



THE SCENE

I don't even know who I am anymore. This is the life I've chosen. Today my name is Manny, I think. I've been Paul. I've been Kevin from Ohio. Whatever they say, you do. It's all about the scene. And make no mistake about it: every aspect of life is a scene, regardless of whether the camera is rolling. Every moment is not just the greatest moment of your day, it's the greatest moment of your life. This is what he said.

Learn your character. That's your motivation is what he told me. Stay positive he also said. Okay. Now I've got a suitcase full of optimism and a headache. The kind of headache you get trying to think about a plot to any Nicholas Cage movie. My forehead is bleeding from a cut.

'You want drink?' asks the Chinese bartender who's wearing an apron that reads Kiss Me, I Love Chile.

'No' I tell him and then add 'You don't have to ask every five minutes.'

'No problem' he replies in a broken Asian accent.

There's a television in each corner of the bar showing soccer. England is playing Amsterdam. The game is scoreless.

Someone is yelling something outside of the Irish bar, so I shift forward in my chair hoping to hear what's going on, but I can't make it out because the other three people at the table are talking about they're top five favorite movies. Neither of them mentions any movies with either Steven Segal or Michael J. Fox and for some reason this makes me feel a little better. For a minute I focus on an Irish flag that's hanging right above the table, then I'm back.

It was easier when acting was just acting and you knew when you were in character. Now it's risky because no one knows. Are you the person committing the crime or just a character portraying this? You have to take risks said Reggie. Risk isn't always good. In Vegas, trying to make up your losses with one bet is the number one cause of vehicle repossession. This is what I'm thinking about right now as I stare ahead at a clock stuck on midnight.

I've said it once and I'll say it again: it was easier when acting was just acting and research didn't mean doing ten to fifteen. Everything was easier back then. Like when someone had a chemical imbalance to just call them crazy.

The guy behind the dingy bar isn't the star. It's unclear as to who the star is here today. Maybe it's me. Only time will tell. It's all a tad funny I tell you, but I can't laugh because it's not part of the character.

Maybe he didn't read his part correctly or maybe he didn't have the proper emotion. I guess none of that really matters now, because in this scene he's now a hostage serving us drinks. This must sound a little fuzzy to you. Welcome to my world. Enough small talk: time to get back into character.

The guy sitting to my left was supposed to be the star, but he never took the lead. It was handed to him and he passed. The problem was that his story changed. The way I see it, eventually every story changes.

‘Always be in character.’

‘When you go to the grocery store, be in character.’

‘When you drive to work, be in character.’

‘Even when you go to the pharmacy to buy condoms and the woman behind the counter who looks like a forty-five year old virgin gives you a strange look, be in character.’

All Reggie’s words running through my pounding head.

Listen to me, I’m a contradicting mess. The truth is this is his fault. Reggie’s words so it’s Reggie’s fault. Don’t even think about uttering the phrase ‘You didn’t have to listen to him.’ You don’t know shit. This is the business I’ve chosen and now I have to pay my dues. Reggie. I hate him totally and completely. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I just don’t like him.

MEET REGGIE

Outside of Reggie’s office reeks of cigar smoke. There’s a window cracked behind me letting in the humidity as I sit in my own sweat. I walk over to close the window, but see that it’s pried open and there’s no way I’m shutting this window.

Reggie’s door is open as I wait in what barely passes as a waiting area. There’s a couple talking to him right now and it appears that they’re drinking. Next to me is a woman who looks very sad. There’s three worn metal folding chairs, the carpet is more like turf, and the walls are stained yellow.

I’m reading the financial section of the L.A. Times. It was either this or an issue of Better Homes and Gardens. The choice was more difficult than you’d think. The headline of the paper is referring to consumer spending and reads Confidence Is At An All Time Low.

I look out the window. It’s one of those smoggy days. Eventually the sun will burn off the smog, but for now everything is as grainy as a snuff movie.

Inside Reggie’s office he’s discussing a new show with a couple. White Trash Weddings is the name of the show he’s interviewing the couple for. I can hear Reggie’s boisterous voice in between puffs off his cigar. The concept for the show is pretty basic. Take three white trash couples, marry them on the first episode, and then follow them around with cameras.

‘So what do we get again?’ asks Ned as he drinks from a can that may or may not be beer.

‘We pay for the wedding, all expenses paid’ says Reggie, then adds ‘Cool, right?’

‘Hot damn yeah, we can’t beat that’ says Ned.

‘Now what’s this about the lottery tickets?’ asks Jasmine.

‘Right’ says Reggie, then takes another drag off his cigar followed by a drink from a can that makes him cringe. ‘We will be selling lottery tickets right outside the church. There’s some sort of law about having a booth right inside so we’re going to have a place right outside the church.’

‘Sounds good to me. Mama will love that’ says Jasmine.

‘Now what’s this right here?’ asks Ned pointing to what must be a layout of the church. At this point I’m staring into the office mesmerized. By the way, I past eavesdropping about twenty minutes ago. I might as well pull up a chair and join them.

Reggie sits up in his chair, pulls out a laser pointer and uses this to point to a sheet of paper twelve inches away. ‘That’s for hats. We’ve made the assumption that some of your guests may be wearing hats and once again the church sort of frowns upon this.’

‘Some, I’d say damn near everyone will be wearing a hat.’ Ned looks over to Jasmine. ‘Could you imagine Joey not wearing his Joe Camel hat?’

‘Oh, God no’ Jasmine laughs. ‘This is a very good idea Reggie.’

‘Hey, we’ve tried to think of everything. The most important thing is that you have the most beautiful wedding possible. And that means inviting all your hillbil... I mean friends and family to join in this sensational special event.’

‘Oh yeah. This is so exciting. I can’t wait to tell mama. And oh, papa is going to want to just run right out and wash the truck.’ Jasmine leans in to speak to Reggie. ‘He doesn’t like folks to see his truck dirty.’

‘Right’ says Reggie as he glances at his watch. ‘So I think we’re pretty much set here. You two just go back to Alabama and I’ll be in touch soon.’

Ned looks like he’s got something on his mind.

‘What is it Ned?’ asks Reggie.

'We're not going to have to move for this, are we?'

'Oh no, we will have the wedding right in sweet home Alabama' says Reggie.

'Just like the song. Isn't that sw—' says Jasmine until Ned cuts her off.

'Now when is the wedding *goin* to be?' asks Ned suspiciously.

'Well, if everything goes as planned...' Reggie thumbs through his desk calendar, stops on a date, and points with his laser pointer. 'Sometime in June. Is this okay?'

Ned is relieved. 'Oh, yeah, that's perfect. I was worried it would be the weekend of Wrestlemania. That's when my mom got remarried last year. Messed up everything.'

This is one of those shows that shakes your faith in society. Reggie is the man that makes these shows happen.

'Right.' Reggie stands up and walks to the door. 'So if there's nothing else...I'll be in touch. You folks have a safe trip back.'

'Thanks Reggie. You sure have been swell to us.'

The couple walks past me and I make believe I'm reading the paper again. Reggie sees me and gives me the 'One minute' gesture and then calls the sad woman into his office. As soon as the woman sits down she begins crying and asking Reggie things like 'Why?' and 'How could you do this to me after you slept with me?' Reggie is showing no emotion. He puts out his cigar and then immediately lights another one, blowing smoke in the direction of the girl. This is as uncomfortable as an episode of My Two Dads. How do I meet these people? I need to network more.

I got into acting ten years ago. I was nineteen and wanted live where it was warm. My first job was a toothpaste commercial. It was seen for three weeks nationwide. It wasn't for Colgate, it was the other one. I had the believable, trusting face. The name of my character was 'The Honest Guy.'

