are.

B.J.

I don't think lying is a good way to make someone happy.

MAMA

But the truth may not make you happy either.

EXT. DAY: RESIDENTIAL STREET

B.J. and Mama stand by the trunk of the car, haphazardly loading a red wagon with merchandise. When the wagon is crammed full, Mama casts a critical eye on B.J.'s appearance. He takes a comb out of his purse and runs it through B.J.'s hair, then straightens the boy's clothes.

MAMA

There--that should do it. You know what to say now? (B.J. nods) Good. Try to be polite. Don't push anybody if they're not interested; that always turns them off. And be careful; I'll be



sitting in the car, watching, so I'll be here if you need help. And don't forget to smile.

B.J.

Yeah, yeah. I know.

MAMA

Okay. Good luck, angel.

Mama watches anxiously as B.J. starts off down the sidewalk with the red wagon rattling behind him.

EXT. DAY: HOUSE

B.J. walks up to the front door of the first house he comes to and rings the doorbell.

After a brief pause, a WOMAN in curlers peers out through the curtains of a nearby window. She looks at him for a long moment, and B.J. shifts his weight nervously. At last her face disappears from the window, and soon there is the rattle and thump of chains and locks being released on the inside. The door opens a crack, and the woman glares at B.J. through the narrow opening. Behind her, a soap opera can be seen flickering on the T.V. screen.

WOMAN

What do you want?

B.J.

Good morning, ma'am. I was wondering if you might want to buy . . .

WOMAN

No.

B.J.

But, ma'am, I haven't even said what . . .

WOMAN

No. Don't you understand English? Now get out of here.

She shuts the door firmly in his face. B.J. turns and heads back down the walk towards the street. When he gets to the sidewalk he looks at Mama sitting at the curb in the car. He flashes him a thumbs down sign.

Mama shrugs in reply.

With a grin, B.J. flips off the woman in the house behind him.

EXT. DAY: ANOTHER HOUSE

B.J. knocks on the side of the house. Through the screen door he can see a cluttered living room. A baby in a playpen cries near the sofa. B.J. knocks again, loudly.

Several young children, in various states of dress or undress, one in diapers, come scrambling towards the door. Hard on their heels is a heavy-set WOMAN, a washcloth clutched in one hand. It is the same woman who served him at the church breakfast.

The children gather about her legs as she stands at the screen door, wiping her hand on the washcloth and squinting into the gloom of the porch at B.J. A smile of recognition dawns across her face.

WOMAN

Why, boy, how are you?

B.J.

(flustered)

I'm, uh, fine.

She waits for him to continue.

WOMAN

Can I help you?

B.J.

I . . . (gesturing at the wagon behind him) I thought . . .

WOMAN

Oh, son, you've changed your mind.

B.J.

What?

WOMAN

You've come to be saved, haven't you?

B.J.

Saved?

WOMAN

(opening the screen and beckoning him in)  
Come in, son; I can see that Jesus has sent you.

B.J.

(turning in confusion towards his wagon)  
Jesus? I think I've got one somewhere.

WOMAN

(taking his hand to draw him in)  
Yes, son, He is here. Come in, and He will save you.

B.J.

Ma'am, you don't understand . . .

WOMAN

You want to be saved. Come in and be saved, boy!

B.J.

I can't.

WOMAN

You can! Jesus wants to save you! I can hear Him knocking at your heart right now. Let him in, boy! Let him in!

B.J.

No, ma'am, really. I can't.

WOMAN

(ecstatically)

Yes! You can be saved! Jesus wants to save you, I know He does! He is knocking at your heart--can't you hear him? Listen to Him, boy! Open your heart to the Lord! Open your heart and be saved! Don't refuse Him and sin; open your heart to Jesus, boy! Let Him in and be saved!

B.J.

I can't be saved.

WOMAN

Jesus can save everyone!

B.J.

Not me, ma'am.

WOMAN

Why not, boy? Why won't you come and be saved?

B.J.

Because I'm Catholic; I can't be saved.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON: CAR

B.J. leans against the car beside Mama, who is counting a thick

pile of money in his hand. B.J.'s wagon, nearby on the sidewalk, is noticeably less crowded with items.

MAMA

Hundred and ten, twenty, twenty-five, six, seven, eight--one hundred and twenty-eight dollars. Not bad, kid, for an afternoon's work.

B.J.

