

"Zapper"

by
Jim Strain

FADE IN:

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Standing in the baptistry as he addresses the congregation, the PREACHER has a firm hand on the shoulder of NICK POOVEY, 12, a ruddy-cheeked innocent.

PREACHER

...and having most successfully completed the Pastor's class and confessed his faith, Nick Poovey now comes before you to be baptized.

ANGLE - NICK'S FAMILY

Sitting proudly in the front pew are MARION POOVEY, his portly mother...

LEO POOVEY, his blue-collar father, head bowed -- cleaning his fingernails...

CINDY, 10, a "Little Miss" sis, all smiles and chiffon...

And PETE, Nick's rebellious identical twin brother, dismissive posture and a scowl...

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

(older and wiser)

As I recall, I wanted to puke. Not that I cared all that much about being baptized or I wouldn't have cut the Pastor's classes. But Nick was always the star.

BAPTISTRY

Preacher turns to Nick and cradles him in an arm.

PREACHER

And so, as is my charge, I baptize you Nick in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

He gently lowers Nick into the water.

But when Nick begins to rise, the Preacher forces him back down, holding him beneath the surface.

Panicked, Nick begins to struggle.

ANGLE - CONGREGATION

Bemused faces turn to one another for reassurance.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BAPTISTRY

The water begins to roil as the struggle between the Preacher and Nick becomes more violent.

UNDER WATER

Nick claws at the Preacher's hand on his neck.

CLOSE - PREACHER

Beet-red face. Eyes closed. Neck veins bulge like cables as he holds the thrashing boy beneath the surface.

PREACHER (CONT'D)
(tight-lipped fury)
I know you, Satan. I smell the stench of
your breath.

Water splashes out of the baptistry as the Preacher reaches down with his other hand.

PREACHER (CONT'D)
God's will be done!

Ahab has his whale in a two-fisted death grip.

CONGREGATION

Uncertainty gives way to alarm and horror.

Instinctively, Leo bolts from the pew and charges the baptistry as Marion begins to SCREAM.

Cindy's mouth is open in a silent shriek. Pete, too, is frozen in wide-eyed bewilderment.

BAPTISTRY

Leo leaps into the water, grabs the Preacher and wrestles him like a 'gator.

Desperate to free Nick from his grip, Leo goes under water and viciously bites into the Preacher's wrist.

Blood seeps into the water in a growing stain, but the Preacher hangs on.

ON THE SURFACE

Blue-suited ELDERS grab the Preacher from behind, pulling him upright.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Leo explodes from below, battering the Preacher unconscious with a flurry of fists.

UNDER WATER

The Preacher's hands release Nick, who sinks like a rock to the bottom of the baptistry.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Forgiveness, of course, was out of the question.

CUT TO:

EXT. CHURCH - LATER

A trail of wet boot prints lead us to the Preacher, still in his fishing waders and soaked clerical robe, as he's escorted in handcuffs by COPS to a patrol car. Bloodstained and knotted, a handkerchief bandages the bite on his wrist.

Mouth bloodied, face puffy, eyes downcast, he shuffles along in a daze.

Members of the congregation watch the procession from the front lawn in stunned disbelief.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Why the Preacher snapped that day is still a mystery. Most folks said it had something to do with his wife running off with the organist the week before. Others figured it was due to the full eclipse of the moon -- a blood moon. And a few thought that when the Preacher looked at Nick, he saw me instead. I was never well-liked.

Next to the patrol car, Pete stares at the Preacher. Feeling the look, the Preacher briefly glances up and meets Pete's gaze before the patrol car pulls away.

Nearby, PARAMEDICS wheel Nick on a gurney toward an ambulance.

Obscured by an oxygen mask, Nick's face is ashen. Marion joins him in the ambulance.

Dripping wet, Leo herds Pete and Cindy toward the family car.

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PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
But terrible as the incident was, you'd
have to say the events that followed
wouldn't have happened otherwise.
Destiny at work, so to speak.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Nick is in the hospital bed tethered to instruments, monitors and drip bags. A DOCTOR hovers over him in the midst of an examination.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
The good news was that Nick suffered no
brain damage, permanent physical
disability, or sensory deprivation. The
bad news was, from that day on, he acted
like he was in some sort of trance.

Vacant-eyed, Nick stares at the ceiling as the doctor prods, pokes and jostles.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
He stayed bedridden and never spoke
another word. Psychologically, he'd gone
over the edge, but it was the Preacher
who pled insanity. "Diminished capacity"
is what they called it in the plea
bargain.

CUT TO:

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

The Preacher stands solemnly in front of the bench as the JUDGE reads his sentence.

JUDGE
 ...and therefore, in lieu of a prison sentence, you shall be committed to Buckman State Hospital for not less than one year and until such time as a review board of the institution's doctors determine you are fit to rejoin society.

PREACHER
 His will be done.

EXT. COURT HOUSE - DAY

Amid a scrum of television reporters, the Preacher is led down the steps to a patrol car.

His ATTORNEY runs interference with a refrain of "No comment".

VIDEO IMAGE - CONTINUING

A "Live -- Breaking News" banner runs across the bottom of the screen.

NEWSCASTER (O.S.)
 ...And so it appears, the Reverend will
 continue to maintain his stoic silence.

The Preacher shields his eyes from the staccato of camera strobes and suddenly loses balance on the steps.

An instant of frenzied panic as he tumbles.

NEWSCASTER (O.S.)(CONT'D)
 Look out! What's going on? Hold on a
 moment... Everything's okay, he only
 stumbled.

PULL BACK - INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUING

The video image is on a television bolted over the door of Nick's hospital room.

Marion sleeps in a straight-backed chair next to Nick's bed.

PREACHER
 (from the television)
 Out of my way. Please.

At the sound of the Preacher's voice, Nick's eyes flutter open. He watches the television image of the Preacher struggling toward the patrol car.

Nick's hand slowly gropes for the television remote control unit, dangling from a cord wrapped around the bed's side rail.

When he finds it...

CLICK!

The television image jumps from the news update to a cartoon show.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Preparing to chomp down on a cat, a bulldog bears his fierce set of teeth, which are suddenly shattered by SHOTGUN BLAST...coming from the cat's owner -- a sweet old lady.

Marion awakens as GUNFIRE ventilates the animated pooch.

She glances at the television.

CLICK!

Another channel: Professional wrestling!

Astonished, Marion looks at her son's hand grasping the remote. CLICK!

Another channel: A slow-motion explosion rips apart an office building.

MARION
(a squeal of delight!)
Nick! Nicky! My son!

She begins to weep over the prone figure of the boy as he numbly clicks through several different channels.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
It was a small thing, but it showed us
that Nick was in touch with the world
again. Sort of.

FADE OUT/IN:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAYS LATER

Nick's bed has been adjusted to prop him into a better viewing position as he watches television.

Squeezed into the tiny room, the family surrounds the bed in plastic chairs -- a tableau in separate togetherness.

Pete plays solitaire on the end of Nick's bed...

Leo snaps through a newspaper sports section...

Cindy plays with "Nurse Barbie" and "Dr. Ken" dolls...

Marion knits an Afghan...

And with a blank expression, Nick channel surfs with the attention span of a housefly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

We thought it was the beginning, but in fact it was the end. Nick's contact with the world never went any further than the television set.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

On the television screen -- tone and bars.

Now alone, Nick still cradles the remote unit in his hand.

Still propped up with his eyes wide open, he's bathed in the glow of the television set. The only light in the room, it surrounds him like an aura.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

INT. POOVEY LIVING ROOM - DAY

A working-class bunker. Same angle on Nick, who now occupies a Lazy-Boy Recliner in front of the family television.

Draped with the Afghan that Marion knitted, Nick watches a televised golf tournament.

WIDEN to reveal he's surrounded by NEIGHBORS, FAMILY and FRIENDS in the midst of a party.

A "Welcome Home, Nick" banner hangs on the wall; bobbing metallic balloons are tethered to the bannister leading upstairs; brightly-colored crepe paper streamers lace the windows.

Sitting on the staircase, Pete watches the festivities below with a jaded eye.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

We had a big party when Nick finally came home, but he couldn't have cared less.

Like an indifferent Sun, Nick is oblivious to the swirl of activity orbiting about him.

Marion circulates with a tray of appetizers.

Tending a card-table bar, Leo is his own best customer.

Wearing tap shoes, Cindy entertains an appreciative gaggle of NEIGHBOR LADIES with a dance routine to "Stars and Stripes Forever" on the kitchen tile.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LATER

With a bottle of beer in hand, RIPBURGER, a smarmy neighbor, sidles next to Nick and watches the televised golf match.

RIPBURGER

(to Nick)

I'd love to see Bobby drain this putt and send Pumphrey back to the caddy shack where he belongs.

INSERT TELEVISION

As "Bobby" prepares to putt...

The channel abruptly jumps to a nature show -- vultures feeding on carrion.

RIPBURGER (CONT'D)

Hey! What are you doing?

(indicating remote)

Here, give me that thing!

He tries to pry the remote from Nick's hand, but Nick, despite his passive expression, keeps an iron fist on the device.

MARION

Problem, Mr. Ripburger?

RIPBURGER

Well, no. I just wanted to see who won. If I could get the remote--

MARION

Oh, Nick never lets go of the zapper. It's like his personal property.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

The good news was that we never had to hunt for the remote again.

As Ripburger drifts into the current of other guests, Marion sets down the tray and sharply CLAPS for attention.

MARION

Everybody! I think it's time we gave Nicky his surprise.

Devouring a hunk of Devil's Food cake on a paper plate, Pete rolls his eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Marion gives Cindy the high sign, and Cindy taps her way through the guests with a DACHSHUND PUPPY cradled in her arms.

Leo downs a shooter.

Cindy places the puppy on Nick's chest. He crawls up to Nick's face and licks him.

Nick doesn't stir, but his remote thumb clicks through television channels in reflexive excitement.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

*Nick had always begged for a Dachshund.
Now that he was a vegetable, they gave
him one. Go figure.*

Nick's channel surfing stops at the opening of an "I Love Lucy" rerun, drawing Cindy's attention.

CINDY

Mom! Nick wants to name the dog Lucy!
(pointing to the television)
See?

MARION

Now, Cindy, I don't think just because--

LEO

The dog's a boy!

CINDY

What do you say, Pete?

PETE

(a chocolate smile)
I say we call him Penis-dog.

Guests freeze. Dead silence except for the "Lucy" theme on the television. Marion helplessly looks to Leo, who downs another shooter.

CUT TO:

INT. UPSTAIRS HALL

Removing his belt, Leo marches Pete down the hall to his room.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

And that's how Lucy got his name.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The door to Pete's room closes behind them and the SMACKING begins.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
The fact is, Cindy was on to something.
She was the first to suggest that Nick
was using the zapper to communicate.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

The television is off, guests are gone and Nick sleeps in the recliner with Lucy curled between his legs.

Marion gathers paper cups, plates and other party trash -- residue of the celebration.

MARION
 (to Leo, sourly)
 Could you at least get me a trash bag?

Leo downs a drink and works himself off the sofa. As he staggers toward the kitchen, his foot slips slightly.

He looks down at his shoe. Closer. Chocolate frosting?

LEO
 Goddammit!

MARION
 Shhhhhhh! What's the matter with you?

Hushed but forceful, the following exchange slowly escalates in intensity...and volume.

LEO
 Hasn't been two hours and that dog's
 already shit on our floor.

MARION
 He's a puppy, Leo.

LEO
 He's a crap factory, Marion.

MARION
 Don't start!

LEO
 I told you this would happen.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARION
Deal with it.

Leo awkwardly slips off his shoe and gestures with it.

LEO
You deal with it! You clean it up. I told you I was gonna have no part of this.

MARION
I didn't step in it.

Stirred from his sleep, Lucy watches the exchange.

LEO
What are you saying?

MARION
Have another drink. Maybe it'll help your hearing.

LEO
Shut your goddamn yap.

MARION
Stop it! No wonder Pete is so foul-mouthed.

LEO
Well, I'm not Pete, and I'll talk however I goddamn please, goddammit!

Marion covers her ears with her hands.

MARION
Enough!

The television suddenly turns on.

MARION (CONT'D)
See that? You've wakened him.

A flurry of televised images flicker by as Nick surfs the channels.

Marion heads for Nick, but Leo hooks her arm.

LEO
Oh, no you don't. I'm not finished.