After my commercial, I went on the soap opera Love And Death where I played a mailman. The part was supposed to evolve into either the love interest for one of the stars or a serial killer, but a new director took over the show and decided it was ridiculous to have a mailman become a love interest. 'This is supposed to be believable stuff' is what he said.

The mailman gig lasted two months and then I landed a starring role in a B movie called The Gorilla. I was the gorilla. I had to dress in that sweaty costume for thirty straight days. When the movie came out it flopped even by B movie standards. Few people had even heard of the movie when I told them about it.

'When was it in the theatre?' is what they would ask. 'A weekend in July' I would always say and they would laugh because they thought I was joking. Little did I know that these would have been the good times.

That movie turned into the next eight years of me scrambling for any part at all. I was Couch Guy #2 in a dog food commercial. In that one I sat on the couch while a dog jumped onto my lap and looked over my shoulder out a window. The dog's ass blocked my face. I also played White Guy #2 in an equal rights commercial. There were three hundred people all standing together, forty-two white guys in all. After that one I continued to audition for part after part, but no one wanted to take a chance on me. That is, no one would take a chance on me until I got the call from Reggie. I don't even know how he got my number, but he remembered me from my toothpaste commercial and told me he thought he had the perfect part for me. The script he was working on called for a character known as 'The Planner' and he said that I was the face he wanted as to play the part of The Planner.

I look into the office and from the pitch of the woman's voice it sounds like Reggie is finishing up. The woman is no longer crying, but is now begging for a part in a play of some sort.

'You promised' she is saying over and over.

Reggie is sitting there emotionless until he stands up, starts walking toward the open doorway, and says 'Maybe it's best you left.'

When Reggie finally calls for me, I get that good feeling like the few seconds before you get a bonus ball in pinball.

'I'll call you if I hear anything' says Reggie as the woman walks out, willing herself to not turn her head and acknowledge Reggie.

'Johnny. How are you? Come in, grab a seat.'

Today Reggie has named me Johnny. As we sit in Reggie's office, he lights up a cigar and offers me one which I decline. I can see now that they are Dutch Masters, the kind with the wooden tips. Reggie kicks back and appears to relax for a minute.

There's a picture on the wall that looks like Stalin. I'm staring at it.

'My Grandfather' says Reggie. I'm guessing it's not Stalin.

His office is more cluttered than his waiting area. Stacks of Variety are on the floor of each side of his desk. An overflowing ashtray full of wooden cigar butts rests on top of the desk. There is a small window, but not much light because of all the scripts piled all the way from the floor to the ceiling. The laser pointer rests in the center of the desk.

Reggie exhales deeply. 'First the hillbillies and then a damn drama queen. Quite a day' says Reggie as he leans back and opens the door to a small refrigerator behind him. The story of Reggie's life would be played by Sinbad.

'Can I get you a drink?' he asks.

I can see all he has is bottles of Heineken and cans of Pabst.

'Want a Heineken? I guess that's all I really have. Hillbillies' says Reggie.

I shake my head and Reggie grabs two bottles. He's wearing a red sweat suit that has a large R embroidered over his heart, Adidas high tops, and a hat that reads Boss.

'Now you know a little from our last discussion, but let me tell you why I want you for this part' says Reggie. And then his cell phone that's sitting on the desk between us begins ringing. Not exactly ringing, but instead playing the music intro from Sex and The City. I look around to make sure no one is around to hear or see this. It doesn't even matter that it's his phone. I know people, okay? Everyone I know would get out of the office as soon as this happened. What can I say? Desperate times cause for desperate measures. I'm just glad he answered the phone and didn't let it play through.

'Reggie here. Yeah. Yeah. Screw him. Yeah. Forget her. Yeah. Okay. I'll hit you if I hear anything. Yeah. Easy.' Reggie's conversation on the phone.

Reggie hangs up the phone and says to me 'You got to know how to talk to those people.'

I must look as confused as I feel because Reggie goes on to explain himself.

'CPS, you know? Color People Speak' says Reggie.

Where do I meet these guys? In my mental Day-Timer I note: must network more.

'Those mothers only care about one thing.'

'Oh yeah?' I say, wondering if we're ever going to talk about this script.

'Yeah. They only care about CTC.'

Once again looking confused.

'C'mon Johnny. Cut The Check. Get with the program.' Reggie points to the corner of his desk where there's an issue of VIBE magazine. 'Have to keep up with them. They know everything about us. Hair styles and tennis shoes, that's what they're all about.'

I nod in agreement because I don't have an option.

Reggie sits up and says 'Okay, the script. As I told you on the phone, there's a part I've got that I think you're perfect for.'

'Okay.'

'You see, the script is called The Heist. And there's four main characters. One is The Muscle. One is The Technician. One character has all the connections. And then there's your part.'

'Yeah...?'

'The Planner.'

'Why me?' I ask.

'I'm not exactly sure, but when I read the script I thought of that toothpaste commercial you did. What was the line you had? Whiter...brighter..'

'Whiter, healthier teeth.'

'Are you sure? It wasn't...'

'Trust me.' I finish the line.

'Right. Trust Me. I think that's what I remember the most. I wanted to trust you. In fact, to this day I use that brand' says Reggie.

'Do you like it?' I ask.

'I don't know. They're all pretty much the same to me.'

'Oh' I say as Reggie puts out his Dutch Master and lights another one.

Reggie starts pointing the cigar my way. 'But here's the thing kid.' Reggie leans in. 'You're not that good of an actor.' Reggie leans back. 'I've researched and seen what else you've done and it stinks.'

'Well, that's because I haven't been given...'

'Ah, bullshit. It's because you haven't applied yourself and actually researched your role' says Reggie, making a stabbing motion with his cigar when he says Bullshit. You need to work it, Johnny' he says.

'Work it?'

'Don't you know anything?' Reggie asks this with a disgusted look on his face. 'Research. Look into it. Know the motivation of the character. Jesus man.'

'Well, yeah. I always...'

'Stop lying to my bloody face. You don't do shit. Now do you want the part?'

'Yes' I say, maybe a little quickly.

'Well then you have it. But under one condition.' The cigar is pointing at me motionless.

'Okay.'

'You do what I say to learn the part. This is an Oscar winning script, I know it. And I don't want the Gorilla Man to mess it up.' The cigar is once again stabbing the air.

'Okay' I say, like I have a choice.

Reggie sits back and we are finally able to take a drink of our beers.

'Good. I'm sure you'll do well. I'm sorry, it's been a long day' says Reggie who is now almost falling over he's leaning so far back. I think this means he's about to reminisce. 'Remember that string of bank robberies last fall?' he asks.

'Yeah, I think so.' I don't.

'They all wore bright green ties' informs Reggie.

'Oh yeah.' No clue as to what he's talking about.

'Do you know why?'

Why what? I don't know what he's asking. Do I still have the part? What's going on here?

'You don't know?' Reggie asks again.

'Uh, no.'

'God. You really don't know anything. It was to distract everyone' says Reggie. I think Reggie is really starting to get irritated with me.

Reggie continues 'The report after every robbery was the same. It was some scared teller telling the detectives that the robbers wore green ties.'

'Yeah. That was the purpose.' I say this to let Reggie know I'm still following his story.