Are we done now? I'm getting hungry.

MAMA

(checking his watch)

It's just about five now. Why don't we hit the rest of this block, and then call it a day.

B.J.

Do I have to? It's getting late.

MAMA

We're gonna need every dollar we can get-- we've got a long drive tomorrow. Come on--hop to it, angel.

B.J. wearily grabs the handle of the wagon and heads down the block. Mama slides into the car and pulls a map out of the glove compartment, musing over it as B.J. approaches a house.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: KITCHEN

A WOMAN is baking cookies in the kitchen. The television on the counter blares a commercial for laundry soap as she drops batter on the cookie sheet, and then, as she is putting the cookies in the oven, the theme for a local evening news show comes on. She glances half-heartedly at the screen as she sets a timer for the cookies.

T.V. ANNOUNCER'S VOICE

And now, keeping you informed, around the nation and around your town, WUTA-TV and the five o'clock edition of NewsTime.

NEWSREADER

Good evening. I'm Jeff Wilson, and this is NewsTime. Our top story this evening: Late breaking news out of Las Vegas concerning a missing boy.

A picture of B.J. flashes onto the screen.

## NEWSREADER (cont'd.)

Billie-Joe Tucker, twelve, was reported missing yesterday by his father, according to Las Vegas police. He was last seen in the company of this man . . .

A police mug shot of Mama--sans wig--fills the screen.

## NEWSREADER (cont'd.)

. . . Henry Humbert, also of Las Vegas. In 1973, Humbert was arrested in New York as part of a "kiddie porn" sting operation, although the charges against him were later dropped for lack of evidence. The boy's distraught father expressed a fear that Humbert may have abducted the boy in order to abuse him.

A shot of Mama's shop now appears.

## NEWSREADER (cont'd.)

Humbert, who has been living as a transvestite and was known only as "Mama" in recent years, owned this small religious store in a quiet Las Vegas neighborhood. Police have issued a drawing of Humbert . . .

A composite drawing of Mama--showing him as a woman--occupies the screen.

## NEWSREADER (cont'd.)

. . . compiled after interviewing many of his neighbors and customers, all of whom were unaware of his true identity. Police suspect that he has fled the Las Vegas area with the boy, and may be heading north. They urge all individuals with any knowledge of the whereabouts of Humbert or the boy to contact their local authorities immediately.

The doorbell rings. The woman turns to answer it, wiping her hands on her apron as she goes.

## NEWSREADER (cont'd.)

In other news today . . .

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: FRONT DOOR

The woman opens wide the front door to the house and, with a start, immediately recognizes B.J. as the boy she has just seen on T.V.

B.J.

Good evening, ma'am. How are you?

WOMAN

I . . . uh, are you okay?

B.J.

Just fine, ma'am. I was wondering if you might be interested in buying a small religious ornament for your home.

WOMAN

Could you wait there a minute?

B.J.

I'm sorry--did I catch you at a bad time? Would you like me to come back later?

WOMAN

No! I mean, don't go; please don't go.

She strains to look past B.J. towards the street, where she can see Mama waiting in the car.

B.J.

Sure, ma'am, if you're interested.

WOMAN

Yes! I am. It's just that I, uh, have to make a phone call. Would you like a cookie?

B.J.

A cookie? Sure, if you've got some.

WOMAN

I was just making some--oatmeal--with raisins. I'll go get one. You stay right here, okay.

The woman hurries off towards the kitchen.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: KITCHEN

A deodorant commercial is playing on the television as she returns to the kitchen. She snaps off the T.V. and grabs the phone, dialing nervously. She glances anxiously towards the living room as she waits for someone to answer.

WOMAN

Come on! (a second later she speaks eagerly into the receiver, keeping her voice low) Yes --hello--police? He's here! He's here at my door! (pause) The boy, the one on T.V. (pause) Yes, the one kidnapped in Las Vegas--he's here. (pause) 3161 Pine St. (pause) Yes, I can keep him here. (pause) Yes. And hurry, please!

She hangs up and hurries back to B.J.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: FRONT DOOR

Breathless with anxiety, the woman stares at B.J. a moment, as he stands on the porch. Then she beckons for him to come in.

WOMAN

Why don't you come in here and have your cookies? And I can get you a glass of milk too.

B.J.