MARION
Then into the kitchen.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Marion pulls the door closed behind them. Their barely audible arguing is punctuated by shouts. A plate shatters.

INT. CINDY'S ROOM

To escape the muted sounds coming from below, Cindy buries her head in her pillow and rolls over.

INT. PETE'S ROOM

Hands folded behind his head as he relaxes in the dark, Pete is more pensive.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

It's not like you knew exactly what Nick was trying to say with the television, but you could tell he was driving at something.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUING

Nick discovers a dogfight on an old World War I movie: Biplanes scream across the sky, machine guns rattle, disabled bogeys explode into the ground.

From Nick's lap, Lucy yaps at the action.

With a passive expression, Nick increases the volume of the televised air war until it drowns out his parents' arguing in the kitchen.

The room begins to rattle as Nick pumps up the volume even more.

Leo opens the kitchen door and shouts above the dogfight.

LEO

What the hell's going on in here?

One end of the "Welcome Home Nick" banner loosens on the wall. As the banner swings gently down...

CUT TO:

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE - MORNING

Clad in a bathrobe, hung-over Leo snatches the newspaper off the front sidewalk and returns to the house.

He nods to Ripburger, also in a bathrobe, who fetches his paper next door.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RIPBURGER

I thought you got a dog for that.

Leo returns a grumpy sneer/smile.

CUT TO:

LEO'S POV - SPORTS PAGE

CAMERA jumps from story to story as if Leo were rooting through a bowl of mixed nuts.

LEO (O.S.)

Any more coffee?...Marion?...Anybody?

He lowers the paper to reveal the family at the dinner table:

Marion wears a jogger's radio headset...

Sleepy-eyed Pete wears a C.D. headset...

Cindy wears a bunny-ear headset...

Nick is in the b.g. asleep on the recliner.

LEO (CONT'D)

(sharply)

Hey!

They simultaneously pry the headsets from their ears. Muted broadcast news, rock music, and storybooks on tape fill the air.

Nick stirs slightly in the b.g.

LEO (CONT'D)

Coffee!

The sports page snaps back to fill the frame.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Last-minute chaos at the front door as Pete and Cindy gather their backpacks, lunches and jackets for school.

Leo waits impatiently.

LEO

If you're not in the truck by the time I'm out of the driveway, you can walk.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Out he goes.

CUT TO:

EXT. LEO'S TRUCK - MORNING

"Poovey & Sons Construction" is stenciled on the door.

As it backs out the driveway, disheveled Pete comes running and hops in the truck bed next to the tool chest before Leo pulls away.

INT. TRUCK CAB

Cindy does homework in her lap as Leo accelerates.

LEO
What's with your brother? Does he just
like to annoy me?

Scribbling in her notebook, Cindy shrugs.

LEO (CONT'D)
I thought you finished your homework.

CINDY
Extra credit.

Leo glances at Pete in the rearview mirror. Pete is picking his nose. Leo sighs.

LEO
(to Cindy)
Maybe I'll leave you the business.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Marion spoon feeds oatmeal to Nick as she talks to him.

MARION
I'm worried, Nicky. Your father's been
so tense lately. Working too hard.
Drinking too much. And the arguments.
They're never about what they're about.
(teary-eyed)
He still blames me for wanting you
baptized. You don't blame me, Nicky, do
you? I'm at my wits end! What am I
supposed to do?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Nick stops channel surfing on a chicken soup commercial.
Marion looks at it with a sigh.

MARION (CONT'D)
Oh, Nicky. How sweet.

She kisses his cheek. Off Nick's passive expression...

FADE OUT:

UNDER BLACK --

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
*It's hard enough to learn any new
language, but imagine what it's like
trying to figure one out while it's being
invented. Cindy called it "Zap-chat",
but, like beauty, it was often in the eye
of the beholder.*

VIDEO IMAGE - WATERFALL

Niagara at its most awe-inspiring.

CINDY (O.S.)
He's thirsty!

WIDEN - INT. LIVING ROOM

Cindy and Pete argue in front of the television.

PETE
He just had a soda. He probably needs to
take a leak.

Marion enters the frame with a concerned look.

MARION
Maybe he's crying.
(hand to Nick's forehead)
Are you okay, honey? What's the matter?
Blink if I'm right.
(nothing)
Blink if I'm wrong.
(nothing)
Blink!

Pete and Cindy roll their eyes. The front door suddenly
swings open to reveal Leo, soaking wet.

LEO
Alright, who changed the timer on the
sprinkler?!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

All eyes turn to Nick.

MARION

Is that what you meant, sweetie?

PETE

Give me a break. How could he possibly know about that?

CINDY

He's right, isn't he? He just knows things.

PETE

Right. My brother the Quija board? What's the matter with you -- brain lock?

MARION

That's enough, Pete!

PETE

But she--

LEO

(sharply)

You heard your mother.

Pete scans their faces looking for a shred of support.

PETE

I give up.

FREEZE as Pete raises his hands in mock surrender.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

It never pays to be a skeptic because if you're right, people hold it against you as if it's your fault. Besides, as time went on, it appeared Nick really did "know" some things. This was not lost on the old man who found himself spending more and more "quality" time with Nick.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Consulting a racing form, Leo sits shoulder to shoulder next to Nick.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LEO
 Okay, third race...
 (mumbling)
 French Wind, Moonshine, Lord Tizzy...

As Leo runs his finger down the column of horses, the channel surfing stops at a quiz show.

LEO (CONT'D)
 Missy's *Question*...
 (glancing at television)
 That's it! Missy's *Question*!

He circles the horse on the form.

LEO (CONT'D)
 Fourth race.

The channel jumps to a cooking show.

LEO (CONT'D)
 Here we are: Sugar & Spice! Stevens
 aboard. Good, good. Whaddaya got for
 the fifth?

CUT TO:

BETTING WINDOW

Leo rakes in the cash from his winning ticket.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
The spooky thing of it was that the old
man started making a little money that
way, and he started to lighten up some.
The mood around the house improved, and I
began to see a silver lining, too.

CUT TO:

LIVING ROOM - DAY

Pete ushers THREE PALS toward Nick in the recliner.

PAL #1
 What's the big deal? He just looks like
 my old man in that chair.

PAL #2
 Only put a beer in his hand.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PAL #3

He stares like this all day? Like he's dead?

PETE

Except when he's sleeping. Like I said, anybody who can make him react gets double their bet back.

PAL #1 suddenly jerks into Nick's vision and making a face -- drools on him. Nick doesn't react.

PAL #2

Wait. I brought a little science lab surprise.

From his jacket pocket, Pal #2 pulls out a jelly jar containing a tarantula. He winks at Pal #3.

PETE

Hey, that's not fair.

PAL #2

I didn't hear no rules.

Pal #2 opens the jar above Nick's head and the tarantula drops onto his forehead and crawls down his face. Nick's expression doesn't change, but the television channels jump like an EKG gone wild.

Lucy hops all over Nick's chest barking at the tarantula, but Nick remains passively frozen.

PAL #2 (CONT'D)

(astonished)

Whoa!

PAL #3

Gawd, look at that. He doesn't even blink.

PETE

(holding out a hand)

Pay up!

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

On top of that, I made a killing charging admission on physical therapy days.

WIPE TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

It's packed with adolescent boys ogling at Nick's PHYSICAL THERAPIST, a shapely young woman in a thong leotard.

Bathed in a glow of perspiration, she works Nick like a pliable rag doll -- maneuvering his legs, arms and body through an array of exercises that entangle her in a variety of provocative positions.

Nick weaves through the crowd of slack-jawed boys collecting money as a Buster Poindexter music video plays "Hot Hot Hot" on TV.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

In time, the novelty of Nick mostly wore off, and we fell back into a routine of everyday living. But even as a vegetable, everything still seemed to revolve around Nick.

As Pete closes the door behind him...

CUT TO:

SERIES OF SHOTS

Intercut with various TELEVISION SHOWS Nick watches.

o SOAP OPERA

o Marion uses one of his arms like a spindle to hold yarn as she knits, and watches with him.

o HANDYMAN HOW-TO SHOW

o Mounted on a ladder straddling Nick's recliner, Leo paints the ceiling. Nick is covered with a clear plastic drop-cloth.

o FOOTBALL HALFTIME MARCHING BAND

o Cindy practices her flute, using Nick's feet to prop up her music in lieu of a stand.

Pete enters and nonchalantly tosses his jacket toward the recliner. It falls across Nick's face, blocking his view of the television, setting off an uncontrollable flurry of channel changing.

MARION

Hey, buster.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Pete sees her watching him from the kitchen, where she's peeling carrots at the sink.

PETE

I didn't mean to.

MARION

No matter. You know, your brother wouldn't toss his jacket willy nilly as he came in the door. He would hang it up in the closet.

Pete retrieves his jacket with a sour look and heads for the closet.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

Yeah, things were back to normal alright. It was "Goofus and Gallant" even when Nick was a potted plant. And it went on that way for years.

As Pete sulks out of the room, Lucy GROWLS at him from the puppy nest she occupies at the foot of the recliner.

MATCH CUT TO:

LUCY

a grown-up Dachshund GROWLING from a larger dog nest as a pair of surplus Army boots passes.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

But at least I got some company. Cindy had outgrown her "Goody Two-Shoes", so I wasn't the only one in trouble all the time.

TILT to reveal that Cindy is the one in the Army boots, transformed into a 16-year-old rebel -- green hair, pierced nose, wrist tatoo, thrift-store chic.

She's propped like a brooding anti-Vanna next to a large object, veiled in bright wrapping paper with an enormous bow.

LEO (O.S.)

Okay, princess...now!

Rolling her eyes, Cindy tears away the wrapping paper to reveal a 60-inch, stereo-equipped television console facing Nick's La-Z-Boy.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

At 18, Nick now fills the recliner as if it were a custom-made pilot's seat. Pete matches Nick's size, but now sports a wanna-be beard.

LEO (CONT'D)
 (taking center stage)
 It's state of the art, Nick! And look at this!

He pulls an 18-inch satellite dish from behind his back with a flourish.

LEO (CONT'D)
 The entire video world is at your doorstep!

Nick's zipper hand twitches uncontrollably with excitement.

LEO (CONT'D)
 Oh, it's not hooked up yet, son.
 Tomorrow!

Pete's eyes narrow as he studies the television, mounted like a high-tech icon in front of Nick. His resentment is palpable.

MARION
 Pete...aren't you going to open your gift?

Pete glances down to the small, wrapped object in his hand.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Something about birthdays always brought out the worst in me.

He shrugs and opens the package to reveal -- a nice wristwatch.

LEO
 Got an alarm, too. No more excuses for being late.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN

Pete leans over a sheet cake ablaze with 18 flaming candles. It says, "Happy Birthday, Nick & Pete"

LEO
 Don't get too close or that fuzz of yours will go up like tinder.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARION

Hush, Leo.

(to Pete)

Well, go on, birthday boy. Make your wish!

Pete closes his eyes -- a wish -- then after glancing sheepishly at Nick, he blows out all the candles.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I've felt guilty ever since...even though what eventually happened wasn't my fault.

As the lingering smoke curls hypnotically into the air...

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

Nick's POV through his bare feet as he watches the television from the recliner.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

In a way, you could blame it on the new television.

As Pete continues his commentary, we slowly move in toward the television screen, gradually losing sight of Nick's feet until the frame is filled with a zap-happy, random montage of televised images.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

It was a pricey piece of equipment for our neighborhood, and all those new channels gave Nick a much larger vocabulary, so to speak. Since all he did was watch TV, he knew what would be on every channel and when, right down to the commercials. Kind of creepy, really. Sometimes, he'd fuss with the picture-in-picture feature and that could get kind of complicated. Was the deodorant commercial playing in the small picture Nick's comment on the news anchor on the big screen? It was like playing charades with two contestants at once.

As if disassembling a pointillist painting, we continue MOVING IN until the recognizable televised images are reduced to flickering, abstract grains of color -- scanning electrons, dancing to some unknown piper.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
I couldn't always get what he was driving
at, but I'd never seen Nick happier.
Which is, I've learned, just an
invitation for fate to deal you a tragedy
to even things up. And all because of
that damned fancy television.

The television screen abruptly shuts off, collapsing to a single bead of light that...

DISSOLVES TO:

A FLASHLIGHT BEAM

darting in the blackness of...

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The beam comes from outside the window.