'Well, yeah. That's what I just said. You okay? Anyway, the key was that when the detectives asked what they looked like, no one could give a good description. Brilliant.' He pauses and then continues 'When they made Goodfellas, Ray Liota and Joe Pesci hung out with mob guys, to see how they talk and act. Same thing with Bull Durham, Field of Dreams, or any of those drama based baseball movies. They worked with players and coaches to help them learn the ropes.' Reggie is looking at me while shaking his head sideways. 'See, kid? This is the shit you need to know, but you don't.' Reggie exhales in disgust. 'Don't worry. I'll take care of you. Just remember what I'm doing for you.'

'Oh definit...' I'm cut off by Reggie.

'No. I really mean it, kid. This is going to be your big break. I'm going to make you a star. But I also know how this town works. As soon as you make it, you'll think you're better than me, kid.' Reggie slams his cigar free hand down on the desk. The laser pointer jumps.

Point taken.

Reggie then adds 'If you even dream that you're beating me in something I want you to wake up, call me, and apologize.'

Confidence is at an all time low.

Reggie sits back and takes a deep breath.

'Okay Johnny, let's get started. Call this guy.' Reggie hands me a card that has a name and a number. The name is Rasheed.

THE AUDITION

I catch a chill as I walk into Valley Productions. I find the room that has a sign posted Father Cursed and I enter. The Director (Curtis) is sitting in the back next to his assistant (James). In the front of the room are two chairs, one for Horny Repenter #1 being played by a girl named Erica and a seat for Father Nielson, the role I'm playing, today.

'I'm assuming you've read the script and are ready?' asks Curtis.

'Yeah, I looked it over, briefly' I tell him. 'Uh, do you have an extra copy?'

Erica slides hers over as I take a seat. 'It's okay. I memorized my lines last night.'

'Oh, yeah. I usually do too, it's just...'

Curtis rolls his eyes. 'Can we please start? On page twenty-four. And.....Action!'

Erica begins reading: But Father, you look so far away in your booth. So...alone.

'Yes. Well these are the rules, my child' I say.

Curtis cuts in 'No! It's not *these* it's *those*. And try not to sound so creepy when you say *my child*. Again!'

'Yes, well.' (I look over at Curtis) 'Those are the rules.'

'Well, I don't like it. You look way too lonely. I'm coming over.'

'Okay!'

Curtis begins stomping 'Not 'Okay!' It's 'Okay' without emphasis. Damn! It's the same damn thing with you every time.' He stands up. 'Everyone take five minutes.' Looks at me, then at Erica. 'Next is the erotic scene. See if you can get him in the right frame of mind.'

'My pleasure' says Erica, as she swings her leg around me, sitting on my lap. Facing me she begins licking my neck, slowly grinding.

This is why everyone comes to Hollywood. Not dreams, not stardom, but random girls grinding on you because of a mere suggestion by someone who may or may not be a director.

Curtis sits back down, whispers something to James, then says 'Okay, let's continue. Johnny, you're holding the girl and are starting to enjoy her advances and.....Action!'

Erica is moving slowly back and forth. I grab her thigh and forget my lines. I improvise 'God, I want to destroy you!'

Cut! screams Curtis and stands up. He's holding his hands in the air not saying a word. Eventually he grabs the chair he was sitting on and throws it across the room, looks over at James.

'Did my Priest just tell the girl 'I'm going to destroy you?''

There's a pause. Then Curtis continues to James 'Well, did he?'

'Uh, yes. I believe those were his words.'

Curtis laughs, still looking at James. 'Tell Johnny 'Thank you' and that 'We'll be in touch?'

James is about to talk.

'No, no' Curtis cuts in. 'Tell him to 'Get the fuck out of here and never come back'. Ever.'

James stares at Curtis.

'Now, James. Tell him.'

James looks over at me. 'Uh, thank you Johnny. But uh...'

Curtis turns to me 'Get the fuck out and never come back.'

I immediately head for the door. On my way out I hear Curtis yell 'And if you ever come back I will Destroy you.'

RASHEED AND THE CREW

On the show Cops I once saw a man in Louisiana get pulled over for a busted tail light. The cop approached the man's car, looked at him, and immediately asked him to step out of the car. The man wasn't sure why. After all, he knew he had a tail light out, so he just figured he'd show his license and registration, get a firm warning, and be on his way. Now for some reason the cop wanted him out of the car.

So he gets out of the car and the cop asks him 'Sir, have you been smoking marijuana?'

'No, sir. That's illegal' replies the man.

'Do you have any illegal narcotics in your possession?' asks the cop.

'No, sir. Absolutely not' says the man with all the right answers.

The cop asks him one last time whether or not the man is aware of any drugs in his possession and the man insists that there's no way he has any drugs in his possession. Then it happens. The cop asks 'Sir, are you aware that you have a joint sticking in your ear?'

'Oh that? Well there's a good reason for that officer.'

The purpose of this story is what I've been saying all along: Eventually everyone's story changes.

Somewhere in between sitting at Rasheed's house this morning and the bar with the broken clock, Rasheed's story has changed. 'No Hostages' has turned into taking a middle-aged Chinese bartender into our custody. I mean I guess he'd still be here working if we hadn't shown up, but now he is definitely not able to leave this scene. I think it's safe to assume that translates into a hostage situation. When I asked Rasheed about our escape, his reply was simply 'Smooth.'

Apparently, everything is going to plan as directed. If you really think about it, every aspect of life is directed, regardless of whether the cameras are rolling.

The gun sitting on the table (next to a bag of pot) in front of the four of us looks real. This is because it is real. This is why the Chinese bartender (nicknamed 'China' by Rasheed) won't be going anywhere. 'Block the windows, keep your Chinese ass behind the bar, and make me the best Bloody Mary I've ever had in my life.' Rasheed had his gun pointed at China when he said this. The gun has been resting on the table ever since.

At this point, Rasheed is looking to be the star, the lead role, the guy who will make or break the scene. If he makes the scene, we leave a little richer. If not, we leave either dead or headed straight to prison. Rasheed is sitting

directly across me. Samuel is to my left. Victory is to my right. She also ordered a Bloody Mary. When her drink arrived she screamed out 'T M!' which drew blank stares from all of us. 'Totally Magic' she explained.

The current scene shows us sitting around a round table with China behind the bar.

Rasheed stands up, looks over at China, and tells him to make him another 'Bloody' the way he likes them. Then walks over to the jukebox. The story of Rasheed's life would be played by Ike Turner, the early years.

While Rasheed is selecting a song, China walks over with his drink and stands there waiting.

'What the hell are you looking at, China?' asks Rasheed as he turns around and sees China staring at him.

'No stare' says China, who is handing Rasheed his drink.

'You're looking at my head, aren't you China? Yeah, that's right. I've got the greatest balding afro of all time.'

'No stare. Serve drink' is all China can say.

Rasheed walks back over to the table and a Jay Z song comes over the juke box.

Samuel, a six-foot-five very white arm wrestling champion from Oklahoma (The Muscle) starts laughing when he hears the song. The story of Samuel's life would be played by Tom Arnold, with even less personality.

'Hey Rasheed? Who do you think wins in a fight: Jay Z's posse or Diddy's posse?' asks Samuel with a smirk on his face.

'Damn Samuel. That's the dumbest question I've ever heard.' A moment passes as Rasheed pulls out a Philly Blunt cigar, empties the tobacco, and then uses the wrapper to make a huge joint. He lights it up and says 'Diddy's crew would kick Jay Z's crew no problem.'

'For real?' says Victory.

'True' replies Rasheed, who takes a huge hit off his Blunt and offers it to Samuel.

'No thanks, man. Need to keep a clear head' says Samuel.

'Me too' says Rasheed, as he takes another hit. He offers the Blunt to both Victory and myself and we blow him off.

Samuel orders a Tequilla Sunrise from China which draws a 'Damn, you're white' comment from Rasheed, who then starts harassing China again.