(with a guilty glance over his shoulder)  
Okay.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON: STREET

From where he sits in the car, Mama looks up to see B.J. entering the house. He turns back to the map.

In the distance, there is the wail of approaching sirens.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: KITCHEN

B.J. climbs onto a tall stool at the end of the kitchen counter. The woman pours him a glass of milk; her hand shakes so badly that she spills much of it on the counter. She is putting several cookies on a small plate when she hears the sirens.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: CAR

Mama looks up, startled, as several police cars come squealing around the corner, lights flashing.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON: STREET

The cop cars skid to a halt, blocking the road in each direction. Policemen leap out, guns drawn.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON: KITCHEN

Hearing the noise, B.J. slides off the stool and heads for the front door. The woman grabs him by the arm and tries to embrace him.

WOMAN

It's okay--you're safe now!

B.J., frightened, breaks away and runs out of the room.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON: STREET

Bursting out of the front door, B.J. sees Mama being dragged out of the car and brutally assaulted.

B.J.

Mama!

A policeman rushes up to restrain him; B.J. watches helplessly as the cops slam Mama against the side of his car to handcuff him. As they twist Mama's arms behind his back, one cop smashes his nightstick against Mama's head; his wig goes flying.

B.J.'s eyes register his disbelief as he sees for the first time that Mama is a man.

INT. MORNING: JAIL CELL

Grey morning sunlight slants through the small barred window above Mama, who sits despondently on a barren bunk. He is dressed in regulation jail garb, wigless and without make-up. His face is puffy and battered; one eye is swollen shut, and traces of blood linger at the corner of his mouth.

Mama looks up when he hears the sound of approaching footsteps and the jangling of keys. A warden stops in front of his cell, unlocks the door, and steps back, motioning for Mama to follow.

Mama rises stiffly and limps out of the cell.

INT. MORNING: JAIL INTERVIEW ROOM

Mama enters a room divided in half down its length by a counter topped with a glass partition. On the other side of the glass, B.J. sits in a chair, not looking up. Mama sits down slowly opposite him. The warden remains lurking in the background.

Finally, B.J. glances up, his eyes searching Mama's bruised features.

B.J.

Hi.

MAMA

Hi.

B.J.

What'd they do to you?

MAMA

(wincing at the recollection)  
Roughed me up a bit.



B.J.  
It looks pretty bad.

MAMA  
I'll survive.

B.J.  
Why'd they do it?

MAMA  
Shit, angel, the reasons are always the same.

A pained silence falls between them.

B.J.  
Is that why you didn't tell me?

MAMA  
I was afraid you'd leave.

B.J.  
So you lied to keep me.

MAMA  
I didn't lie, B.J.

B.J.  
You didn't tell me the truth!

MAMA  
(resignedly)  
What is the truth? What is it that you need to know?

B.J.  
Who are you? That would be a good start.

MAMA  
The same person I always was.

B.J.  
That's not what they tell me.

MAMA  
What do they tell you?

B.J.  
That you're somebody else.

MAMA  
Do you believe them?

B.J.

I don't know. I don't know what to believe. I don't know who to believe. Maybe there's nothing to believe in anymore.

MAMA

You can believe in love.

B.J.

And what is that? Love--what is it? All I've seen is people doing crazy things to each other because of it: fighting and yelling and hitting and cheating--and lying too--all in the name of love. Tell me one good thing that comes of love!

MAMA

Love takes us out of ourselves. It lets us forget for a little while the pain that's inside us and all around us.

B.J.

I never yet saw anyone that wasn't loving himself more than someone else.

MAMA

Then it wasn't really love. It was something else masquerading as love.

B.J.

And what were you pretending to be?

MAMA

I wasn't pretending, B.J! With you I really did forget. I forgot the past, the pain, the bitter regret; with you it was like the rest of it never happened. I forgot it all.

B.J.

You forgot it so well you forgot to tell me.

MAMA

I didn't forget, B.J., it just didn't seem important anymore. Who I was didn't matter; all that mattered was you.

B.J.

Didn't it matter that you were lying to me?

MAMA

Oh, angel, can't you see--it isn't a lie! It's me, it's the true me, it's what I am. If you

put on a mask it doesn't change who you are underneath. It's just a way to be safe--like a turtle in its shell. The danger is just that later, you get to be scared; you're afraid to come out of the safe dark shell.

B.J.

But I thought love was supposed to make you brave.