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE - NIGHT

At the side of the house, silhouettes of TWO GANG-BANGERS are at the window with the flashlight.

Its beam continues to sweep the darkened living room until it eventually finds the big-screen television.

We hear a whispered: "There."

They glance up at the second floor windows, all of which glow with the flickering hues of television sets playing in darkened rooms. We follow the muted sounds above to:

INT. CINDY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Smoking a joint, Cindy is hypnotized by a music video broadcast on her television.

INT. PARENTS' ROOM - NIGHT

Jay Leno plays to the snores coming from Leo and Marion's bed.

Wearing a blindfold and earplugs, Marion is rolled on her side. Leo is sprawled next to her, an empty glass in his outstretched hand and a bottle of scotch on the bedside table.

INT. PETE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Wide-eyed Pete is bathed in the glow of the Playboy Channel.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dark, silent.

CLOSE UP - WINDOW SILL

A burglar tool works under the sash, pops the window lock, and pries the pane open.

ANGLE - LUCY

Curled on his dog nest, he pops awake with a LOW GROWL and warily approaches the window.

A handful of sausage links suddenly land at Lucy's feet from outside. He immediately begins wolfing them down.

CUT TO:

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Flickering television lights and competing audio tracks seep from beneath all of the closed bedroom doors.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The two Gang-Bangers with flashlights advance on cat's feet.

They step over Lucy's lifeless body, a half-eaten sausage link still remaining from the poisoned feast.

Banger #2's flashlight beam washes over Nick, sleeping in the recliner. He doesn't stir.

BANGER #2
(whispering)
He don't look crippled.

BANGER #1
Trust me. He's a dummy. Now get the
front door.

As Banger #1 approaches the big-screen television it suddenly blurts on.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Banger #1 pivots with a start, looking at Nick on the recliner. Nick's eyes are open, and his hand frantically clicks up the volume on the zapper.

Banger #1 quickly jerks the television's power cord from the outlet, and the television goes dead.

He glances nervously upstairs and waits holding his breath.

INSERT - HALLWAY

Not a creature is stirring. We still hear sound and see flickering lights from beneath the doors to each room.

BACK TO SCENE

When Banger #1 looks back at the recliner, he discovers Banger #2 has put a pistol to Nick's head.

BANGER #1 (CONT'D)
(to Banger #2)
No, man! He can't do nothin' to us.

Nick's fingers click helplessly away at the zapper.

BANGER #1 (CONT'D)
(indicating console)
Grab a side. Hurry.

Banger #2 obediently joins his partner and together they heft the television console.

They awkwardly maneuver toward the open front door, one on each end of the console.

Walking backward, Banger #1 bumps into something. His head swivels...

SHOCK CUT:

Nick is standing rigidly behind him! They're almost nose-to-nose. Nick's eyes are fixed in a frightening, penetrating stare.

Banger #1 gasps in fright, loses his grip on the console.

The console topples sideways, cracking the video screen as it hits the floor and taking Banger #2 down with it. His foot is pinned underneath.

Banger #1 reflexively grabs Nick by the throat and wrestles him to the floor.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Zapper still in one hand, Nick thrashes helplessly in Banger #1's choke-hold.

INSERT - UPSTAIRS HALL

Serene by contrast.

BACK TO SCENE

Banger #2 frees his foot and hobbles toward Nick and his partner.

As they struggle...

INTERCUT - JAY LENO

Nick flails, gasps for air...

INTERCUT - PLAYBOY CHANNEL

Banger #1's eyes seem to burn with an intensity reminiscent of the Preacher...

INTERCUT - MTV ROCK VIDEO

Banger #2 pulls the pistol from his pocket...

CUT TO:

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE - NIGHT

Pop! Pop! Pop! Strobe-like flashes spark through the ground-level windows, while the television-lit rooms on the second floor continue to flicker indifferently above.

Moments later, the Gang-Bangers explode through the front door, jump into a ratty van parked in front and peel off.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE - SUNRISE

A pickup swings down the street from the opposite direction and newspapers are thrown out the window, sliding onto driveways.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

*We didn't even know what happened until
the next morning.*

The peaceful morning silence is sharply broken by Marion's AGONIZED WAIL from the house. It seems to echo throughout the neighborhood.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
I'll never forget that sound. Ever!

CUT TO:

INT. MORTUARY - DAY

Braced by Leo and softly sobbing behind her black veil, Marion slowly approaches Nick's open casket.

Nick looks peaceful, waxy. Lucy is tucked next to him like a stuffed animal.

Clean-shaven and wearing a dark suit, Pete watches soberly from the doorway.

Marion falters momentarily as she nears the casket, but with Leo's help completes her difficult journey.

MARION
 (barely a whisper)
 Oh, Nicky...

She places Nick's well-worn TV zapper beneath his crossed hands, lifts her veil to kiss his forehead, then slumps in anguish over his body, weeping inconsolably. Leo doesn't seem to know what to do.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Cindy locked herself in the bathroom all weekend and wouldn't come out. Mom thought it was grief, but in truth she was stoned out of her mind. Who could blame her?

ANGLE - PETE

He sneaks a peek at his birthday wristwatch. Its second hand suddenly stops 18 seconds past noon.

Pete thumps the watch face with his index finger. The second hand doesn't budge.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
Frozen at 18 seconds after. Just like that. Like it was marking Nick's age when he died.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CHURCH

The closed casket is at the front of the church, with Nick's smiling photo propped on top. Pews are packed with mourners listening to a piano soloist play "Over the Rainbow".

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

We hadn't stepped foot in that church for six years. Mom had searched endlessly for another spiritual lifeline. She tried Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hare Krishna...even Amway. But when push came to shove and with no where else to turn, she returned to the familiar for comfort. After all, it was the Preacher, not his flock, that had dealt Nick's fate.

ANGLE - BACK DOORWAY

A mysterious, backlit silhouette of a man stands like an apparition in the doorway...then turns and leaves.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

Some claim they caught a glimpse of him at the funeral, as if he were making certain his unfinished work was now completed. But as far as I knew, he was still in the nut house.

Panning the mournful faces in the congregation we find...

MARION AND LEO

In the first pew, sobbing in each other's arms.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

Since I was the only family member in any kind of shape to say something at the funeral, I got stuck with the chore.

ANGLE - PETE

Waiting for the solo to conclude, he sits stoically behind the pulpit next to the NEW PREACHER, as stern as his black robe.

Pete glances at his watch, still frozen, and shuffles through a handful of note cards.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

I dreaded the moment. But when it arrived, I don't know....

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

When the solo ends, Pete nervously approaches the podium. But as he begins to look out over the sea of expectant faces a strange serenity seems to come over him followed by a surge of confidence. As he milks the silence, we sense a young man ready to seize the moment.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
...something just came over me.

Pete suddenly throws his head back and shouts to the heavens!

PETE
 I know you're up there, Nick. Watching
 us from God's own luxury box!

Stunned silence. And then a voice from the back of the congregation...

OLD WOMAN
 Amen!

Pete smiles gently

PETE
 (softly)
 Amen.
 (eyes measuring the
 congregation)
 I don't want to talk about Nick from
 these...

He fans his note cards for all to see then flings them into the air. They fall like confetti!

PETE (CONT'D)
 ...but from *here!*
 (thumps his heart with a fist)
 That's what he'd do. And it's time I
 started to follow his example.

More "Amens". Marion and Leo look at one another with astonishment. Others sit up. Attention is paid.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
I don't know where the words came from,
but it was like I was suddenly filled
with light. I was the vessel. I was the
messenger. For the first time in my life,
I was Elvis.

Pete grabs the pulpit with both hands and looks eagerly over the flock.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

PETE

One of Nick's favorite shows was "Wheel of Fortune", and now I know why. Because it's just like life -- part luck and part skill. Nick always had the skills to succeed, but his luck was lousy. I, on the other hand, have no skills, but I realize now how lucky I've been. It's sad that it has taken a tragedy to wake me up, but I saw on one of Nick's nature shows how sometimes forest fires are necessary to release the seedlings of certain kinds of trees. And that's kind of how I feel -- like a new seedling with Nick showing me the way to become a mighty tree.

Pete glances down and Marion and Leo, who are clearly captivated by his remarks. Leo, of all people, is even nodding.

Pete takes a sip of water from a glass beneath the pulpit. He's about to put it back when, in a moment of inspiration, he holds it up for all to see.

PETE (CONT'D)

You know that thing where some people think the glass is half full and others think it's half empty? I tend to be a half-empty kind of guy.

(points to casket)

But now that I've seen what empty really is...I'm thinking life's pretty full.

"Amen" and murmurs of agreement. We sense Pete's energy growing as it feeds off the positive response. What he lacks in polish he makes up for with passion.

PETE (CONT'D)

Nick was full of it. Life I mean. And in a good way. You know the show "Fixer-Upper"? Where the guy comes and restores old homes?

(off a few nods)

Yeah? Anybody else? Let's see some hands.

A few hands rise tentatively in response. His silence yields more hands. As Pete smiles and nods his acknowledgement, more hands continue to rise, until it's a room full of upraised arms.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

PETE (CONT'D)

Yeah? Yeah? Good. Nick loved that show, too. And I think it's probably because he was trying to tell us that with enough work we can all be fixed up. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, right? Well Nick left us a whole lemonade stand. And he wants us to fill every glass to the top.

(glancing behind)

Right, Reverend?

Caught off guard, the Preacher gives an uneasy nod.

PETE (CONT'D)

Good man.

Nick steps from the pulpit and retrieves Nick's photo from atop the casket. He holds it next to his face in comparison.

PETE (CONT'D)

The thing about being an identical twin is every time you look in the mirror, you can see your sibling. But maybe that's not such a bad thing. Maybe from now on, when you look at me you'll see a little of Nick in there, too.

He gently returns the photo to the casket.

PETE (CONT'D)

Nick may not be with us physically anymore, but he can sure be with us in how we behave and treat one another. And I'm going to do my level best to prove he didn't die in vain. I can never be like Nick, but I can be a much better Pete. And that's my pledge to you this day.

Pete scans the congregants, who nod in affirmation.

LEO AND MARION

seem strangely comforted by Pete's moving transformation.

MARION

(a whisper to Leo)

It's a miracle.

PETE'S POV

scans a row of mourners then suddenly whips back to someone for a second look. He fixes his gaze on...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

A PRETTY TEENAGE GIRL

She seems mesmerized...inspired! She offers him an angelic smile.

BACK TO PETE

A triumphant grin and we hear the opening salvo from the "Hallelujah Chorus" of Handel's "Messiah".

CUT TO:

INT. POOVEY HOUSE - THAT NIGHT

ANGLE ON Nick's smiling casket photo, which now rests atop the damaged television console. As the "Hallelujah Chorus" fades...

PULL BACK to reveal Pete, shaking hands and chatting with neighbors and friends attending a post-burial gathering.

He displays a charm and maturity unseen before, and those engaging him are clearly impressed.

Momentarily, he's distracted by a glimpse of the Pretty Teenage Girl as she enters the front door with her family.

After offering earnest condolences to Marion and Leo, she begins to weave through the group toward Pete.

Subtly tracking her progress, Pete concludes his conversation and turns to her just as she arrives.

The girl, hereafter known as SHARON, extends her hand and smiles warmly.

SHARON

I can't tell you how much what you said impressed me.

As Pete takes her hand, the pheromone surge is almost palpable.

PETE

I just tried to put myself in Nick's shoes. That's all.

SHARON

I think he would have been very pleased.

PETE

You two were friends?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SHARON
Sort of. Fifth and sixth grade.

PETE
Really? Where was I?

SHARON
(shrugs)
It was in Sunday school.

PETE
Ah! Well, that explains it.

SHARON
(a reassuring touch)
Sorry, I should have introduced myself.
I'm Sharon. Sharon Heartly.

PETE
I'm Pete.

SHARON
Yeah, I know.
(an awkward beat)
Actually, Nick and I really weren't
friends.

PETE
Oh?

SHARON
Well, I sort of had a crush on him if you
want to know the truth. But he didn't
know I was alive.

PETE
Really? How come?

SHARON
Too shy.

PETE
Nick? He didn't have a bashful bone in
his body.

SHARON
No, me. I was the timid one.

PETE
You're kidding.

SHARON
People change.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Taking his arm, she walks him to a quieter corner.

SHARON (CONT'D)

That's why I was so inspired by what you said today. It takes a lot of courage to put yourself on the line like that. I mean, it's one thing to send flowers, but it's another to dedicate your life to a new path in your brother's memory.