'Hey China, why don't you tell us one of those ancient Chinese secrets?'

'Secrets? I no understand' says China nervously.

'Damn China. You know? Secrets, proverbs, fortunes, and all that shit.'

China looks at the gun on the table and says 'Oh yes. Proverbs. I know couple.'

'Let's here one, China man' says Samuel.

'Yeah, watcha' got little man?' adds Victory (our sexy explosives expert).

China sets down a shaker he was holding and says 'Man with one chopstick go hungry.'

Victory and I laugh while Samuel shrugs like he doesn't get it. Rasheed squints over China's way and says 'True.'

The Jay Z song is finished, so Victory gets off her stool and walks over to the jukebox. I have China get me a coffee (black) because I'm exhausted. We've been up since four in the morning. This is what the job called for. Personally, I don't think anyone should be up at four in the morning unless they have a body to bury or an early flight to Las Vegas.

Some song I've never heard before that sounds a little bit like Hootie and the Blowfish plays and as I listen to the lyrics it sounds like the song was hastily written the night before it was recorded. Victory loves it and tells me she's excited because the band that we're listening to (I don't catch the name) is getting back together. I think it's safe to assume that it's over for a band when they reunite and you never knew they broke up in the first place. Or never heard of them, for that matter.

Rasheed (the man with the connections) holds up his empty glass and shakes it to let China know he wants another. When China brings over his drink, Rasheed demands another proverb. I wipe my forehead with my red stained towel.

'Man who run in front of car get tired' says China, while standing next to the sitting Rasheed.

Rasheed immediately stands up, grabs the gun off the table, and holds it against China's chest. 'China, what you say is true. Don't worry, you may be Chinese, but you're my nigga now. And I'll take care of you.' Rasheed puts the gun down. This is Rasheed's twisted sense of humor. This is why this scene is more drama than comedy.

Rasheed sits back down. Rasheed and Samuel have a good laugh over the fact that a five foot Chinese man almost had a heart attack.

Tina Turner's 'Private Dancer' is now playing as Victory sits down. She's wiggling her Latino body, singing the lyrics 'A dancer for money I'll do what you want me to do...' as she looks my way.

'I love to sing and dance' she says.

I no longer have control of anything. Rasheed is high, China may have just pissed his pants, Victory is singing to me, and Samuel is laughing like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Victory continues to sway her body to the song, rubbing her hands up and down her sides. 'What can I say? I love to entertain.'

Do I need to remind the group that this bar is surrounded by cops waiting to bust us? Is that my role? In my mind I underline: must network more.

LUNCH WITH REGGIE

By my third meeting with Reggie, I'm used to him keeping me waiting. We agree to meet at Chad's, a new place where agents meet with clients in an attempt to impress and sub par food is served. There are skylights above and the walls are bright white. On the far side of the restaurant is a bar, but no one dares sit at the bar. This is considered career suicide in these parts. Be seen sitting at the bar at Chad's and never work in this town again. The idea of going to Chad's and having to wait at the bar? That's preposterous.

I'm sipping on a glass of Chardonnay for ten minutes until Reggie arrives. I've got a lot to discuss with him, but right now he's preoccupied with his white trash reality show.

'This last couple, you're not going to believe this' says Reggie as our waiter comes over.

Reggie orders a barbecued chicken sandwich with chips and I order a chicken salad, which draws a strange look from Reggie, but it passes because he's got white trash on his mind.

'So they come into my office and (get this) they demand a wedding in Vegas' says Reggie, loud enough so that half the restaurant can hear him. He continues 'Don't kid yourself, normally I'd tell them to take a hike. But hey, let me tell you, these are the two biggest hicks I've ever met. They have more car parts on their front yard than grass growing. They're perfect. Guaranteed ratings eighteen to thirty-five year old males.'

I laugh and then get another glass of wine. This is going to be a long ride, I can tell.

'So here's my plan' says Reggie and I'm hoping he's talking about the script, but I know he's not. 'Since McDonald's is the sponsor of our show, we're going to have a Vegas wedding sponsored by McDonald's. Doesn't that sound great!'

'Yeah' I say. My wine is here, thank God.

'It should really be something. We'll have showgirls, they'll get married by an old bloated Elvis. Yeah, it will be great once I get this all lined up. A McWedding.'

When I stop and think about it, listening to Reggie is a lot of drama for one day.

Our food arrives and Reggie orders extra barbeque sauce. His phone rings and he mumbles something then says 'Easy' and hangs up. Then he says 'Enough about that shit. Let's talk about the script.'

Finally the script. I was beginning to develop a twitch in my right eye listening to Reggie's stories.

'I've got a great feeling about this. It's going to be the next big movie' says Reggie with his mouth full of chicken. The excess barbeque sauce collects along the sides of his mouth, creating an even more disgusting image of Reggie. This could take years of therapy.

'Why the feeling?' I ask Reggie as I look across the restaurant and see the cast of The Bernie Mac show being seated.

'Why the feeling?' says Reggie in an annoyed tone. 'Why are there only car chases in California? Why do French fries always taste the same to me? What do you mean 'Why the feeling'? Because I know, that's why.'

Confidence is at an all time low.

The waiter comes over and Reggie orders even more barbeque sauce. The waiter shakes his head in embarrassment for Reggie.

'What the hell, I just want some more sauce' says Reggie to me and half the restaurant as the waiter walks away. 'Oh by the way, we got Snipes.'

'Snipes? What are you talking about?'

'Wesley Snipes. He's interested in the script.'

'Wow' I say, actually impressed.

'That's right, Johnny. This is why I'm so excited, today. This and the McWedding.' He thinks for a second. 'Mostly this script. You'll be costarring with Wesley Snipes!' Reggie's sauce arrives. With only one bite of chicken left, Reggie dips the piece in the small bowl of sauce, lets it sit for a minute and then pops it in his mouth. 'Man I love their sauce.' The sauce is now all over his face. There's so much he has to know it's there and just not care.

Do I have to say something? I check the menu to see if there are any instructions on what to do in this case. Nothing. 'So, tell me more' I say.

'Oh, so now you're finally getting excited about this thing? Damn, Johnny. This is your big shot. You should be ecstatic. Chance like this, it's an opportunity of a lifetime.'

Reggie wipes off his face and then gets up to use the restroom. What a relief. I notice he's wearing a jacket that says 2003 NBA All-Star weekend, the kind managers of strip clubs wear.

The waiter comes over and drops off the check. I sneak a peek and see that they charged Reggie for the extra sauce. I'm chuckling to myself when he comes back, but he doesn't notice or just doesn't care. The sauce is that good at Chad's.

'You call Rasheed?' asks Reggie.

'Uh, yeah. I talked to him briefly' I say, then ask 'What exactly does he do? Some kind of actor or something?'

Reggie stares at me for a minute then says 'No.' Reggie chuckles. 'He's a bank robber.'

When I hear this, I almost light myself on fire. 'He's a bank robber? Why was I supposed to call him?'

'Jesus, Johnny. Listen and listen closely. This is the last time I'm going to explain this. You are going to be a star in a movie that centers around a bank robbery. You don't know shit about anything, so I'm assuming you don't know shit about bank robberies. Rasheed is the best in the business. Not only are you going to call him, you need to meet with him, talk about the work, and learn how to play your bloody character!'

THE PROCESS

Break a leg? No one says what they really mean. The industry used to be about art, capturing an audience, a story told on the big screen. Now? Well now it's a formula, plain and simple. And if you screw up? No big deal. That's what editing, retakes, and deleted scenes are for. In the end you have an Introduction, a Plot, an Ending, and sometimes a Conclusion (when warranted).