MAMA

On the contrary, angel, love makes cowards of us all. We fear to lose the things we love. It's like a mother with a newborn babe, who starts awake at every midnight creak in the house, every movement of her sleeping child, instantly, wildly, fully awake, fearing God knows what--burglars, murderers, fire, flood--planning how to escape, how to climb out the window with her little one, should any of it come true. And then, though all is peaceful, she still can't rest, but gets up and checks that the baby hasn't stopped breathing in its sleep. And it never ends. She never really sleeps again, all the rest of her life, not the way she did before, unthinkingly. There are always more horrors, more fears, than even a mother can imagine. More ways to lose the ones we love.

B.J.

You're the only real mother I ever had, and now they're trying to take you away.

Mama reaches through the small opening in the glass between them and takes B.J.'s hand.

MAMA

What do you want to believe?

B.J.

That you're Mama.

MAMA

Then that's who I am; it doesn't matter what they say. I am a mother to you, aren't I?

B.J.

A father, too, I guess.

MAMA  
 (ruefully)  
 Even if you didn't know it.

B.J.  
 And my best friend.

MAMA  
 I sound like a regular blue light special:  
 Hurry, shoppers, while it lasts.

B.J.  
 It will last, won't it? I won't wake up  
 someday and you'll be somebody else.

MAMA  
 I am what you think I am, son.

B.J.  
 I think you're somebody who loves me.

INT. NOON: McDONALD'S

B.J. and Doreen sit opposite each other in a booth, eating hamburgers and fries.

DOREEN  
 You gave us a terrible fright, William.

B.J.  
 I didn't mean to scare you.

DOREEN  
 I don't understand why you want to leave us,  
 to be with this . . . this . . .

B.J.  
 His name's Mama.

DOREEN  
 With this "Mama" person. If you want to come  
 home you'll call me, won't you?

B.J.  
 I have a home.

DOREEN  
 Not a real home, with a mother and a father  
 who love you.

B.J.  
 It's real enough.

DOREEN

But you will call if you need anything--  
promise me that.

B.J.

I promise.

B.J. digs in his pocket and pulls out the crucifix she had given him.

B.J. (cont'd.)

I think you should have this back.

DOREEN

Why?

B.J.

We can still be friends without it.

DOREEN

(placing a bejeweled hand on his arm)  
Honey, it's not the money that counts. I like  
to think of you having that and remembering  
me.

B.J.

But what if I lose it?

DOREEN

Then I hope you'll think of me anyway.

B.J.

(looking at her rings)

Are all of these are real?

DOREEN

(with a laugh)

I hope so--Daddy paid real money for them.

B.J.

What if you found out they weren't?

DOREEN

Don't be silly, William.

B.J.

I'm serious--what if you found out they were  
fake?

DOREEN

I guess I'd be a little sad.

B.J.  
Because someone fooled you?

DOREEN  
Because I fooled myself. I always said that appearances don't matter. But if I can't tell a rhinestone from a diamond, then I guess appearances are all there are.

B.J.  
Mama calls it belief.

DOREEN  
Belief? Yes, that helps.

B.J.  
(after a moment)  
Would you do me a favor?

DOREEN  
Of course, William.

B.J.  
(pulling out a lumpy envelope)  
Would you give this to someone for me?

DOREEN  
Sure. What is it?

B.J.  
It's something I borrowed; I want to return it. I don't know the address, but I drew a map for you, there, on the back.

Doreen turns the envelope over and looks at the crudely drawn map.

DOREEN  
This is in Reno, right? (B.J. nods) I think I can find it.

B.J.  
And, please, don't tell him about it.

DOREEN  
Peter? Why not?

B.J.  
Because it's something between us--as special friends--and I don't think he'd understand.

DOREEN

I think you underestimate him, William.

B.J.

Please--promise you won't tell?

DOREEN

I promise.

INT. DAY: COURTROOM

B.J., Pete, Doreen, and PETE'S LAWYER sit at a long table in a sparsely populated courtroom. Pete leans towards B.J. conspiratorially.

PETE

(whispering)

You got 'em with you? (B.J. nods without looking at him) Let me see.

B.J.

After.

PETE

You better not fuck me over, kid.

A BAILIFF enters the room.

BAILIFF

All rise!

Everyone stands as the JUDGE enters and takes his seat. He nods towards the bailiff, who in turn motions to a guard; Mama is led into the room accompanied by his LAWYER, the nervous-looking man from the motel.