She stops and they lock eyes.

SHARON (CONT'D)

It must have been exhilarating to have that many people hanging on your every word. All that power.

PETE

(straining for humility)
I just did what felt right.

SHARON

Cool.

Pete can scarcely believe his good fortune.

PETE

You want some punch?

CUT TO:

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE - NIGHT

As the gathering continues inside, two plastic punch cups slosh precariously on the fender of Leo's pickup truck which rocks slightly in the driveway. The windows are fogged.

INT. PICKUP CAB

Teenagers in heat. Greedy kissing, darting tongues, panting hands, clothes in disarray. Awkward and hungry.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

It wasn't the first time temptation had knocked on my door, but never had it been so hot. Forbidden fruit, I guess. I didn't know how far she'd let me go until...

Sharon takes his hand from her breast and moves it to her thigh.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SHARON
 (gasping)
 God wants you to know me. God wants us
 to do it!

She clumsily works at Pete's belt buckle.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
It wasn't exactly that old time religion,
but I went with it.

Pete's eyes widen in anticipation. As his hand disappears beneath Sharon's skirt, she erupts with a passionate shriek.

SHARON
 Oh, Niiick!

Pete instantly freezes -- a deer in the headlights look.

INSERT

A punch cup slips from the fender and splatters on the concrete.

CUT TO:

EXT. YARD

Pete marches from the truck toward the house with Sharon in pursuit, buttoning her blouse.

SHARON
 I'm sorry, but what difference does it
 make? You said you wanted to fill Nick's
 shoes. It was just a slip of the tongue -
 - that's all!

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
She was right of course. What was I
thinking? She was a peach, ripe and
begging to be plucked. Was I going to
let a little vanity get in the way?

Pete stops and allows Sharon to catch up. She embraces him with a sigh of relief.

SHARON
 Thank God.

Pete instantly sours and peels her arms away.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE

Will you leave Him out of this? I'm just a little confused right now. I tell you what -- let's...

(searching)

let's take a rain check. Okay?

SHARON

(disappointed)

Rain check?

PETE

Just for now. Nothing personal. There's plenty of time. After all, we just buried Nick today.

SHARON

You're right. I didn't mean any disrespect.

Tears begin to well up in her eyes and Pete responds by taking her into his arms for a comforting hug.

PETE

I know. I know.

We hear the faint sound of an APPROACHING SIREN.

Unknown to Sharon, Pete's gaze drifts down the opening in her blouse and a tantalizing glimpse of bra and breast. It's clear he's having second thoughts.

PETE (CONT'D)

Maybe I'm being too hast--

Suddenly a PARAMEDIC VAN fishtails onto the street, SIREN BLARING.

Bathed in its flashing lights, Pete and Sharon are stunned to see it screeching to a halt in front of the Poovey house!

CUT TO:

INT. UPSTAIRS BATHROOM

Weeping Marion desperately tries to revive Cindy, who is unconscious in her arms as TWO PARAMEDICS burst in and take over.

Pete and Leo watch from the doorway.

A syringe and other drug paraphernalia on the sink suggest an overdose.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
I remember thinking, Maaaaan... is
everybody starved for attention here?

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM

A DOCTOR greets Marion, Leo and Pete with a reassuring smile.

DOCTOR
 She's going to be fine.

Marion bursts into relieved sobs and falls into Leo's arms.
 Pete adds a consoling hand on her shoulder.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
 I'd suggest a good night's sleep. You
 can visit her tomorrow.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
But instead of that being the end of a
strange day, things got even stranger.

CUT TO:

INT. PETE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Pete is awakened by sounds from downstairs.

Baffled and disoriented, Pete rolls out of bed and goes to
 the door of his room and listens.

It sounds as if the television downstairs is on.

INT. HALLWAY

As he steps into the hall, the sound stops. He heads toward
 the stairs and meets--

Marion, in her bathrobe, coming up the stairs.

PETE
 Mom?

She is wiping tears from her cheeks.

MARION
 Pete. It's going to be alright, son.
 Everything's going to be alright. Nicky
 said so.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE

Nick?

MARION

He spoke to me.

PETE

Spoke to you. How?

MARION

Like he always does. Through the TV.
With the zapper.

PETE

Mom, the TV is busted.

MARION

I saw what I saw.

PETE

What exactly did you see?

MARION

His favorite chicken soup commercial.
The one he liked to comfort me with. It's
a miracle, Pete. Everything's going to
be okay.

PETE

Mom--

She cups his concerned face in a motherly hand.

A kiss on the cheek. And with that, she leaves Pete standing alone in the hall.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dark, quiet. Kind of spooky. The recliner is lit by moonlight from the window. Nick's portrait smiles atop the television set with its cracked screen.

Pete pushes the control panel's "on" button. Nothing happens.

He checks the cord and outlet behind. The set is unplugged.

Pete plugs it in and tries the "on" button again. Nothing. The cracked tube stares blankly ahead like a blind eye.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

Naturally, I thought she'd gone over the edge.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

With a bemused shrug he heads back upstairs.

CUT TO:

INT. PETE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Pete groans and thrashes in a restless sleep. His sheets are wadded around him like a clinging vine.

CUT TO:

INT. PETE'S ROOM - MORNING

Pete is awakened by sunshine streaming through the curtains into his face.

PULL BACK to reveal he's awkwardly sprawled on the floor next to his bed. He looks like hammered shit. He massages his temple, trying to squelch a headache.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
I figured it was all a weird dream.
until...

INT. KITCHEN

Cheery Marion is fixing breakfast in a robe and curlers.

MARION
Oh hi, honey.
(indicating skillet)
Blueberry pancakes. Your favorite.
(off Pete's surprise)
I know, it's been ages, but a new day has
dawned.

At the table stuffing himself, Leo offers Pete a nonchalant shrug.

MARION (CONT'D)
I was just telling your father that
Nicky's coming back next week, too.
Isn't that wonderful?

PETE
Coming back?

MARION
For another visit. Through the TV like
last night. Same time. Eighteen minutes
past midnight.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE

How do you know?

MARION

He blinked the console's clock display
before he said good night.

PETE

You mean, zapped to the National Anthem?

MARION

Just like he always did.
(serving the pancakes)
Next time we'll all be there to watch.

Pete meets her pleasant gaze with a look of concern.

PETE

Ma...

Leo kicks him sharply under the table.

PETE (CONT'D)

Thanks for the pancakes.

MARION

You two eat up, while I get ready. I
want to be at the hospital by nine.

She exits, leaving Leo and Pete in an uncomfortable silence.
Finally...

PETE

I checked the TV. There's no way that it
could--

LEO

Unless you're going to replace whatever
you're aiming to tear down right now with
something better...I'd suggest you leave
the whole matter alone. Understood?

(off Pete's nod)

Good.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM

Hollow-eyed but upbeat, Cindy sits in her hospital bed,
cradled by Marion who strokes her hair.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CINDY

It's sooo funny. I was moving toward this white light and then I actually saw Nick and he was waving at me to go back. And when I came to, I felt like I'd been reborn for some other purpose.

To Pete's surprise, Leo nods thoughtfully.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

The "old me" would have suggested that maybe Cindy's near-death apparition had more to do with the speedball she popped in the bathroom than anything else. But instead, I decided to take her hand, look square into her eyes, and keep my mouth shut. I swear, it was the first time that she ever truly smiled at me.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

We see the reflection of Cindy, Pete, Leo and Marion sitting eagerly in front of the dark, cracked television screen.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

And, know what? She stayed clean. Amazing! In fact all of us were on our best behavior as we waited for an electronic word from beyond.

PULL BACK -- a lone candle flickers atop the TV set next to Nick's photo. The room is otherwise dark and shadowy, befitting a seance.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

"Nick at Night" had a whole new meaning for me.

A GRANDFATHER CLOCK ticks toward the appointed bewitching hour of 18 minutes past midnight. A silent countdown on the TV console's digital clock -- 10, 9, 8...

INTERCUT looks of anticipation.

...3, 2, 1! The digital clock on the television console blinks to 12:18...

And nothing happens! The minute-hand of the grandfather clock shudders then finally jumps to the next minute mark. Anticipation gives way to uncertainty in all but Marion's eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LEO
Marion?...

MARION
Shhhhhhhhh!

LEO
(to Marion)
Were you sure about the time?

CINDY
(hopeful)
Maybe if we held hands.

MARION
Good idea.
(to Pete)
Why don't you sit in Nicky's chair.

PETE
Me?

LEO
What could it hurt?

Pete nods and moves to the recliner. The family joins hands.

The console clock blinks to 20 minutes after midnight. Except for the ticking of the grandfather clock, the room is eerily silent.

Eyes are glued to the TV screen. Pete steals a glance at the others. The hope and expectation in Marion's and Cindy's eyes is heartbreaking.

Leo shoots Pete a "do something" look.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Right then I decided I couldn't let this happen. Mom would have been devastated, the old man unbearable, and who knows what Cindy would have smoked, snorted or popped next. Besides, Nick had brought us here together as a family -- first time in ages. What was I supposed to do? Let him disappoint everyone? I figured, there was no harm in acting out a little white lie.

Pete suddenly gasps.

CINDY
What!?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

PETE
Don't you see it?

CINDY
See what?

PETE
I can't believe it! Ma, you were right.

A bit bemused, but hopeful, Marion stares at the blank screen, then looks to Pete.

PETE (CONT'D)
It's the chicken soup commercial. Just like you said.

MARION
I... I don't see it.

CINDY
Me neither.

Leo jumps in to help Pete out.

LEO
I bet it's an identical twin thing. You know, like a special frequency.

CINDY
Hold on a second. We're all family. Why can't we see?

PETE
Maybe it was because I was the only one who needed proof to believe it.

MARION
Like doubting Thomas.

PETE
Right.
(to Cindy)
I mean, you had your near-death thing... Mom saw the first TV thing...
(looking to Leo)

LEO
And I don't need to see it.

PETE
(defense rests)
There you go.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

MARION

He's *chosen* you, Pete. You're his
spiritual messenger.

PETE

Spiritual messenger?

CINDY

(to Pete)

I don't understand. Why does he need a
messenger? What does he want?

Pete turns to Marion.

MARION

Don't look at me.

(gesturing toward the TV)

There's where you'll find the answer.

Pete's eyes jump to the blank television and he stares
intently. Finally...

PETE

He wants us to tune in again next week.

Off their bewildered looks...

CUT TO:

INT. PETE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Pete tosses and turns in a fitful sleep.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

*For several days I had a horrible time
trying to sleep.*

Pete's eyes suddenly pop open. He hears the faint noise of
chatter from downstairs.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dark except for an eerie glow coming from Nick's television
and the fragments of sound from channel surfing.

Still groggy, Pete descends the stairs with a growing sense
of dread.

He sees that the TV set is glowing.

PETE

(almost a whisper)

Is that you, Nick?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He pivots at the bottom of the stairs and takes his first apprehensive look at the television screen.

PETE'S POV - VIDEO SCREEN

The television channel zaps through a montage of televangelists, new-age spiritualists, psychics, self-help gurus and get-rich-quick infomercials.

PETE

swallows hard at the parade of images before him.

PETE (CONT'D)

Me? You've got to be kidding...How?

The image on screen suddenly flutters into visual gibberish as if scrambled by interference, then it pops to black.

Pete rubs his eyes in disbelief.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT PETE'S ROOM - DAY

Rubbing his eyes, Pete awakens to the glare of sunlight streaming through the curtains. He's sprawled on the floor.

ADULT PETE

So was this a dream? A subliminal extension of my "performance" for the family. Or was I actually being called to some sort of service?

DING-DONG! The doorbell.

CUT TO:

I/E. FRONT DOOR - DAY

Disheveled, Pete opens it to reveal MRS. ZALOTNY, a frail, elderly woman bracing herself with a walker.

PETE

Oh, hi, Mrs. Zalotny. Mom's not home.

MRS. ZALOTNY

I know. I ran into her at the church bake sale earlier. It's you I want to speak to.

(off his look)

She told me you've talked to Nick.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE

Well...I wouldn't exactly--

MRS. ZALOTNY

(interrupting)

I was wondering if you would inquire about my Henry next time you speak to him.

PETE

You mean Mister Zalotny?

Mrs. Zalotny's eyes well up as she nods.

MRS. ZALOTNY

I miss him so.