Back to the formula. You have an Opening Scene, alright? Make it someplace everyone can identify with. Maybe a circus, a living room, or a mall. Maybe it's a dark pub. The Introductions work with the Opening Scene. What's happening? Here's where you set the tone. If there is a man sitting on a sidewalk staring at a piece of trash, that's all you have to see to have an idea what the movie is about. Not understand the whole movie, but understand the tone. That's the purpose.

The Story (or 'The Body' as our English teachers taught us) follows. It's here that every scene needs to build the story, every piece of dialogue a purpose, every action a reason. The Story (or Body, forgive me Ms. Reed) builds until it can build no longer. This is what is referred to as the Climax. Something has to give. This is also where the viewer is caught at the end of his chair or fast asleep.

There's always an Ending. And really, when it comes down to it, the Ending doesn't matter. It's just there to give people something to talk about. Did you like the ending? I was surprised. Oh really? I saw that coming a mile away.

Some say that in the end all that really matters is that it makes you feel good inside. Of course, these are the same people who tell you to break a leg.

DOING TIME

Anywhere in upstate New York is a good place to do time. Tennessee is not the best place go away to. At the moment, this is what I'm learning.

Victory is continuing to sing along with the jukebox. Now it's Whitney Houston's 'I Want To Dance With Somebody' that has her occupied. The story of Victory's life would be played by a Spanish soap opera actress. Any one. Take your pick.

'Concord' says Samuel. 'That's the worst time I've ever done. Dudes were crazy there.'

I'm totally out of this conversation. I'm the proverbial third guy in a porn movie. The scene begins with three guys and one girl. Eventually, the girl is having sex with two of the guys while a third guy stands back and watches. At the moment this is what I feel like.

'Shit. Concord in New England?' asks Rasheed, who is shaking his empty glass once again at China.

'No, outside Detroit. Tough...' Samuel trails off.

Rasheed looks at me and then over at Samuel.

'Where have you done your time?' he asks me.

'I haven't.' This is what I'm supposed to say. It's what Rasheed is expecting.

'You will. It's part of the job' says Rasheed, not missing a beat with the dialogue.

China brings over Rasheed's drink and then waits a second while Rasheed takes a sip to make sure it's to his liking. Rasheed nods. China begins to walk away and then the blunt smoking man with the greatest balding afro of all time speaks up.

'Oh China man. Oh China man. Don't play innocent with me, China man. You owe me, us, another bit of wisdom.' He says this as if he's chanting a college fight song.

'Yes. Proverb. Uh...Uh...' China is looking for the words. The story of China's life would be played by an unfunny Jackie Chan (oh wait Jackie Chan hasn't ever been funny). The story of China's life would be played by Jackie Chan. This will work perfectly.

'Take a minute, it's cool' says Rasheed as he passes the blunt over to Samuel.

Victory is still singing and her leg is now pressed up against mine and she's tugging on my arm as she's singing 'I want to dance with somebody, I want to feel the heat with somebody, Oh...' When she says 'Heat' she grabs my arm. Does anyone understand that we have been in this bar for an hour, surrounded by cops, with a Chinese bartender held hostage? Food for thought.

'Man who live in glass house should change in basement' says China.

Rasheed is nodding in agreement. 'Yeah, China. That's the shit.'

For the next couple of minutes, everyone is silent. Maybe they are trying to figure out what went wrong, maybe searching inside for their lines, or maybe just high.

The next song is a country tune with the following lyrics:

*Fireplace in my backyard.
Dog left, wife left, and all I got left
is my pick up truck and my name.*

Everyone remains silent during the entire song. China looks more mortified over the song than the present situation. Rasheed, who is fast becoming the star here, takes a hit off his blunt and offers it around the table. We all wave him off. Victory leaves and walks back over to the juke box. Samuel asks Rasheed something about a 'Plan' and Rasheed breaks the silence by saying 'It's all smooth' to Samuel and then asks the following question:

'Y'all think I smoke too much?'

'Um, I don't know. Maybe a little too much' says Samuel. Listening to Samuel would make it sound like there actually is an acceptable amount. In my mind I wonder 'Why is Rasheed taking charge of the plan?' This is why he's the star. I'll play along with this for now. It's what I'm supposed to do.

'Man, sometimes I wonder.' Rasheed takes another hit off the monster sized blunt. 'Sometimes I feel like I'm not even getting high.'

'What do you think?' I ask.

'What?' replies Rasheed.

'What do you think? Do you think you smoke too much?' Right now I'm a little out of character. Focus. What's my motivation? I'm back.

'Man, I don't know. A year ago, last time I got out of the can, Tennessee...' Rasheed looks over at Samuel who is nodding because he understands what doing time in Tennessee means. '...my moms and friends and shit had one of those... intra... communication things...'

'Intervention' yells Victory from the juke box, and then yells 'T B!'

'What!?' screams Samuel as a techno sounding song begins playing.

'TB: Too Bad. Don't you guys know shit?'

'Yeah. Intervention' says Rasheed, not sure what to make of Victory's acronyms. I'm gathering this is the first time they've worked together. 'I don't know. Ever since that shit, I've wondered, maybe I do smoke too much.' Rasheed takes another hit, blows the smoke straight up, and then says 'Man, it sure is cloudy in here.'

'Oh yeah, intervention' says Samuel. 'I remember that happening to Dylan in 90210'.

Rasheed stares down Samuel for about twenty seconds, seems like an hour. 'What!? You comparing my shit to 90210? What? I get out after doing time in Tennessee and you comparing that shit to some kid show?'

'Hey man, I'm just saying' says Samuel, not worried one bit what Rasheed is saying. Samuel plays 'The Muscle' well.

'Man, 90210? No way. My shit was more like Christopher on the Sopranos. Remember that shit?' asks Rasheed, who finishes his Bloody Mary and is looking around the table for acknowledgment.

'Yeah' I say and then forget what I was going to say for a second because I'm distracted by a drop of blood that has dripped onto the table. 'When he sat on the dog.'

'Damn straight. That's the shit I'm talking about. That guy was so wrong he sat on a dog.' Rasheed looks over at Samuel shaking his head. 'Dylan.'

The phone rings. China looks over to Rasheed who nods so China picks up the phone.
'Detective Rawlings? Want talk to you?' asks China as he holds the phone out for Rasheed.
Rasheed looks around the table, says 'Shit', and then walks over to the bar and grabs the phone from China.
'Yeah?' says Rasheed. You can hear someone with a loud voice commanding something which causes Rasheed to begin laughing and then hang up the phone.

ALL RISE

Reggie looks happy for a man about to set foot into a courtroom as we stand outside West Hollywood courthouse. He smokes a cigar and tells me to smile more.

'It's not a real case' says Reggie. 'Small Claims.'

One last puff and we walk inside. Looking into the courtroom Reggie turns to me to say 'Thanks for meeting me here. I'm sure you've got better things to do with your time.'

What's going on? Who is this new Reggie?

'No problem, it's cool' I reply, removing the sunglasses I still had on.

Reggie laughs. 'I was joking.' More laughter. 'What else could you possibly have going on?'

And he's back.

We walk into the courtroom for Reggie's trial (he calls it a hearing) and right away notice the strange looking bailiff standing next to the judge's throne. He has spiked hair and a henna tattoo that reads Forever on his forehead. I think it's henna. I hope its not real. Reggie notices me staring.

'I've been here before. The guy is a total nut. I think his name is Lonnie, or something. He drinks.' Reggie looks over at me. 'A lot. He drinks a lot.'