BAILIFF

Be seated!

The judge shuffles some papers on his desk, then clears his throat and addresses the court.

JUDGE

According to the documents before me, Mr. Humbert, you are the legal guardian of the boy.

MAMA'S LAWYER

Your Honor, the boy's mother had sole custody; she agreed to name the defendant as his legal guardian and filed papers with me to that effect.

JUDGE

And his father has no objection? He does not wish to contest the guardianship?

PETE'S LAWYER

No objection, Your Honor.

JUDGE

And the boy? This arrangement is satisfactory to him?

PETE'S LAWYER

It is.

JUDGE

I see that you have moved to drop the charges of child abuse against the defendant.

MAMA'S LAWYER

There was no basis in fact for these allegations, Your Honor.

PETE'S LAWYER

My client has agreed to drop charges.

JUDGE

Then I see no reason why this court should not recognize the defendant's legal guardianship of the boy. I furthermore find that this circumstance invalidates the charges of kidnapping. Case dismissed.

INT. DAY: COURTHOUSE HALL

As they are filing into the hall after the hearing, Pete steers B.J. to one side.

PETE

Okay, kid, ante up.

B.J. hands him the receipt from the pawn shop; Pete glances at it hurriedly.

PETE (cont'd.)

You're alright, sport; you play fair.

B.J.

Isn't that the way you play?

PETE

(grinning and punching his arm playfully)  
You're a chip off the old block, son.



EXT. DAY: COURTHOUSE

B.J., Doreen, and Pete are parting in front of the court building.

DOREEN  
(hugging B.J.)  
You take care of yourself, William.

B.J.  
I will. You too.

DOREEN  
Oh, I'll be fine; don't you worry about me.

B.J.  
He's not the man you think he is.

DOREEN  
You're the one who told me to believe.

B.J.  
Believe in something else.

He reaches into his shirt and clutches the crucifix.

B.J. (cont'd.)  
Believe in this.

Pete brusquely takes Doreen by the arm.

PETE  
Come on, honey; let's go. (to B.J.)  
See ya, sport.

DOREEN  
Good-bye, William.

B.J.  
Bye. Don't forget, okay.

DOREEN  
I won't.

EXT. DAY: COURTHOUSE PARKING LOT

Mama, wearing jeans and a shirt still stiff with newness, his graying hair buzzed close to his skull, walks into the parking lot with B.J. They climb into Mama's car. As Mama starts the reluctant engine, B.J. slips the crucifix off his neck and hangs it on the rear view mirror.

MAMA

That's nice.

B.J.

Doreen gave it to me.

MAMA

Bet it's worth some bucks.

B.J.

Naw. It's fake.

MAMA

(peering closely it)

They look pretty real to me.

B.J.

Nope. She told me herself.

MAMA

Too bad.

B.J.

I don't know. I like it the way it is.

MAMA

Yeah, sure; but if it were real it'd be worth something.

Mama puts the car into gear and backs noisily out of the lot; he and B.J. pull out onto the main street. The sun glints blindingly off the car's back window as they merge into the throbbing metallic stream, watery ripples of heat rising like incense from the asphalt.

INT. DAY: RENO WAREHOUSE OFFICE

A lumpy envelope is ripped open by a pair of thick-fingered hands. A diamond-encrusted ring falls out of the envelope onto the desk where it lies winking in the glare of the overhead lights.

A small folded piece of paper is fished out of the envelope. On it, in neat block letters, are printed the words "TUCKER SENT ME."

The ring is lifted slowly and held to the light to be examined. It slides onto one of the short, stubby fingers, then it is raised to the lips of Morgan Richards to be kissed.

At last, Richards turns in his chair to address Doreen, who stands pale and nervous at the side of the desk.

DOREEN

That's Daddy's ring. (Richards ignores her comment) What's going on here? How did B.J. get that ring? Why did he want me to give it to you? I don't understand.

RICHARDS

You're Mrs. Tucker, I suppose?

DOREEN

Not quite yet. But soon, I hope.

RICHARDS

Don't count on it.

Fiercely, he crushes the slip of paper on his desk into a ball in his fist.

EXT. DAWN: GRAND TETONS

The first shy fingers of light stretch above the eastern horizon. The sky blushes pink and gold over the mountains, their harsh profiles etched in charcoal against the air. In the valley below, long blue shadows gather like pools of water.