To Pete's surprise, she reaches for his hand -- a modest gesture of appeal.

MRS. ZALOTNY (CONT'D)

I just want to know he's alright.

Pete looks into her pleading eyes.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

What was I supposed to do? Blow her off?

CUT TO:

INT. POOVEY LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Marion reverently lights a candle. And then another. And another...

PULL BACK -- to reveal a cascade of flickering candles and burning incense that now flank the TV set with Nick's photo, giving the console more of a shrine-like appearance.

The ticking of the GRANDFATHER CLOCK fills the room as it approaches 18 minutes past midnight.

MRS. ZALOTNY

May I?

She places a well-used tobacco pipe next to Nick's photo.

MRS. ZALOTNY (CONT'D)

It was Henry's. I thought it might help Nick find him.

Marion gives her a hug and ushers her to a spot on the sofa next to Cindy.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Pete takes his seat in Nick's recliner and nods to Leo, who obligingly clicks off the electric lights. Cloaked in the shadows, Leo's expression is all business.

When the hands on the Grandfather Clock hit the 18-minute mark and nothing happens, Mrs. Zalotny looks at Marion with concern.

MRS. ZALOTNY (CONT'D)
 (indicating the TV cord)
 Is it plugged in?

Cindy takes her hand in gentle reassurance.

CINDY
 Don't worry. It'll be fine. Won't it,
 Pete?...Pete?

Pete's eyes bore into the TV screen.

MARION
 What is it, son?

PETE
 It's... it's a test pattern.

Mrs. Zalotny squints at the blank television as if to focus an image.

MRS. ZALOTNY
 (to Cindy, whispering)
 I don't see anything.

CINDY
 Only Pete has the gift.

PETE
 Show-time!
 (to the television)
 Nick. Do you remember Mister Zalotny?

MRS. ZALOTNY
 Tell him that's his pipe.

PETE
 He knows. He's jumped to a Sherlock
 Holmes flick....Now he's zapped to a news
 broadcast. Does that mean anything to
 you?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MRS. ZALOTNY
(excited)
Oh, my yes! Henry used to watch the news
on TV.

PETE
Ah.

MRS. ZALOTNY
How is he? Is he alright?

PETE
He's fine. Very busy. Nick's zapping
through a lot of stuff here. A gardening
show. Was that a hobby maybe?

MRS. ZALOTNY
(puzzled)
No.

PETE
Oh, it's the *flowers!*
(to Mrs. Zalotny)
Mister Zalotny's sending you flowers!
Sorry, my mistake. Sometimes tough to
keep up. Tracy, Hepburn...
(turning to her)
Henry misses you. Loves you. Loves you
very much.

MRS. ZALOTNY
Are you sure?

PETE
(gesturing to TV)
"African Queen". The journey's not over.

Mrs. Zalotny erupts into joyful sobs.

MRS. ZALOTNY
Praise be. Praise the Lord.

Marion furnishes her with tissues.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Ever since Nick's death, I had seen the
benefits that came from telling people
what they wanted to hear. But it really
wasn't until that night with Mrs. Zalotny
that I realized how much good it could do
in the world. And I'd never felt better!

CUT TO:

FRONT DOOR

Still sniffing, Mrs. Zalotny hugs Pete at the door.

MRS. ZALOTNY
 God bless you, Nick.
 (Pete winces slightly)
 I mean, Pete. Both of you.

She presses a \$100 bill into his hand.

PETE
 I can't take this.

MRS. ZALOTNY
 You must. Just a small donation from a
 grateful person to further your work.

PETE
 My work?

MRS. ZALOTNY
 Clearly this is your calling.

PETE
 But--

Leo snatches the money from Pete's hand and smiles at Mrs. Zalotny.

LEO
 We'll see that it's put to good use.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

At the table are Leo, Marion, Cindy, Pete...and an engraved Benjamin Franklin, staring from the \$100 bill that sits before them like the ante in a high-stakes poker game.

LEO
 It's clear what Nick wants. He wants us
 to help people. That so, Pete?

PETE
 Well--

LEO
 (off Pete's hesitation)
 Marion?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARION

But I'm not sure it's right to take people's money.

LEO

(gently correcting)
Donation. For expenses. Why do you think they make collection plates? There's overhead, upkeep...salaries.

CINDY

Salaries?

LEO

You think pastors, priests, and rabbis work for nothing?

Pete stares at the \$100 bill on the table before him.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I could see where this might be far more lucrative than charging to see the physical therapist in action.

PETE

I hadn't thought of this as a career.

LEO

Well, maybe you should. This is just the beginning. Did you see how happy that woman was? Once word gets out about this...Well, you just fasten your seat belt, boy!

CINDY

Mrs. Z's a talker alright.

LEO

And we need to be ready for more like her.

(to Pete)

It's your calling, son. Just like the lady said. And it's our duty as a family to help you and Nick help the people who need it.

CINDY

(to Leo)

I've never seen you so...compassionate before, Dad.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LEO

I think we owe it to Nick. He's brought us together again as a family. Now we need to pull together as a family. And Pete, here, is our point man. He's got the gift. Cindy, you can be treasurer. Marion, you're in charge of upkeep and such.

PETE

And you?

LEO

I'm your father. Like always. I just keep things moving forward.

CUT TO:

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - DAY

Pete enters the passenger side, dressed for construction work. Dad peels out.

PETE

Dad, there's something I need to tell you about last night.

Leo holds up his hand for silence.

LEO

I don't need to know anything. I have *faith*.

PETE

Faith?

LEO

Look, son. I figure it was religion that took your brother from this family, and now it's religion that's gonna give a little something back.

(off Pete's look)

Enough said?

PETE

Whatever.

They continue their drive in silence.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

It was clear I was in over my head, but I couldn't turn back now.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
*Sure enough, the word of my connection to
 Nick in the hereafter gradually began to
 spread.*

CUT TO:

CLOSE UP - MR. ZALOTNY'S TOBACCO PIPE

PULL BACK to reveal a few additional personal items have been added in front of the TV: a stuffed animal, sunglasses, dog collar, baseball cap, a woman's hairbrush.

ANOTHER ANGLE - INT LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A SKEPTICAL MAN stares hard-eyed at Pete in the recliner.

SKEPTICAL MAN
 She didn't watch soap operas.

Thrown for a moment, Pete stammers through an explanation.

PETE
 Of course not. But... but you don't understand exactly. What she's saying is that love keeps the world turning. Love your neighbor, right?

Skeptical Man narrows his eyes, staring at the blank television.

SKEPTICAL MAN
 My neighbor?

PETE
 Not just.
 (glancing at the TV)
 I mean, I'm seeing... She's also telling you there will be more love -- you know, the other kind, too -- in your future, and she doesn't want you to turn away from it.

The Skeptical Man's expression softens and he perks up.

SKEPTICAL MAN
 Oh, yeah? Go on.

Off Pete's relief...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I was able to skate by on instinct at first, but as time went on, it became clear that more preparation was necessary.

To the sober-sounding Latin of a GREGORIAN CHANT...

CUT TO:

INT PETE'S ROOM - NIGHT

MOVING IN slowly on Pete at his desk.

Like a monk studying the ancient texts, Pete pours through "Cliffs Notes" versions of the Old and New Testaments. He underlines passages, jots notes, and cross references with a well-thumbed copy of TV Guide.

ADULT PETE

I started slow at first, but one thing led to another, and I gradually added more ammo.

TIME LAPSE TO:

SAME ANGLE

A variety of books, magazines and leaflets progressively DISSOLVE INTO THE FRAME until they clutter the entire top of Pete's desk.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

Ma had built up quite a library during her spiritual soundings over the years, and I found loads of stuff I could use...

We begin to see titles: "The Torah" "Koran", "Dianetics", "Watchtower", "Pilgrim's Progress", "Awaken the Giant Within", "Book of Common Prayer"...

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

I also had to get up to speed on what was going on in television because everyone knew Nick had been a sponge when it came to the tube.

"Prime Time Network Serials Episode Guide", "100 Best TV Commercials And Why They Worked", "Total Television -- The Comprehensive Guide to Programing from 1948 to Present"...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)**The more I was able to blend it all into
one big stew, the more successful I
became...*

"Predicting Events with Astrology", "Soap Opera Digest",
"Book of Mormon", "Maltin's TV Movies and Video Guide",
"Bhagavad Gita", "Entertainment Weekly", "The Analects of
Confucius", "America's Infatuation with Game Shows", "Tao te
Ching"...

*PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)**...and the happier I made my -- what
should I call them -- my patrons?*

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

The television shrine is now overflowing with dozens and
dozens of personal objects.

BLUE-HAIRED LADY

Star Trek, a Lexus ad, Charlie Rose, the
weather channel...what's he trying to
tell me?

Pete leans back in Nick's recliner with a cleansing breath.

PETE

Like water, wisdom falls to earth in many
forms -- sleet, snow, rain -- but always
in harmony with the season.

BLUE-HAIRED LADY

(a thoughtful beat, then sotto)
Sounds like Randall is bearish.
(brightening)
Maybe he's telling me it's time to adjust
the balance in our portfolio!
(to Pete)
Do you think?

PETE

I can't say. I'm only the messenger.
(glancing at the blank
television screen)
But he's just zapped from TNT to Bravo.
Does that suggest anything to you?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BLUE-HAIRED LADY
 Bravo?
 (and then it dawns on her)
 TNT to *Bravo!* Bravo!

PETE
 (sitting up)
 Hallelujah!

BLUE-HAIRED LADY
 (louder)
 Bravo!

PETE
 (matching her)
 Hallelujah!

BLUE-HAIRED LADY
 Bravoooooooo!

She envelops him in a vigorous embrace.

CUT TO:

INT FOYER

Blue-haired Lady tears a check from her checkbook and hands it to Leo.

LEO
 Thank you, sister.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Pop insisted on "brother" and "sister"
because he thought it would make people
feel like they were part of the family.

As she gathers her belongings, she confides to Leo in almost a whisper.

BLUE-HAIRED LADY
 I'm sure Randall's estate would show even greater appreciation if you ever get tax exempt status.

LEO
 Amen.

And with that, he opens the door revealing a porch full of people randomly gathered like restaurant customers awaiting the next open table.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Marion circulates with cookies followed by Cindy with coffee.
Leo checks his wait list.

LEO (CONT'D)
Brother Gus?

A tattooed BIKER pops to his feet from the porch swing and follows Leo inside the house.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

The Biker looks hopefully at Pete, who studies the blank television screen with a penetrating stare.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
I was amazed at how much most of them wanted to believe. Loss defies logic. And what I said I saw on the TV didn't really matter as long as it was familiar, vague and hopeful. I'd provide the dots and they'd connect them in a way that made sense to them. Some needed permission to grieve...

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - SERIES OF INSERTS

Pete embraces Biker, who cries like a baby.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
Some needed forgiveness...

INSERT - NERVOUS WOMAN

NERVOUS WOMAN
I should have been there, but my job-- I couldn't just up and leave.

As her head bows in shame, Pete puts a consoling hand on the crown of her head and gently strokes her hair.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Some needed to vent their anger...

INSERT - SCRAWNY MAN

Like a boxer using a heavy bag, Scrawny Man pounds a sofa cushion held up by Pete.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
Some just needed to talk...

INSERT - GABBY WOMAN

Nodding pleasantly, Pete listens intently as Gabby Woman babbles and gesticulates.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
Some needs were spiritual...

INSERT - REVERENT WOMAN

She kneels side-by-side with Pete in silent prayer in front of the television shrine.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
Some needs were practical...

INSERT - OLD MAN

OLD MAN
 (to Pete, indicating TV)
 Can you find out where she put the extra set of car keys?

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Regardless of the need, I made sure they went away feeling better.

QUICK CUTS

A broadside of hugs as Pete bids each of them goodbye.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
After years of alienating people by telling them what they didn't want to hear, it seemed only natural to switch my approach. It's amazing how much good you can do when you don't have any scruples.

CUT TO:

INT. PETE'S ROOM - NIGHT

In bed with a cluster of spiritual books, Pete mindlessly surfs with his own remote through the progression of channels on his personal TV in the same rhythm as the quick cuts.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I got so I began to think in TV images -- snippets of commercials, sitcoms, public service spots, whatever -- like dealing an endless deck of tarot cards. But I was coming up with this stuff on my own. Nick had nothing to do with it, which led to that whole deal with the photo.