'Oh. You mean after court?'

'No. Breakfast, lunch, and breaks. I mean he drinks a lot.'

'Doesn't the judge know?'

'Of course. But he doesn't care.' Reggie smiles.

'I see. It's tough to get good help, eh?'

'No, that's not it.' Reggie laughs. 'He likes Lonnie because he's happy.' Reggie nods up at the judge preparing for his next case. 'All day long he has to deal with bullshit cases that depress him. But not Lonnie, he's always happy.' I nod, not understanding any of this. 'He's a nut, but a happy nut' adds Reggie, then he turns to me and says 'Smile more.'

Reggie squirms in his chair as a case revolving around a stolen case of Cracker Jacks proceeds. The plaintiff (A Truck Driver) claims that the defendant (A 7-11 Manager) never paid for a case of Cracker Jacks that were delivered. I'm bored and Reggie doesn't want to talk about the movie (why am I even here?) so I leave and find a water fountain in the hallway where I get a quick drink of water. When I walk back into the courtroom, the Cracker Jack case has ended and the Judge is asking 'Where is Reggie?' I look over where we were sitting and see Reggie sound asleep on a bench. I wake him and he makes his way up to the front.

He never mentioned what the hearing was about, but it becomes quickly apparent when I hear the plaintiff, a twenty-something struggling actress begin to plead her case to the judge. The way she tells it, Reggie promised her a part on a new sitcom called Waiting For Marriage, but never delivered her an audition for the part. The judge quickly stops her well rehearsed speech and looks over at Reggie who is wiping sleep out of his eyes.

'Is what she's saying true?' the judge asks Reggie.

'Well, it's half true.'

'What half? I don't have all day here.'

'The part of promising her an audition for the sitcom she mentioned, well that was all true.' Reggie sits down.

'Please stay standing' requests the judge. 'So it sounds like everything was true, not half.'

'Well' Reggie leans to the side 'I did come through with an audition for her.'

The judge looks over at the woman. 'Is this true?'

'No.' She fires a look of disgust over at Reggie. 'Sure, after I had sex with this piece of shit he did finally get me an audition... for a porn movie.'

'Hot damn!' screams out the bailiff.

'Ass Blasters Volume Seven' Reggie quickly points out. The judge looks over at Reggie, lifting his eyebrows, and nods. He then looks back to the woman. 'So you did get an audition, correct? For Ass Blasters Volume Seven, right?' Judge looks over at Reggie 'That's not out yet is it?' Reggie shakes his head No.

The woman mumbles something about California Law.

'You see there's your mistake' says the judge. 'This isn't California. This is Hollywood, baby!' And he slams his gavel down.

The woman demands a fair trial. The courtroom breaks out into laughter. The absurdity of this woman expecting a fair trial in Hollywood.

'Smokin!' yells the bailiff.

CONTACT HIGH

I really want to be in Reggie's movie. I know there's a certain amount of bullshit about him, but it's all I've got right now. So I go and meet Rasheed like he said to do. On my way to meet him, I swear there's a guy with a camera following me, but I never actually see him.

I meet Rasheed in front of a club called Lucky's that's known for their exclusive list, high cover, and the fact that it's the number one hang out for African American men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five who play by no rules. Lucky's is in the news often. Just like Hollywood, the slogan All Publicity Is Good Publicity applies to Lucky's.

Rasheed is on the phone and upset. I can tell he's upset because he hastily folds up the phone and says 'I'd like to wrap a crow bar around that guy's skull.'

Okay. Now, what am I doing here again? When I called Reggie and asked if he wanted to come along, all he said was 'Busy' and then hung up. I'm not very good at picking up on signs.

As we wait to get in to the club, Rasheed is still pissed off about the call. 'Man, if that guy was an East Coast rapper and I was a West Coast rapper I'd have to kill him.'

I'm horrified by this comment and then Rasheed starts to laugh. I give my best fake laugh and Rasheed gives me the 'Loosen up white guy, we're going into Lucky's' look.

We have yet to be formally introduced. Or maybe we have and I just missed it. I hear Reggie in my head: Learn the way he talks, moves around, and operates. Damn you Johnny, for once in your life learn the motivation of your character. Reggie's words running through my head as I enter Lucky's with a known criminal.

This is a great idea. If it wasn't the fact that Reggie called me an hour ago to let me know that Wesley Snipes had signed, I would have bailed by now. Wesley Snipes. I'm going to be working with an Oscar winning star. Well, maybe not Oscar winning, but that doesn't change the fact of one thing. It's Wesley Snipes. I really do want to be a star.

We go up to the bar and Rasheed orders a Bloody Mary and looks at me. I tell him I'll have the same. After they greet each other, the bartender promptly gets Rasheed two drinks. I see another white guy standing in the corner who looks familiar. He's carrying audio equipment. I glance over at the bartender to watch him make the drinks and then when I look back the man has disappeared.

'You need anything Sheed, you let me know. Just ask for Big Dog' says the bartender.

Haven't we reached the quota on the number of people allowed to have the nickname 'Big Dog?'

We sit on a leather couch next to two black women with short black skirts and T-shirts they're ready to burst out of. Loud music with a lot of bass is playing. Red and white strobe lights flash throughout the bar. Two couches over, a couple is doing coke. On the couch next to them is a woman giving the largest black man I've ever seen in my life a hand job.

I'm so out of place. I lean over to Rasheed. 'Come here often?' I ask.

After I say this, Rasheed motions for me to lean back and then stares at me for three minutes. 'Reggie sent you?' he asks me. And I nod. He stares at me for another two minutes then he leans in. 'I've got a question for you.'

'Okay. Shoot' I say. For some reason I'm acting even whiter than normal. I'm just going to keep my mouth shut before I ask Rasheed to go on a skiing trip with me.

Rasheed leans in even closer, he's about five inches from my face. No expression on his face.

'Look at me' he says. 'Are you a cop?'

I laugh, look away, and tell him that I'm not a cop.

'Look at me and tell me that' says Rasheed, now four inches from my face. I look at him and tell him what he wants to hear.

'No problem' says Rasheed and then leans back and checks out the two girls who are now standing with their backs to us. Rasheed points and asks me which ass I like better. I say the one on the right and he agrees. We're cool again.

Another round of drinks have been served and other than 50 Cent playing in the background the couch is silent.

'So Reggie thought I should talk to you about, uh, the business' I say to Rasheed, but I don't think he's following.

'Yeah, Reggie. That's a tricky cat.'

'Yeah' I say. Why am I here again?

'So you want to know the business?' asks Rasheed. And before I can answer he says 'Let me tell you a story. When I moved into my new crib, I was getting phone calls for a medical hotline. At first I would tell them they have the wrong number or, shit, I'd just hang up on them. But then I got to thinking. You know how sometimes you get to thinking?'

'Uh, yeah' I say. I'm still awake.

'I was thinking that maybe I could help out these people. Damn, doesn't hurt to try. After all, what's a doctor going to do? Usually not shit. Tell you to go buy something from the pharmacy on the corner. So I started giving advice.'

'Medical advice?' I say this to let him know I'm following along. Looking around this place, I need Rasheed on my side right now.

'Yeah, so I started giving people advice. Shit, I'm just sitting around playing Playstation, you know? Madden Football. I was able to talk and play at the same time.'

'What were the calls?'

'Oh, shit like sore throat, headaches, and rashes. Lots of rashes' says Rasheed.

'What did you have them do?'

'Mostly I just told them to drink green tea.'

Reggie.

A minute passes and I have to ask. 'So that's the story?'

'Yeah. My point was... Damn, what was my point? I guess it had something to do with You Can't Learn Shit Until You Actually Try It.'