INT. DAWN: CAR

Mama and B.J. are asleep in the car, pulled off the highway in a roadside scenic turnout overlooking the valley. B.J. sprawls across the back seat beneath a covering of clothes, a jacket under his head for a pillow. Mama is snoring softly in the front seat, leaning against the window. Abruptly, he starts in his sleep and awakens.

Mama gazes out the windshield at the lightening sky. He looks over his shoulder at the still sleeping form of B.J., then opens the door and gets out quietly.

EXT. DAWN: ROADSIDE

Mama goes to the trunk and opens it, rummaging in the clutter of discarded clothes. His hand lights on a small suitcase, which he pulls to the surface and opens.

Inside are several neatly folded dresses and other feminine garments. Mama fingers the soft material and strokes the lace on a collar. He lifts out a disheveled wig and tries to straighten the unruly locks. Opening a make-up case, he takes out a mirror and examines his lined face. He stares for a long time at his reflection.

Slowly, Mama replaces the mirror and other items and closes up the suitcase. Then he lifts it out, carefully shutting the trunk, and walks thoughtfully, the suitcase banging at his knees, towards a picnic area beside the turnout.

INT. DAWN: CAR

Hearing the muffled thud of the trunk lid as it closes, B.J. opens his eyes sleepily. From where he lies on the back seat he sees Mama walk past the car window, weighed down by something he is carrying. B.J. sits up slowly, watching Mama's back as he heads for the picnic tables.

EXT. DAWN: PICNIC AREA

Mama places the suitcase on a table and sits wearily on the end of the bench. With a long stick that he picks up from the ground he stirs at the ashes in the adjacent firepit. Sparks from the still smoldering fire rise redly in the air. Mama reaches for a handful of the firewood lying nearby and feeds it to the growing tongues of flame.

As the fire licks greedily at the wood, Mama opens the suitcase again and lifts out a dress. He buries the fabric against his face for a moment then wads it into a ball and holds it over the fire.

He is startled when B.J.'s hand unexpectedly appears on his arm to stop him.

B.J.

You don't really want to do that, do you?

MAMA

No. It's like burning my own flesh.

B.J. takes the dress and sits beside him on the bench.

MAMA (cont'd.)

I used to love to watch my mother in the morning, making a face for each day. It was our ritual. I came to worship at her dressing table, arranging the brushes and the beautiful powders, holding the cool bottles of perfume in my hand. I saw every day a kind of miracle, a butterfly drying its wings in the sun. She used to let me choose her lipstick for her. I was in love with the names of the colors: Burgundy, Soft Coral, Wild Plum, Earth-warmed Peach, Silk Champagne. And afterwards, pressing her lips on a piece of tissue, she left behind a kiss in the color of that day.

Sometimes I saved the tissue and at night, when I was in bed and supposed to be asleep and my mother and my father were arguing in their bedroom--I could hear the voices hard as stones falling against my ears--then I would take out the tissue and hold it against my cheek and imagine that she was there. And the next morning we would need more foundation, to cover the bruises.

Even when she was finally dying of cancer she got up every morning to put on her make-up. Some mornings she could hardly sit there, she was so weak. All her hair fell out, even her eyelashes. And then she'd crawl back in bed and drink Bailey's Irish Cream, laced with morphine, all day to kill the pain.

When she died, I wanted to blame my father. He had been gone for years, of course, but I wanted to think that it was still his fault, that it was one of his blows that had started the cancer, a bruise that hadn't healed. She tried to hide it all behind her make-up--the bruises, the divorce, the cancer, death--but in the end it wouldn't stay covered up; it bobbed to the surface like a dead body, filled with gas.

You know, I can't remember whether she ever actually kissed me. I only remember something lightly brushing my cheek. Maybe it was her lips. But they were dry, like tissue.

B.J. rises, shakes out the dress, and folds it neatly. He lays it on the table beside the suitcase. He reaches in for the wig and holds it up, examining it.

B.J.

A little the worse for wear.

MAMA

Aren't we all.

B.J. digs a hairbrush out of the suitcase and begins brushing the wig.

MAMA

What're you doing that for?

B.J.

So you can wear it.

MAMA

No, angel; that's finished.

B.J.

It's not finished. It's only started. Here (he hands the wig to Mama) put this on.