CUT TO:

INT "PHOTO-LAND" STUDIO

An overworked FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHER positions Pete for a run-of-the-mill studio portrait. Pete's frozen-grin expression remains unchanged through the series of strobe flashes. He knows the look he wants.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

You might call it vanity, but it was more like a private joke. No big deal.

CUT TO:

INT POOVEY LIVING ROOM

Alone in the room, Pete surreptitiously removes Nick's portrait from above the television set. He replaces Nick's photo in the frame with his own from a "Photo-land" envelope.

It appears to be no different -- same expression, same background.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I figured what was the harm? Nobody's gonna know but me anyway. But what happened the next Saturday night, really threw me for a loop.

CUT TO:

EXT POOVEY HOUSE - NIGHT

A small cluster of people on the porch are patiently waiting for their session with Pete.

In the background, GLASSMAN, a wealthy attorney, uses A-S-L to sign with his 11-year-old deaf son, WILL.

Body language and the intensity of their gestures, suggest a heated argument. Their silent quarrel continues until...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GLASSMAN

Enough!

He sharply cuffs Will across the ear, knocking him off balance.

Just then, Leo opens the front door with his list.

LEO

Brother Glassman?

INT. LIVING ROOM

In a lotus position, Pete sits serenely on the recliner sipping bottled water.

Towing Will, Glassman enters in a huff. He pulls an expensive woman's bracelet from his pocket.

GLASSMAN

What am I supposed to do with this?

Pete's eyes widen at the sight of the jewelry. Leo takes it from Glassman's hand and places it on the shrine.

LEO

There are no rules, but we find it often helps Nick identify the deceased.

GLASSMAN

(skeptical)

Uh-huh.

(to Pete)

What now?

MARION

Why don't you sit down, brother, and take a moment.

Glassman steers Will to the sofa and sits him down before taking a place next to him. Will suddenly bolts, but Glassman jerks him back into place.

GLASSMAN

(to Marion)

He's been like this since we lost his mother. I don't know what to do. I'll try anything.

(to Pete)

But I'm no sucker.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I'd had some tough nuts before, but this guy scared the hell out of me. I felt sorry for his kid.

PETE

I'm only the messenger.

GLASSMAN

And I'm only an attorney with a client list that would knock your socks off. Do you know the law for fraud, young man?

PETE

I know there are higher laws than those you deal with.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I must admit, I had gotten pretty good at this.

GLASSMAN

(eyes narrowing)

Then I won't be disappointed, will I?

PETE

It's not for me to say. A tree can't pass judgement on its own fruit.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

By now, I was well-stocked with rhetorical bank shots, and with this guy I needed to be at the top of my game.

Glassman meets Pete's gaze.

GLASSMAN

So what do we do?

PETE

A moment of silent prayer or meditation often helps.

Glassman bows his head and nudges Will who closes his eyes and follows suit.

Draped over the sofa, Will's hand reflexively signs his private thoughts.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I could see these two really needed my help.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

I was thinking maybe I should open with something soothing like my soup bit and then ease into family shows and court TV. But then it happened--

The television screen POPS and suddenly lights up to Pete's utter surprise.

PETE

Whoa!

Glassman looks up with a start. Eyes still closed, Will is unaware of what's happening.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

This was no dream!

ON SCREEN -- video snow, scrambled patterns, distorted shapes, slashes of color.

GLASSMAN

What's it mean? What's he saying?

Pete is dumbfounded, but his inability to respond is overshadowed by the INCREASING VOLUME coming from the television -- and INDECIPHERABLE ROAR!

Leo and Marion dash into the room and freeze, stunned by what they see. Marion clasps her hands together in gratitude and smiles tearfully.

MARION

(a whisper)

Oh, Nicky.

GLASSMAN

(shouting over the TV)

Do something?

PETE

(shouting back)

I'm just the messenger!

Eyes closed and head bowed, Will still hasn't stirred despite the SOARING VOLUME. But Pete sees blood begin to trickle from the boy's ear. It's the same ear Glassman smacked.

The DECIBEL LEVEL is THUNDEROUS. Windows rattle. All those in the room cover their ears except Will. He looks up with a start, aware now of the blood flowing from his ear.

The portrait of Pete above the TV shrine fogs to black then ignites...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Porcelain figurines throughout the room shatter like exploding flashbulbs...

The TV suddenly goes black...

And the room falls eerily silent.

Glassman charges toward Pete in a blind fury and grabs him by the shirt, pulling him out of the recliner.

GLASSMAN

By God, I'm going to have your head on a pike before the week's finished.

WILL

(from behind them)

I can hear!

Glassman pivots like a puppet jerked on a string. All eyes turn to Will sitting on the sofa.

GLASSMAN

What?

WILL

I said I can hear!

(off Glassman's look)

By God, I'm going to have your head on a pike before the week's--.

Before he can finish, Glassman has him smothered in an embrace.

GLASSMAN

Oh, my God, it's true.

Marion rushes to envelop them like a mother hen.

MARION

A miracle.

White as a sheet, Leo is frozen in open-mouthed astonishment.

With his forearm, Pete wipes perspiration from his face.

PETE

Say hallelujah, brother.

He glances at his portrait. MOVING IN on the smoldering ash in the frame.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

Talk about getting turfed! Who knows -- maybe it was just a weird power surge or something, but I couldn't explain it. And I wasn't going to chalk it up to mere coincidence. It's one thing to channel a dead relative by zapper, but healing is huge! To be safe, I figured I better do something to cover my ass and make amends.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Pete slips the old photo of Nick back into the picture frame and hangs it above the TV.

PETE

(to photo)

Okay, now what? What am I supposed to do next Saturday night when every invalid within a hundred miles shows up looking for an encore performance?

The doorbell RINGS.

CUT TO:

I/E. FRONT DOOR - DAY

Pete opens the door to find...

WINFIELD STORM, 80, a fragile, wheelchair-bound C-E-O, who is accompanied by his 28-year-old trophy wife MISTY.

MISTY

You're *him!*

(taking Pete's hand)

Thank God, you're home. This is Mr. Storm and I'm his wife Misty. We're friends of Mr. Glassman and--

WINFIELD

He represents my board. We came to see the TV.

MISTY

Winfield, please.

PETE

Look, I understand, but you see this isn't a drop-in kind of a thing. We gather on Saturday nights and--

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WINFIELD

(interrupting)

I may not live to see Saturday night, boy! And I don't want to contact my beloved Gertrude either, because Misty here is all I need.

(she smiles innocently at Pete)

I'm not asking for a TV show. I just want to touch the damn thing. Say a prayer or something and see what happens.

PETE

I'd like to help, but--

LEO

(interrupting from behind him)

Come on in, brother!

INT LIVING ROOM

In his wheelchair, Winfield sits face-to-face with the blank TV screen.

WINFIELD

(to Pete)

Give me your hand.

PETE

Huh?

WINFIELD

You're the damn messenger, aren't you? Give me your hand and you touch the thing. Just in case it gets any ideas about electrocuting me.

MISTY

(scolding)

Oh, Winnie.

WINFIELD

You take the other one.

(off her look)

We'll all go together if we go.

With an uneasy smile, she takes his hand. Off Winfield's nod, Pete places his free hand flush against the television screen.

PETE

(to the TV)

It's me, Nick.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WINFIELD

Shhhhhhhh.

He bows his head and closes his eyes. Pete glances at Misty. She *winks* at him.

Suddenly Winfield shudders! Startled, Misty tries to jerk free, but Winfield's grip is vice-like. Pete's hand, too, feels the pressure.

Winfield's eyes open, then begin to roll back. Slowly, uncertainly, he begins to rise to his feet.

Standing upright, he totters momentarily then stabilizes himself.

WINFIELD (CONT'D)

Look at me!

And then he flounces back into his wheel chair with a smile and a dizzy look of exhaustion.

MISTY (V.O.)

(kissing his cheek)

Oh, Winnie.

(to Pete)

I've never, ever seen him stand up before.

LEO

Hallelujah, sister.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

*Miracle or placebo effect? Who knew?
But hope travels like a virus and I
figured the epidemic wasn't too far off.
Pilgrims began dropping by at all hours.
Some just to touch the TV and get a jolt
of life-force or whatever they thought
was at work. Others were looking to be
cured.*

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE - DAY

Sprinkled with sick and disabled visitors, the porch looks more like the waiting room to a clinic.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

*Unfortunately, most people left in the
same condition that they arrived.*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)
*Like the fellah that hoped to grow a ring-
 finger to replace the one he lost at his
 machine shop.*

INT. LIVING ROOM

Pete presses a MAN'S hand (ring-finger missing) to the blank television screen as if he were going to photocopy it.

LATER - CLOSE ON

A handshake -- Pete and the MAN, ring-finger still missing.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
*The odd thing was they didn't fault me or
 Nick when nothing happened. They blamed
 themselves, like they weren't worthy or
 something. Every now and then somebody
 would throw away a crutch or see better
 despite a cataract, and that's all that
 was needed to keep the fires stoked.*

EXT. POOVEY PORCH

A MAN steps out of the house with a shout and hurls his crutch like a javelin into the street. Those waiting brighten with optimistic expectation.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
*I just went with the flow. Besides, there
 were other problems we had to deal with.*

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Gathered around the kitchen table are Pete, Leo and Cindy, who is now a picture of tailored administrative efficiency.

CINDY
 Parking?

Marion is at the sink doing dishes.

MARION
 The neighbors are starting to complain
 about all the cars.

LEO
 Let 'em.
 (to Cindy)
 Financials?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Cindy deals copies of her multi-page report around the table. Marion takes one in her wet, rubber-gloved hand...to Cindy's mild chagrin.

CINDY

As you can see, we have another Winfield windfall.

As they browse the report, Pete whistles his surprise.

PETE

Blessed are the bounteous.

CINDY

Mostly Glassman clients.

LEO

And our non-profit status?

CINDY

I sent in the 501-C-3 application Monday. So now it's in the hand of the good Lord and the I-R-S. Any other questions?

PETE

What's this six-hundred bucks to Angus Studio?

CINDY

Development and design of our web site.

MARION

Web site?

LEO

Church of the Hereafter dot org. No reason to hide our halo under a bushel.

(winking at Cindy)

Right, kiddo?

PETE

This is news to me.

LEO

You've got your hands full. Cindy and me can handle the business end.

MARION

Don't you think we're getting a little carried away here? After all, we're just a family.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LEO
An incorporated family.

CINDY
With a hot-line to heaven.

MARION
I just thought--

LEO
Leave the thinking to me. You nurture.
(glancing at Pete)
You got a problem?

PETE
Not really.

LEO
Good. Next item.

As he passes out another packet of papers...

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
I was content to be the face man. Even though I was still second banana to Nick, I got a buzz from all the attention.

EXT. PARK

In a pastoral glade near a lake, a dozen attentive LISTENERS sit on the grass in a circle as Pete leads an informal discussion.

PETE
...and one of the discoveries I've made is that life, like television, is sort of circular. No matter how you struggle, in the end, you wind up where you began. Kind of like on Gilligan's Island.

TIME LAPSE as MORE LISTENERS dissolve into the frame, doubling the size of the group.

PETE (CONT'D)
...so along the way, I've figured out that in both religion and television, the number "three" has this kind of cosmic thing going for it. I mean, there are three letters in "God", right? And there's the trinity. But guess how many animals are at the hub of the Buddhist wheel of life? And how many sounds are there in the Hindu's most sacred chant?
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE (CONT'D)
 How many holy cities does Islam have?
 (A Listener signals three with
 her hand)
 That's right!

A silent chorus of understanding nods.

PETE (CONT'D)
 Okay, ask yourself this -- How many
 letters in CBS?... NBC?... ABC?... and
 Fox? Huh? News, weather and sports add
 up to what number? How many hours are in
 prime time?

As we PAN their enlightened faces...

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
*I got pretty cocky again. I had my own
 little flock -- people looking to me for
 answers, which I was happy to give them.
 I was also back doing my zapper readings
 on Saturday nights and the shrine-healing
 gigs in between. Plus taking advantage
 of all the perks that come with being a
 small-time celebrity.*

CUT TO:

INT. DINER

The check is snatched by a COMPANION before the Waitress can
 set it down.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Free food...

EXT. STOCK CAR SPEEDWAY

Pete is at the "Will Call" booth.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Free tickets...