'What does that mean?' I ask, not knowing what to do with any of this information.

'You'll find out' says Rasheed, who then calls over the two girls in tight skirts. For the next hour, Rasheed is 'Working' the two girls and throwing money around like a crack dealer from the eighties. Eventually the girls are shaking their asses like strippers in front of us while Rasheed rolls a joint. I look around and no one seems to care. A guy who wants to be near the girls comes over and says that he's the next big thing in Hip Hop. He's all bullshit. This guy is stumped for a response when you say Hello. I can't wait to walk into Starbucks someday and have him fetch my coffee.

Eventually the alcohol (or the chaos) wears on me and I go to the bathroom and throw up. When I come back, I'm disoriented and can't find Rasheed. I'm walking around Lucky's with a 'Walking around a parking garage and realizing your car has been stolen' face.

I find Rasheed, who says he's going home and is taking the two girls. At first I say cool and then he tells me that they're both for him.

'Come by Saturday morning. Early. I'll teach you all about the business.'

Overall, it felt like the night took between four and six years off my life.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

After two hours of bickering about what cameras would be allowed into the Casino, Maury is allowed to bring his crew inside. Today his crew consists of a Director named Paul, and three camera men named Sam, Matt, and Tom respectively.

'It's got to be centered over there, above that table.' Paul points at a Black Jack table.

'Matt, you also. Stay on the table. How's the lighting in here?'

Matt gives a thumbs up.

'Fantastic. Now Tom.' Paul spins around. 'Where in the hell is Tom?' He finally spots him getting instruction from Maury.

'Get over here, Tom. It's Paul's time now.'

Tom hurries over, camera on his shoulder. 'Yeah?'

'Okay Tom, I need you over by the lobby, in the corner. See where it's dark over there?'

Tom nods.

'Can you crouch over there and still get a good shot?'

'What the hell? Why not?'

'Fantastic.' Paul turns so that all three camera men can see him. 'It's all about show business, baby!'

Paul notices a man nearby playing a slot machine. 'No, absolutely not!' Paul runs over and grabs the man's hat that reads NC, turns it backwards, and places it back on the man's head.

Paul steps back. 'Much better.'

Two men in suits approach Maury and talk in his ear. Maury approaches Paul and tells him he needs to 'Tone it down a little.'

Paul pouts 'As if.'

He looks around. 'When did this place get so up tight?' Looks back at Maury. 'That's it. After this, I'm not working outside of L.A.'

Matt is focusing his camera when Sam approaches and purposely bumps his arm, almost causing the camera to fall.

Sam laughs. Matt looks back annoyed.

'Oh c'mon. Don't you remember the gags at Universal we used to play on each other?' Continues laughing. 'What about Luke? Do you remember that?'

Matt, still annoyed, says 'Luke? Of course I remember. You pulled the ladder out from under him. He was like a hundred feet in the air.'

Sam stops laughing. 'Yeah. He knew he was on camera, too. That sure was a lesson.'

'What did you learn?' sarcastically asks Matt, then continues 'Let me guess: Never do shit on camera?'

'No, dude. That's not what I learned at all.' Sam's face turns solemn. 'No. What I learned was that you can die at anytime, man. That's what I learned.'

Paul runs into the middle of the Casino and yells 'The Benz has arrived!' and then says 'Action!'

VEGAS

Sometimes when I'm listening to Reggie I get the feeling that he's so cautious with his words that each word has been insured by AllState.

'Vegas, baby. It's only a four hour drive' says Reggie. 'Vehhhhhgassssss!' he adds. Reggie called early, too early in the morning to invite me along to Vegas. He told me he was going to go scope out chapels for his white trash show. Now that we are in the car, he says he really just needed to get away and gamble. His car is a 1981 green Mercedes Benz. He tells me he doesn't want to upgrade because they don't make them like this anymore. I don't know much about cars, but I'm guessing he's right. You can't buy an old, rusted piece of shit that permanently smells like a cheap cigar just anywhere.

As we're driving, Reggie feels it's necessary to inform me of his Three Rules Of Vegas. I've already been there several times, and we're only going for a day.

The windows are rolled up, the air conditioner isn't all that cold, and Reggie has just lit a cigar. I'm prepared for anything at this point. Hit me with the Three Rules.

'First: No DTM Gambling' says Reggie as he fills the car with smoke.

I bite. 'What's DTM?'

'Drunk, tired, and miserable gambling. None of that.'

'Okay.'

Reggie is wearing a blue and red jacket with the word Competition written across both sleeves.

'When In A Vegas Strip Club, Never Go Back Into The Champagne Room. Strange shit happens back there. You're just going to have to trust me on this one.'

I really despise this man. Snipes. Wesley Snipes. This is why I'm still here. This is why when Reggie called me late last night after the Rasheed experience I agreed to go with him to Vegas. Have to play the game. This town is all about schmoozing those who control you. I've given up control.

'And finally, and this is the most important one...' More important than the useless Champagne room rule? I can't wait. 'If Someone Comes Up And Asks You If You Want To Star In An X-Rated Film, Just Say No. You're just going to have to trust me on this one.'

A few miles from Vegas, Reggie tells me how Vegas feels like a small town to him. 'Just more lights', he says. All cities are small in someone's eyes.

A peaceful moment goes by and then Reggie once again opens his mouth. 'This place has changed since the slogan has changed.'

I say nothing, which Reggie now understands as that I don't know what in the hell he's talking about.

'The old slogan 'Vegas, Baby' was perfect. It said that this is a fun place, a playground of sorts where adults can go and have fun. Everything is cool, it's Vegas, baby. Guys would be sitting on the couch next to their wives, see the advertisement and everyone was happy with a guys weekend in Vegas. Oh, then it changed. Man, did it change.'

'What's the slogan now?' I ask.

Reggie shakes his head and mumbles 'What Happens In Vegas, Stays In Vegas.' He has a dramatic pause and then continues. 'The same guy is now sitting on the couch with his wife and that advertisement comes on it's followed by jaws hitting the ground.' Reggie appears to actually be getting angry telling this story. 'Bastards.'

We arrive at Vegas and the usual rush I feel just isn't there. I'm tired. I'm with Reggie. And I just received a phone call from Rasheed who said he wants me to stop over at four in the morning. I told him that's too early and the line went silent until I said I would be there. 'Smooth' is all I heard. And then he hung up the phone.

'How did things go with Rasheed?' asks Reggie.

'Uh, okay, I guess. But we really didn't get to talk about anything?' I tell him.

'Don't worry. Rasheed will set you up with way more than you want to know about your character.'

We go The Palms, because this is where Reggie likes to play. 'We can hit the strip later.'

I check my watch. It's noon. I'm already exhausted.

Inside The Palms, Reggie wants to play the slot machines. I can't understand how someone could get so excited about coming to Vegas if all you're going to do is play the slots. Looking around, I see some high rollers who are talking to someone who may or may not be the owner (I like to think it's the owner). They're all laughing and having a good time. Anyone who owns a casino has to be fun to hang out with. Anyone. I head over to the Black Jack tables.

I find an opening on a ten dollar table and I pull up a chair. The dealer has an 'I just stabbed someone and left them for dead' mustache, complete with handle bars. He's also got a booming voice like an announcer for wrestling. The story of his life would be played by a combination of Denis Franz and Mean Gene Okerland. I put a hundred dollars on the table and his voice booms 'One hundred' and then gives me my chips. After two hands I realize I'm on the table from hell.

In the first chair is the 'Condescending Guy'. My first hand I get dealt Black Jack and he yells out 'Must be the chair.'