EXT. DANNY'S SHIRT SHOP

Pete exits the store with an armful of Hawaiian shirts.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Free clothes...

INT. RADIO STUDIO

In headphones at a microphone, Pete is interviewed by a local
 DISC JOCKEY.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Free publicity...

EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Misty, Winfield's trophy wife, throws her head back in rapture.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
And, of course, free women.

Her face arcs out of frame and Pete's face sways into view from the opposite direction.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Facing one another naked, Misty straddles Pete's lap as they pump to and fro on a squeaky park swing in the moonlight.

Hands entwined on the swing chains, they sail back and forth to an orgasmic crescendo.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Misty curls into Pete's arms beneath a blanket near the swing. They gaze at the star-filled sky.

PETE
 You're full of surprises.

A meteor suddenly sparks and fades.

MISTY
 Wow! So are you! Shooting stars? You think of everything.

PETE
 Look, I've got a confession to make.

MISTY
 Shouldn't that be the other way around?

PETE
 I'm no priest.

MISTY
 You got that right.

PETE
 But I'm also not what you think I am.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MISTY

You mean, a phony?

PETE

Well, I'm not sure "phony" is exactly the way I'd put it. I mean, I may have this connection with something mystical, sort of, but I don't quite understand it all.

MISTY

I'll take your word for it.

PETE

No, don't take my word. That's part of the problem. Everybody's taking my word, and I don't even know what I'm saying half the time.

MISTY

Please don't open up to me. You're going to spoil everything. You want to take a guilt trip, do it solo.

PETE

Who says I'm feeling guilty?

MISTY

If you're not, what's to confess?

PETE

Nothing...I guess.

MISTY

Good. Glad we got that settled.

She nuzzles into him, and returns her attention to the endless sea of stars above.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

The moral? Embrace your fate, don't fight it.

MISTY

Mind if I ask you a question?

PETE

Shoot.

MISTY

What really happens to us after we die?

Under her POV of the stars, we hear the opening riff of "Spirit in the Sky".

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

"When I die and they lay me to rest
Gonna go to the place that's the best
When I lay me down to die
Goin' up to the spirit in the sky..."

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SKY - DAY

As the stars give way to the hazy wash of daylight.

"Goin' up to the spirit in the sky
That's where I'm gonna go when I die
When I die and they lay me to rest
Gonna go to the place that's the best"

As the music fades, we TILT DOWN INTO

EXT. PARK - DAY

Fifty Listeners sit cross-legged on the grassy bank, the better to hear--

PETE

bobbing on a paddle boat in front of them. Wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap, and a Hawaiian shirt, he speaks with relaxed assurance from his floating rostrum. A picture of laid-back serenity.

PETE

People often ask me what it's like in the hereafter. I don't think we should look at the "world to come" as a whole new show. I'd like to suggest it's more like a spin-off from a series. The one we're living in right now.

Confusion moves through the Listeners like the wave. Pete's response is confident, reassuring.

PETE (CONT'D)

Ask yourself, what is reality? Bill Nye, the science guy, would be the first to tell you that at the sub-atomic level we're all just energy particles, exactly like the electrons smacking into the phosphor coating of your big-screen at home.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE (CONT'D)

So you and I are really no different than TV images banging around the universe with a little free will thrown in to make it interesting. And the hereafter is just a different screen that we'll someday blast into at a different frequency.

A few illuminated nods.

A MAN, whose face is obscured by tree branches, turns and walks away from the periphery of Listeners.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

Not everybody hears your music.

PETE

Think of it as like being picked up for a syndication once your prime time series has ended. If you behave yourself, you get a better deal. And if you don't act right, you wind up with Perry Mason on some dead-end cosmic community access channel at 3 a.m. So think about that, brothers and sisters, as we give something back to those in need.

Pete flings his cap into the group. As it's passed among them for donations, he takes off his sunglasses and casually cleans them on his shirt tail.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I thought of myself as a "don't worry-be-happy" transcendentalist not a moral authority. But the temptation to tell others how to behave was just irresistible. I mean, they wanted it! And I promised myself to steer clear of rules, codes, and commandments. I was a messenger helping people find balance, harmony, serenity, not a foot soldier in the battle of good and evil...

EXT. PARK - LATER

As the Listeners disperse, GRACIE, 18, attractive and a little loopy, locks into Pete's gaze as she walks toward him.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

At least that's what I thought before I hooked up with Gracie.

Cradling his cap, overflowing with cash, she wades barefoot into the water to meet him as if the lake didn't exist.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

PETE

Wait! Whoa! Hold on!

She stops, glances at the skirt of her cotton dress swirling in the water at her thighs and looks up with an enigmatic smile.

PETE (CONT'D)

I'll be right there.

He pumps the paddle-boat to her side. She offers him the cap full of donations and whispers in his ear with a soft, country twang.

GRACIE

Take good care of this, sweetie-pie.
It's quite a haul.

PETE

Thanks...

GRACIE

Gracie.

PETE

I'm Pete.

GRACIE

I know.

She takes a motel key from her dress pocket and places it atop the money in the cap.

GRACIE (CONT'D)

I'd like to make my own special
contribution to your work.

Confused, Pete searches her face for an explanation. He's answered with that enigmatic smile.

PETE

(playfully)
Whatever you say.

She suddenly pivots and hurriedly wades from the lake.

PETE (CONT'D)

Hey! Not so fast. Where are you going?

Glancing back over her shoulder, she runs up the bank and disappears into the trees.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Off Pete's playful smile...

CUT TO:

EXT. "CLOUD 9" MOTEL - NIGHT

A dumpy outpost on the edge of a decaying neighborhood. Clean sheets, hourly rates and a near-empty parking lot.

Now stenciled "Hereafter.Org" the Poovey pickup truck passes the sputtering neon sign and pulls onto a side street where it parks.

INT. CAB

Pete takes the room key from the dashboard and examines its plastic paddle:

"Cloud 9"
Room #3

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

My lucky number.

ANGLE - MOTEL DOOR

A brass "3" hangs precariously below the peephole. Pete's first knock dislodges it and it clatters on the cement below.

As Pete stoops to pick up the number, the door swings open from the inside -- dark as a cave. Beckoning...

PETE

Hello?

When nobody replies, instead of entering, Pete backs away.

GRACIE'S VOICE

Yoo-hoo!

Pete cautiously enters the dim room. Lit by the table lamp, a Gideon Bible is on the bed.

PETE

Anybody home?

The door suddenly SLAMS SHUT behind him.

Pete pivots with a start only to see a reddish brown blanket swooping toward him, concealing the person behind it.

PETE'S POV - ENGULFED BY THE BLANKET

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A reddish-brown haze until -- THUNK!...

SLAM TO BLACK:

Under the HOWL of a dust storm...

FADE IN:

DREAM SEQUENCE

Colors muted in a sepia wash.

EXT. DESERT ROAD

An empty two-lane highway, nearly obscured by blowing dust. Tumbleweeds shoot past like runaway beach balls.

In the haze, we find Pete, shielding his face, leaning into the growing wind as he heads toward...

A TIMEWORN PHONE BOOTH

Cracked glass and a jammed door. Seeking shelter, Pete frantically works his way in.

The receiver swings wildly on its cord like a dizzy pendulum beneath the old rotary phone.

The HOWL of the gale grows into a deafening OTHERWORLDLY SHRIEK. The phone booth teeters.

Pressing arms and legs against the glass, Pete tries to stabilize himself in the unsteady cocoon.

With a THUNDERCLAP, the phone booth topples to its side.

Then suddenly -- like a freight train at a crossing -- the storm passes, leaving an eerie stillness in its wake.

Pete climbs out of the horizontal phone booth to discover...THREE DILAPIDATED BARN WOOD BUILDINGS.

"ROADSIDE GEYESER AND REPTILE GARDENS" is painted on the sloping roof of the main building. An "Entrance" sign dangles cockeyed from one nail over a rotted screen door.

The site appears abandoned.

Dusting himself off, Pete cautiously approaches,

PETE
Hello! Anybody here?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A single gas pump sits near the open bay of an auto service garage.

As Pete passes the pump, he's drawn toward a box that says: "See the Baby Rattlers"

Suddenly...a LOUD HISS accompanies a sharp and sudden movement on the ground by Pete's foot.

Startled, he jumps like a coiled mainspring.

HEARTY LAUGHTER erupts from inside the dark garage.

At his feet, Pete sees an uncapped air hose painted with a diamond-back pattern. It suddenly jumps to life again with a HISS of rushing air. Another LAUGH.

VOICE
(from the garage)
Gets 'em every time.

Stepping from the shadows next to the air compressor in the garage is NICK -- still Pete's mirror image.

Wearing sunglasses (always), Nick is clad in tennis whites and twirls a racket like a baton in one hand.

PETE
Nick? Nick, is that really you?

NICK
Who else?

He wraps Pete in a bear hug.

NICK (CONT'D)
I thought you'd never get here.

PETE
You're alive.

NICK
Not exactly. More like out of hibernation.

He pulls the zapper from his pocket.

PETE
Is that?--

NICK
Yep. My magic wand. Get a load of this!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

He clicks the remote, and a three-dimensional holographic image of his dachshund appears at his feet. Lucy holds a well-chewed tennis ball in his mouth.

NICK (CONT'D)
 Except for a few drops-outs and a little interference from time to time, Lucy's just the same.

Nick takes the ball and THWOCK! sends it sailing. Lucy instantly charges after it.

NICK (CONT'D)
 He loves tennis.

Nick gestures toward the buildings.

NICK (CONT'D)
 How about the cook's tour?
 (off Pete's hesitation)
 What are you afraid of?

He makes devil horns and wiggles his tongue.

NICK (CONT'D)
 Don't be stupid. I'm here to promote you
 -- from messenger to full partner!

Lucy returns with the tennis ball and begs.

NICK (CONT'D)
 No more, not now!

He clicks the zapper and Lucy evaporates.

NICK (CONT'D)
 (resuming, to Pete)
 You're a natural! I never really appreciated your gifts when we were kids. But all that's changed since I've seen the light. Come on. I've got just the thing to put you at ease.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOT SPRINGS

Steam rises from the water, as Pete and Nick soak at the edge of a large, rock-lined pool.

NICK
 Mother Nature's jacuzzi.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE

Is there really a geyser that goes with this?

Nick grabs his zapper, sitting on a nearby rock.

NICK

Watch.

PETE

(reaching for the remote in Nick's hand)

Can I try?

Nick sharply jerks it away.

NICK

No!

(sheepish)

Sorry, it's like King Arthur's sword. Definitely not for amateurs.

He zaps the center of the pool and a small fountain of water burbles up, gradually building into a 20-foot geyser.

NICK (CONT'D)

Ta-daaaaaa!

PETE

(impressed)

Not bad.

Another zap and the geyser burbles back into the pool.

NICK

Always makes me thirsty.

He aims the zapper to the side of the pool. CLICK! Lemon-garnished DRINKS on a tray materialize!

NICK (CONT'D)

As you said at my funeral, when life gives you lemons...

He clinks Pete's glass in a toast. Pete drinks greedily.

PETE

That's the best!

Nick winks at the Waiter then zaps him into thin air.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

NICK

It's only the beginning, Petey. This thing is bigger than you and me. Real estate in the desert is dirt cheap. With the money you can generate we could buy up the entire valley. A little irrigation and it's a paradise.

PETE

Irrigate with what?

Nick squirts him with water from the pool.

NICK

Duh!

PETE

This?

NICK

The the tip of the aquifer. And if anything would happen to the Hoover Dam, this place would be bigger than Vegas. We'd live like gods!

PETE

Is something up with the Hoover Dam?

NICK

(with a shrug)

Shit happens, right? The point is to be prepared. With my brains and your charisma--

PETE

Charisma?

NICK

People are listening to you. You're the "king" -- the main event. Pete is in the building. It's Pied Piper time! Just say the word, and I'll draw up the partnership papers.

PETE

It's certainly tempting.

(hesitates)

What's the catch?

NICK

Catch?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

PETE

Yeah.

NICK

There's no catch.

(after a sip of lemonade)

But there is one little thing...

CUT TO:

VIDEO IMAGE

The "Live -- Breaking News" segment of the Preacher being led down the Court House steps that Nick first saw in the hospital six years earlier.

NICK (V.O.)

Haven't you heard of an eye for an eye?

PETE (V.O.)

I'm no killer.

NICK (V.O.)

I said "get even".

PULL BACK to REVEAL --

INT. BARN-WOOD SHACK

The image is on a large television monitor surrounded by DOZENS OF TELEVISION SETS, channel-hopping in strobe like intervals. From many different eras, the sets are all shapes and sizes and are stacked like crates.

An open door behind them leads outside to the hots springs.

NICK

Look, you've passed every other test since I died with flying colors.

The big monitor suddenly switches to a "Roadrunner" cartoon. Wile E. Coyote slams into a painted tunnel.

PETE (V.O.)

You've been testing me?

NICK (V.O.)

I had to see if you had the chops to be my partner, didn't I? And you're ninety-nine percent there.

Nick indicates the flickering television sets.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

NICK (CONT'D)

Isn't it great? Once they're broadcast,
TV signals travel forever. Ripples in the
cosmic pond. Electronic immortality.

A folding chair sits in the middle of the room next to a cot.

NICK (CONT'D)

Have a seat.

PETE

After you.

NICK

Nope. I don't sit anymore. I did enough
of that for two lifetimes...

Using his zapper, he clicks the main monitor back to the
courthouse image of the Preacher.

NICK (CONT'D)

Thanks to him.

PETE

So what am I supposed to do?

NICK

You'll figure it out.

PETE

And if I don't?

NICK

You lose the spotlight and I find
somebody else...maybe Cindy.

PETE

Cindy?

NICK

She has a lot of potential. All she
needs is a friendly nudge from beyond the
grave.

Nick puts a reassuring hand on Pete's shoulder.

NICK (CONT'D)

But that's not my preference.

(he zaps to a close-up of the
Preacher on the monitor)

Sooner or later, another opportunity will
come along to even the score, and all you
have to do is take it.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

NICK (CONT'D)
 (a slap on the back)
 Nothing to worry about now. I bet you're
 exhausted. Why not get some sleep? I'll
 catch you later.

Pete takes a weary seat on the cot with his back to Nick, who heads for the door.

Before exiting, Nick glances back. Unseen by Pete, he lowers his sunglasses, peering over them for the first time.

CLOSE-UP - NICK'S EYES

Ovals of video static. MOVING IN until the static ultimately fills the frame.

CUT TO:

INT. CLOUD 9 MOTEL

AS DREAM SEQUENCE ENDS...

PULL BACK from the same video static to reveal its source is now a television in an otherwise darkened room.

Lit by the glow from the television, Pete is sprawled on the floor in his boxers and socks. The reddish-brown blanket is wadded next to him.

His eyes blink open. Disoriented and confused, he groggily rights himself. He feels the back of his head for a lump and winces in pain.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Man, did I feel stupid! Things sure
aren't what they appear to be. Whoever
conked me, took everything -- money,
keys, clothes...
(peeking out the curtains)
Even the truck! All I had left was a
splitting headache. And a hangover from
that crazy dream! Or was it a true
vision? A genuine spiritual encounter.
Was Nick really tweaking me from the
hereafter?

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL OFFICE

Wrapped in the blanket, Pete stands in front of the registration manned by a grisly CLERK. He chews a toothpick as he gives Pete a skeptical once-over.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DESK CLERK

You don't expect me to call the police,
do you?

PETE

No! No cops. The last thing I want is
attention. Just-- do you have any
clothes I can borrow?

DESK CLERK

You're not even a guest.

PETE

Just something to get home in.

Desk Clerk's eyes suddenly light up!

DESK CLERK

I seen you before! You're that kid in
the paper who does that television
healing thing.

PETE

I'm begging you.

DESK CLERK

(brightly)

Hey, no need. It's my honor. Let me check
"Lost and Found".

He pulls a cardboard box from a nearby closet and starts to
rummage through it.

DESK CLERK (CONT'D)

Say, I've got this little arthritis thing
going in my pitching arm. You think
maybe you could do something with it?

Off Pete's sigh...

CUT TO:

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Overcast. Pete's outfit: Letter jacket with no shirt, pink
sweat pants; rubber thongs.

Lost in thought, he's oblivious to passers-by and the sights
and sounds around him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

I did a lot of thinking on the way home. Sometimes it takes a two-by-four between the eyes to get your attention. Maybe what I had been doing was not all that good.

He crosses the street against the light, inadvertently bumps a pedestrian.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER (CONT'D)

I was pretty mixed up. I had been going with Nick's flow so long, I'd lost track of who I was. Maybe this was some sort of spiritual test. If so, the final exam awaited me when I got home.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - DAY

Storm clouds build ominously as rumpled Pete rounds the corner onto his block...and into a POLICE BARRICADE!

Down the street he can see his house is surrounded by cops, some using police cars parked in front for cover.

PETE

(to Cop)

Hey! That's my house!

Off the COP'S look...

CUT TO:

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE

Pete is hurriedly escorted to the secure perimeter by the COP who takes him to the LIEUTENANT in charge of the siege. Cop offers Pete up like a carnival prize.

COP

We found him, Lieutenant.

PETE

Found me? What are you talking about? What's going on here?

LIEUTENANT

Patient who busted out of the state hospital -- a preacher -- has a bomb in there. He's holding your family hostage.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PETE
Preacher! What's he want?

LIEUTENANT
You.

TIME CUT:

EXT. SURVEILLANCE VAN

The storm cloud above crackle with flashes of lightening.

Pete is being wired with a bug and peppered with instructions from the Lieutenant and a PSYCHOLOGIST.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER
Turns out a hospital psychologist had been trying to negotiate with him for several hours on the telephone and hadn't gotten squat. So when I insisted on the hostage exchange, the cops really couldn't object. They figured one guy with a wire and police support stood a better chance than three helpless captives. I could be their eyes and ears inside. If things got desperate, maybe I could lure him to a spot behind the drapes, where they could blind-side him with a spray of sniper fire.

CUT TO:

EXT. POOVEY PORCH - DAY

Arms raised to display his vulnerability, Pete nervously climbs the stairs of the porch.

The main door to the house opens slowly. POLICE SNIPERS ready their weapons.

Leo suddenly darts out the front door dragging Cindy by the hand. They bound down the porch steps in a gust of panic.

Marion then slowly appears. She stops next to Pete with a look of motherly concern.

Pete kisses her sweetly on the cheek.

PETE
It'll be okay, Ma.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Off the crack of THUNDER...

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

Pete warily enters the dim living room. The heavy drapes in front of the picture window filter the only light inside. The Preacher is nowhere to be seen.

INSERT - INT. SURVEILLANCE VAN

TECH COP suddenly adjusts his receiver.

TECH COP
Something's haywire. I'm getting nothing
but interference. Must be this
electrical storm.

The Lieutenant takes his headphones and listens -- STATIC!

PSYCHOLOGIST
Back to the phone?

LIEUTENANT
Not yet.

INT. LIVING ROOM

As Pete moves toward the TV shrine lit by candles, he begins to hear TICKING.

PETE'S POV follows the sound to...

A WIND-UP CLOCK that is perched atop the television next to Nick's picture. The minute hand is less than ten minutes away from a red alarm needle.

Detonation wires from the back of the clock lead to electrodes imbedded in a crudely sculpted LAMB made of plastic explosives. It's surrounded by shrine memorabilia.

PETE
(into his bug)
He's set the timer! I'm outta here!

As Pete pivots...

A leg abruptly pops from behind the recliner, tripping him to the floor.

PETE'S POV - FROM THE FLOOR

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The Preacher steps forth -- towering over Pete and eclipsing the ceiling light.

PREACHER

They think I'm crazy, but you and I know the truth. This evil must be destroyed. The path to salvation requires our sacrifice.

PETE

"Our" sacrifice?

PREACHER

My actions spawned the very evil I was trying to destroy. It was Satan's trap! For that I repent.

PETE

Hey, I'm just the messenger!

PREACHER

We're both being used -- by forces you can't imagine.

Preacher carelessly jerks a BASEBALL BAT from the memorabilia surrounding the television.

Candles on the shrine spill to the floor. One rolls to the base of a floor-length curtain, which begins to smolder.

PREACHER (CONT'D)

I knew you'd be reluctant...

He raises the baseball bat like an ax over Pete.

PREACHER (CONT'D)

But His will shall be done!

The Preacher strikes! Pete twists his body, narrowly avoiding the blow. CRACK! The bat smashes into the floor.

With the Preacher off balance, Pete kicks into his knees, bringing him down, too.

The bat rolls beneath the sofa as the curtain ignites!

On his hands and knees, Pete scrabbles for the door.

The Preacher grabs him by the ankle. Pete struggles to pull away.

With one hand holding Pete, Preacher gropes beneath the couch for the bat with the other.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Pete turns on him. They wrestle for dominance -- tangled like two crabs -- grabbing, punching, scratching...

Smoke clouds the room as the fire begins to blaze out of control.

Pete rolls on top, his hands wrapped around the Preacher's throat. Seething with uncontrollable rage, Pete tightens his grip.

PREACHER (CONT'D)

(choking)

You demon. You're no different than your brother!

Turning red-faced, Preacher's eyes begin to bulge. His legs helplessly kick the air. His hands claw wildly at Pete, the baseball bat just out of reach.

In a near-trance, Pete bears down until--

The PHONE RINGS. Startled, he glances up, catching his reflection choking the Preacher in the television screen.

The image jars him!

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

The tables had turned. I had the Preacher just like he'd once had Nick. But this was their fight, not mine. Then and there, I decided I was finished living Nick's life.

Pete releases his grip from the Preacher's neck.

Coughing and gasping, Preacher rolls onto his side. Kneeling next to him, Pete's hands tremble as he wipes blood from the corner of his mouth.

The bomb clock continues its mechanical countdown within a minute of its deadly alarm.

Grabbing Preacher under the arms, Pete drags him toward the front door as fire engulfs the room.

Near the door, he glances back. Flames dance around Nick's recliner.

Partially obscured by the smoke and flames -- Pete sees the translucent, shimmering image of Nick, laying in the recliner with the zapper in his hand!

Nick slowly turns his head...and smiles! Then--

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

A NOISE behind Pete. He turns to see a COP coming up the steps to help him.

When Pete looks back at the recliner, Nick's image appears to be no more than a cloud of sparks above the flames.

EXT. POOVEY HOUSE

As Pete and the Cop drag the groggy Preacher clear of the porch, we hear the CLOCK ALARM from inside followed by...

KABLOOEY! An explosion that showers the area with flaming debris.

As if in response, a THUNDERCLAP erupts from the clouds above and a hard rain begins to fall as people begin to emerge from cover.

PETE'S VOICE-OVER

So that's the whole story. Whether you believe it or not, you needed to hear the truth from me.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

(Note: Pete's Voice overlaps then gives way to Cindy as she reads aloud from his lengthy hand-written letter.)

CINDY

It may also help you understand why I have to leave.

Leo comforts Marion, who sits sobbing at the foot of the bed.

CINDY (CONT'D)

I've been in Nick's shadow for so long, I think it's finally time for me to figure out who I am.

(a Cindy smirk)

The only thing I know for sure is I can't do it here. I'll be fine, and I promise to stay in touch. Don't worry. Love, Peter.

(sotto)

Peter?

Pages scatter as she dismissively tosses the letter onto the bed next to Leo and Marion.

CINDY (CONT'D)

So what are we supposed to do now?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A KNOCK at the door. Cindy opens it to reveal...an ELDERLY WOMAN.

ELDERLY WOMAN

I heard you were able to salvage--

What she sees over Leo's shoulder stops her mid-sentence.

ELDERLY WOMAN (CONT'D)

Oh, Thank God!

HER POV -- On a table behind Leo is the charred, half-melted carcass of Nick's television set.

ELDERLY WOMAN (CONT'D)

May I...touch it?

The looks fall like dominoes from Marion to Leo to Cindy. Cindy takes the woman's arm and reverently escorts her to the television.

CINDY

By all means.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY - SUNSET

Pete hitchhikes on the outskirts of town. An 18-WHEELER pulls to the shoulder, kicking up a dust cloud.

Pete opens the passenger side cab door to see the DRIVER, who has a striking resemblance to...

PETE

Gracie?

DRIVER

Delbert?

PETE

You must have someone else in mind.

DRIVER

I guess we're even then.
 (off his hesitation)
 You want a lift or not?
 (as Pete climbs in)
 Where you headed?

PETE

As far as you'll take me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DRIVER
Suit yourself.

PETE
I intend to.

And as the truck grinds into the twilight, we...

FADE OUT.