Confidence is at an all time low.

It has nothing to do with the chair. Maybe it's just because you're an ass, Condescending Guy.

Next to him is a person eating while playing. How much of a degenerate gambler are you when you can't stop for fifteen minutes to stop and eat a sandwich.

Running Update Guy is next to The Eater. His buddies are standing behind him and he's giving a running total of how much he is up, after each hand. He finally leaves after losing two consecutive hands. A woman takes his place, which then introduces the guy next to me, The Guy Whose Personality Completely Changes When A Girl Sits At The Table. Out of nowhere, it's Showtime at the Apollo and he's bombing.

'Yeah, I just flew into Vegas today. My arms are really tired.'

The woman eventually leaves, as do the bad jokes.

She's replaced by a guy who's really drunk, so drunk it's comical. This is what's great about Vegas. It's okay to be drunk, as long as you're at a Black Jack table. Can we get you another drink, sir?

The Drunk Guy is taking a full minute to decide whether he wants to take a hit, almost lights himself on fire when lighting a cigarette, and just split fives with the dealer showing six. I love Drunk Guy. Drunk Guy is always great, that is unless you're exhausted, have to get back to L.A. tonight, and have to be at Rasheed's by four in the morning.

After Condescending Guy leaves, an idiot shows up and wants to take a hit on eighteen with the dealer showing four. The dealer has to actually call the pit boss over to make sure there's no question over this. He takes the hit. A king. Everyone gets up and leaves the table.

I find Reggie and he's down five hundred dollars. In slots! Maybe it's better he sticks with slots. Anyway, he's ready to leave The Palms. Before we leave, he has one more piece of advice for me. 'Don't Mix Allergy Medication With Red Bull.'

As we leave the Casino, I wonder whether it's more difficult to adjust to the sunlight or lack of oxygen after spending hours in a casino. We go to MGM and shoot Craps. Then over to Bally's, where we both play Black Jack on the same table. This is where Reggie tells me how he can tell how strong a man is by how they play the game.

'If you've got sixteen and the dealer has a face card and you don't hit, you're weak' says Reggie. 'Double Down? You've got guts.' Reggie lights a Dutch Master and blows smoke at the dealer. 'Works both ways. Say the dealer has a two and you hit on sixteen? That's a cowboy move. A man with very little self control.' Luckily Reggie runs out of money fast, because it just wasn't fun playing with him. Where's Drunk Guy?

Next we go to Mandalay Bay, enjoy over priced drinks and play a little Roulette. Reggie then decides he wants to do some shopping.

At the Ventian, he drops three grand on a new suit. At Ceasar's he drops nine hundred on shoes. None of this is that big of a deal, until we get to The Bellagio. Reggie drops over fifteen grand on jewelry and a gold plated globe that he likes because of the way Australia is slightly raised. Reggie is acting like token drunk guy on EBay with a new credit card.

Finally, Reggie decides we can head back to L.A. On the way to the car, out of nowhere, Reggie reminds me 'The camera's always rolling.'

'I've had a long day. You drive' says Reggie, as he tosses me the keys.

I'm so tired and beat. The last thing I want to do is drive. On the way back, Reggie tells me once again that he's got a good feeling about this script and that Paramount pictures is really behind the project.

'I see this as the beginning of a lot of work for you, Johnny' says Reggie. The word Paramount is the only thing that can possibly keep me awake. Well, that and Wesley Snipes, of course.

SHOW TIME

If you wake up in the morning and see a strange naked man running around your neighborhood, it's not a big deal. If you wake up and there's a strange man running around your living room, that's something you have to deal with.

If you and three others have just robbed a Federal bank, are at a table in a bar, and that bar is surrounded by cops, eventually you have to deal with this. This is where we are at. Rasheed is staring at me. Victory is staring at Samuel. Samuel is staring at the ceiling, oblivious to the world.

I'm looking down at the table. There's a faint smell of marijuana in the air. I think about the first time I got high, how I passed out and woke up in my best friend's parents bedroom. Luckily, they were sound asleep. Much like the present situation, I was unsure as to how I got there.

My forehead is no longer bleeding, but I still have a headache. The pain killers Samuel gave me a little while ago are wearing off.

'Yeah, they usually only last about two hours. Frankie doesn't have shit when it comes to meds. Cocaine, yes. Meds, not shit.' Frankie is Samuel's drug dealer. He has no address, just wanders Venice Beach.

Sometimes he wanders over to Santa Monica beach, but mostly he's at Venice Beach' is what Samuel told me.

Victory is tapping her fingers on the table. Samuel threatened to strangle her if she kept singing after her rendition of 'Surf City' by the Beach Boys. To be honest, it was truly an uninspiring rendition. What could she do?

Everything that happens here is happening for a reason.

Victory looks over at Rasheed.

'Sheed, what's up baby? What are we going to do?'

'Relax, it's okay. I've got a plan.' Rasheed smiles at Victory.

Samuel puts his arms up and stretches, letting out a deep breath. 'Man, shit got a little messed up' says Samuel as he looks at me and then over to Rasheed.

I have China bring me over a vodka on the rocks. I do this because I'm told to do this. I am who they tell me I am. I do what I'm told to do. This is because I haven't been networking nearly enough.

Everyone is quiet for a minute, until Samuel speaks up. 'Can anyone hear that? The Flinstone's theme song?'

'You a damn fool, Sam. There aint no Flinstone's playing' says Rasheed as he's shaking his glass for China, who is looking the other way at the moment, not seeing Rasheed.

'I don't hear anything' I say.

'I thought I heard something, earlier' says Victory, then adds 'But I don't really know for sure.' A moment passes. Victory speaks again. 'I grew up watching that show. That's why I've got a handle on reality.'

'Me too' I say. 'And Bugs Bunny.' I've officially been pulled into the denial part of the situation.

'Oh yeah. Bugs. Have to love him' says Samuel.

Rasheed is still waving his glass. China is staring the other way.

'See? That's what is wrong with the youth today. No Fred Flinstone. No Barney Rubble. And definitely no Bugs Bunny.' Rasheed looks over at the bar and sees China staring off to the side. 'Damn nigga, get me another drink!' China drops the towel he was holding and begins to make Rasheed's drink. Rasheed laughs.

'I don't even think the Flinstone's are on today' I say as I stare at the bag of money sitting next to the table.

'Course not. It's all little boy and girl shows. And Screech.' Rasheed looks as if he has just had an epiphany. He is the star here. 'Yeah, it's the Screech factor. That's what's wrong with society today.'

China brings over his drink. Rasheed is staring at him.

'Let's hear it' says Rasheed.

'Oh, yes. Another proverb?' asks China.

'Yeah boy, I aint got all day.' Rasheed slams half of his drink and then looks back over to China.

Victory grabs my leg and says something about 'The Backroom' and 'Being Horny'. It doesn't seem like it's quite time for this to happen. Of course, I may not be a free man for much longer. Call it a moment of weakness, or a sequence of events, either way I decide to take Victory up on her offer. Victory and I stand up.

'Well?' says Rasheed to China.

'Uh... uh... Dead man sleep well?' says China.

'What?' says Rasheed.

The story changes, again. This is the second time his story has changed. His story affects our story, which in turn affects the story of the cops outside the bar. First Robbery. Then Hostage. Now Rasheed grabs the gun off the table and shoots China three times squarely in the chest. The empty glass I was holding drops to the floor, shattering, ice cubes sprawled all over the floor.

'Good night, dead man' says Rasheed.

Hearing the gun shots, the cops announce that they are coming in.

I believe this is what is referred to as The Climax.